

Kant: Imagining Apperception

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FACULTIES NECESSARY FOR COGNITIVE PERCEPTION

It would not be too far off the mark to suggest that in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant implies a sort of loose mechanism of perception and cognition. But even to use such terms as “mechanism” or “model” would do Kant's project an injustice, as he neither claims to even attempt such, nor that such would necessarily be possible. Kant does, however, attempt to separate what he considers to be various parts, or aspects of perception and cognition, and these various parts are said to interrelate, much as different parts of a mechanism might relate. But the various subdivisions of perception and cognition that Kant employs could in no way be said to generate perception and cognition, but should rather be viewed, as Kant would have it, as the absolutely necessary logical requirements for our ability to even think through our perception and cognition.

Thus we find Kant discussing the likes of Sensibility, Understanding, and other aspects (and subdivisions) of the mind that in total comprise a sort of technical description of the faculties we use in ordinary perceiving and thinking. A good bulk of his technical vocabulary is employed with special attention to the necessary relations between the specific faculties in the “Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of Understanding.” It is in this section of the *Critique* that Kant claims to expose:

“the a priori grounds of the possibility of experience.”
(A95)

Which indeed is the very essence of the Transcendental project (in that the pure concepts deemed as necessary in this discussion indeed transcend all experience, yet are required for this experience to be intelligible).

It is my hope in this paper to outline, as briefly as possible, the major elements of the deduction and their necessary interrelations, in order to get at least a fuzzy grasp on what Kant considers to be the necessary grounds of experience. This discussion will include reference to the likes of Apperception, The Understanding, Imagination, Inner Sense, and The Intuition, which I hope to show constitute a sort of hierarchal relation between the perceiver (the “I”) and the world of appearances. After such a broad (and, I must admit, overly ambitious) discussion, I hope to focus on what seems to be a problematic area for Kant—the Imagination, and what he holds as the highest faculty, Apperception. Indeed, it is the Imagination which mediates between the intelligible and the sensible, and thus it suggests a sort of bridge between two radically different aspects of perception; and it is Apperception which brings everything together.

OUR BASIC PHENOMENAL EXPERIENCE OF THE WORLD

Before diving into Kant's technical descriptions, however, I believe it might be helpful to discuss some of the problems that seem to naturally arise when we think about our perceiving. This preliminary discussion will not be too philosophically profound, yet it should help to set the stage for the sort of problems that Kant is treating.

Now, it would seem, first and foremost, that each of us finds ourselves as a perceiver in a world of perceptions. From one's

earliest memories, one can note that there is a continual progression of sensations as one moves about the world, or as the world moves about one. For example, if you walk on a trail through the woods, it would seem as if sense perceptions were continually changing in a continuous manner such that your own location seems to be constant, or at least in a smooth movement from one location to another in time. In an analogous way, if one is recording such a walk with a film or video camera, the resulting footage would suggest that only one camera was used, and that it was focused on certain things and then directed towards others. The footage would not, as with certain television commercials, cut rapidly from one scene to another—the transitions would be smooth and coherent. Thus, by simply looking at the footage shot by a camera, one can hypothesize that only one camera was used in a continuous filming without a cut; and in a similar way, one could suggest by the continuity of one's own sense perceptions, that there is indeed only one perceiver, or “I,” who is having those specific perceptions. So much, it seems, would be obvious— all of a person's perceptions are unified through a single perspective for a single perceiver.

Now we, as “single perceivers” find ourselves in an environment full of physical “things”— objects. These objects could be other people, animals, trees, or even parts of other objects, like hands and eyes. In each case one usually has little trouble in distinguishing one object from another; sometimes you can pick something up, a bottle for instance, and it seems to be a unified whole. There can be problematic cases though, such as when one thing turns out to be two things (what looked like one big tree turns out to be two smaller ones). And there would also be cases where it would be difficult to distinguish a thing from the environment one found it in; such as a chameleon which changes colors to hide itself— seeing such a thing might require an acute focusing of one's attention.

The view just accounted thus describes a sort of perception where a perceiver finds themselves as the sole subject of a multiplicity of perceptions, perceptions often of objects (which might be related). Two types of singularity or unity have been mentioned—the singular unity of one's perspective as continuous through time, and the singular unity of objects which are distinguishable from all that are not those specific objects: a single subject perceiving single objects.

