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Immanuel Kant

Kant's Power of Imagination

Rolf-Peter
Horstmann

Cambridge Elements 

Elements in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant

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IMAGINATION

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CAMBRIDGE
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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108464031

DOI: [10.1017/9781108565066](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108565066)

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First published 2018

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-46403-1 Paperback

ISSN 2397-9461 (online)

ISSN 2514-3824 (print)

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Contents

Introduction	<i>page</i> 1
1 The Power of Imagination in the Two Versions of the First <i>Critique</i>	5
1.1 The Power of Imagination and the Understanding	5
1.2 The Power of Imagination and the Process of Object Constitution	27
1.3 Problems with and without Solutions	44
2 The Power of Imagination in the Third <i>Critique</i>	55
2.1 Aesthetic versus Cognitive Judgment	55
2.2 The Free Play between the Power of Imagination and the Understanding	66
2.3 Schemata and the Freedom of the Power of Imagination	79

Kant's Power of Imagination

Rolf-Peter Horstmann

Abstract: *This Element is a study of how the power of imagination is, according to Kant, supposed to contribute to cognition. It is meant to be an immanent and a reconstructive endeavor, relying solely on Kant's own resources when he tries to determine what material, faculties, and operations are necessary for cognition of objects. The discourse is divided into two sections. The first deals with Kant's views concerning the power of imagination as outlined in the A- and B-editions of the Critique of Pure Reason. The second focuses on the power of imagination in the first part of the Critique of Judgment.*

Keywords: *Epistemology*

ISSNs: *2397-9461 (online), 2514-3824 (print)*

ISBNs: *9781108464031 (PB), 9781108565066 (OC)*

Introduction

"Thoughts are hard to come by."

(Anonymous)

Not many topics in Kant's theoretical philosophy have captured the imagination of Kant scholars as vividly as his conception of the power of imagination. It is not as if Kant scholars particularly enjoy indulging in the exercise of "representing an object without its

presence in intuition” (*CpR*, B 151),¹ though this might sometimes be a recommendable exercise, even for Kant scholars. Rather, this conception captures their imagination because they cannot imagine what on earth led Kant to think that his doctrine of the power of imagination contributes anything valuable to his otherwise elegant attempt to reconcile conceptual and nonconceptual, active and passive, intellectual and sensual elements in his account of knowledge and experience. When having to deal with Kant’s ideas about the mechanisms and achievements of the imagination in the context of his epistemology, most Kant scholars behave as we all supposedly behave in the face of fantasies and dreams: they either repress the whole topic, as if Kant could as well have done without it, or aggressively blame Kant for willfully making his epistemology more obscure than it needed to be.²

Now, one must admit that these two attitudes are not unfounded, that they are even encouraged by what Kant says about the power of imagination. Even if one focuses on the first two editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*CpR*) and the *Critique of Judgment* (*CJ*), one has to acknowledge that the power of imagination is at work in

¹ The *Critique of Pure Reason* (*CpR*) is quoted according to the original pagination of the first (A) and the second (B) editions. All other works by Kant are quoted by volume and page number of the “Akademie Ausgabe” (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902). As a rule I rely on the translations of Kant’s text in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), though sometimes there are small deviations that are not marked.

² This is meant to be a caricature. Scholarly assessments of the role of imagination in Kant’s theoretical philosophy are admittedly more subtle and nuanced. In what follows I address some among numerous publications on the topic. Nevertheless, there is the tendency to understate the function of the power of imagination either by assimilating it too closely to the understanding (see Paul Guyer, *The Deduction of the Categories*. In P. Guyer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 118–150) or by discrediting it as a relic from an outdated psychological model of mental activities (see Peter Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Methuen, 1966, 40 ff.). It is worth noting that in a later article, “Imagination and Perception,” (In: P.F.Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*. London: Methuen, 1979, 45–65) Strawson grants the power of imagination a more positive role in the process of establishing cognitive objects.

many seemingly disparate contexts. It can seem as if the only common ground among these different functions of imagination is that it always synthesizes, connects, brings together (*zueinander hinzutun*, cf. *CpR*, A 77/B 103) different items into a unified complex. It is thus tempting to follow Paul Guyer by asking: “[I]s there sufficient reason to accept the assertion of the existence of a transcendental imagination within Kant’s theory of the conditions of the possibility of human knowledge?”³

This study is an attempt to answer this question. It is a study of how the power of imagination is, according to Kant, supposed to contribute to cognition within his framework for explaining its possibility. It is meant to be an *immanent* and a *reconstructive* endeavor, relying solely on Kant’s own resources when he tries to determine what material, faculties, and operations are necessary for cognition of objects. It is immanent in that it presents Kant’s considered view on this subject, without questioning this view. But this view must first be reconstructed by retracing some of Kant’s basic assumptions and sometimes obscure considerations in order to integrate them into a comprehensible account. This is to say that this study did not originate in a desire to justify or criticize any aspect of Kant’s epistemology, only to satisfy the curiosity of a person who (like me) always wanted to know more about the power of imagination in Kant’s theoretical philosophy, but was too lazy to spend much time on this topic. Curiosity sometimes gets rewarded, sometimes not. In the case of the power of imagination, it definitely gives rise to thoughts that are otherwise hard to come by.

