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Kant's Critique of Pure Reason Preceptorial

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Difficulties with the Apprehension of Time

Kant begins his Critique of Pure Reason by considering a topic that has always intrigued me, a puzzle for which I have not found any adequate philosophical system: Time (and its close relative, Space). “In the course of this investigation it will be found that there are two pure forms of sensible intuition, serving as principles of *a priori* knowledge, namely, space and time.” In this paper I will explore some of the edges of Kant's treatment of time. I go to the edges because it is there that systems tend to reveal conceptual difficulties.

Background

For Kant, space and time are neither things in themselves, nor properties of things in themselves, but simply the forms we require in order to think anything at all. Space is the form of outer intuition, and time the form of inner intuition. When we think things as being “outside ourselves”, we must place them in space; and when we consider our thoughts and those elements which we call “inside” ourselves, we find that we do, in fact *must*, order them in time. The words “outside” and “inside” when used in this way refer not to position with respect to our physical bodies as things in themselves, nor to our minds as things in themselves, but only to the manner in which we organize representations of the world into a “unity of apperception”, the

experience of a unified self. Those representations that we place in space we call “outside”, and those that we organize into a timeline we call “inside”.

Throughout the Critique, Kant retains the notion of the existence of things-in-themselves, as being something different from the intuitions and representations and appearances to which they give rise in our world of experience. He is adamant that nothing at all can be known about these things-in-themselves (which he calls “transcendental objects”), but they are always lurking behind his world of possible experience, and seem to be necessary to his understanding of the possibility of freedom. He does not treat the thing-in-itself as a mere foil for his arguments, nor as a theoretical starting point that he intends to disprove or dispense with, but rather as something real in the sense that it has consequences or effects. His very choice of the words “appearance” and “representation”, and his emphasis that the very earliest (logically) item in our knowledge—an intuition—is “given”, all regard this thing-in-itself as somehow generative. If something is given, it implies a giver. An appearance presumes something that appears, and a representation likewise presumes an original or a referent. “Though we cannot *know* these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to *think* them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearances without anything that appears.” (Bxxvii)

If we were to posit that there is no such thing-in-itself, we would be left with an insurmountable problem: the origin of the intuitions. If the intuitions do not arise from something else, then they must arise spontaneously or be eternally existent. Furthermore, if they arise without reference to anything else, then they *are* things-in-themselves; there is no sense in

speaking of their being *representations*, and no sense in saying that we cannot know the things-in-themselves, for that would be all we *could* know, since all thought is directed to the intuitions.

(A19)

I will presume the existence of things-in-themselves, and will refer to the collection of all things-in-themselves as the “world-in-itself”. Of course, “existence” in this usage does not refer to the presence of this world in our experience, for we cannot experience the world-in-itself, but only the intuitions and representations and appearances that are given to us, through our senses. What I mean by saying that this world-in-itself exists is simply that our intuitions do not arise spontaneously and of themselves, but are *in fact* given by something else.

The logically first step toward knowledge occurs when “the object is given to us” in intuition. “This again is only possible, to man at least, in so far as the mind is affected in a certain way.” The ability to be so affected is called “sensibility”. By means of our sensibility we receive “representations”, which term can refer to the raw intuitions themselves as well as to synthetic combinations of intuitions such as perceptions and concepts.¹ These intuitions are presented to our minds as each containing an undetermined and unorganized “manifold” which is the raw material of thought, and which is organized and processed synthetically into perceptions, concepts, and the experiences of a unified self.

“Every intuition contains in itself a manifold which can be represented as a manifold only in so far as the mind distinguishes the time in the sequence of one impression upon another; for each representation, *in so far as it is contained in a single moment*, can never be anything but absolute unity. In order that unity of intuition may arise out of the manifold (as is required in the representation of

¹ A320

space) it must first be run through and held together. This act I name the *synthesis of apprehension*, because it is directed immediately upon intuition, which does indeed offer a manifold, but a manifold which can never be represented as a manifold, and as contained in a single representation, save in virtue of such synthesis.” (A99)

We have then, at one logical end, a manifold of appearances that has been given us by the world-in-itself via intuition, and at the other an organized, time and space-ordered experience in a unified self. Critical to the synthesis of this unified experience is the organization and connection of the manifold into space and into a time sequence. This is accomplished using the Principles of Pure Understanding, which consist of the “Axioms of Intuition”, the “Anticipations of Perception”, the “Analogies of Experience”, and the “Postulates of Empirical Thought in General. “

