

THE SYNTHESIS OF PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION IN THE IMAGINATION

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The Transcendental Deduction of Kant's first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* contains a paragraph which is poorly understood.¹ This paragraph unnecessarily clouds the meaning of the "Synthesis of Reproduction in the Imagination," making the three-fold Synthesis more confusing than it ought to be. In this paper, I will show that Kant actually discusses two different syntheses in the "Synthesis of Reproduction in the Imagination," one which is pure and one which is empirical. These two syntheses have very different roles in the types of knowledge they help create. One synthesis, which Kant calls the synthesis of reproduction, deals only with the information we gain from experience. The other synthesis, the productive synthesis, is more fundamental. It has two roles: It not only makes synthetic *a priori* knowledge possible, it also provides the foundation for the synthesis of reproduction, and so has a role in processing the information we gain from experience. I will illustrate these claims through four steps. First, I will clarify the terms Kant uses to describe this part of the acquisition of knowledge. Then, I will show that Kant proposed to provide a ground for knowledge which was independent of experience. Third, I will show that the explanations from the first paragraph of "The Synthesis of Reproduction in Imagination" justify the reproductive synthesis, while those from the second paragraph show the importance of the *a priori* productive synthesis. Finally, I will show that the specific examples which Kant uses follow this trend from empirical (dependent on experience) to *a priori* (independent of experience). Although Kant seems to conflate the two syntheses in this section, he later provides evidence that the distinction was clear to him. Understanding this distinction should add to a reader's comprehension of Kant.

Kant is interested in the problem of knowledge and in explaining how empirical knowledge is possible. He shows that empirical knowledge must have an *a priori* basis. In other words, there must be a basis for empirical knowledge apart from experience. The three-fold synthesis is part of the *a priori* ground which makes knowledge from experience possible.

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The three-fold synthesis consists of three separate syntheses. First, we must apprehend (see, or take in) all the presentations given to us in any given moment. These presentations can come from our senses, as perceptions, or from our own mind, essentially as unformed ideas. Second, we must grasp all these presentations in our mind in a given instant so that the third synthesis can unite them in a recognizable concept or object.

Each of these syntheses is transcendental, which means that it can yield synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Synthetic *a priori* knowledge is a term that Kant uses to describe knowledge which is independent of all experience, but which requires that we construct it. Geometry is an example of the synthetic *a priori*. Through the synthetic *a priori*, I know that the angles of a triangle add up to 180°. While I have measured many triangles in my life and have never seen one that was exactly 180°, I know that this postulate is true. The knowledge I have is true, but not true purely by either definition or experience.

In order to yield synthetic *a priori* knowledge, a synthesis must rest on *a priori* presentations. The first synthesis rests on time and space, which are *a priori* concepts. The second synthesis rests on my ability to maintain in my mind all of the presentations that will allow the third synthesis to unify them into a concept or object. The third synthesis rests on the categories (an *a priori* way to unify presentations) and on a consciousness of the self (a consciousness in which I, one particular being, always perform the synthesis).

I have stated that Kant presents two syntheses under the heading of the second synthesis and it may be helpful to know exactly what happens in both of these syntheses before continuing with my argument. As the evidence I provide in this paper demonstrates, the productive synthesis deals only with *a priori* presentations. Think about drawing a line. As you do so, you must be able to hold in your consciousness previous parts of the line. If you could not, the line would seem only like a point. The productive imagination holds in your consciousness all the parts that went before. This enables you to see each point as part of a whole. So, the productive imagination provides the continuity that makes presentations more than a series of unconnected points. It may be easy to remember that the productive synthesis is *a priori* if you think of it as something that is *produced* in the mind.

The reproductive imagination deals with empirical presentations. It helps me to see continuity in objects of experience, which enables me to have empirical knowledge. Kant uses the example of cinnabar, a heavy red crystal made of mercury and lead. When I see the red crystal shape that is

typical of cinnabar, my imagination reproduces the idea of heavy and associates it with the red crystal. This reproduction is the stage the mind must go through before it can recognize (in the third synthesis) that the red, heavy crystal is cinnabar. It provides the associations that give our thought meaning. These associations, in turn, rest on continuity. I must always reproduce heavy when I see the red crystal or I cannot think that the object is cinnabar. It may help to remember that the reproductive synthesis is the synthesis that involves empirical presentations if you think that some parts of the object or concept that will be united through the three-fold synthesis must be *reproduced* (from prior experience) in the mind.

