

## Kant's Perceiver

Hannah Ginsborg, U.C. Berkeley

Who or what is Kant's thinker? Both in the book under discussion (2011), and in her *Kant's Transcendental Psychology* (1990), Patricia Kitcher takes the appealing view that Kant's thinker is a human being, a part of the natural order. His or her knowledge of objects arises not from affection by noumena outside of space and time, but from the effects of spatio-temporal objects on her sense-organs. And the various "syntheses" which bring about the transition from sensory effects to more sophisticated forms of representation are, to a large extent, the stuff of empirical psychology and neuroscience.

The present book departs from the earlier one, however, in its attention to the idea that Kant's thinker is a rational being. While remaining a spatio-temporal human being affected by other spatio-temporal objects, she is capable not only of processing sensory information so as to arrive at knowledge of those objects, but also of appreciating the rational grounds of that knowledge. She not only finds herself in mental states which carry information about how things are around her, she also grasps rational relations among her states, recognizing, for example, her judgment that something is a body as rationally grounded on the judgment that it is extended (8), or her judgment that the puppy is in the room as rationally grounded on her perception that it is by the window (5, 139).<sup>1</sup> This is the key to Kitcher's interpretation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all page references in the text are to Kitcher 2011.

transcendental unity of apperception. It is the thinker's recognition of her representations as rationally interconnected that allows her to think of them all as belonging to a common "I".

Kitcher's primary focus, in the present book, is Kant's theory of thought rather than his theory of perception as such. To the extent that she considers Kant's views on perception, it is to illuminate aspects of her treatment more directly related to self-conscious thought. Relatedly, the cognition which is her primary concern is not perceptual experience but what she calls "rational empirical cognition": cognition in which the cognizer knows the reason for her judgment (121). However, while her discussion of rational empirical cognition contains a wealth of important and interesting material, I shall focus here on her treatment of perception. For we cannot understand Kant's thinker without considering her also as a perceiver, given that thought, for Kant, is operative not only in self-consciously rational judgment but also in perceptual experience. And, more pointedly, the case of perception poses a potential threat to Kitcher's distinctive account of the unity of apperception. Specifically, Kant claims that the unity of apperception holds not only among our conceptual representations but also among the sensible intuitions through which objects are perceptually presented to us. And as Kitcher recognizes, this raises a *prima facie* difficulty for her understanding of the unity of apperception. "[I]f the relation of necessary connection across mental states is to be understood... in terms of relations of rational dependency... how can that relation hold for the case of intuitions?" (150-151).

Kitcher's response appeals to a complex psychological model of perceptual experience, whose presentation unfolds over the course of the book. Perceptual experience begins with objects affecting our senses to produce sensations of qualities such as colour, impenetrability, and hardness (209), of sounds and smells (209) and of motion (222). Understanding then engages in an activity with respect to these sensations which Kitcher, drawing on a passage from

A126, describes as “scrutinizing” [*durchspähen*] (94). “An active understanding examines sensory representations to see if they could fall under its rules”; more specifically it runs through them “to see if any can be understood as instances of causation, as an instance of an object altering from being in state B to being in state C in the presence of some other object A... [W]hen it finds candidates, when B-type properties are always followed by C-type properties in the presence of A, it pronounces the relation to be one of cause and effect” (94). Kitcher here describes the “scrutinizing” as an operation on sensory representations, rather than on their contents, although elsewhere she speaks of scrutinizing sensory data (107, 135) or the contents of sensory representations (135).

Kitcher makes clear that the sensory representations received in this initial stage of perceptual processing, and scrutinized by the understanding, do not have spatial or temporal content (209). What enables the perceiver to form a determinate spatio-temporal perceptual image is a second stage of processing which takes place subsequently to, and as a result of, the scrutinizing activity of the understanding. This is the *synthesis speciosa*, or figurative synthesis, carried out by the imagination under the direction of the understanding. Kitcher illustrates this the role of this synthesis by appeal to Kant’s example of water freezing in the presence of cold. The understanding’s scrutiny of the sensations caused by the coldness in the environment and by the water in its fluid and solid states – sensations received without any indication of temporal relations holding among them – results in a judgment about the causal relations holding between the elements of the scene (presumably the judgment that the cold caused the water to freeze). This judgment in turn leads to the recognition that the fluid state of the water must precede, rather than follow, the solid state. “When a cognizer thinks of something in causal terms... he thinks of the temporal order as determined. Lowering the temperature necessitates the state of

