

# Anticipating the Non-Anticipatable: Kant and the Anticipations of Perception

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## Abstract

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defines a principle that he himself terms “unusual” and “startling”: the so-called “Anticipations of Perception”, contained in the *System of the Principles of the Pure Understanding*. The “Anticipations” determine the ability of the understanding to anticipate phenomena in their *matter*, i.e. not in that which concerns their form, but in that which is empirical, in that which concerns *sensation*. What is so startling here, is that precisely in sensation, where the subject seems to be passively subjected to the contingency of a material reality, there is a minimal form of anticipation, a form of *a priori* knowledge. Hereby, the standard 'Kantian' distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori*, between transcendental form and empirical matter, is, for a moment, collapsed. In the present paper, I hope to show how this principle accounts for the necessarily problematic status of the origin in transcendental philosophy.

**Keywords:** Kant, Anticipations of Perception, origin, retroactivity,

## 1. Introduction

The question that will be addressed in this paper is the problem of the origin in the philosophy of Kant, and in particular in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The thesis will be that in this work, and by extension in transcendental philosophy in general, the origin *necessarily* appears as something problematic, as something that intrinsically, for structural reasons, remains obscure and enigmatic. To argue for this thesis, the lead will be taken from a notoriously difficult but very crucial passage in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, namely the “Anticipations of Perception”. Through a reading of this passage we will try to show that the notion of the origin constitutes the blind spot of transcendental philosophy, a point where necessity and impossibility overlap.

## 2. 'The supreme principle of synthetic judgements'

As is well known, the central problem of the *Critique of Pure Reason* concerns the possibility of objective knowledge. As Kant himself famously put it: “how are synthetic judgements *a priori* possible”? In his approach to this question, Kant departs from a dual starting point: the refusal of traditional metaphysics on the one hand, and the

rejection of empiricism on the other. Against traditional, rationalist metaphysics, Kant holds that it is incapable of yielding objective knowledge, because it uses formal concepts and principles in abstraction from the sensible conditions only under which objects can be given. Metaphysical entities, like God, the Spirit and the World, cannot be given in any possible experience, and hence cannot constitute objective knowledge. Likewise, Kant also refuses the radical empiricist position, which leads to a generalized scepticism. *A priori* knowledge is possible, says Kant, and the results of mathematics and natural science attest to this fact. The project of the first *Critique* is about understanding how it is possible that mathematics and natural science succeed in furnishing objective knowledge precisely where metaphysics fails to do so.

Central to Kant's argument is the consideration that the human subject is a *finite* being, incapable of categorical or intellectual intuition, that is: incapable of producing objects of knowledge by way of our intellectual faculties alone. Only within the horizon of a possible *sensible* experience, can there be objective knowledge. This is why the Kantian subject is essentially a split subject: split between sensible intuition on the one hand and intellect or understanding on the other. The basic fact about transcendental subjectivity, for Kant, is that there is a fundamental rift or separation between two radically heterogeneous spheres. Given that there is such a fundamental rift, a kind of reconciliatory *synthesis* is necessary: objective knowledge is only possible as the result of a synthetic relation between two separate terms: the activity of intellectual understanding on the one hand, and the passivity of sensible intuition on the other.

It is in these terms that we can understand the central question to the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "how are synthetic judgements a priori possible?"

Kant's answer to this question, in a nutshell, is contained in what he calls "the supreme principle of all synthetic judgements". It goes as follows "every object is subject to the necessary conditions of the synthetical unity of the manifold of intuition in a possible experience". A little bit further Kant furnishes a somewhat clearer definition of his "supreme principle": "the conditions of the possibility of experience in general, are at the same time the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience" (Kant, 1998 [1787]: A158=B197).

Let us try to expound this somewhat awkward formula. The "conditions of the possibility of experience in general" are the forms of sensible intuition on the one hand and the categories of understanding on the other. Both furnish *a priori* rules according to which every possible experience is conditioned. As the human subject is a finite being, he finds himself in relation to a world which he did not himself create, a world which is other to him, which appears as *given* to him from the outside. But, and this is crucial, the knowing subject can only receive the given in as far as he, in advance, knows something about it. The given object is, so to speak, "ready-made", it is "always already" molded by the necessary conditions of the forms of intuition on the one hand and the categories of understanding on the other. Firstly, any object can only appear to the subject as an object given within the coordinates of space and time. Space and time cannot themselves be intuited, but they are the formal conditions under which the given is given. There is thus a minimal anticipatory activity in the receptivity of sensible intuition, an anticipation which establishes the given in its very spatio-temporal



dimensionality. But still, this given is a manifold, an inconsistent multiple. For there to be an *object* of experience, the categories of the understanding are needed to confer unity and consistency upon this manifold. So there is not only anticipation in receptivity, but also in the understanding: the categories of the understanding have to be applied to what is given *in* and formed *by* intuition, in order to constitute an object for the subject, an object of possible experience.

