

# Kant's Model of the Mind

## The Concept of the Imagination Before Kant

Basically, discussions of imagination have been of two types, those that associate imagination with novelty, creativity, and irrationality, and those that treat it as a faculty of the human mind which connects sensation with reason. The first type can be called *Platonic*, and the second type can be called *Aristotelian*.

- The “Platonic” view of imagination holds that imagination is the lowest form of cognition because it provides us with only the shadows, images, and reflections of objects. Since for Plato knowledge consisted in comprehending the unchangeable essence of a thing, its ideal form, the imagination has no access to knowledge because it has no access to the ideal forms, only to shadows and reflections. (See also the “Metaphor of the Dividing Line” in Book VI of *The Republic* and the banishment of poets from the ideal society.)
- The “Aristotelian” view of the imagination sees it as a faculty that mediates between sensation and thought, as depending on sensation for its supply of images, and in turn supplying these images as input to thought. Imagination is thus closely related to the functions of perception and memory, and can be thought of as the repository in the mind of knowledge about the physical world.

These two views of imagination represent the dominant ideas up to the nineteenth century, and in some ways still persist today. However, these two views did not proceed independently, and there were attempts to unite them into a unified theory of imagination that could comprehend both the spontaneous imagination of creativity, and the more mechanical imagination of image formation and recall.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes constructs a model that posits all knowledge begins with the senses. An object impinges itself upon our external senses leaving an image (or sense impression) which is stored in memory. These images can then be recalled and recombined later. These operations are performed by the imagination, which is defined by Hobbes to be “nothing but decaying sense” or “memory.”

In *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume clarified some of the confusion found in Hobbes’ treatment of the imagination by separating memory from imagination. Both memory and imagination describe how the mind is able to re-image or recall a sense impression in the mind independent of the actual sense impression. Those images recalled by imagination are mere ideas, faint copies or images of the original impressions. Of more importance is the further distinction he draws between the two, for unlike memory, “the imagination is not restrain’d to the same order and form with the original impressions” (I, I, III, 9). Nonetheless, we find in Hume a similar attempt to show imagination as both governed by fixed laws (the laws of association) and, when not governed by laws, dangerous. The dangerous imagination described by Hume, capable of producing such absurdities as “winged horses, fiery dragons, and monstrous giants” (I, I, III, 10), remains akin to the “fancy” described by Hobbes and in spirit not far removed from the demonic possession described by Plato.

## The Kantian Imagination

The three critiques of Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and *The Critique of Judgment*, were published along with other works during a nine year period known to Kantian scholars as the “critical period.” Taken together, the critiques provide a model of the functions and processes of the mind, and more importantly, attempt to ascertain the limits

of human reason. Individually, each critique focuses on a particular act of judgment performed by the mind, *The Critique of Pure Reason* investigating judgments made on the validity of propositions within the sciences, *The Critique of Practical Reason* investigating moral judgments, and *The Critique of Judgment* investigating aesthetic judgments. For Kant, a judgment is that activity of the mind whereby we cognize, recognize and order the world around us. Judgment is the faculty that enables us to process the data of the world, and consequently, to have a world at all.

Judgment becomes an important question because of the possibility of relativism that Kant introduces when he posits that in perception objects are not so much given as they are created.

all our intuition [pure sensation] is nothing but the representation of phenomena; that the things which we intuite, are not in themselves the same as our representations . . . and that if we take away the subject, or even only the subjective constitution of our senses in general, then not only the nature and relations of objects in space and time, but even space and time themselves disappear; and that these, as phenomena, cannot exist in themselves, but only in us . . . We know nothing more than our own mode of perceiving them, which is peculiar to us, and which, though not of necessity pertaining to every animated being, is so to the whole human race. (*CPR*, 35)

Kant's problem then was to explain how all of these subjective, solipsistic worlds could coexist with the recognition that all humans to a greater or lesser extent share a single world, that while two people might disagree on the exact color of a dog, one of them would not insist that the dog was really a house. Kant's answer lies in the two-fold nature of all experience, that all experience consists of both material given to our senses and mental structures that organize the sensual material and allow us to comprehend it. Thus our experience of external physical objects is comprised of a material component that we receive through our senses and a formal component that is applied to the material component thus structuring and making sense of the manifold of sensation. Kant calls these formal elements *concepts*, or *categories*, forms of thought that we have in our minds (the understanding) and apply, or "build" into the world. Kant identifies twelve basic categories which when combined into various combinations permit us to form more determinate empirical concepts and thus to make determinate judgments. These judgments are *a priori* (prior) to a given intuition of an object, but not to all experience with such objects. The categories themselves are the only concepts that are *a priori* to all experience.