In several places, Kant clearly states that the purpose of the three-fold synthesis is to provide a transcendental ground for knowledge. In the introduction to his discussion of the three-fold synthesis, Kant tells us that he wants to explore those functions of the mind "that form the *a priori* foundation for the possibility of experience" (74:17–18 A97). This must be the "transcendental rather than the empirical constitution of these sources" (74:19–20 A97). Clearly, Kant is looking for that part of the synthesis which will yield synthetic *a priori* knowledge—the transcendental foundation that makes empirical knowledge possible.

He also states this purpose in the conclusion of the section on the Reproductive Synthesis. Here, he calls it one of the "transcendental acts of the mind" and the "transcendental power of imagination" (78:19–22 A102f). Again, Kant clearly intends to discuss a function in the mind which provides a basis for synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Knowledge of this type logically presupposes experience. It will be concerned with *a priori* presentations, such as the *a priori* concept of an object, and not with objects of experience.

The explanations and discussion of the syntheses do not describe what each synthesis does. Instead, they explain why each synthesis is necessary. In the first paragraph, Kant justifies the possibility of the empirical imagination. Then, in the second paragraph, he shows that the empirical imagination rests on the *a priori* imagination in such a way that it could do nothing without the *a priori*.

Kant starts out the first paragraph with an allusion to Hume that clearly shows that Kant was concerned with the empirical:

It is a merely empirical law that presentations that have often followed or accompanied each other finally become associated and are thereby connected in such a way that, even in the absence of the object, the presentation of one leads the mind to a presentation of the other according to a fixed rule. (77:8–13 A100)

Part of Kant's project was to show why the empiricists, especially Hume, were wrong in their claim that all knowledge is based solely on the empirical. Here we see that Kant recognizes that there is empirical law, by which presentations become ordered in our minds. Hume says that this association was unjustified, since it was based only on habit. Kant simply says that such associations are made by the mind, but at this point he makes no claim regarding their legitimacy. He goes on to say: "This law of reproduction presupposes that the appearances themselves are actually subject to such a rule, and . . . accompany each other according to specific rules" (77:13-17 A100). In other words, the empirical law from the first quotation is the same as the law of reproduction in this quotation and comes from the synthesis of reproduction. The "appearances themselves" are not the things in themselves, but are subject to the workings of the inner mind. The synthesis of reproduction presupposes that there are some rules by which appearances can be associated. Without the underlying rules "our empirical imagination would have nothing on which to exercise its powers, and it would remain hidden in the mind as an inert and to us unknown power" (77:18-20 A100f). Without this *a priori* ground for rules, our empirical imagination would be powerless, functionless, and "there could be no empirical synthesis of reproduction" (77:33-34 A101).

In the second paragraph, Kant further emphasizes that the empirical synthesis must be grounded on an *a priori* synthesis. He begins with the claim that any reproduction of appearances must have an *a priori* ground. "Thus, there must be something that makes possible this reproduction of appearances by providing the *a priori* ground for their necessary synthetic unity" (77:35-38 A101). We must remember that appearances "are not things in themselves, but . . . proceed according to determinations of inner sense" (77:39-41 A101). In other words, all appearances are subject to the workings of our mind and should not be confused with the object itself. All continuity is given by *a priori* concepts in the mind. Knowledge of this continuity comes to us through the three-fold synthesis:

Suppose we could show that even our purest *a priori* perceptions provide no knowledge except in so far as they contain a combination of the manifold that will make possible a thoroughgoing synthesis of reproduction. (77:42-46 A101)

Here Kant alludes to the first synthesis, that of apprehension. He tells us to suppose that the synthesis of apprehension can only contribute

to knowledge through the Synthesis of Reproduction. Kant seems to presuppose that such a supposition is so easily satisfied that it requires no further attention from him. He simply concludes: "Then this synthesis of imagination must be grounded on *a priori* principles prior to all experience" (77:46–48 A101). On this basis, "one must assume that there is a pure transcendental synthesis that is the foundation of the very possibility of all experience" (77:48–50 A101). Although this is a large assumption, it clearly shows that the emphasis of this second paragraph is that the productive synthesis in imagination provides the grounds for both empirical and *a priori* knowledge, "for experience as such necessarily presupposes that appearances can be reproduced" (77:50–51 A101) and, as Kant has shown, the reproduction of any appearance presupposes their *a priori* ground, which is the productive synthesis.