Returning to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, it should be noted that Kant questions the absolute reality of any objects (or, rather, our ability to know objects in-themselves), and the ultimate validity of our *peculiar* perspective (in space and time). Yet, such a “naïve” empirical stance certainly describes to some extent what we perceive given our position within the natural world. Thus, we have a rough sketch of experience in general.

STAGES OF PERCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE: THE FACULTIES

I will now attempt to account for Kant's inquiry into the conditions he considers necessary for such experience to be possible. To do so we must first outline the various aspects of perception that Kant relies on to describe the mind; and foremost among these aspects we must distinguish the fundamental distinction between the Understanding and the Sensibility. Roughly, this split distinguishes the activity of thinking from being receptive to sensations. From our above discussion, we might suggest that objects are sensibly given to us through the Sensibility and that we as perceivers think about them via the Understanding. For Kant, the picture is not so clear though, as there are multiple stages of necessity between the “I” of the perceiver and the given sensations. And, to even further complicate matters, we will be discussing two separate arguments for “the deduction of the pure concepts of

understanding”, from both the first and second editions of the Critique. The basic framework of experience described in both editions is similar though, and only a few distinctions between the second and first will be pointed out.

Throughout this discussion we must keep in mind that a major theme of the Transcendental Deduction concerns the possibility of having knowledge of empirical objects. What is knowledge for Kant? Most specifically Kant says,

“knowledge is [essentially] a whole in which representations stand compared and connected.”
(A97)

And, concerning the specific knowledge that is of concern in the Transcendental Deduction, Kant says:

“among the manifold concepts which form the highly complicated web of human knowledge, there are some which are marked out for pure a priori employment, in complete independence of all experience; and their right to be so employed always demands a deduction.”
(A85, B117)

Knowledge, for Kant, is what in modern terminology would be called a semantic network. Basically, it is number of different types of concepts with various types of connections: a “web” of connected concepts (for example the concept of “cinnabar” is connected with the concept “red”). Thus, an increase in knowledge will simply require the addition of a concept, or the connecting of concepts in a new way. And hence, we have the discussion of “combination” in the second deduction, which is an activity of the Understanding: the synthesis of new knowledge.

IMAGINATION CONSTRUCTS EXPERIENCE BY RULES OF THE UNDERSTANDING

Given the above remarks on the nature of knowledge, we must now begin to show how we can add to knowledge through perceiving the natural world. In the first deduction, Kant suggests that there are three phases in which our receptive sensibility can be actively incorporated into our web of knowledge, including:

“the apprehension of representations as modifications of the mind in intuition, their reproduction in imagination, and their recognition in a concept.”
(A97)

Now, our mode of Intuition, which is our subjective Sensibility, offers, as it were, an appearance of an object which we sense, but do not know (“raw sense data.”) And necessarily, the appearance given in the Intuition:

“must... be run through and held together”
(A99)

by the synthesis of apprehension— the given sensation (the manifold) must be a unified singularity.

Given this unified and singular manifold of sensation in the intuition, the Imagination must be able to reproduce the appearance according to (a) rule(s):

“[The] law of reproduction presupposes that appearances are themselves actually subject to such a rule, and that in the manifold of these representations a co-existence or sequence takes place in conformity with certain rules.”
(A100)

The rules in question here concern our knowledge-web of concepts. As opposed to the purely passive nature of our sensible intuition, imagination is an activity which (re)produces everything we can possibly know about what we perceive. The difference between the intuited manifold and the imagined manifold might provisionally be demonstrated by the difference between a picture of a house and a drawing of it—indeed, the picture might contain microscopic details that one might never have noticed (and thus known) but the drawing would reflect only what we knew about the object (or its relation to other objects):

“the affinity of appearances, and with it their association, and through this, in turn, their reproduction according to laws, and so [as involving various factors] experience itself, should only be possible by means of the transcendental function of imagination.”
(A123)

Of course, we do experience much before we seem to know anything (especially as children). There are rules for reproduction that the Imagination uses which are in the Understanding (implicitly), but not yet in our (explicit) knowledge—this will be discussed a bit more in depth later.

PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF UNIFYING APPERCEPTION

Now, given the sensible unified manifold in intuition, which is reproducible via rules by the imagination, we must now discuss the Synthesis of Recognition in a Concept. This stage is tricky, because we must recognize the appearance of the manifold as an object, yet we do not actually perceive an object but rather a manifold of separate sensations—the object will thus be a hypothetical object = x:

“since we have to deal only with the manifold of our representations and since that x (the object) which corresponds to them is nothing to us—being, as it is, something that has to be distinct from all our representations—the unity which the object makes necessary can be nothing else than the formal unity of consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of representations.”

(A105)

This unity of consciousness is the singular and constant perspective which remains throughout all our perceptions—the “I” which is always the same subject; Kant declares:

“This pure original unchangeable consciousness I shall name transcendental apperception.”

(A107)

Moreover:

“This transcendental unity of apperception forms out of all possible appearances, which can stand alongside one another in one experience, a connection of all these representations according to laws.”

(A108)

Thus, this transcendental unity of apperception, the “I” that remains constant for all perceptions, is the single factor which unifies all experience, and makes such understandable (that is, inter-connectable within the web of knowledge) under concepts:

“The unity of apperception in relation to the synthesis of imagination is the understanding”

(A119)

In a strange way, this unity of consciousness somehow allows for the recognition of a manifold as singular object— Kant simply asserts:

“this unity of possible consciousness also constitutes the form of all knowledge of objects: through it the manifold is thought as belonging to a single object.”
(A129)

The singular unity of an object is thus dependent on the unity of the “I” of our apperception.

The basic structure of experience explicated in the second Transcendental Deduction is quite similar to the first—it avoids some troublesome discussions of “objects” and gives a fuller explanation of apperception. Most importantly, there is a full discussion which explains that it is the “I” of apperception which allows for the comparison of multiple representations:

“The thought that the representations given in intuition one and all belong to me, is therefore equivalent to the thought that I unite them in one self-consciousness, or can at least so unite them; and although this thought is not itself the consciousness of the synthesis of the representations, it presupposes that possibility of that synthesis.”
(B134)

(Such a synthesis would also incorporate the transcendental synthesis of imagination.) Also, rather than discussing the mysterious object = x as in the first deduction, Kant says in the second deduction:

“knowledge consists in the determinate relations of the given representations to an object; and an object is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given

intuition is united.... [and] it is the unity of consciousness that alone constitutes the relation of representations to an object.”

(B137)

Since we have seen that knowledge is simply a web of concepts, it might be suggested that an object is the presence in intuition of the criteria of a concept (its relation to other concepts) as recognized by the “I” of apperception via the structuring of the imagination (by rules of the understanding).

There are, of course, many subtleties in both the first and second deductions, and differences between the two which I have ignored for the sake of brevity. However, the overall general structure of experience remains similar in the two, and might be summarized as follows: *A raw appearance given in the intuition is structured by the imagination as governed by the rules of understanding and thought through the unity of apperception as an object.* I have developed this rather course over-generalization not as an end in itself, but rather as a way of situating a discussion of the imagination. As noted earlier, the imagination is critically placed in-between the active understanding and the receptive sensibility; and moreover, we have seen that it has the ability to structure our experience through a part of our understanding that we ourselves do not know! How the imagination functions within this crucial position will occupy the next section.

SPLIT BETWEEN CONSTRUCTION OF EXPERIENCE AND EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

In the above discussion we have surmised that the imagination is able to construct our experience of an appearance by certain laws that would be found in the understanding. In this way, far from developing our notion of an object from the accumulation of knowledge gained from outer appearances (as

with empiricists) our experience of an appearance is predetermined by the structuring activity of our own understanding. In the second edition of the deduction, Kant claims:

“The understanding, that is to say, in respect of the manifold which may be given to it in accordance with the form of sensible intuition, is able to determine sensibility inwardly. Thus the understanding, under the title of a transcendental synthesis of imagination, performs this act upon the passive subject, whose faculty it is, and we are therefore justified in saying that the inner sense is affected thereby.”
(B153-B154)

