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2023

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Plotinus and the Transcendental Aesthetic of Kant

John Shannon Hendrix

A paper presented at the Foro di Studi Avanzati Conference, Rome, 2023.

The Transcendental Aesthetic is the first part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The A version was written in Königsberg in 1781; the revised version or B version was written in 1787. The transcendental aesthetic is defined as the “science of all principles of *a priori* sensibility” (A21/B35).¹ Aesthetic is defined as the science of the doctrine of sensibility. Transcendental is defined as the manner of knowing objects *a priori* (A11–12/B25), that is, not of empirical origin (A56/B80–81). This should be seen as the basis of experience (A783/B811), but is independent of all experience (B2–3). The *a priori* is universal and necessary, and includes all elements of thought that do not derive from sensations (B1). *A priori* elements are the product of cognitive faculties, and are invariant features of cognition. While matter or *morphe* is given *a posteriori* in sensation, form or *eidōs* exists *a priori* in the mind, separate from sensation. Form was described by Kant as arising “according as the various things which affect the senses are coordinated by a certain natural law of the mind.”²

A priori knowledge requires intuition and representation. Intuition is defined as the immediate relation between a mode of knowledge and an object. The mind receives representations of sensible objects (A19/B33), which is called sensibility. Sensibility, which is the aesthetic, gives objects and intuitions to the mind. The objects and intuitions are then thought through understanding, and from understanding arise concepts. So sensibility, intuition and representation are pre-conceptual. There are also pure representations that are not connected to sensation. Kant says, “The pure form of sensible intuitions in general, in which all the manifold of intuition is intuited in certain relations, must be found in the mind *a priori*” (A20/B34). So *a priori* knowledge, knowledge not connected to sensation or experience, involving intuition and representation, is based on an immediate relation between knowledge and an object, making transcendental aesthetic a contradiction in terms. Kant’s empiricist idealism or transcendental idealism is a contradiction in terms.

Several commentators on Kant have pointed out the lack of an adequate definition of “intuition” and “representation” in the Transcendental Aesthetic. Peter Strawson, in *The Bounds of Sense* in 1966, complained about the “confused presentation of the doctrine of pure intuition,”³ and the unclear differentiation between an intuition and a concept. Space is defined as both an intuition and a concept, and an intuition can be “non-empirical,” not based on the appearance or representation of an object. An appearance is defined by Kant as “the undetermined object of an empirical intuition” (A20/B34). Is a representation an image or a word? Kant does not say. Wilfrid Sellars called Kant’s intuition “the Myth of the Given.” In his *Science and Metaphysics*, based on the John Locke lectures at Oxford in 1965, he wrote, “It is, I suppose, as non-controversial as anything philosophical can be that

visual perception involves conceptual representations.”⁴ If Kant thinks of intuitions as representations, then they have to be conceptual. “And since it is clear that Kant thinks of intuitions as representations of individuals, this would mean that they are conceptual representations of attributes or kinds. Indeed Kant refers in the *Aesthetic* to the individuals Space and Time as concepts (A24; B38: A32; B48)” (3), that is, as representations. The lack of a distinction between sensation, intuition, representation, and concept in Kant fueled Hegel’s critique. Sellars sees Kant as being “confused about the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual representings ...” (39). Forms of sensibility have to be seen as conceptual representations.

John McDowell, in his book *Mind and World*, based on the John Locke lectures at Oxford in 1990, adopted Sellars’ myth of the given. According to McDowell, representation requires a combination of concept and intuition, which is connected to sensibility.⁵ Intuition in Kant’s scheme must be understood as having conceptual content (9). Experience must have conceptual content. Knowledge of what we perceive cannot be independent of the conceptual processes which result in perception. James O’Shea went so far as to say: “Some philosophers today contend, in fact, that when Kant’s full story is taken into account, particularly in the Transcendental Aesthetic, one of his key insights is that our ‘sensory intuitions’ of objects are themselves really a certain kind of *conceptually* informed response to and direct presentation of given objects. In recent years John McDowell (1996), in part following Sellars, has been a notable defender of this view.” Space, according to Kant, is an *a priori* intuition, and not “an empirical concept which has been derived from outer experiences” (A23/B38). Space is a representation that cannot be empirically obtained, and it underlies all appearances.

