



The Synthetic Unity of Apperception Immanuel Kant

It would be quite a sufficient deduction of the categories, and justification of their objective application, to show that, apart from them, no object whatever is capable of being thought. But there are two reasons why a fuller deduction is advisable: firstly, because, in thinking an object, other faculties besides understanding, or the faculty of thought proper, come into play ; and, secondly, because it has to be explained how understanding can possibly be a condition of the knowledge of real objects. We must, therefore, begin with a consideration of the primary activities of the subject that are essential in the constitution of experience; and these we must view, not in their empirical, but in their transcendental character.

If consciousness were broken up into a number of mutually repellent states, each isolated and separated from the rest, knowledge would never arise in us at all, for knowledge is a whole of related and connected elements. When, therefore, I call sensible perception a synopsis, in order to mark the complexity of its content, it must be remembered that in this synopsis a certain synthesis is implied, and that knowledge is possible only if spontaneity is combined with receptivity. This is the reason why we must say that in all knowledge there is a three-fold synthesis: firstly, the apprehension in perception of various ideas, or modifications of the mind; secondly, their reproduction in imagination; and, thirdly, their recognition in conception. These three forms of synthesis point to three sources of knowledge, which make understanding itself possible, and through it all experience as an empirical product of understanding.

1. Synthesis of Apprehension in Perception

Whatever may be the origin of our ideas, whether they are due to the influence of external things or are produced by internal causes, whether as objects they have their source a priori or in experience, as modifications of the mind they must all belong to the inner sense. All knowledge is, therefore, at bottom subject to time as the formal condition of inner sense, and in time every part of it without exception must be ordered, connected, and brought into relation with every other part. This is a general remark, which must be kept in mind in the whole of our subsequent inquiry.

We should not be conscious of the various determinations that every perception contains within itself 'were we not, in the succession of our impressions, conscious of time. If each feeling were limited to a single moment, it would be an absolutely individual unit. In order that the various determinations of a perception, as, for instance, the parts of a line, should form a unity, it is necessary that they should be run over and held together by the mind. This act I call the synthesis of apprehension. It is apprehension, because it goes straight to perception; it is synthesis, because only by synthesis can the various elements of perception

be united in one object of consciousness.

Now, this synthesis of apprehension must be employed a priori also, or in relation to determinations not given in sensible experience. Otherwise we should have no consciousness of space and time a priori, for these can be produced only by a synthesis of the various determinations that are presented by sensibility in its original receptivity. There is therefore a pure synthesis of apprehension.

2. Synthesis of Reproduction in Imagination

There is an empirical law of the association of ideas. When any two ideas have often followed, or accompanied each other, an association between them is at last formed, and they are so connected that, even when an object is not present, the mind passes from the one to the other in conformity with a fixed rule. But this law of reproduction presupposes that phenomena are themselves actually subject to such a rule, and that the various elements in these phenomena of which we are conscious should accompany or follow one another in accordance with certain rules. On any other supposition our empirical imagination would have nothing to reproduce in any way conforming to its own nature, and would therefore lie hidden in the depths of the mind as a dead, and to us unknown faculty. Were cinnabar, for instance, sometimes red and sometimes black, sometimes light and sometimes heavy; or were the same name given at one time to this object, and at another time to that, without the least regard to any rule implied in the nature of the phenomena themselves, there could be no empirical synthesis of reproduction.

There must, therefore, be something which makes the reproduction of phenomena possible at all, something which is the a priori ground of a necessary synthetic unity. That this is so, we may at once see, if we reflect that phenomena are not things in themselves, but are merely the play of our own ideas, and therefore at bottom determinations of the inner sense. Now, if we can show that even our purest a priori perceptions can yield knowledge, only in so far as they involve such a combination as makes a thoroughgoing synthesis of reproduction possible, we may conclude that this synthesis of imagination, being prior to all experience, rests upon a priori principles. We must then assume a pure transcendental synthesis as the necessary condition of all experience, for experience is impossible unless phenomena are capable of being reproduced. Now, if I draw a line in thought, or think of the time from one day to another, or even think of a certain number, it is plain that I must be conscious of the various determinations one after the other. But if the earlier determinations — the prior parts of the line, the antecedent moments of time, the units as they arise one after the other — were to drop out of my consciousness, and could not be reproduced when I passed on to the later determinations, I should never be conscious of a whole; and hence not even the simplest and most elementary idea of space or time could arise in my consciousness.

The synthesis of reproduction is therefore inseparably bound up with the synthesis of apprehension. And as the synthesis of apprehension is the transcendental ground of the possibility of all knowledge — of pure a priori as well as empirical knowledge — the reproductive synthesis of imagination belongs to the transcendental functions of the mind, and may therefore be called the transcendental faculty of imagination.

3. Synthesis of Recognition in Conceptions

Were I not conscious that what I think now is identical with what I thought a moment ago, all reproduction in the series of ideas would be useless. The idea reproduced at a given moment would be for me a perfectly new idea. There would be no identical consciousness bound up with the act of producing one idea after another; and as without such consciousness there could be for me no unity. I should never be conscious of the various members of the series as forming one whole. If, in counting, I should forget that the units lying before my mind had been added by me one after the other, I should not be aware that a sum was being produced or generated in the successive addition of unit to unit ; and as the conception of the sum is simply the consciousness of this unity of synthesis, I should have no knowledge of the number.

