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## The Capacity to Sustain Receptivity Spontaneously: Imagination in Kant's Theory of Experience

One problem that is fundamental for a theory of experiential judgment lies in the question of how to understand the unity of spontaneity and receptivity that is essential to its exercise. According to Kant's original insight in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, any such theory has to conceive of two conditions of success of empirical judgments: In order to be about the world, judgments must relate to objects given to the subject *receptively*; yet in order to possess intentional determinacy, judgments depend on the application of concepts that belong to the *spontaneity* of the subject. Due to the fact that judgments are spontaneous, they have a normative characteristic: An experiential judgment expresses a commitment and thus inscribes itself into a "space of reasons." But due to the fact that such judgments are reliant on receptivity, they also bear a non-normative or "natural" characteristic, since awareness of the particulars that are comprehended in judgments as instances of something general (a concept, a norm, etc.) is constituted by "affectations" (the passive reception of sensible determinations), which seem to possess neither normative status nor conceptual content by themselves. The puzzle that surrounds the unity of both the spontaneity and the receptivity condition of judgment is thus: How is it possible for a non-normative and non-conceptual aspect (i.e. receptivity) to bear normative significance with regard to experiential judgments?

Kant's solution to this puzzle is usually understood as amounting to a conception of spontaneously conditioned receptivity, or of receptive spontaneity: For sensibility to be able to contribute to the formation of judgments and to bear normative significance, the nature of sensible affectations must be such that they are assessable by the faculty of judgment, and this can only be guaranteed by spontaneity and its guiding normative principles itself; the conditions of spontaneity hence constitutively enter the manner in which things are given to us in receptivity. Only to the extent, thus, that conceptual capacities are already actualized within the reception of sensations—which Kant explains with a conception of transcendental self-consciousness—is sensibility able to describe an

155

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instance with normative value (a “tribunal of experience,” in Quine’s words<sup>1</sup>). In this way, however, the aspect of non-normative and non-conceptual determination that characterizes receptivity tends to disappear—and hence results in a risk of rendering the account of experiential judgments unintelligible.

The starting point of this paper is the assumption that such a picture is the result of an “idealist” misunderstanding of Kant’s account of experience in the first *Critique*—and of the “materialist” punchline of the conception of spontaneous receptivity that the latter involves. The proposal is that we should reconstruct the unity of spontaneity and receptivity in such a way that the judging subject spontaneously determines itself to be receptive, i.e. that the subject sustains his or her own sensible affections as affections self-actively. That aspect of spontaneity that brings sensible manifolds to bear as received manifolds is the power of imagination. The aim of the following considerations is to reconstruct some basic traits of Kant’s conception of imagination in the so-called A and B deductions of the first *Critique*, and to sketch out an argument that highlights receptivity as a non-normative factor bearing a normative impact on judging.

The first section is concerned with the philosophical introduction of Kant’s concepts of spontaneity and receptivity and with a certain impasse that might be discernible in contemporary interpretations of Kant’s elucidation of their unity. The second and third sections attempt to present a brief sketch of Kant’s notion of cognitive imagination as a quasi-materialist account of the role of receptivity in judgment. This sketch involves the following: a clarification of what it means that imagination is at once an actualization of sensibility and an actualization of the understanding (i.e. of original apperception); an explanation why this involves the idea of a certain “self-division” or even “self-estrangement” of the understanding from itself; an account of the specific mode of “active passivity” characterizing this functioning; and a hint at the peculiar (quasi-aesthetic) normativity that imagination bears.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in: John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. xii-xvi.

## 1. The Puzzle of Receptivity

The problem of how to understand the unity of spontaneity and receptivity, or understanding and sensibility, emerges from the two conditions of success that reside a priori in the self-understanding implicit in experiential judging. McDowell calls the first condition “minimal empiricism”:<sup>2</sup> Empirical judgments purport to disclose something about the world as it is, and this presupposes a capacity of *receptivity* on the part of the subject. The presupposition of receptivity means that my judgment stands in a relation of “ontological” dependence on its object: the reality and hence validity of the determination that my judgment ascribes to the object depends on the reality of the object—and not *vice versa*.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the object must be *given* to me beforehand, namely through the “affection” of my senses.

