

Kant's Theory of Sense Perception and Appearance

(condensed from Waxman's *Kant's Model of the Mind*)

1. The distinction between synopsis and apprehension allows us to identify the *given* of sense perception (appearances themselves) with a *product* of imagination (i.e. our own mental activity). Failure to realize this will lead us to misinterpret Kant, when he appears to equate them (which happens quite often, and seems implicit in his "Copernican" hypothesis), since we cannot attribute to him so obvious a logical inconsistency as describing one and the same thing as both a *given* and a *product* of mental activity.

(The kind of mental activity involved here is not intellectual, but much more primitive: it concerns the apprehension and subsequent reproduction of appearances, and so concerns imagination alone.)

2. What makes this distinction possible is **transcendental idealism**. This doctrine, for the first time in philosophic history, introduces a distinction between the object of sense perception (i.e. the appearance immediately intuited through sensation) and the given of the senses. For transcendental idealism does not state that *sensations themselves* (= the result of affection = sense impressions = the synopsis of the manifold as present a priori through sense, etc.) embody the forms space and time, but only that objects present to us in *perception* do (i.e. appearances). Perception = *empirical consciousness*. Transcendental idealism states simply that no empirical consciousness is possible until the manifold to be represented in it has been subjected to pure intuition in space and time. Otherwise, this manifold of sense impressions lacks the *form* whereby alone it is able to *appear* to us in its guise *as* a manifold. This does not mean it has no existence outside and independently of our perception; but since, without this form, we cannot become conscious of it empirically at all, the manifold as it is outside perception can be nothing to us. That is, we are as utterly oblivious of its existence, and so it can play no role whatsoever in our representation (in experience, no question is ever asked of it – just as none is ever asked of the thing in itself). (See relevant handout)

3. Cautionary remark: nothing said in the preceding number prejudges the issue of whether space and time exist only in and through imaginative activity or, on the contrary, are, in some sense, pre-imaginative givens in their own right. For all transcendental idealism asserts is *that* space and time pertain only to sense perception of a manifold, and not the manifold itself; *how* perception differs from synopsis – i.e. what specifically confining the involvement of space and time to perception implies about both perception and space and time – is another question.

4. Nevertheless, it is readily evident that nothing short of saying that imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself, together with absolute restriction of pure space and time to imaginative consciousness, can possibly make the transcendental idealist distinction between the sensation and appearance go through. For *how* could consciousness in sense perception be in any way distinguished from the contents *immediately* present in it (sensation, impressions, the manifold), unless the form of appearance, quite specifically, is a product of a synthesis in imagination? Otherwise, the form would be part of sensation itself, and so no form at all (see 6 below).

There is explicit confirmation that Kant attributed all sense perception to imagination at A120 n. (see also B160), where he attributes **the synthesis of apprehension in intuition** – which everyone prior to him (Locke and Hume,

presumably, included) had ascribed to sense (receptivity, passivity) – to imagination (mental activity, spontaneity).

(Kant declared that “no psychologist had even so much as thought that imagination may be a necessary ingredient in perception itself.” So, it only stands to reason that this connects up with the only other claim to originality he makes in his theory of perception and appearance: transcendental idealism.)

5. If the synthesis of apprehension is necessary to give appearances a form (whereby to perceive the sensible manifold in empirical consciousness – as Kant explicitly asserts at A99-100), and if apprehension is always the doing of the imagination, the inescapable conclusion is that (i) appearances too exist only in and through the imagination and (ii) it is impossible that what we represent as appearance in perception can exist in us pre-imaginatively.

(Again, what does exist pre-imaginatively we are never in a position to know: for until a form is synthesized for the manifold, it lacks any immediately intuitable *appearance*, and so an empirical consciousness of it is impossible.)

6. Also: if sense perceptions did not invariably involve imagination, then what would remain to distinguish appearances from sensations? The forms, space and time, cannot do it, since they would then be inseparably part of sensations themselves; and were this were so, they could not be represented in a pure intuition, but only empirically, by abstraction from perceived sensations (an assumption which, Kant did not hesitate to point out, would have the effect of making geometry and arithmetic a posteriori, and so strip them of all necessity and universality). To recover a distinction between space and time, on the one hand, and sensations, on the other, it is therefore necessary that one or the other be confined to the imagination. The obvious candidates are space and time, not sensations (which cannot plausibly be supposed to require anything more than mere sense affection). Consequently, it is solely by virtue of its dependence on pure space and time that all synthesis of apprehension is confined within imagination, which in turn necessitates that appearances be distinguished from sensations.

7. How does all this bear on the issue of given and produced? The appearance is, in a quite genuine sense, both at once. For although produced through synthesis in imagination and devoid of any existence outside imagination, the appearance is still the most primitive and fundamental content of representation capable of entering into our perception. If anything deserves to be described as “given”, it is surely this content, that is, the object presented to us in immediate sense perception, prior to all association of perceptions, reliance on experience, or conceptual acquisition and determination. Thus Kant’s appearance is something unprecedented in mentalistic philosophy: an original given that we ourselves produce.

8. Of course, the need still remains to distinguish the given of consciousness from the given itself, i.e. appearance from sensation. But this poses no problems for philosophy, since all questions are necessarily restricted to objects of which we have consciousness, and cannot in any way concern that of which we are totally oblivious. Since synopsis of the manifold by sense is in no sense an empirical consciousness of that manifold, this is the case with it: we know only that it exists (because apprehension necessarily presupposes a manifold of sense), but nothing more can be said of it; it is, as Kant said of everything outside the scope of consciousness, “nothing to us.” (A116; see also A117n.)

9. The determination that appearance is a product of synthesis in imagination, and that pure space and time exist only in and through this and similar (i.e. imaginative) mental

activity, also opens the way to Kant's attempts to account for the origin and objective validity of the categories (pure concepts of the understanding). The categories cannot, of course, determine appearances directly, since, unlike space and time, they are not presupposed simply in order for an appearance to be given in intuition (see esp. A89-91/B122-3). But it is possible for the understanding to determine the synthesis in imagination which is responsible for appearances, and thereby the appearances themselves. *Thus does Kant's theory of sense perception paves the way for his theory of cognition and experience.*

(This however the understanding can only do insofar as appearances conform to pure space and time; and what all this means we cannot begin to know until we move onto the transcendental logic.)