Throughout the Critique Kant is adamant that time and space are mere forms of intuition, the necessary grounds of any experience and of all knowledge, and not things-in-themselves. This, I believe, we can grant. It is impossible to think any thought without invoking concepts of time or space, and impossible to think of no time or of no space. However, he also insists that neither time nor space “represent any property of things in themselves”², nor “an order inhering in things themselves”³. He wishes to separate time and space absolutely from the world-in-itself, saying not only that they do not exist in that world as objects, but also that they do not even correspond to any attribute of that world. This I cannot so easily grant, as it seems to raise

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³ A33

insoluble problems in understanding the manifold of appearances and the operation of his Principles of Pure Understanding.

The Manifold

Let us begin with the concept of the manifold of appearances. How are we to think of this, as regards to its organization in space and time? Note in A99, quoted above, that Kant seems to think of the manifold as existing in two modes: as *given* or offered (not capable of being represented) and as *synthesized* (into a representation.)

In contemplating the concept of the manifold as *given* we must not think of it as being given already *organized* in time or space, for that organization is the product of the synthesis of the understanding. We cannot, for example, think of multiple intuitions as being presented to us sequentially in time, as though I am first given a representation of billiard balls separated by two feet, then by one foot, then touching, then separated again. That would be to conceive of the manifold as being given in an order that corresponds to the order of its appearances after the operation of the Second Analogy. Even insofar as we conceive of one of the intuitions being of billiard balls separated by two feet, we have already assumed a coexistence in space, which is the effect of the Third Analogy. We cannot even think that one of the intuitions is of ball A and another of ball B, because “ball” is a representation that already contains spatial organization. No, we must consider the initial intuition, the manifold *as given* by the world-in-itself, to contain data that we cannot comprehend or imagine in any way.

One might object, “But of course you can’t imagine the manifold without time or space. That’s the point! We can’t begin to speak of anything, even the manifold, until after the understanding has processed it, and it can only process it in terms of time and space.” Well and good, but then is not the given manifold itself a type of transcendental object, which we can never experience? The manifold is supposed to be presented to us through our senses, and hence, in one sense, to be an object of experience. Space and time are logically prior to sensation; they are the grounds of intuition. Hence the manifold, which is a manifold of intuitions and hence a type of experience, should be comprehensible to me. Yet we cannot think the manifold as *being given* in any particular order. *As given*, then, the manifold seems to be a transcendental object that we cannot know in itself.

At the bottom of page B 234, in speaking of the Second Analogy, Kant states, “The apprehension of the manifold of appearance is always successive. The representations of the parts follow upon one another.” Furthermore, he argues, “...we must therefore agree that the manifold of appearances is always generated in the mind successively.” Kant here seems to distinguish between the manifold itself, and the apprehension of the manifold. Later he states,

“...the apprehension of the manifold in the appearance of a house which stands before me is successive. The question then arises, whether the manifold of the house is also in itself successive. This, however, no one will grant.”(B235-236)

Apprehension of the manifold as ordered in time and space is the function of the Second and Third Analogies. The “manifold of the house in itself” is not so ordered. I am uncertain

whether by this phrase Kant means all the in-themselves qualities of the house as transcendental object, or the collection of intuitions (into a manifold of intuitions) given by the house-in-itself, whatever that may be. From his subsequent discussion and distinction between “subjective succession of apprehension” and “objective succession of appearances”, in which he uses the house as an example of subjective succession, I conclude that by “the manifold of the house” he means the manifold of intuitions as given.

If the manifold as given is not already organized into time and space, then we must think of it as being given at no time and at no place. This means, for example, that we cannot think of the manifold as unfolding to us, beginning when we were born and stopping when we die. No part of the manifold can have been given to us before any other part. In a sense, we must think of the manifold as being given all-at-once, as an unordered collection of intuitions, or better, perhaps, as being *always* given, as an eternal, unchanging collection of intuitions that simply *is*.