On the basis of this first condition, then, it may seem obvious to locate the source of the normativity of empirical judgments in this affectively mediated relation to the object. But this results in an *empiricist* view that is based on what McDowell calls with Sellars the “myth of the given”:<sup>4</sup> For the mere reception of sensible affections does not deliver “complete” representations of objects, but rather leads only to modifications in the stream of impressions, i.e. to a loose manifold of sensations, not to *intentional* representations relating to objects on their own accord. A “givenness” of objects on the basis of sheer receptivity hence seems out of the question. This is why McDowell speaks of *minimal* empiricism: The mere reception of sensations, although indispensable, does not seem to function as *determining* with respect to empirical judgments.

What constitutes an intentional relationship to an object—and with this, we arrive at the second condition of success residing a priori in the self-understanding of experiential judging—is rather the “application” of concepts: In order to relate a sensible intuition to an object, this intuition must represent something *as* something; and since “sheer receptivity,” as McDowell maintains, cannot possess such an intentional character (because it only changes the inner state

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Engstrom, “Understanding and Sensibility,” *Inquiry* 49:1 (2006), pp. 2–25.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. McDowell, *Mind and World*, pp. xiv–xvi, p. 25f.

of the subject),<sup>5</sup> we should conceive of empirical judgments as constituted at the same time *spontaneously*. Representing something as something is a “self-activity,” because it has the principles of relating to objects in itself and hence governs itself on its own accord. And insofar as the receptivity of sensibility cannot determine cognitive judgments in a causal way, the latter possess an essentially normative character: They bear a claim to appropriateness and are governed as such by the consciousness to ascribe predicates to an object on the basis of a reason, namely on the basis of the receptively mediated object itself.

Yet how is it possible for such an object—an object essentially facilitated by affection—to bear normative significance for the activity of empirical judging, if receptivity alone is not able to establish a qualified relation to an object that could function as a “rule” according to which the judging subject is committed to determining the object? Kant’s famous answer is that we should conceive of the transcendental conditions of the spontaneity of understanding as constitutively entering the “manner” in which objects are given to us in sensibility. For on this account it seems that sensible intuitions can in fact have the normative validity characteristic of experiential judgments: they count as empirical grounds. So Kant’s claim is that the peculiar source in virtue of which the sensible representation of an object mediated by receptivity is able to play this normative role resides in the spontaneity of the understanding—namely in the structure of the very self-consciousness that carries the spontaneity of judgment. Kant’s central thought is, of course, that we should conceive of the pervasive identity of one and the same logical function of the “I think” as bringing every sensible representation—in order to be cognitive at all—under the condition of the necessary unity of consciousness. And since, as Kant holds, the system of logical functions of judgment basically defines the conditions under which representations of objects are able to stand and to sustain a standing within the unitary coherence of one self-consciousness, the spontaneity of understanding thus constitutes the conditions of objectivity in general.

158

The problem is obviously how this strong conception of spontaneity might be reconciled with the condition of receptivity, that is, without dismissing the “minimal empiricism” and degenerate into a version of “coherentism,” as

<sup>5</sup> See John McDowell, “Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality,” *The Journal of Philosophy* XCV:9 (1998), pp. 431–491, here pp. 452–470.