solidity, so he must represent the substance as a solid *after* it was in a fluid state” (153). But this representation of temporal succession is still at the level of the understanding, and not yet perceptual. It is the synthesis speciosa which allows us to “move from the judgment of ice after water to a *perception* of water followed by ice” (154, my emphasis.) “When the understanding represents something causally, it directs the imagination or *synthesis speciosa* to construct a sensory representation that is suitable to the causal relation... The relation of the lowering of the temperature *causing* water to become ice is represented perceptually as the cognizer apprehending the substance as ice *after* apprehending it as water. So the cognizer not only judges ice after water but constructs a perceptual representation of water followed by ice” (154).

Now it is not a part of this account that the cognizer is conscious of forming her perceptual representation of ice following water as a consequence of her judgment that the drop in temperature caused the water to freeze. The cognizer is not aware of her own *synthesis speciosa*, so even though she is aware of the causal judgment she does not recognize it as responsible for her perceiving the temporal succession as she does. But the theorist can recognize the perception as a consequence of the judgment, and this is what allows Kitcher to explain, in response to the *prima facie* difficulty mentioned above, how perceptual experience can be governed by the rational relations characteristic (on her reading) of the unity of apperception. “For the theorist it is clear that the relation between intuitions in a temporal array...depends on rational considerations.... The perception of ice is not rationally dependent on the perception of water, but the perception of ice after the perception of water depends on a rational appreciation of the relations among the representations of ‘water,’ ‘ice,’ and a causal rule” (155). So Kant can claim that “the bond created across states through the action of synthesis” is, both in perception and explicit judgment, the result of the mind’s rational activity,

and accordingly, that “an appreciation of rational relations is the source of all the connections — conceptual and temporal — that bind mental states to each other” (155).

I am not here concerned with the textual evidence for the “scrutinize and construct” (107) model of perceptual experience underlying Kitcher’s response to the objection, but I do want to raise two questions about its intrinsic plausibility, and thus about whether it is charitable to ascribe it to Kant. (To be fair, Kitcher also indicates that she finds the aspects of the model implausible, making clear in particular that she “do[es] not endorse either Kant’s theory of the perception of time or his argument for the causal principle” (154). But I believe that my concerns here bear in part on aspects of the model which Kitcher does not find problematic.). My first question concerns the nature of the “scrutiny” which the understanding applies to sensible representations. If we take the talk of scrutiny literally, then there seems to be an obvious circularity. In order to scrutinize or examine something, we have, first, to perceive it. So we cannot appeal to our capacity to “scrutinize” in order to make sense of our capacity to perceive, even if the kind of thing we are scrutinizing (our sensations, or the sensory data we receive) is different from the kind of thing whose perception we are trying to explain (spatio-temporal objects and events). To this Kitcher might reply that the talk of scrutinizing is not meant to be taken literally, as though the understanding itself were a homunculus with its own sense-organs. But how, then, are we to make sense of it? In particular, is it a subpersonal process, or is it something which we can self-consciously ascribe to ourselves? If it is subpersonal (as suggested briefly at 231, where Kitcher describes the principles by which the understanding scrutinizes as unconscious), then it is hard to see how the resulting causal “judgments” are responsive to rational considerations, and this in turn threatens the claim that the perceptual construction carried out by the *synthesis speciosa* is informed by an appreciation of

rational relations. But if it is personal-level, then it is not clear how we are to distinguish it from the ordinary “scrutiny” or “examination” by which we, as human beings, look for patterns and regularities in our spatio-temporal environment, with a view to subsuming the objects and events we perceive under causal laws.<sup>2</sup>