Likewise we cannot think of the manifold as being given at any particular location in space. Hence I cannot think of the manifold as being given to me in the United States and as being given to Tony Blair in the U.K. I cannot even think that when I drive from Hershey to Annapolis, the manifold given to me is changing in its perspective. That change in perspective for me must already be in the manifold of given appearances, in some sense.

Alternatively, if we think of the manifold of appearances given in an intuition as already organized into a time sequence, as in one sense it must be, since time and space are the forms of intuition, we have a somewhat different problem. If the manifold is *given* us as already ordered

in time and space, then it is difficult to understand in what sense it can be said that this order is a product of any synthetic process of mind. Or if we say that the manifold, as given, is not ordered but contains time and space data that the understanding uses to order its appearance in the timeline, we seem to be positing some type of time and space “tags” as attaching to the appearances themselves.

It occurs to me that I may be working out a paralogism here, extending the concepts of understanding beyond experience to the world-as-it-is. I would answer that the manifold is presented by Kant as being the source of the content of our experience, as being that part of our knowledge of objects which relates immediately to the object. Consideration of the type of data that our understanding uses to synthesize our world of experience should be in some way comprehensible to us; it is on the side of experience. The problem of the manifold does not arise, as the antinomies do, by my trying to consider it in its entirety, as a completed series, for I am not considering it as a series at all, but as a collection which may or may not have a determinate size.

Kant himself seems to speak of the manifold as a sort of collection, one that can be “gone through”, organized, and connected into a single apperception, the self.

“But if this manifold (the manifold of pure *a priori* intuition contained in space and time) is to be known, the spontaneity of our thought requires that it be gone through in a certain way, taken up, and connected. This act I name *synthesis*. By *synthesis* in its most general sense, I understand the act of putting different representations together, and of grasping what is manifold in them in one act of knowledge.” (A77) (see also A99 above)

A certain vagueness in the nomenclature may be part of the problem here. Kant sometimes speaks of *intuition* as singular, as if to mean the sum total of all the impressions upon our sensibility by the world-in-itself, and sometimes he speaks of *intuitions*, suggesting that that whole can be considered in its parts. Likewise, he defines *appearance* as “the undetermined object of an empirical intuition” (A20) and most often speaks of *appearances* in the plural, as though they were distinguishable items. Appearances are closely related to intuitions, but seem to be used by Kant as being slightly more removed from the transcendental object and hence logically closer to our experience. Both intuitions and appearances present a *manifold* to the mind. I am uncertain whether this manifold is to be thought of as consisting of parts or members, and whether there is one manifold or many.

The Second Analogy of Experience

Let us leave the problem of the manifold aside for now, and move further along in the process of apperception. The Second Analogy seeks to describe the way in which the understanding organizes the *given* manifold into time order, and states that each appearance is placed in the timeline in such a manner that it follows necessarily from the appearance that is placed prior to it in the timeline. That is, each appearance contains in it such determinations that a following appearance is completely determined thereby. This is to say it in the future-looking sense. Kant seems to prefer a perspective that looks toward the past:

“This rule, by which we determine something according to succession of time, is, that the condition under which an event invariably and necessarily follows is to be found in what precedes the event. The principle of sufficient reason is thus the ground of possible experience, that is, of objective knowledge of appearances in respect of their relations in the order of time.” (B246)

There must be something, therefore, in each appearance that provides some ground for placing it before or after each other appearance. Again, to even begin to think about ordering appearances, we must first begin thinking of a collection of appearances that are not yet ordered. Kant speaks of the appearances as discreet items that relate to each other. In the Third Analogy, they interact with each other.⁴ Hence, we should be justified in considering appearances as discreet items in our discussion.

What could constitute the sufficient reason that one appearance would be arranged as prior to another? To say that the prior appearance must have in it the “cause” of the subsequent is merely to beg the question because, for Kant, the operation of the rule itself *is* causality. Upon what elements of the appearances does this rule operate? The doctrine of sufficient reason requires that there be something distinguishable between items if they are to be distinguished. So, upon what basis does the understanding distinguish between appearances so as to place them in the time sequence as “before” and “after”?

Like the problem of the manifold, this problem is made more pressing by the presumed existence of the world-in-itself as somehow originating the intuitions that underlie the appearances. If we could consider the appearances as simply appearing in the mind *ex nihilo*, then we could allow the creating mind to provide any connection it wished between appearances, and to place into any appearance whatever elements would distinguish it from the subsequent appearance. However, this would result in a solipsistic system, in which the isolated mind creates all its own experience, indeed its entire world. To retain a world in which it is possible

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for multiple minds to share a common experience, we must retain the world-in-itself as generative, and the manifold of appearance as in some way shared.