So we have here two forms of a preliminary reaching towards the object, two forms of anticipatory, *a priori* knowledge. The former is contained in the first part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the Transcendental Aesthetic; the latter is contained in the second part, the Transcendental Analytic. These two forms of anticipation constitute both the conditions of the object's representation in experience *and* the conditions of the object itself. That is to say: there is no object outside the realm of possible experience; there is no object that escapes the horizon delineated by the *a priori* knowledge of the transcendental subject. This is what the "supreme principle of all synthetic judgements" is about.

### 3. Squaring the transcendental circle

Now, we have to admit that here is something blatantly *circular* about this "supreme principle". As numerous commentators have remarked, following Kant we can only define the *conditions* of experience by presupposing the *object* of experience and, inversely, we can only apprehend the *object* of experience if it is anticipated by its *conditions*. As Nietzsche put it mockingly: "How are synthetic judgements *a priori* possible, Kant asks himself. And what is really his answer? *By means of a means*" (Nietzsche, 1973 [1886]: 21). So instead of providing an answer to the central question, the above quoted "supreme principle" merely seems to redouble it: synthetic judgements *a priori* are possible in virtue of their conditions of possibility. In a similar vein, we could repeat Alfred Jarry's famous quip from *Père Ubu*, which was later adopted by Jacques Lacan *à propos* Kantian moral philosophy: "Long live Poland, for if there were no Poland, there would be no Poles!" (Lacan, 1966[1963]: 765-790). That is to say: long live the synthetic *a priori*, for if there were no such thing, there would be no experience...

The crucial problem here seems to be the following: by introducing the idea of a synthesis between intuition and understanding, Kant establishes a regime of *reciprocal conditionality* between two radically separate spheres. But in absence of any account of the *origin* of this separation itself, that is, without any account of an *original alterity* that precedes the regime of conditionality, the fact *that* there is synthesis remains contingent, arbitrary and enigmatic. The crucial question thus becomes: how to give an account of an original alterity - not beyond but *before* (i.e. anterior to) synthetic conditionality? And how to give such an account while at the same time remaining faithful to the critical project, that is: without relapsing into any kind of naive ontological realism? In short: how to break out of the transcendental circle *from within*? It is here that we have to confront the problem of origins.

And, as to this problem, it would not be fair to say that the question of origins is

entirely absent in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It appears implicitly, as something intrinsically problematic and paradoxical, as something that has to remain obscure in order to appear at all.

The closest we get to an explication of the question of origins in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is in a section called the Anticipations of Perception. The Anticipations of Perception, together with the Axioms of Intuition, the Analogies of Experience and the Postulates of Empirical Thinking in General, is part of the Principles of Pure Understanding, which, under the banner of the "supreme principle of all synthetic judgements", regulate the way in which the categories of the understanding are applied to what is given in intuition. In the Anticipations of Perception, the aforementioned circularity is at the same time the most flagrant *and* the most susceptible of being fractured. Why? Because here, Kant gives an account of *sensation*. The most remarkable feature of the anticipations of perception is that it says something about sensation, not empirically, or even psychologically or physiologically, but transcendently. In sensation, the formal structure of pure thought and intuition encounters an element that is radically heterogeneous to it, an element that necessarily escapes the *a priori* anticipations of transcendental consciousness. But even then it turns out that the subject has a kind of precursory grasp of what necessarily escapes him.