My second question concerns the epistemological implications of the suggestion that the imagination’s construction of a spatio-temporal perceptual image follows, rather than preceding, the understanding’s recognition of categorial relations. Surely, it might be objected, we need to have spatio-temporal perceptual images in order to arrive at judgments about causal relations among the events perceived. The problem is raised by Kitcher herself, who points out that “particular causal laws.. can only be learned through the observation of constant succession” (221-222) but that, on the “scrutinizing” hypothesis, “perceiving succession requires that the events represented be understood as standing in causal relations” (222), apparently dooming the hypothesis to a “vicious circularity” (222). Her response is to appeal to the capacity to detect motion, which is (and, she notes, would have been recognized in Kant’s time as being) a reliable indicator of both temporal succession and causal relations. Drawing on recent results from neuroscience, according to which “the nervous system ... does not detect time, but motion” (222), she suggests that the circularity can be avoided by supposing that the understanding uses the perception of motion to identify instances of causal, and thus temporal, relations in what is given.

But this response does not solve the problem. For one thing, as Kitcher herself makes clear (289n8), there are many cases, in particular that of water freezing, where our cognition of a causal relation seems to be based on something other than the perception of motion. For another, and more importantly: if the issue is, as Kitcher suggests, an epistemological one – that of how the understanding can “learn” (i.e. come to know) what the causal laws are, or have “evidence”

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<sup>2</sup>In fact this is how I am inclined to read Kant’s own talk of “scutinizing” at A126.

for its causal judgments – then appeal to our neurophysiological or psychological capacity for detecting motion seems to be beside the point. To judge on the basis of perception that two events or states of an object are causally related in a certain way, it is not enough for our sensory systems to detect motion (or, for that matter, any other property of the object); rather the motion, or whatever other properties might be relevant to determining the causal relation, must figure in the intentional content of the perception. If motion is serving as the evidence for our judgment that a certain kind of causal relation holds, it can only be because we perceive *that* some identifiable thing is moving, or because we perceive the thing *as* moving. It cannot simply be that we respond differentially to the motion in the manner, say, of a photoelectric cell. But it is hard to see how we could have perception of motion in the more demanding sense without our perception having any spatio-temporal content, and hence without the *synthesis speciosa* having already taken place.

Suppose, notwithstanding these difficulties, we grant that the *synthesis speciosa* depends on causal judgments, as suggested by the “scrutinize and construct” model. This is still not sufficient to show that perceptual experience is subject to the unity of apperception as conceived by Kitcher. For our cognitive judgments might influence the imaginative processing responsible for perceptual experience without perceptual experience itself coming to have the kind of intellectual or rational unity possessed by our judgments. This is the case, for example, in the kind of “cognitive penetration” discussed in Macpherson 2012, in which a subject’s judgment about what kind of thing an object is influences her perception of its colour (for example, shown different cut-out shapes of the same shade of orange colour, a subject will perceive the heart shape as redder than the mushroom shape). Or we might consider a case in which someone’s rational judgment that the train in which she is sitting is not due to leave for another ten minutes

influences her perception of the movement of an adjacent train (her judgment prevents her from succumbing to the familiar illusion that her train is the one which is moving). In both these examples, the understanding influences or “directs” the imagination to construct a perceptual representation which is suitable to the state of affairs it has rationally judged to hold (that the cut-out represents a heart, that the train is stationary). But we cannot draw any conclusions from the rationality of the judgment which influences our perception to rational connections between that perception and other perceptions. So if the dependence of perception on judgment is of that kind, it is too tenuous to do justice to Kant’s view that sensible intuitions are subject to the unity of apperception. That view requires that we think of the understanding as somehow operative within perceptual experience, so that its concepts, and in particular the categories, figure in or inform that experience. It is not enough for the understanding to play a merely external role in influencing the content of the experience.