This study is divided into two sections, each of which contains three subsections. [Section 1](#) deals with Kant’s views concerning the

³ Paul Guyer, “Is There a Transcendental Imagination?” In Günter Abel, ed., *Kreativität: XX. Deutscher Kongress für Philosophie, Kolloquienbeiträge*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2006, 462 ff. I want to clarify at the outset that my question is going to differ from the question about whether the imagination is the “common root” (*CpR*, A 15/B 29) of sensibility and understanding, a question posed by the German Idealists and revitalized by Heidegger. As Dieter Henrich demonstrated more than sixty years ago (in his “Über die Einheit der Subjektivität,” *Philosophische Rundschau* 5, 3, 1955, 28–69), this question is ill conceived and unworthy of further pursuit.

power of imagination as outlined in the A- and B-editions of the *CpR*. In [Section 1.1](#), I explain why it is so difficult to find a genuine place for the power of imagination within the boundaries of Kant's theory that shows this power to be independent of the understanding. This section is meant to cast doubt on the prospect that the imagination can possess an autonomous function within object constitution, as Kant understands it. [Section 1.2](#) offers a different conception of object constitution, according to which the imagination *must* play a self-standing role. This conception relies heavily on the assumption that Kant wants to distinguish among different stages or phases within the process of object constitution. [Section 1.3](#) gives evidence in favor of my reading by arguing that it helps explain Kant's motivation for rewriting the Transcendental Deduction in the B-edition in the way he does. It also answers some objections against the claims put forward here that are based on textual and terminological grounds.

[Section 2](#) focuses on the power of imagination in the first part of the *CJ*. [Section 2.1](#) examines how Kant establishes the distinction between an aesthetic and a cognitive judgment by clarifying the contribution of the power of imagination to the operations of what Kant here calls "the reflecting power of judgment." I argue that Kant takes the power of imagination to perform an independent activity, irrespective of whether an aesthetic or a cognitive judgment is at issue. [Section 2.2](#) elaborates different scenarios available to Kant for conceiving of a "free play" between the power of imagination and the understanding, both in aesthetic and in cognitive contexts. This section is meant to show that they all comply with his account of the interaction between these two faculties and that they presuppose the independence of the power of imagination from the other faculties. [Section 2.3](#) takes up Kant's cryptic remark that the freedom of the power of imagination consists in its ability to schematize without concept and elaborates its relevance to its independence in cognitive contexts.

This text benefited greatly from detailed and informed comments by colleagues and friends. I am indebted to Dina Emundts, Luigi Filieri, Eckart Förster, Paul Guyer, Johannes Haag, Gary Hatfield, Desmond Hogan, Béatrice Longuenesse, and Sally

Sedgwick for their generous efforts to make the best out of what was (and presumably still is) not always to their liking in the hope of preventing something worse. I am especially indebted to Dina Emundts for organizing a two-day manuscript workshop at the Free University Berlin in 2017 and to Béatrice Longuenesse for her unceasing support of my project in all its many phases. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for helpful suggestions and to the editors of *Elements in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* for including this essay in their series. Very special thanks are due to Andreja Novakovic for her marvelous work, not just in improving this text stylistically but also in eliminating many, if not all, rhetorical superfluties and repetitions, thereby purging my presentation of awkward obscurities. It goes without saying that whatever still is objectionable and mistaken is my fault exclusively. This *Element* is dedicated to two eminent Kant scholars and lifelong friends.

1 The Power of Imagination in the Two Versions of the First *Critique*

1.1 The Power of Imagination and the Understanding

At least three different contexts can be distinguished when it comes to the power of imagination in Kant's theory of cognition as outlined in his first *Critique*. The first (1) is the context of empirical association in which I relate a representation to another on the basis of past experiences. When I hear a barking sound outside my study, I associate this sound on empirical grounds with the representation of a dog. According to Kant and many others, both in the rationalist and in the empiricist tradition, I am able to bring together the acoustic representation of barking with the pictorial representation of a dog because I possess a faculty of imagination, which in this case works reproductively, in accordance with an empirical regularity or law of association. This context is not at the center of Kant's philosophical attention because he rightly considers the reproductive exercise of the power of imagination to be the object of empirical psychology and he sees no reason to challenge the views of it put

forward by empirical psychologists like Tetens and others. Philosophy is, after all, not meant to correct empirical findings.

The other two contexts in which the power of imagination has a crucial function are indeed of philosophical interest to Kant, for they are relevant to the conditions for the possibility of achieving a conceptual organization to what is given through the senses. The first of these two contexts (2) is characterized by the question of how a very specific set of conceptual rules – the categories – can determine a spatiotemporal manifold (based on the affection of the senses and on the reproductive capacities of the power of imagination) to produce a representation of an object about which cognitive claims, i.e. objectively valid judgments, can be made. Kant's answer to this question depends on what he calls the schematizing operation of the power of imagination and is the subject of one of the most obscure chapters in the *CpR*, namely, the eleven pages on the *Schematism of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding*. Context (2) addresses the operations of the power of imagination under a proviso already established in the first book of *The Transcendental Analytic*, "The Analytic of Concepts." This proviso consists, roughly, in the claim that a condition for what can count as a sensory datum, on which schematized conceptual operations resulting in the representation of an object can be performed, is that this datum be amenable to conceptual operations in the first place.

This leads directly to the third context (3) in which Kant wants the power of imagination to play an essential role. Here he is concerned with the problem of how to differentiate within the virtually unlimited totality of sense impressions a sensing subject has at any given moment between those that comply with general conceptual rules and those that happen not to so comply. From a phenomenological perspective, this problem arises from the commonsensical intuition that, among the many sense impressions I have at any given moment, a lot more is given than eventually ends up as the representation of a spatiotemporal object standing in ordered relations to other objects. Kant accommodates this intuition by admitting that it is impossible for a subject to be conscious of *all* her sense impressions at once (A 99). From a more systematic perspective, this