In our prior discussion, we noted that the imagination was the ability to structure an experience by way of rules of the understanding. The comparison of a drawing with a photograph illustrated the distinction between what could appear to us, and what we could construct with our imagination, again, via the rules of our understanding. Such conformed to the view that knowledge consisted of our accumulation of associated concepts—these associations that we learned could serve as rules for constructing an image (e.g., an “orange” could be associated with a “sphere” of a certain size and color, and could be drawn as such). However, it could also be noted that we definitely see things in complex ways that we might not be able to construct, or be too articulate about—e.g. at a young age we see humans as being more complex than the stick figures we might be able to draw. Thus, it would seem that the imagination would draw upon some part of the understanding that was not part of our explicit and conscious knowledge; Kant confirms such in the first deduction:

“Thus the understanding is something more than a power of formulating rules through comparison of

appearances; it is itself the lawgiver of nature.... All appearances, as possible experiences, thus lie a priori in the understanding, and receive from it their formal possibility.”
(A126-A127)

Thusly, the understanding supplies the imagination with all the rules that it needs to construct our experience in all its full complexity.

There is therefore a split in the understanding, between that part which is:

“the faculty of knowledge”
(B137)

and that which via the categories:

“grounds the possibility of all experience in general.”
(B167)

The imagination has the ability to draw upon both aspects of the understanding, which is distinguished by Kant in the second deduction:

“In so far as imagination is spontaneity, I sometimes also entitle the productive imagination, to distinguish it from the reproductive imagination, whose synthesis is entirely subject to empirical laws, the laws, namely, of association.”
(B152)

The productive imagination therefore structures our experience in general, while the reproductive imagination can only be used to imagine images as limited by our explicit knowledge. So, with the photograph and drawing example, our

experience of the photograph would be structured by productive imagination (down to the microscopic details) while our ability to construct a drawing would be limited by the powers of our reproductive imagination. With the aforementioned split in understanding, the ability of productive imagination would therefore be to construct the entirety of all implicit human knowledge in an experience; which in turn would be the approachable limit of an individual's ability to use their explicit reproductive imagination: the limit of our obtainable knowledge is already contained in our understanding.

As the imagination structures our experience of the sensible by laws of the understanding, we can thus see how it mediates between these two realms. However, the constructions of the imagination always remain an activity of understanding, and therefore the imagination never really “touches” the sensible. In regard to this distinction, Kant suggests in the preface to the second edition:

“In order to determine to which given intuitions objects outside me actually correspond, and which therefore belong to outer sense (to which, and not to the faculty of imagination, they are not to be ascribed, we must in each single case appeal to the rules according to which experience in general, even inner experience, is distinguished from imagination—the proposition that there is such a thing as outer experience being always presupposed.”

(Bxli)

However, since imagination represents the absolute limit of the understanding in its extension towards the sensible, we must conclude that our knowledge of outer sense can only be defined in the negative—as lying just beyond the grasp of imagination.

QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE EXTENT OF FOREKNOWLEDGE

Of course, there are some serious questions that arise for me concerning Kant's account of the grounds of experience. First and foremost, I find myself dissatisfied with the notion that all types of structuring of experience arise out of our own human understanding. It is one thing to say that our understanding shapes how we perceive things, but quite another to say the "arrangement" of things is determined by the understanding (which Kant seems to imply). In other words, what is the relationship between the understanding and how objects are related to each other in the world? If there are things in the world that have relationships to each other (e.g. Europe is north of Africa), if these sorts of relationships do occur outside the understanding—then how could they break into it? Would Kant suggest that even the whole factual arrangement of objects (past, present, and future) is already predetermined by the understanding?

Another serious problem concerns the ability of imagination to pick out one object from a manifold of the intuition. How is the imagination able to distinguish a chameleon from its surroundings? Through the unity of apperception? This sort of detail is inadequately dealt with in Kant's account of experience. Such criticisms do not deal a lethal blow to Kant's type of project though. As he was not attempting to build a workable model of the mind, I might suggest that he could have simply added a few more transcendental necessities.