At this point it is necessary to have a clear idea of what we mean by an object of consciousness. We have seen that a phenomenon is just a sensation of which we are conscious, and that no sensation can be said to exist by itself as an object outside of consciousness. What, then, do we mean when we speak of an object as corresponding to our knowledge, and therefore as distinct from it? It is easy to see that this object can be thought of only as something = x , for there is nothing beyond knowledge that we can set up as contrasted with knowledge, and yet as corresponding to it.

It is plain that in knowledge we have to do with nothing but the various determinations of our own consciousness; hence the object = x , which corresponds to these determinations, if it is supposed to be distinct from every object of consciousness, is for us nothing at all. The unity which the object demands can be only the formal unity of consciousness in the synthesis of its various determinations. In saying that we know the object, we mean that we have introduced synthetic unity into the various determinations of perception. But this is impossible, if the perception could not be produced by a function of synthesis, which, in conforming to a rule, makes the reproduction of those determinations *a priori* necessary, and renders possible a conception that unites them.

There can be no knowledge without a conception, however indefinite or obscure it may be, and a conception is in form always a universal that serves as a rule. The conception of body, for instance, as a unity of the various determinations thought in it, serves as a rule in our knowledge of external phenomena. Now, it is always a transcendental condition that lies at the foundation of that which is necessary. There must, therefore, be a transcendental ground of the unity of consciousness in the synthesis of the various determinations implied in every perception ; and this ground must be necessary to the conception of any object whatever, and therefore to the conception of every object of experience. In no other way can there be any object for our perceptions; for the object is nothing but that something = x , the conception of which involves necessity of synthesis.

This original and transcendental condition is just transcendental apperception. The consciousness, in internal perception, of oneself as determined to certain states, is merely empirical, and is always changing. In the flux of inner phenomena there can be no unchanging or permanent self. This form of self-consciousness is usually called inner sense or empirical apperception. Now, from empirical data it is impossible to derive the conception of that which must necessarily be numerically identical.

What we require, in explanation of such a transcendental presupposition, is a condition that precedes all experience, and makes it possible.

No knowledge whatever, no unity and connection of objects, is possible for us, apart from that unity of consciousness which is prior to all data of perception, and without relation to which no consciousness of objects is possible. This pure, original, unchangeable consciousness I call transcendental apperception. That this is the proper name for it is evident, were it only that even the purest objective unity, that of the a priori conceptions of space and time, is possible only in so far as perceptions are related to it. The numerical unity of this apperception is, therefore, just as much the a priori foundation of all conceptions as the various determinations of space and, time are the a priori foundation of the perceptions of sense.

It is this transcendental unity of apperception which connects all the possible phenomena that can be gathered together in one experience, and subjects them to laws. There could be no such unity of consciousness were the mind not able to be conscious of the identity of function, by which it unites various phenomena in one knowledge. The original and necessary consciousness of the identity of oneself is at the same time the consciousness of a necessary unity in the synthesis of all phenomena according to conceptions. These conceptions are necessary rules, which not only make phenomena capable of reproduction, but determine perception as perception of an object, that is, bring it under a conception of something in which various determinations are necessarily connected together. It would be impossible for the mind to think itself as identical in its various determinations, and indeed to think that identity a priori, if it did not hold the identity of its own act before its eyes, and if it did not, by subjecting to a transcendental unity all the synthesis of empirical apprehension, make the connection of the various determinations implied in that synthesis possible in accordance with a priori rules.

15. Possibility of Any Combination whatever

Though a perception is merely sensuous or receptive, the various determinations of consciousness may be given, while the form, as simply the way in which the subject is affected, may lie a priori in the mind. But the combination (*conjunctio*) of those determinations can never come to us through the medium of sense, and therefore cannot be contained even in the pure form of sensible perception. Combination is a spontaneous act of consciousness, and, as such, it is the especial characteristic of understanding, as distinguished from sense. All combination, therefore, whether we are aware of it or not, whether it is a combination of the various determinations of perception or of several conceptions, and whether the determinations of perception are empirical or pure, is an act of understanding. This act we call by the general name of synthesis, to draw attention to the fact that we can be conscious of nothing as combined in the object, which we have not ourselves previously combined. And as it proceeds entirely from the self-activity of the subject, combination is the element, and the only element, that cannot be given by the object. It is easy to see that this act must in its origin always be of one and the same nature, no matter what may be the form of combination; and that the resolution or analysis, which seems to be its opposite, in point of fact always presupposes it. If understanding has previously combined nothing, there is nothing for it to resolve; for without the combining activity of understanding there can be no consciousness of an object at all.