McDowell writes, which identifies the source of normativity one-sidedly with the coherence of a holistic and inferential system of judgments.<sup>6</sup> How, in other words, are we to avoid both an “empiricism” and a “rationalism” about the normativity of experiential judgments? The neuralgic point for a solution to this problem obviously lies in the topic of Kant’s transcendental deduction: How is it possible that the transcendental conditions of the spontaneity of understanding constitutively enter the way in which objects are given to us in sensibility? For in order to have normative significance with regard to the formation of judgments, the reception of sensible manifolds must already involve some aspect of spontaneity—an activity on the part of the subject that Kant describes as “synthesis”<sup>7</sup>—because otherwise, sensible intuitions would not amount to the presentation of an experiential object at all.

In contemporary debates concerning the interpretation of Kant’s solution to the problem, however, we can discern two tendencies that seem to form equally unsatisfactory alternatives: In reconstructing Kant’s idea that the conditions of spontaneity constitutively enter the manner in which things are given to us, we either arrive at an account in which the non-normative or non-conceptual element of receptivity tends to be obliterated,<sup>8</sup> or we end up with a picture of sensible experience as a composite containing non-normative and normative aspects without being able to understand the very necessity that holds these heterogeneous aspects together.<sup>9</sup> Both tendencies share a common thread: They try to maintain the normative character of intuitions by ascribing an aspect of spontaneity to them. This seems fair enough, for it would be odd to claim that we immediately receive representations of objects; rather, the formation of singular and immediate representations in the form of intuitions should be construed as a response to affections, namely as an activity of “synthesizing” sensible manifolds. The difference between both tendencies as regards interpreting

<sup>6</sup> See McDowell, *Mind and World*, pp. 16–23.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A.W. Wood, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, A 77, p. 210. Hereinafter referred to parenthetically in the text as KrV. Page references will be, as usual, to the original A and B editions of the text.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lectures I-II, pp. 3–45.

<sup>9</sup> I will try to explain this assessment later in the text. The approaches I have in mind are found in Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*, London: Routledge, 1968, Ch. 1–2, pp. 1–59, and Hannah Ginsborg, “Kant and the Problem of Experience,” *Philosophical Topics* 34:1 (2006), pp. 59–106.

Kant resides in the exact specification of this synthetic activity and the space they provide for the non-normative characteristic of receptivity.

John McDowell, as the most well-known representative of the first tendency, understands Kant as maintaining that the very point of the categories of the understanding with respect to sensibility consists in constituting the intentionality of intuitions in such a way that sensible experiences can figure as reasons for empirical judgments. According to McDowell, he tries to solve the problem by conceiving of sensible intuitions as actualizations of the understanding, namely in the sense of a “faculty of concepts” (AA 9:36):<sup>10</sup> To the extent that intuition has—from the very beginning, through and through—conceptual content, it can determine judgments in a normative way.<sup>11</sup> For McDowell, though, this does not amount to cancelling out the receptive nature of intuition and, with it, of “minimal empiricism,” since the intentionality of intuition lacks the attitude of assent characteristic of the spontaneity of judgments alone. Intuitions are therefore not an actualization of the understanding in the sense of a “*faculty of judging*” (KrV, A49).<sup>12</sup> The lack of such a judgmental attitude shall hence make it intelligible that the actualization of concepts in sensibility occurs in a receptive way—namely because the subject does not take a stand on sensible representations, but rather relates to them only acquiescently.<sup>13</sup> McDowell’s account is thus a conception of receptive spontaneity: Concepts are not “exercised *on* an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity,” but rather “drawn on *in* receptivity” in a passive manner.<sup>14</sup>

For McDowell, thus, the philosophically relevant notion of receptivity does not seem to be much more than a label for a specific mode of actualization of spontaneity, that is, a passive way of exercising our understanding as a capacity of concepts. So whatever the senses may deliver—it is always already conceptually articulated. Thereby, however, the very aspect that characterizes receptivity as

160

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Jäsche logic*, in: *Lectures on logic*, trans. J. Michael Young, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press 1992, p. 546. In the Akademie edition: Immanuel Kant, *Logik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vol. 9, Berlin: Reimer, 1923, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> See McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 205.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. McDowell, “Having the World in View,” p. 439f.