APPERCEPTION: SOME HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

"...consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended,
should it be to ages past, unites existences and actions

very remote in time into the same person, as well as it does the existence and actions of the immediately preceding moment, so that whatever has the consciousness of present and past actions is the same person to whom they both belong.”

—John Lock, *Essay on Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter XXVII.

There is a definite shift of emphasis in the Transcendental Deduction between the first and second edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*; and again, although this shift could not be called a complete shift from a concern with objects to a concern with the subject, one can easily notice that Kant abandons a certain lengthy discussion pertaining to the transcendental object = x (some unknown object on the other side of sensation) in favor of a more in depth discussion of apperception. Such a shift evidences Kant’s high regard for this later concept, which at one point he calls:

“the highest principle in the whole sphere of human knowledge.”

(B135)

It will be the aim of the second half of this essay to elucidate this highest principle, and also to show some of the influences that previous rationalist philosophers had on Kant.

The first major philosopher to use the term “apperception,” as far as I can trace, is Leibniz in his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, a work obviously influenced by Lock’s own *Essay on Human Understanding* (note the above quote). The French word, “appercevoir,” used by Leibniz, roughly means, “to catch sight of, to notice, to perceive, to understand, and to comprehend;” and it was used by him most specifically to distinguish the multiplicity and massive detail of our given perceptions from our limited ability to focus on particular parts

of these perceptions. From my interpretive viewpoint, I would suggest that what Leibniz was pointing out with the concept of “apperception” was our ability to perform a pre-reflective recognition. Indeed, before we can reason about our perceptions, we need to be aware that we perceive something. Some critics, however, have suggested that apperception also includes a sort of self-consciousness, as one critic claims:

“apperception is made to apply not only to awareness of perceptions but to awareness also of the I: ‘The immediate apperception of our existence and our thoughts furnishes us with the first truths a posteriori, or of fact.’ (NE, 4, 9, 2).”
 (Robert McRae, *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, & Thought*, 1976, p.33)

In this way, one might discern hints also, of the Cartesian cogito, or thinking ego.

No doubt, Descartes’ radical distinction between the perceiver and perceived in some way influenced Leibniz’s, and subsequently Kant’s use of the term “apperception.” And in this way, we can see a correlation between Descartes’ indubitable “I think” as the ground of all certainty, and Kant’s use of apperception and its generated representation, the “I think,” as the pivot of all understanding. Now, Descartes’ use of the “I” to distinguish mind from sensible matter brings along with it not only subjectivity, but reason as well—mind, for Descartes includes both the subject and reason. However, although Kant claims that the:

“faculty of apperception is the understanding itself.”
 (B134n)

It should be noted that Kant often makes a distinction between apperception and the understanding. Indeed there is a

sort of one dimensional scheme of faculties that might be listed as such:

Apperception	↓	(experience & judgment unity)
Understanding	↓	(web of connected concepts)
Imagination	↓	(construction of perceptions)
Inner Sense	X	(theater screen of experience)
Intuition	↑	(indistinct experience notions)
Outer Sense	↑	(the world of “objects” we don't directly know)

A general working out of this scheme might, again, be as follows: an intuition is given in inner sense, which in turn is constructed as experience by the imagination; the imagination in turn, draws its rules of construction through the understanding; and the understanding presupposes, and uses the unity of apperception.

UNITY REMAINS THE SAME IN THE DIVERSE

Of what sort, then, is the unity of apperception? A clue to answering this question might be found in Kant’s discussion of how we can become aware of this unity by considering its relationship to the diversity of representations that we are conscious of. Of this, Kant states:

“Only in so far... as I can unite a manifold of given representations in one consciousness, is it possible for me to represent to myself the identity of the consciousness [i.e. throughout] these representations. In other words, the analytic unity of apperception is possible only under the presupposition of a certain synthetic unity.”

(B133)

Kant discusses this distinction between analytic unity and synthetic unity further in a footnote:

“only by means of a presupposed possible synthetic unity can I represent to myself the analytic unity. A representation which is to be thought as common to different representations is regarded as belonging to such as have, in addition to it, also something different.”