Dermot Moran began his recent essay “Kant on Intuition” by saying that “Intuitions ... prove to be a very problematic starting point for Kant ...”.⁶ William Henry Walsh “raised the question as to whether the notion of intuition can be made at all intelligible in Kant” (24). Objects are given by sensibility, which is the source of intuition, although intuition as *a priori* has no connection to sensibility. Forms of intuitions and representations can only be seen as appearances as forms of knowledge, and not connected to objects in themselves, phenomenal and not noumenal. Space and time form the basis of perception and knowledge, but they have no reality beyond intuition. It is possible that Kant was thinking of intuition in the German mystical tradition, Jacob Boehme, for example, for whom intuition is a form of mystical apprehension, and a sub-species of representation (25, n. 13). Intuition, as connected to sensation, must be distinguished from concept by Kant as a contrast to Leibniz and Descartes, for whom sensation was a mode of thinking, but a confused and special mode of thinking. Baumgarten saw sensation as a form of representation. In Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, intuitions that are direct representations of concepts are called schemata, while symbols are indirect representations of concepts. Intuitions are representations of understanding.

In Kant’s Inaugural Dissertation, an intuition is referred to as a “singular concept” (Moran, 36), but in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “appearances can certainly be given in intuition independently of functions of the understanding” (A90/B122). There is thus an “unresolved tension” (36) according to Moran, and in my view, appearances cannot be given in intuition independent of understanding. Although space is referred to as a concept

in the Dissertation, in the Transcendental Aesthetic, space “is not a discursive or, as we say, general concept of relations of things in general, but a pure intuition” (A24/B39). Should Kant’s intuition be seen as the classical intuition, noetic and non-discursive? If that is the case, where does it come from? Wouldn’t it be separated from sensibility? Kant’s pure immediacy of intuition, its lack of separation from sensibility, was not accepted by Fichte and Hegel. Kant’s empirical realism is a form of phenomenology. Kant distinguishes between sensation and representation (A166) and sensation and appearance (A167), but appearances as representations cannot be separated from apprehension and reception in the imagination (A190). According to Kant, sensibility leads to intuition, which leads to appearance and representation, which lead to understanding, which leads to concepts (A19). This is somewhat the reverse of the classical model, especially Plotinus. Moran concludes by saying that “the various accounts of intuition in Kant are too diverse to be melded into a single coherent doctrine” (53).

None of this confusion exists in Plotinus, whose model of cognition and perception makes much more sense. Unfortunately, nobody knows if Kant read Plotinus or not. Plotinus followed Aristotle in asserting that it is not sensible objects themselves that are perceived, but rather their image, the *eidos* that results from noetic thought, impressions that are “already intelligible entities”⁷ as described in *Enneads* I.1.7. Unmediated perception of the sensible world, as in Kant’s sensibility and intuition, is impossible, because perceived forms result from the combination of sensible perception and the conceptual formation of the forms in intellect, or intelligible forms. For Plotinus, it is the intelligible forms that are *a priori*. In fact, in order for perception of the sensible world to occur, intellect must be able to operate without being affected by the sensible world, as in the idealism of Berkeley, for example. Pure intellect is the noetic intellect, while the dianoetic intellect involves a dialectic of sense experience and noesis. Imagination mediates between the upper soul and lower soul. Understanding for Plotinus would result from the confluence of the *a priori* intelligible form, the sensible form, and the representation of it in linguistic articulation, whether spoken or unspoken, *logos prophorikos* or *logos endiathetos*. So the noetic concept leads to the dianoetic understanding, which leads to the discursive representation in language, which leads to sense experience and intuition, the opposite of Kant.