<sup>14</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 9.

a non-spontaneous capacity is disregarded, i.e. the moment of *being- or becoming-determined* in a factual, non-normative way. And insofar as this moment disappears, the first condition of success of experiential judgment is threatened with becoming unintelligible. We must therefore find an answer to the very puzzle that surrounds Kant's notion of receptivity (and that McDowell does not accept as a problem): How is it possible that a non-normative or non-conceptual factor as such bears normative significance for experiential judgments?

Contrary to McDowell, it is this very aspect that Sellars or Ginsborg want to maintain in their accounts. They try to solve the puzzle by construing intuition as a kind of composite structure containing, on the one hand, a natural or non-conceptual aspect, and on the other a normative aspect. Ginsborg, for example, rejects the idea that intuitions could be able to perform the role that McDowell ascribes to them—namely, to function as rational grounds for judgments—without containing a kind of normative stance.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, she opts for a strategy diametrically opposed to McDowell's: She denies that intuitions have conceptual content, yet holds that they bear a primitive judgmental attitude:<sup>16</sup> The synthetic presentation of sensible appearances entails “a sense of [its] appropriateness to the present circumstances of perception,”<sup>17</sup> that is, “a normative demand” according to which “anyone else in [the same] circumstances ought to synthesize in just this way.”<sup>18</sup> This “primitive” sense of appropriateness, however, lacks any orienting or guiding role with respect to the activity of synthesizing sensible manifolds itself;<sup>19</sup> Ginsborg rather conceives of the combining of sensible manifolds as the actualization of a *natural* disposition to associate representations in reaction to the affection of our senses.<sup>20</sup> In this way, she would like to highlight the distinct cognitive role of receptivity, which consists not least in facilitating the acquisition of new empirical concepts. But since our habitual mechanisms of association are not guided by any rule (concept or schema)—they are rather structured like regular patterns—Ginsborg's picture appears as the mere juxtaposition of two separate moments: the habitual association and combination of sensations, on the one hand, and a primitive sense of normativity with respect

<sup>15</sup> Ginsborg, “Kant and the Problem of Experience,” p. 79f.

<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 96.

to this activity, on the other. The latter gives the former a “normative twist,” because it expresses an assent or commitment<sup>21</sup>—an assent, though, that seems simply added to the activity of habitual association. What remains unclear in Ginsborg’s account, thus, is the unity holding these heterogeneous aspects together: Her view gives the impression of a mere juxtaposition of two loosely connected elements.

## 2. A “Materialist” Solution: Two Modes of Spontaneity

The assumption I want to pursue below is that these two unsatisfactory alternatives—the opposed tendencies that McDowell and Ginsborg exemplify—are both the result of an underestimation of Kant’s account of *imagination* in the first *Critique* and the conception of spontaneous receptivity that it involves. My suggestion is thus to conceive of the notion of cognitive imagination as providing the key to understanding the unity of spontaneity and receptivity: Imagination describes the capacity to *sustain one’s own receptivity self-actively*. If the synthesizing of manifolds should be understood as an activity that “draws on” concepts in sensibility, on the one hand, then the “faculty of concepts” cannot be the spontaneous activity that realizes the synthesizing in the first place; rather, synthesis initially describes both pre-conceptual and pre-judgmental operation, which provides the element of “materiality” that is necessary for experience. But if, on the other hand, such activity of synthesizing must be conceived as bearing normative significance with regard to the formation of judgments, it cannot be characterized as the actualization of a natural disposition; rather, we should maintain that sensible synthesis is in fact the actualization of a capacity that is every bit as spontaneous as receptive—an actualization that, precisely because of this double character, puts a kind of “normative pressure” on the activity of judgment. Imaginative synthesis hence marks the manner in which the subject receives the “matter” of experience; yet since we are dealing not with “sheer” receptivity but with *spontaneous* receptivity, “matter” (in the sense of an apprehended manifold of sensations) qualifies as the “outside” of the subject brought to bear as such in the subject. So if the unity of the understanding with sensibility resides in spontaneity itself, as Kant holds, then we should conceive of spontaneity’s ability to constitute this unity such that it must be able to operate “besides oneself,” as it were: The cognitive power of imagination describes

162

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.