(B133-B134n)

The point being made (in a footnote!) seems rather obscure, but nonetheless represents one of the most critical claims of the transcendental deduction. Basically, what Kant is suggesting is that we receive no pure or distinct concepts in our experience of the world—our experiences are always a mixture of many ingredients, and this mixture would always precede our knowledge of any specific part. For example (following Kant’s), we do not have a singular experience of the color red, from which we get the analytic conceptualization—“red” is the color red; but rather, we find red as one aspect among many in the variety of representations we encounter. In other words we get our ability to form the concept of red from our ability to distinguish this singular quality from different qualities in different representations (two objects share little other than the color red, and hence we can identify the color red as a distinct aspect knowable in itself: redness). In order to form this distinct concept of red, we must find that it is something which is the same in different representations, a connecting thread; and in each of these representations, red must be something distinct from the rest of the representation. Thus, there is a sort of “putting together” of certain aspects of distinct representations—a synthesis (“red” is something disparate objects have in common); and a synthesis which can “produce” something a priori, something true prior to experience (the concept “red” denotes redness, and redness exists as a

possibility prior to experience). Hence we have something approximating the Kantian compromise between a priori rationalists, and synthetic empiricists with synthetic a priori knowledge.

APPERCEPTION'S A PRIORI UNITY KNOWN VIA SYNTHESIZED EXPERIENCES

Now, Kant claims:

“The first pure knowledge of understanding... upon which all the rest of its employment is based, and which also at the same time is completely independent of all conditions of sensible intuition, is the principle of the original synthetic unity of apperception.”
(B137)

For Kant, the most essential concept that must be discerned from experience (as being at least implied or presupposed in it) is the unity of apperception—however, it must also be noted that this apperception is required a priori for there to even be experience. Despite the special status of this concept, it is still synthesized in a way similar to the example using “red” above. In this case, however, what is seen to remain constant in a given diversity of representations is the singularity of the “I think” which can accompany them all. (B132) This point might be better illustrated by considering a given segment of film footage (as with the example of general experience given above). Now, if we view a film made by someone carrying a camera on a walk, the resulting footage would most likely evidence that only one camera was used. If there were no cuts from one perspective to another, the continuous flow from one view to another would make it obvious that only one camera was used—even though we never actually see the camera itself in the film. In the same way, we can see that all our personal representations are not

fragmented presentations for diverse perceivers, but that there is only one “I” which accompanies all of one’s representations. In this way, we can see how Kant shows our knowledge of original apperception to be a synthesis—we are not simply given the knowledge of apperception, but must discern it from the diversity of our representations; and necessarily prior to this knowledge of the unity of apperception is the unity of synthesis. It is the unity of apperception which is necessary for the synthesis of representations to be possible, yet it is this very synthesis which gives evidence for there actually being an apperception: thus the knowledge of apperception is (loosely) synthetic a priori (this knowledge of a unity necessary prior to any knowledge at all is pulled together from a plurality of experiences).

With the above discussion, a definite problem can be discerned, as evidenced by Henry Allison’s discussion of a point made by Dieter Henrich:

“Henrich notes that, in his various formulations of the apperception principle, Kant sometimes refers to the unity of consciousness and sometimes to its numerical identity. He also points out that Kant himself distinguishes between these two conceptions, and he maintains that only the latter conception, construed as ‘moderate’ rather than ‘strict’ identity, ultimately provides the basis for the successful proof of the categories.”

(Henry Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism an Interpretation and Defense*, 1983, p. 139)

The problem here seems to be that Kant often discusses apperception as if it referred to the subject (the “I think”) of representations. However, any sort of logical “judgment” would not require an empirical subject (cp. the calculations of computers), but only the unity (numerical unity) of the concepts

involved, and a common reference point—the logical “I,” each of which is guaranteed by apperception. It is this distinction, between a logical-transcendental necessity and the empirical unity of consciousness, which might be used to distinguish between the transcendental unity of apperception and empirical apperception. Of this distinction, Kant writes:

“The transcendental unity of apperception is the unity through which all the manifold given in an intuition is united in a concept of the object. It is therefore entitled objective, and must be distinguished from the subjective unity of consciousness.... the empirical unity of apperception... has only subjective validity.”
(B139-B140)