In other words, as we encounter objects in the world we apply concepts that order and structure the objects so as to make them cognizable. These are determinate judgments. Over time we construct new concepts that permit us to more accurately reflect the objects we experience, and we amass a great number of concepts that allow us to interpret the world around us. The formation of new concepts and the assignment of different concepts to past perceptions are called reflective judgments. For example, if we had no concept for a "dog" but did possess the concept of an "animal," we might upon our first encounter with a dog apply to it the concept of "animal," and in this way cognize the object and make a determinate judgment. Over time, upon repeated encounters with dogs, we might upon reflection form a new concept, that of "dog," thus providing us with a more determinate concept for structuring our experience with dogs. In this way all empirical concepts are built up from other more primitive concepts already present in our understanding, the mind creating additional less general concepts to deal with the more specific intuitions it encounters.

A determinate judgment consists then of a match between an empirical intuition supplied by the senses and some concept present in the understanding. But as our continued experience of the

world necessitates an increasing number of concepts (or more refined, determinate concepts), there must be present in our minds some active power that can both structure the particular features of an intuition to match an existing concept and modify or create the concept necessary to match the intuition. Kant calls this power the imagination.

### The Reproductive and Productive Imagination

For Kant, knowledge consists of judgments which order and unify mental representations under more general representations. The judgments subsume the manifold of sensual data under concepts that exist in our understanding. Since nothing inheres in the “thing-in-itself,” the principle of organization must exist in the mind of the observer and not in the thing being observed. It is the imagination that performs this synthesis, that structures and orders our experience of the world by providing concepts to the manifold of experience. But while these concepts are a priori to a given intuition, they are not a priori to all intuition. In other words, they are not innate. Therefore, the imagination must be capable of both matching existing concepts to sensual data, and creating concepts to match sensual data. Kant called these two aspects of the imagination, the *reproductive* and the *productive*.

The imagination (*facultas imaginandi*), as a power to intuit even when the object is not present, is either *productive* or *reproductive*. As productive, it is a power of original exhibition of the object (*exhibitio originaria*), and hence of an exhibition that precedes experience. As reproductive, it is a power of derivative exhibition (*exhibitio derivativa*), an exhibition that brings back to the mind an empirical intuition we have had before. (quoted in *CJ*, 91n.)

Kant’s concept of the reproductive faculty of the imagination differs little from the empiricist view of the imagination put forward by Hobbes, Locke, and Hume. But if it is true that we share a common world of objects, then some type of objective experience must be possible at some level. Since Kant believed that such objective experience was possible, that all humans did share a world, he had to identify the grounds of that shared world.

Kant’s answer was to demonstrate that our consciousness unifies our experiences. If we only possessed the reproductive imagination to structure our world, then our experience would consist only of a series of states of consciousness, related to each other only by succession. But we don’t experience a series of mental states, we experience a consciousness of successive mental states that are all *our* mental states.

Consequently, only because I can connect a variety of given representations in one consciousness, is it possible that I can represent to myself the identity of consciousness in these representations; in other words, the analytical unity of apperception is possible only under the presupposition of a synthetical unity. (*CPR*, 77)

The very structure of consciousness itself is that of a synthetical unity, in that in the most primitive act of perception, the perception of self (apperception), we subsume all mental states under the single unity that is *our* mental state. Thus when we speak subjectively and say “These representations given in intuition, belong all of them to me,” we are in fact speaking objectively and saying “I unite them in one self-consciousness, or can at least so unify them” (*CPR*, 77-8). Now, this unifying structure of our consciousness is an operation of the productive imagination.

But the figurative synthesis, when it has relation only to the originally synthetical unity of apperception, that is to the transcendental unity cogitated in the

categories, must, to be distinguished from the purely intellectual conjunction, be entitled the *transcendental synthesis of imagination*. *Imagination* is the faculty of representing an object even without its presence in intuition. Now, as all our intuition is sensuous, imagination, by reason of the subjective condition under which alone it can give a corresponding intuition to the conceptions of the understanding, belongs to sensibility. But in so far as the synthesis of the imagination is an act of spontaneity, which is determinative, and not, like sense, merely determinable, and which is consequently able to determine sense *à priori*, according to its form, conformably to the unity of apperception, in so far as the imagination a faculty of determining sensibility *à priori*, and its synthesis of intuitions according to the categories, must be the transcendental synthesis of the imagination. It is an operation of the understanding on sensibility, and the first application of the understanding to objects of possible intuition, and at the same time the basis for the exercise of the other functions of that faculty . . . Now, in so far as imagination is spontaneity, I sometimes call it also the *productive imagination* . . . (CPR, 87)

The *transcendental synthesis of imagination* is called both productive and figurative because it *produces* the *figures* by which the world of objects is structured. It is transcendental because it is inherent in the structure of the mind, in the unity of apperception, and cannot be deduced from empirical experience. Because the structure of the mind is transcendental, those activities derived or grounded on the unity of consciousness are themselves transcendental. In addition, the activity of the productive imagination can be called objective, because the activity is derived from the unity of apperception which is the very structure of human consciousness and thus is can be thought of as shared and public.