The examples which Kant uses more clearly describe how this synthesis provides knowledge, and they also illustrate the distinction between the empirical and the *a priori* synthesis in this section. In the first paragraph, he uses examples from ordinary experience.

Suppose that cinnabar were sometimes red, sometimes black, sometimes light, sometimes heavy, or suppose that a man appeared sometimes in one and sometimes in another animal shape, or that, on the longest day, the land were sometimes covered with fruit and sometimes with ice and snow. Then, when I have the presentation of red, my empirical imagination would never have an opportunity to imagine heavy cinnabar. (77:21–28 A100–01)

He further demonstrates that we depend on this continuity in language in order to have meaning:

Or suppose that a certain word were sometimes applied to one thing and sometimes to another, or that one thing were sometimes named one way and sometimes another, without following any rule to which the appearances are subject. (77:29–33 A101)

The continuity of nature and of language each has a role in the reproductive synthesis of imagination. Kant suggests that this empirical synthesis rests on continuity in the external world as well as its *a priori* basis in the mind. In other words, in addition to the logical necessity of the productive synthesis in imagination, which gives us our idea

of continuity, the empirical synthesis works only because there is continuity in the natural world and language. Thus, when you say "black," my imagination reproduces in my mind "no light." Suppose, however, that black could describe any color. It would soon become useless because it would not tell me anything at all about a color in question. If it were not used with a specific continuity, it would lose its meaning.

The examples from the second paragraph are similarly specific, but *a priori*:

If I think of drawing a line or of the time from one noon to another or if I imagine some particular number, it is obvious that I must first apprehend in thought one after another of these manifold presentations. But suppose that earlier presentations—the first parts of the line, the earlier parts of the time interval, or the previously presented units in the number—always fell from thought and were not reproduced while I advance to those that follow. (78:1–9 A102)

What are the subjects Kant is writing about here? First, he writes of the continuity of a line. This is geometry, a discussion of space, one of the *a priori* forms of sensible perception. Second, he writes of the continuity of time, the other form of sensible perception. Both of these are subject to this synthesis and yield synthetic *a priori* knowledge (such as geometry or an interval of time). These examples only presuppose the continuity of time and space, a concept which Kant has proven. This productive synthesis is purely *a priori* and provides the transcendental ground for the empirical synthesis. Although we may think that there is continuity in objects of experience, we can know this continuity only through the *a priori* productive synthesis in imagination.

In this section, the two syntheses are lumped together in such a way that it almost seems that Kant is conflating the two. However, he later clarifies the distinction between them, making it clear that they are indeed two separate syntheses. In the second edition, for example, he states:

Since imagination is an exercise of spontaneity, I sometimes call it productive imagination. This distinguishes it from the merely reproductive imagination whose synthesis is entirely subject to empirical laws, namely, to laws of association. (100:26–31 B152)

Kant calls the empirical synthesis of the imagination the reproductive synthesis in imagination, while he labels the *a priori* synthesis the produc-

tive synthesis in imagination. The reproductive synthesis rests on the productive synthesis and is the source of what he calls "laws of association." Later, he says that the reproductive synthesis "contributes nothing to the explanation of the possibility of *a priori* knowledge; it is a part of psychology rather than of transcendental philosophy" (100:31–34 B152). We have experience and learn to associate different things through our experience. Black becomes associated with an absence of light. Cinnamon becomes associated with heavy and red, winter becomes associated with cold, short days, and so on. The productive imagination has a completely different role. It holds in the mind the presentations important to the recognition of a particular object. These must be completely *a priori*. For example, to construct in my mind the idea of a triangle, I must be able to hold in my mind three lines which fit together in a certain way. If I could not hold these in my mind, I would not be able to perform the third synthesis and recognize that what I have in my mind is a triangle.

Thus, we can see that Kant did present two different syntheses in his section on the "Synthesis of Reproduction in the Imagination." Both of these syntheses are necessary for experience. The productive synthesis provides the transcendental grounds for the possibility of all types of knowledge, while the empirical synthesis yields only empirical knowledge. Understanding this distinction should help any reader of Kant, by enabling her or him to see that while the empirical synthesis is necessary for experience, the productive synthesis is the main point of the section on the Synthesis of Reproduction, because it provides transcendental grounds for all kinds of knowledge.

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