A question that arises for me here would be: how has Kant deduced a universal principle of transcendental apperception when the only singular unity that he can deduce is that of his own “I think.” Has not Kant developed his entire argument concerning logical objectivity with reference only to his own subjectivity?—how is Kant certain that his logic is not only solipsistically his own? How did Kant know that the coherent logic implicit in his subjective experience was universal? In a footnote he writes:

“that all the variety of empirical consciousness must be combined in one single self-consciousness, is the absolutely first and synthetic principle of our thought in general.”
(A117a)

Evading this rather thorny question, and turning to a new issue, it should be noted that the transcendental unity of apperception is necessary to discern objects in various representations. Kant claims:

“it is the unity of consciousness that alone constitutes the relation of representations to an object.”
(B137)

This suggests a dilemma picked up on by Allison:

“we can infer from the apperception principle that there can be no representation of objects apart from the unity of consciousness, because without such a unity there can be no representation of anything at all. It would seem, however, that we cannot similarly infer that whenever there is a unity of consciousness there is a representation of an object. Yet this is precisely what Kant appears to be claiming.”(Allison, 146).

An important point to note is that it is apperception’s activity of synthesis which unifies the various aspects of an object (“found”/”constructed” via schemas of the imagination) into a singularity. For example, given aspects such as fur, four legs, barking, etc., the unity of apperception can synthesize all these diverse aspects into the single concept, “dog” (just as it could draw particular occurrences of the color red into the singular concept of red). Thusly, an object can only be thought through the unity of apperception. (This sort of notion, that the unity of the object requires the unity of a subject might have parallels with Descartes noting that the unity of an object beyond its appearances, e.g. wax, can only be discerned by the mind. (See Descartes’ *Meditation II*))

UNIFYING APPERCEPTION AND CONSTRUCTING IMAGINATION

In conclusion, I cite a general problem that I have with Kant’s notion of synthesis, and a problem which thus concerns

Kant's most fundamental theme of apperception—it is that the issue of memory is completely ignored. Kant often writes as if all the various components of a judgment are all present to the “I think” in a single instance. Such is not necessarily the case though, and I wonder how Kant would account for the combination of present and past representations—the use of apperception seems to be more than simply an act of unification, but also an act of remembering! However, although memory is not discussed explicitly, it may be implied by the activity of the imagination. It is these two concepts, unifying apperception and constructing imagination that form two major foci of Kant's Copernican Revolution, where the apperceptive subject becomes the new solar center of knowledge, rather than the earthly world of objects; due to the imagination's constructing (via the understanding), rather than reflecting our knowable experience. By connecting the double activity of the imagination (constructing our complex worldly experience through possibly unknown implicit rules of the understanding, and working with our explicitly known knowledge to think about worldly possibilities)—connecting this with the unifying action of apperception (where with the understanding, unified connections of diverse experiences are discerned) we may imagine that the implicit knowledge of the understanding that shapes our inner sense becomes explicit and hence workable by the imagination through constructing and connecting the similarities found in the plurality of experiences. Kant sees this new knowledge not to be entirely empirical and not only synthetic, in that what would be considered the knowable empirical world is already present in the understanding a priori. Kant falls somewhere between the parallel between Plato's theory of recollection and Chomsky's early notions of innate ideas in the brain—his Understanding has access to a priori knowledge that may be out of this world, like (but not necessarily identical to) Plato's forms, yet his faculties of logical perception and judgment resemble the compartmentalization of thought found in cognitive science. Do connected experiences

trigger an “aha!” moment of learning an identifiable aspect of our environment that was always implicit in our understanding’s construction of our perception of that environment prior to that moment? Maybe we could compromise with Kant, agreeing that some aspects of our engagement with the world are shaped by the structure of the understanding—a structuring of perception without which we could not perceive as we do—but holding out the possibility that the multitude of facts of an ever changing world plug into that fore-knowing structure. The core structure of the understanding might be flexible enough to negotiate a complex world of facts, events, ways of being, etc., all of which one would be hard pressed to say completely existed in an individual’s ability to comprehend everything entirely. Unless, of course, knowledge and the real world are actually one and the same, and our particular perspectives fall short of that absolute effacement of the difference between all the known and all the unknown.