Thus, objective, shared experience is possible because there is an objective, shared structure to our consciousness. The productive imagination performs the transcendental synthesis necessary to order and structure our experience of the world. Working from the principle of the unity of consciousness, this faculty of the imagination, acting spontaneously in response to sensual data, synthesizes intuitions so as to reveal the appropriate concept underlying them. In this way, the productive imagination makes possible our experience of the world, and because its operation is derived from the transcendental unity of apperception this experience of the world has an objective origin. Quite simply, the productive imagination is the active application of the unifying structures of consciousness by the mind onto the world of objects. For Kant, the imagination, in both its productive and reproductive functions, is that faculty of the mind that makes possible all of our cognitions of objects.

### **The Structure of Experience**

The imagination mediates between the empirical world of the senses and the abstract world of the understanding. It selects and structures the manifold of sensation so that it can subsume those sensations under a conception which it can then pass on to the understanding. In this way the imagination is both constitutive and productive of our experience of the world. But how does the imagination select and structure the manifold of sensation? How is it that we can subsume the heterogeneous data of the senses under the general and homogeneous categories? How do these abstract formal structures of the imagination connect up with the material of the phenomenal world?

Now it is quite clear, that there must be some third thing, which on the one side is homogeneous with the category, and with the phenomenon on the other, and so makes the application of the former to the latter possible. This mediating representation must be pure (without any empirical content), and yet must on the one side be *intellectual*, on the other *sensuous*. Such a representation is the *transcendental schema*. (CPR, 101)

Since the *schemata* are products of the imagination, the imagination then becomes responsible for schematizing our representations. The schematism of our representations allows us to distinguish different objects, and identify certain new objects as falling under existing concepts. For example, our concept of a “dog” consists of abstract rules for determining whether any intuition we may receive matches the concept of “dog.” The rule specifies the conditions that must be met (four legs, a wet nose, a tail, and so forth) for the object to be considered a dog. The imagination uses these abstract rules to construct a schema, or a template, which represents a generic dog and would not be limited to any particular individual form of a dog which I may have experienced before. However, if I had no concept of “dog” then if I encountered a dog, my imagination would use the schema that most accurately matched the intuition. Perhaps, if I possessed the concept of “wolf,” this concept would be substituted, and I would look on the dog and think “wolf,” and be frightened. (Over time and upon reflection, after repeated encounters with dogs, the imagination would formulate a new concept, that of “dog,” based on those encounters and perhaps partially derived from the concept of “wolf.” But this is a reflective judgment and so is discussed later.)

This schematizing activity of the imagination mediates between mental images or objects of sensation and the abstract concepts by which those images or objects are cognized. For empirical concepts, such as “dog,” there exists a mental image which the imagination can form from the concept, but which is always inadequate to the concept. However, for a pure conception of the understanding (such as causality), only the schema exists, there can be no associated image since we cannot form images of pure concepts.

A schema, then, is used by the imagination to structure experience, in that it is through the schema that we cognize an object as a concept. However, we are not born with all of the concepts and schemata necessary to allow us to make determinate judgments on all of our experiences. There must be a means by which the imagination can construct new concepts and new schemata, and to reinterpret past perceptions and events based on those new concepts. Kant recognized this need, and in *The Critique of Judgment* he provided a solution.

Judgment can be regarded either as mere[ly] an ability to *reflect*, in terms of a certain principle, on a given presentation so as to [make] a concept possible, or as an ability to *determine* an underlying concept by means of a given empirical presentation. In the first case it is the *reflective*, in the second the *determinative, power of judgment*. To *reflect* (or consider) is to hold given presentations up to, and compare them with, either other presentations or one’s cognitive power [itself], in reference to a concept that this [comparison] makes possible. (CJ, 211)

The determinative judgment is limited to the concepts present in the mind at the time of the perception. Because we cannot have any cognition of an object without assigning to it a concept, the imagination presents a “best-fit” concept and schema for the perception to the understanding. However, later, the mind can reflect on this perception and from the perception derive a new concept (and a new schema as well). For example, in my earlier example of the encounter with the dog, my determinate judgment associated the perception with the closest applicable concept I

possessed (that of “wolf”). However, upon reflection, and perhaps upon subsequent encounters with dogs, I might come to see the need of a more determinate concept, one that more accurately describes the phenomenon I have perceived, and so I would formulate the new concept of “dog” and associate with it certain rules by which I will in the future recognize dogs. Of course, this scenario makes both reflective and determinative judgment appear to be conscious activities of the mind, when in fact their operation takes place at the lowest levels of the cognition.