By combination, however, must be understood not merely the synthesis of the various

determinations of sense, but also their unity. Combination is consciousness of the synthetic unity of various determinations. The consciousness of this unity cannot be the result of the combination, for were we not, in being conscious of various determinations, also conscious of their unity, we should have no conception of combination at all. Nor must this unity, which precedes any conception of combination, be confused with the category of unity; for all categories rest upon logical functions of judgment, and, in these, combination, or the unity of given conceptions, is already implied. For an explanation of the unity in question, which is qualitative, we must go further back, and seek it in that which as the ground of the unity of various conceptions in judgment, is implied in the possibility even of the logical use of understanding.

16. The Original Synthetic Unity of Apperception

The “I think” must be capable of accompanying all my ideas; for, otherwise, I should be conscious of something that could not be thought; which is the same as saying, that I should not be conscious at all, or at least should be conscious only of that which for me was nothing. Now, that form of consciousness which is prior to all thought, is perception. Hence, all the manifold determinations of perception have a necessary relation to the “I think” in the subject that is conscious of them. The “I think,” however, is an act of spontaneity, which cannot possibly be due to sense. I call it pure apperception, to distinguish it from empirical apperception. I call it also the original apperception, because it is the self-consciousness which produces the “I think.” Now, the “I think” must be capable of accompanying all other ideas, and it is one and the same in all consciousness; but there is no other idea beyond the “I think,” to which self-consciousness is bound in a similar way. The unity of apperception I call also the transcendental unity of self-consciousness, to indicate that upon it depends the possibility of a priori knowledge. For, the various determinations given in a certain perception would not all be in my consciousness, if they did not all belong to one self-consciousness. True, I may not be aware of this, but yet as they are determinations of my consciousness, they must necessarily conform to the condition, without which they are not capable of standing together in one universal self-consciousness. In no other way would they all without exception be mine. From this original combination important consequences follow.

The absolute identity of apperception in relation to all the determinations given in perception, involves a synthesis of those determinations, and is possible only through consciousness of the synthesis. For, the empirical consciousness, which accompanies each determination as it arises, is in itself broken up into units, and is unrelated to the one identical subject. Relation to a single subject does not take place when I accompany each determination with consciousness, but only when I add one determination to the other, and am conscious of this act of synthesis. It is only because I am capable of combining in one consciousness the various determinations presented to me, that I can become aware that in every one of them the consciousness is the same. The analytic unity of apperception is, therefore, possible only under presupposition of a certain synthetic unity. The thought, that the determinations given in a perception all belong to me, is the same as the thought, that I unite them, or at least that I am capable of uniting them in one self-consciousness. This does not of itself involve a consciousness of the synthesis of determinations, but it presupposes the possibility of that consciousness. It is only because I am capable of grasping the various

determinations in one consciousness, that I can call them all mine; were it not so, I should have a self as many-coloured and various as the separate determinations of which I am conscious. Synthetic unity of the various determinations of perception as given a priori, is therefore the ground of that identity of apperception itself, which precedes a priori every definite act of thought. Now, objects cannot combine themselves, nor can understanding learn that they are combined by observing their combination. All combination is the work of understanding, and in fact understanding is itself nothing but the faculty of combining a priori, and bringing under the unity of apperception, the various determinations given in perception. The unity of apperception is, therefore, the supreme principle of all our knowledge.

This principle of the necessary unity of apperception, is no doubt in itself an identical and therefore an analytic proposition; but it also reveals the necessity for a synthesis of the various determinations given in perception, because without such synthesis the thoroughgoing identity of self-consciousness is inconceivable. In the simple consciousness of self, no variety of determination is given; such variety of determination can be given only in the perception which is distinguished from the consciousness of self, and can be thought only by being combined in one consciousness. An understanding in which the consciousness of self should at the same time be a consciousness of all the complex determinations of objects, would be perceptive; but our understanding can only think, and must go to sense for perception. I am conscious of myself as identical in the various determinations presented to me in a perception, because all determinations that constitute one perception I call mine. But this is the same as saying, that I am conscious of a necessary synthesis of them a priori, or that they rest upon the original synthetic unity of apperception, under which all the determinations given to me must stand, but under which they can be brought only by means of a synthesis.

17. The Synthetic Unity of Apperception is the Supreme Principle of Understanding

In the Transcendental Esthetic, we have seen that the supreme principle, without which perception in its relation to sensibility is impossible, is, that all the determinations of perception should stand under the formal conditions of space and time. Now, the supreme principle, without which perception, in its relation to understanding is impossible, is, that all determinations of perception should stand under conditions of the original synthetic unity of apperception. Under the former stand all determinations of perception, in so far as they are given to us; under the latter, in so far as they must be capable of being combined in one consciousness. Apart from the synthetic unity of apperception, nothing can be thought or known, because the determinations given in perception, not having the act of apperception, "I think," in common, would not be comprehended in one self-consciousness.

Speaking quite generally, understanding is the faculty of knowledge. Knowledge consists in the consciousness of certain given determinations as related to an object. An object, again, is that, in the conception of which the various determinations of a given perception are united. Now, all unification of determinations requires unity of consciousness in the synthesis of determinations. Hence, the unity of consciousness is absolutely necessary, to constitute the relation of determinations to an object, give them objective validity, and make them objects of knowledge; and on that unity therefore rests the very possibility of