Therefore, the intuitions from which the appearances are synthesized must have *some* correlation with the world-in-itself, even though we be incapable of perceiving that correlation. To say that there is *no* correlation whatsoever would be to remove all meaning from the words “given”, “representation”, and “appearance” as relating to the intuition and its object. We need not assume any particular type of correlation; it need not be one-to-one or linear or geometric, for example. But to say that there is no correlation whatsoever between the intuition and the thing-in-itself leaves us with nothing to think about.

If we accept any correlation between an intuition and any thing-in-itself, we objectify the appearances. They cannot be entirely created by the mind, from whole cloth, but must be synthesized from what is given, and that *given* is not a pure creation of the mind but has some connection to the world-in-itself. The mind must work with what it is given. Therefore, that which it finds in the appearances to order them in time must, in the final analysis, be found in some form in the intuitions that underlie the appearances.

Hence, using the doctrine of sufficient reason, we must trace the basis for distinguishing time order all the way back to the intuitions. Note that we are not trying to find, in the intuitions, some clue as to how they fit into some “real” time, transcendently outside us, but only some sufficient reason to place them in some *particular* order, using whatever rule might be posited, such that their order will “become” the timeline for us. To say that there is nothing in the

intuitions that could allow them to be placed in a sequence, or to be combined through a synthetic process into one particular sequence, is to say that there is no discernible reason for any sequence that might be chosen.

What are the minimal requirements for arranging any collection into a determined sequence? I will use the analogy of a collection of blank cards or bits of paper, not located (in this thought experiment) in space, so that their position with respect to one another is not a factor. If the cards were absolutely identical to one another, then there would clearly be no sufficient reason for organizing them into a series, nor any way of even distinguishing one random arrangement from another. In fact, we could say that, if they were absolutely identical, there would be no meaning at all to the concept “series” as applied to them. If the cards bear markings, for example a single spot located in a different location on each card, then we could clearly find a rule that could operate upon the spot’s location to order the cards. However, a little thought will reveal that, with the spot, we have also had to introduce some kind of scalar reference system, a system using magnitude of distance to locate the spots, prior to their being organized. Likewise, if we envisioned a series of markings resembling a Mensa-style IQ test, we would be invoking, *a priori*, a spatial framework in which to determine the sequence.

Consider cards that were sprayed randomly with various colors in various amounts. We could choose a rule that arranged the cards according to the area on each which was occupied by the color blue, or alternatively, according to the intensity of the colors in the blue spectrum.

In all these examples, the rule, whatever it is, requires the existence, in each card to be placed in the series, of some identifiable attribute which is both similar from card to card and in some way different. (This suggests Kant's First Analogy of Experience, with this necessary similarity from card to card perhaps corresponding to his "substance", without which time cannot be determined.) In any case, it suggests that, in the manifold *as given (and not yet ordered)*, logically prior to the manifold *as synthesized (and so ordered)*, the elements upon which the synthetic operation is to operate must already have attributes which correspond to time, in so far as it is these attributes which provide the sufficient reason for placing one appearance before another. These attributes, whatever they are, need not *seem* time-like; the varying blues in our example above give no hint, in themselves, of a series. The series arises from the operation of the rule. Nevertheless, could we not say, in this example, that blueness in the appearance somehow relates to its position in time?

Hence it is difficult for me to accept Kant's assertion that time corresponds to no attribute of the world-in-itself, but is *nothing but* the form of inner sense. That it is the form of our inner sense is quite conceivable, perhaps even "clear and apparent". That there can be *no* attributes of things-in-themselves that correspond to, or give rise to, our intuition of time and space is, for me, much less apparent. If there is to be any correspondence whatsoever between our intuitions and the world-as-it is, however inscrutable, (and such correspondence is inherent in our ideas of representation or appearance), and any synthetic process of creating a specific, necessary sequence in these intuitions or appearances, it seems there must be some attribute or attributes in the world-in-itself which give rise to that in the appearances upon which the synthesis of the Second Analogy operates.