What do the Anticipations of Perception say? Perception, says Kant, contains, over and above the *a priori* forms of intuition, a contingent, impure, material element, which is sensation. Perception is thus composed of two elements: an *a priori*, formal one (pure intuition), and an *a posteriori*, material one (sensation). Kant defines the relation between the two in terms of anticipation. He says: "all cognition by means of which I am enabled to cognize and determine *a priori* what belongs to empirical cognition, may be called an anticipation" (Kant, 1998 [1787]: A166=B208). This we already saw a minute ago: *a priori* knowledge can be called anticipation, because it is a preliminary grasping and forming of the object by the transcendental subject. And Kant continues along these lines: "But as there is in phenomena something which is never cognized *a priori* (...) that is to say sensation as the matter of perception, it follows that sensation is just that element in cognition which cannot be at all anticipated" (*ibid.*). All this is in the line of expectation: sensation, as the material component of perception, is that what cannot be anticipated. And indeed, the following could count as a plausible definition of sensation *qua* index of reality: sensation is what escapes the anticipative procedures of a subject, and hence indicates reality as the 'other' of the subject.

At this point, however, Kant adds a complication, which seems to turn the whole argument around: "But suppose that in every sensation (...) there existed something which *could* be cognized *a priori*, this would deserve to be called anticipation in a special sense - special because it may seem surprising to forestall experience in that which concerns the matter of experience and which we can only derive from experience itself. Yet such really is the case here" (*ibid.*, A167=B209).

The paradox we encounter here, is that precisely in sensation, where consciousness seems to be passively subjected to an external, contingent, material reality, there is something that is anticipated, something that is known *a priori*. Here lies the fundamental paradox of the whole transcendental approach, a paradox which most



radically underlines the circularity of this approach and at the same time allows for a possible breaking out of it. The anticipations of perception constitute a point at which impossibility and necessity meet: namely the anticipation of what *cannot* and what *must not* be anticipated, but what necessarily *has* to be anticipated if the transcendental procedure is to be conducted to its ultimate end. Thus, as was said earlier: it is here that the transcendental circularity is at the same time at its most blatant *and* at its most fragile.

#### 4. The origin of sensation

Now what precisely is anticipated in sensation? Kant says: the "intensive magnitude" or "degree of reality" of sensation. "All sensations as such are given only *a posteriori*, but the property *that* they have a degree, can be known *a priori*" (*ibid.*, A176=B218). The only quality that may be assumed *a priori* is that every sensation will possess some degree of reality. This *a priori* quality is a categorical determination, an anticipatory function of the understanding. So the reality of the phenomenon, that what constitutes the "thing-ness" of the thing, is a determination of the faculty of understanding.

We can thus see how in the transcendental analytic - the domain of pure understanding - there is assumed, recuperated, what in the transcendental esthetic - the domain of pure intuition - was still immediately posited as 'other', outside: namely sensation as the index of reality. Here, in the transcendental analytic, sensation is re-interpreted as something essentially measurable, quantifiable, and it is only as such that sensation has a sense, that it is determinable in a possible experience. What this amounts to, in effect, is a kind of transcendental deduction of sensation, and hence, of reality. Reality is no longer attributed to something indeterminate "out there", but is posited as a function of pure understanding. We can thus see, how Kant, so to speak, tries to square the transcendental circle: even in sensation, where we assume to be most immediately "touched" by an outside reality, there is mediation by the understanding, and this in the guise of the category of quality that expresses the degree of reality of sensation. The presumed immediacy of sensation turns out to be a mediated immediacy, the result of a becoming. And it is here that the question of genesis, the question of origins assumes its full weight. What is the origin of sensation?

At first sight, Kant seems to be heading towards a kind of Fichtean or Hegelian idealism, in which sensibility is ultimately superseded by logicity, in which every externality is interiorized, and in which the affection of thought by reality becomes a positing of reality by thought. However, if we closely examine the text of the Anticipations of Perception, we can find some clues that open the possibility for a rather different reading. It will turn out that sensation is not so easily fit into the kind of logicist genesis suggested by a purely idealist reading.

Let us, in order to elucidate this, take a closer look at the somewhat strange "proof" Kant provides of the principle of the Anticipations of Perception. He says: every phenomenon has an element of sensation. And the plenitude of this sensation, that is: its simple presence, can always be posited as a maximum-degree, as a "one", in relation to which the absence of the sensation, the point at which the sensation

disappears, is a nothing, a "zero". It is important here to note that for Kant, sensation is always apprehended immediately, not successively. "Apprehension by means of sensation alone fills only one moment", as he himself puts it (*ibid.*, A167=B209). So the presence of a sensation is immediately apprehended as a plenitude, as a unity, and this unity is posited as a 1. Then, this 1 is related to its possible disappearance, the zero.