As I have been construing the “scrutinize and construct” model, the understanding’s scrutiny of the sensible manifold results in conscious, personal-level judgments, whereas the process of scrutiny required for these judgments and the imaginative processing consequent on them are both subpersonal. What if, instead, we construe the entire process leading to perceptual experience, including the understanding’s categorial “judgments”, as subpersonal? The corresponding account, which harks back to Kitcher (1990), is also suggested in a recent article in which Kitcher directly addresses the question of how perceptual experience is possible. Here she acknowledges that, although the understanding is supposed to be spontaneous and the basis of rational thought,” on her reading “its ‘direction’ of the synthesis of apprehension by the imagination is a ‘blind,’ ‘brute causal’ process” (2012, 33). It is, she allows “reasonable to object that [her] Kant has the understanding functioning in perception in a most un-



understanding fashion,” seeming to operate “just like the mechanical processes of the animal mind that Kant, Leibniz, and other moderns used as the contrast case for the human mind” (2012, 33-34). And she acknowledges that, “[i]n a sense, [the objection] is correct. The only ‘rationality’ involved in the understanding’s direction of the synthesis [responsible for perception] is that of Mother Nature” (2012, 34). This model, which seems to exclude any role for conscious personal-level judgment in the processes leading to perception, avoids both the worry that Kitcher’s talk of “scrutiny” commits her to a homuncular view of understanding, and the epistemological difficulty about the evidence for the causal judgments preceding perceptual synthesis. However, as the passages I have quoted indicate, it seems to take away any rationale for claiming that “understanding” in the paradigmatic sense, as a capacity for self-conscious thought and judgment, has a role to play in perceptual experience. It allows us to construe perception as shaped by sophisticated innate mechanisms which enable us, like animals, to track temporally enduring substances and to respond to events in ways that are sensitive to their causes and effects. But it does not seem to entitle Kant to claim, as he needs to do to show the objective validity of the categories, that the concepts of substance and causality figure in the intentional content of our perceptual experience.

Kitcher’s own response is to point to “a crucial difference” between the human and the animal cases. “In the human case, Nature’s norms have an additional purpose, because they are useful to humans in a special way. Unconscious processes work up the raw materials of sensation in such a way that they are apt for the understanding’s capacity to look for rules in the appearances of conscious perception” (2012, 34). It is because of the suitability of the unconscious perceptual processes to our conscious activity of making rationally grounded empirical judgments about the world that it makes sense to say that one and the same faculty is at

work both in perceptual experience and in conscious judgment. “It seems extravagant to hypothesize two faculties that operate in accord with the same basic principles. So [Kant] opts instead for one faculty with two modes of operation, one blind and one where the cognizer can be aware of his representations as instantiating rules and so of the rational relations among them” (2012, 34). But this portrays Kant’s commitment to the involvement of understanding in perception as empirically based rather than *a priori*. We recognize, as a matter of empirical fact, that human perceptual experience is structured in a way which allows us to apply the categories to the objects it presents to us, and we hypothesize – apparently appealing to considerations of simplicity – that the innate mechanism responsible for this structuring is the same mechanism which allows us to engage in conscious thought. This kind of argument is in order if Kant’s aim is to answer a *quid facti* question about our actual ways of thinking and perceiving, but it does not seem relevant to the *quid juris* question of how we can legitimately apply *a priori* concepts to what is given to us in experience.

The difficulties I have raised stem from a more fundamental problem which faces any interpretation of Kant’s account of empirical cognition. How are we to make sense of Kant’s view that understanding is operative in perceptual experience without giving short shrift either to the passively receptive character of perceptual experience – its role as that through which objects are “given” to us – or the spontaneous character of understanding, as a faculty whose operation requires a self-conscious responsiveness to normative constraints?<sup>3</sup> In *Kant’s Transcendental Psychology* Kitcher’s response to the problem was, putting it bluntly, to deny the spontaneity of understanding. In *Kant’s Thinker*, however, she not only insists on the spontaneity of understanding but construes it in a very demanding way, as amounting to the conscious

recognition of the reasons for one's judgments. So the fundamental problem manifests itself in a particularly acute form. The approach Kitcher takes to the problem – and indeed to Kant's theory of the thinker more generally – is novel, resourceful and thought-provoking. It is hardly a criticism of her book to point out that she fails to provide a definitive solution.

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<sup>3</sup> I attempt my own solution, with some discussion of Kitcher's (1990) approach, in my (2006). For discussion of the fundamental assumption I share with Kitcher, that the "I" for Kant represents the standpoint of an embodied thinker, see my (forthcoming).

## References

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