### **Determinative and Reflective Judgment**

Reflective judgment differs from determinative judgment in that it does not immediately structure intuition by associating with it a definite concept. Instead, the cognitive powers of the imagination and the understanding are in “free play,” as the mind “plays over” various ways of structuring the intuition by employing different schemata and concepts or by forming new ones (*CJ*, 217). By *free play*, Kant means that the reflection is not guided by any definite concept that would limit its operations. Determinative judgment is then the act of determining or recognizing an intuition through the use of an existing concept. In reflective judgment, rather than automatically applying an existing concept to an intuition, the mind reflects imaginatively on any number of concepts or representations that could be used to structure the intuition. And unlike determinative judgment which by definition fits a concept to an intuition, reflective judgment may or may not find an appropriate concept, or be able to construct an appropriate concept for an intuition. In this way, reflective judgment permits the re-cognition and restructuring of experience, and in this way Kant accounts for the creative activity of the imagination.

The concept of the reflective judgment is used by Kant as the foundation for his discussion of the judgment of taste. A judgment of taste is based on the pleasure we feel when we imaginatively reflect on the formal “rightness” of an object, and is exemplary of the freedom of imagination. In a judgment of taste, the imagination is permitted free play as the mind experiments with possible ways of structuring the object. We consider an object beautiful if it possesses a formal “rightness” free from any empirical conceptions which we might bring to the act of judging the object. Kant calls this “rightness” a “purposiveness without any purpose” (*CJ*, 241). What we communicate when we say that an object is beautiful is not something that is intrinsic in the object, for we cannot possess a concept of beauty. Instead what we communicate is an aesthetic judgment, a feeling.

Now a judgment of taste is an aesthetic judgment, i.e., a judgment that rests on subjective bases, and whose determining basis cannot be a concept and hence also cannot be the concept of a determinate purpose . . . An aesthetic judgment instead refers the presentation, by which an object is given, solely to the subject; it brings to our notice no characteristic of the object, but only the purposive form in the [way] the presentational powers are determined in their engagement with the object. Indeed, the judgment is called aesthetic precisely because the basis determining it is not a concept but the feeling (of the inner sense) of that accordance in the play of the mental powers insofar as it can only be sensed. (*CJ*, 228)

An aesthetic judgment then is not so much a judgment based on the object, but rather a judgment based on the effect of the subject’s reflection on an object. The *feeling* that Kant mentions is “the mental state in which we are when imagination and understanding are in free play” and we feel pleasure both “in the harmony of the cognitive powers” and the “quickenings of the two powers (imagination and understanding) to an activity that is indeterminate” (*CJ*, 218-9). A judgment of taste is then

an ability to judge an object in reference to the *free lawfulness* of the imagination. Therefore, in a judgment of taste the imagination must be considered in its freedom. This implies, first of all, that this power is here not taken as reproductive, where it is subject to the laws of association, but as productive and spontaneous (as the originator of chosen forms of possible intuitions). (*CJ*, 240)

Paradoxically, our judgments of taste are formed then by a creative, non-rule-governed imaginative activity that possesses the traits of rationality (lawfulness) and objectivity (universality).

The same free imaginative play required for judging beauty is also required for creating beauty. Also, as there are no rules by which an objective standard of beauty may be constructed, the judgment of taste being an aesthetic judgment, there can be no rules for the creation of beautiful works of art. Beautiful art is the result of *genius*, which Kant defines as “the exemplary originality of a subject’s natural endowment in the *free* use of his cognitive powers” (*CJ*, 318). Genius then is the capacity for initiating free imaginative play (either in the mind of the artist, or the mind of the audience) that results in a new ordering of representations that still somehow makes sense to us.

For the imagination ([in its role] as a productive cognitive power) is very mighty when it creates, as it were, another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it. We use it to entertain ourselves when experience strikes us as overly routine. We may even restructure experience; and though in doing so we continue to follow analogical laws, yet we also follow principles which reside higher up, namely, in reason (and which are just as natural to us as those which the understanding follows in apprehending empirical nature). In this process we feel our freedom from the law of association (which attaches to the empirical use of the imagination); for although it is under that law that nature lends us material, yet we can process that material into something quite different, namely, into something that surpasses nature. (*CJ*, 314)

Through the distinction made between determinative and reflective judgments, Kant is able to unite the two different concepts of the imagination, the mechanical faculty involved in image formation and recall, and the creative faculty involved in the production of novel order. However, Kant maintains that the creative imagination, even when in *free play*, is bounded by a certain lawfulness, even if it is a lawfulness without a law. In other words, the operation of the imagination is not driven by frenzy or demonic possession. The imagination is not irrational, but it is nonalgorithmic (or at least the algorithms of its operation are fundamentally different from the algorithms of reason and therefore cannot be cognized by reason).