Cognition for Plotinus is a dialectical process facilitated by imagination, which is suspended between upper soul and lower soul, or intellect, the source of thinking, and sense perception, the object of thinking. The dialectical process involves the imprint of the sense object or sensible form in perception, like a seal in wax; the imprint of the idea of the object or intelligible form, the *eidos*, in the imagination or image-making power; the memory or recollection of past thoughts and perceptions in relation to present thought, as in anamnesis; the transformation of the image, both sensible and intelligible, into the *logos*, or word in language; both the spoken word and the word prior to speech in intellect; and the fitting together of these elements: sensible image, intelligible image, recollected sensible image, recollected intelligible image, sensible word, and intelligible word. The process requires the anticipation of the perception of the image or word in relation to the recollection of the intelligible image or word in intellect, as it is perceived as a reflection or imprint in the

mind. In contrast, the elements of language and memory play no role in Kant's model of cognition.

Plotinus is similar to Kant, though, in the synthesizing roles of apperception and the manifold, although apperception follows perception in Plotinus, while in Kant the manifold is prior to perception. For Plotinus, sense perception perceives forms in bodies, organizing the shapeless matter of which bodies are composed. Apperception, the faculty that combines sense perceptions, then "gathers into one that which appears dispersed and brings it back and takes it in, now without parts, to the soul's interior," as described in *Enneads* I.6.3. According to Kant, the synthesized manifold is the *a priori* ground for sensible intuitions. "The pure form of sensible intuitions in general, in which all the manifold of intuition is intuited in certain relations, must be found in the mind *a priori*" (A20/B34). The primary intuitions which supply the manifold are space and time. Space and time are intuitions not based on conceptual activity or sense experience. "Space is not an empirical concept which has been derived from outer experiences The representation of space cannot, therefore, be empirically obtained from the relations of outer appearance" (A23/B38). "Space is a necessary *a priori* representation, which underlies all outer intuitions," and "Space is not a discursive or, as we say, general concept of relations of things in general, but a pure intuition" (A24/B39). Space is a sensible intuition and a representation, or *Vorstellung*, but a *Vorstellung*, or mental image, requires a previous perception. It is not an immediate perception. The *Vorstellung* entails the intuition, concept, and idea in the Platonic sense. The Platonic idea or archetype exists beyond human experience and understanding, so cannot be a form of idealism, while an idea or concept of reason is for Kant "a concept formed from notions and transcending the possibility of experience ..." (A320/B377), while being derived from experience, thus not a form of idealism. The *Darstellung*, or presentation, is a sensible, aesthetic idea, which is an intuition for which there is no concept.

Space for Kant is an intuition and a representation, but it cannot be a concept, outside a synthesized *a priori* manifold. Geometrical and mathematical propositions are also intuitions and not concepts, in that they contain the synthesized *a priori* manifold, and depend on the perception of space and time. Like space and time, geometrical and mathematical propositions are necessary and universal, and cannot be subdivided as synthetic intuitions. Any object that is perceived must be perceived in space; the absence of space is not possible, therefore it is the necessary ground for all sense experience. Thus sense experience, and the reality of the world, is not possible without the *a priori* construction of the mind, though intuitive and not cognitive. As Wilfrid Sellars wrote in *Science and Metaphysics*, "Kant's whole conception of experience is a sophisticated development of the platonic notion that we experience the world as spatial by responding to sense impression with ideal geometrical concepts which have not been derived from experience" (55).

Geometrical figures are constructed in the space of perception, and the properties of geometry must correspond with the properties of space. There are no properties of objects in sense perception that do not conform to the properties of space. The *a priori* manifold of Kant entails the construction of unified representations from multiple contents. The faculty of synthesis is labelled "imagination" by Kant. "... every appearance contains a

manifold There must therefore exist in us an active faculty for the synthesis of this manifold. To this faculty I give the title imagination" (A120) Here the intelligible form must be constructed in order for the sensible form to be perceived, as with Plotinus, but it can only be in the form of intuition. As with Plotinus, there is a higher imagination and a lower imagination in Kant, one dealing with intelligibles and one dealing with sensibles. There are both a productive, transcendental, *a priori* imagination, and a reproductive, empirical imagination. Imagination provides the rules for synthesis which make perception possible, as for Plotinus. "Since imagination has to bring the manifold of intuition into the form of an image," Kant says, "it must previously have taken the impression up into its activity, that is, apprehended them" (A120). This sounds like Plotinus; it is difficult to imagine how this is possible without cognition and conceptualization, that it, how it can rely on intuition, which is intended as something other than a concept.