Now, says Kant, "a gradual transition from empirical consciousness [=1] to pure consciousness [=0] is possible inasmuch as the real in this consciousness entirely vanishes and there remains a merely formal consciousness *a priori* of the manifold in time and space" (*ibid.*, A167=B208). Every empirical sensation is susceptible of emptying itself, gradually negating itself, until only a pure, formal consciousness remains, a consciousness *a priori* of a manifold in time and space. The zero, or negation of the 1, is here identified with pure, empty consciousness, pure intuition.

Between the 1 and the 0, between empirical consciousness and its emptying in pure consciousness, a certain amount of time will have passed. And this time, in virtue of its continuity, is composed of infinitely small moments, just as sensation is defined by infinitely small degrees. It is the category of quality which permits us to think these degrees of sensation, which are by definition unsensed, because they do not rise up to conscious sensation.

Now, says Kant - and this is the crux of the argument - the inverse trajectory is also possible: the gradual "filling up" of the pure, empty consciousness (=0) up to any magnitude of any sensation (=1). "Consequently there is possible a synthesis also of the production of the quantity of a sensation from its commencement, that is from the pure intuition=0 onwards, up to a certain quantity of the sensation" (*ibid.*).

This is what Kant wanted to demonstrate. It is precisely the gradual movement from 0 to 1, from negation to reality, that constitutes the anticipation of perception: the pure, empty transcendental consciousness, the zero, anticipates its possible fulfilment, the 1.

The remarkable thing here, is that this fulfilment is by definition unconscious, unsensed, obscure: conscious sensation only has to do with "full" sensations, sensations that are instantaneously perceived as a plenitude. The genetic account that Kant provides seems little more than an *ad-hoc* affair, a retroactive construction, a "genesis after the fact", so to speak. To account for this "genesis", one has to use the future perfect tense: for every sensation, there is a zero-degree from which that sensation *will have ascended*. What is anticipated in perception, what is *a priori* presupposed, is precisely negation as the vanishing point of sensation, the zero from which every sensation (= 1), *will have originated*. From this point of view, it would perhaps be more appropriate to term Kant's principle "the retroactions of perception": the degree of reality presents itself to consciousness in an instant, and not by succession, and for this reason, the genesis of sensation, the time of the gradual ascension from 0 to 1, stays invisible, and therefore only determinable after the fact. We could say Kant is here at his most Lacanian: the transcendental subject, as the pure, empty consciousness, appears as a pure presupposition, as an effect that retroactively posits itself as a cause. What is truly unusual about the anticipations of perception is perhaps then not the fact that something in sensation can be anticipated, as Kant holds, but the fact that we are forced to account



for genesis as something which for structural reasons has to remain obscure and unconscious, something which necessarily escapes, something which, so to speak, operates behind the back of the conscious subject.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, let us return to our previous question: can we still say that we are dealing, in the Anticipations of Perception, with a purely idealist solution à la Fichte and Hegel, in which ultimately the separation between receptivity and spontaneity, between what is given and what is posited, is undone? Certainly not. On the contrary. a reading of this principle in terms of retroactivity opens an original dimension of alterity and contingency of which Kant does not explicitly speak, a dimension which precedes sensibility proper and which is radically subtracted from the domain of representation constituted by transcendental synthesis. All the elements of Kants analysis we just saw - the degree of reality as a mesure of sensation, the quasi-genesis of the 1 out of the 0, the retroactive assumption by the subject of something that is external to it - all these elements can be seen as so many attempts to provide a subjective answer to something that remains stubbornly enigmatic, something that structurally escapes the realm of sense and determination, something which is neither inside, nor outside, and which can only be apprehended negatively and retroactively, as the residue of the signifying operation that is the transcendental constitution. And precisely because this residual element escapes any qualitative or quantitative determination in terms of reality, because it cannot properly come into existence, it it keeps on *insisting*. It keeps on insisting as something which in itself carries no meaning, but which demands to be interpreted. And perhaps it is not too far-fetched to see in this insisting instance the origin itself, the element that from within ruptures the transcendental circle, the element which at the same time constitutes its impetus and its obstacle, its condition of possibility as well as its condition of impossibility. In short: it is the origin as the blind spot of transcendentalism, the constitutive impurity of Reason.

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