In the *Enneads*, the image formed by imagination based on sense perception is accorded to the image formed in imagination by logos from the forming principle. The architect, for example, can "declare the house beautiful by fitting it to the form of house within him" (I.6.3), the intelligible form of the house based on the geometry, mathematics and proportions of the forming principle in noetic thought, similar to Kant. As Kant describes, "When, for instance, by apprehension of the manifold of a house I make the empirical intuition of it into a perception, the necessary unity of space and of outer sensible intuition in general lies at the basis of my apprehension, and I draw as it were the outline of the house in conformity with this synthetic unity of the manifold in space" (B162). As Kant's imagination is both intelligible and sensible, "Imagination is the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is not in itself present" (B151), he says in the Transcendental Deduction in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The "transcendental synthesis of imagination" is an *a priori* synthesis, an apperception prior to perception. Intuition, likewise, was defined in the Transcendental Aesthetic as existing in the mind *a priori* as a form of sensibility "even without any actual object of the sense or of sensation ..." (A21/B35). But the sensible intuition is the necessary basis for all thought and concept, and "the thought of an object in general, by means of a pure concept of understanding, can become knowledge for us only in so far as the concept is related to objects of the senses" (B146). In the Paralogisms of Pure Reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "Without some empirical representation to supply the material for thought, the *actus*, 'I think', would not, indeed, take place; but the empirical is only the condition of the application, or of the employment, of the pure intellectual faculty" (B422 note). Kant avoids being an idealist.

Objects, forms, appearances, motion, and direction cannot be perceived in space alone; they can only be perceived in relation to other objects, forms, appearances, motions, and directions. An object cannot be perceived in relation to empty space, and cannot be the basis for conceptual activity. Sequences of objects perceived in reproductive imagination have no necessary connection to each other and cannot be the basis of knowledge without conforming to rules of representation, schemata and categories. These are given by the productive, transcendental imagination. Without them, no unified experience would be possible. The juxtaposition of sensibility and understanding, for which Kant is known, and for which he was criticized by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, is reconciled in the transcendental imagination. As Kant says, "The unity of apperception in relation to the

synthesis of imagination is the understanding” (A119). *A priori* modes of knowledge which “contain the necessary unity of the pure synthesis of the imagination” are labelled the categories. Just as no object can be perceived outside a relation to other objects, no concept is possible outside a relation to other representations. Intuitions could be seen as signifiers in language, as only defined in relation to other signifiers in language, but language plays no role in Kant’s theory of representation. To summarize Kant, we have sensibility, which allows us to receive sensations of objects, but only within the framework of the *a priori* intuitions of space and time, and simultaneously within the framework of *a priori* representations, both of which form the basis of understanding, which allows for perception of objects, but only as appearances, not as the objects in themselves. Understanding and perception lead to concepts, which lead to thought. We can only know the mechanisms of our sensation, intuition, representation, understanding, perception, and thought. We cannot know objects outside of those mechanisms; they have no existence as such, as Berkeley said. Many commentators have observed that Kant is closer to Berkeley than he thinks.

There is little study of the relevance that Plotinus’ theory of cognition might have for the thought of Kant, or for the thought of his predecessors in the foundations of modern theories of perception and cognition, such as Descartes or Berkeley, Leibniz or Hume. Plotinus seems to be more relevant to Kant’s followers, like Schelling and Hegel, the Romantics. Certainly a comparison between Plotinus and Kant can be a fruitful exercise in trying to figure out how the mind works in philosophical terms.

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Notes

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1968).

² Immanuel Kant, *De Mundi Sensibilis atque Intelligibilis Forma et Principiis*, AAI: 392–93, quoted in Patricia Kitcher, *Kant's Transcendental Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 35.

³ Peter Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019 [1966]), p. 55.

⁴ Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 12.

⁵ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 6.

⁶ Dermot Moran, "Kant on Intuition," in *Kant and the Continental Tradition: Sensibility, Nature, and Religion*, ed. Sorin Baiasu and Alberto Vanzo (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 23–60, p. 23.

⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, The Loeb Classical Library, 1966).