*a spontaneity invested in receptivity itself.* And due to such “para-spontaneity” pertaining to receptivity, imagination’s synthetic activity brings receptivity to bear a normative impact on the spontaneity of judgment—although not by accompanying sensible syntheses with a primitive normative stance, but rather by *affecting* the “inner sense” of the subject and thereby triggering an actualization of the understanding, namely by drawing on concepts (perhaps in a demonstrative manner<sup>22</sup>) in the synthetic presentation of sensible appearances.

If it is possible to reconstruct Kant’s argument along these lines, we can avoid both a re-introduction of the “empiricist” notion of a natural disposition of association and an “idealist” disregard of the non-normative aspect of receptivity. Instead, Kant’s account of imagination comes close to what Adorno describes as a *passing to materialism* in his *Negative Dialectics*.<sup>23</sup> Adorno introduces his idea of materialism by distinguishing it from both empiricist and idealist approaches. His argument corresponds in substance to Kant’s insight into the two normative conditions of experiential judgment, i.e. spontaneity and receptivity: On the one hand, the object of experience is neither a “given” nor is it based on so-called “immediate data” received through sensible affection.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, the object should be conceived as “mediated”: “Mediation of the object means that it must not be statically, dogmatically hypostatized but can be known only as it entwines with subjectivity.”<sup>25</sup> But the Kantian insight that objectivity rests on the spontaneity of the subject—that the conditions of spontaneity constitute the manner in which things are given to us in receptivity—does not imply, on the other hand, that the givenness of the object is a *product* of the subject: “That the definitions [*Bestimmungen*] which make the object concrete are merely imposed upon it—this rule applies only where the faith in the primacy of subjectivity remains unshaken.”<sup>26</sup> According to Adorno, the flaw of “idealism” resides in the idea that the cognitive capacities of the subject can be understood independent-

<sup>22</sup> Cf. McDowell, *Mind and World*, pp. 56–60.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, London, New York: Routledge 1973, pp. 192–196. I am grateful to Christoph Menke for making me aware of these passages. For his interpretation of Adorno’s idea of materialism, see his *Kritik der Rechte*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015, pp. 169–171 and p. 378f.

<sup>24</sup> See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 186–189 and pp. 194–197.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

ly from the fact that they are about objects<sup>27</sup>—namely about objects that *ontologically precede* their intentional representation. Adorno’s objection against the idealist “primacy of subjectivity” (as well as against empiricism) is therefore a *dialectical* understanding of the unity of spontaneity and receptivity. Both cannot be understood separately, on their own terms, because they are what they are only *in mediation with each other*: Spontaneity is essentially the spontaneity of a genuinely receptive capacity, and receptivity is an essential aspect of a genuinely spontaneous capacity. Therefore, we must conceive of spontaneity and receptivity as aspects of one and the same capacity—namely of the sensible as well as conceptual capacity of cognition.<sup>28</sup>

If we stop here, nothing in Adorno’s view seems to prevent us from accepting McDowell’s approach to Kant. But the materialist punchline of Adorno’s argument does not become clear until we understand how he conceives of the dialectical unity of the spontaneity of the subject and the receptivity toward objects: For it “is by passing to the object’s preponderance that dialectics is rendered materialistic.”<sup>29</sup> Adorno thus puts emphasis on the fact that it is characteristic of a materialist understanding of experience that the “object”—and with it the receptivity of the subject—possesses a certain priority within the dialectical unity of cognition. He argues that this does not mean that the object is logically independent of the subject’s spontaneity. “To grant precedence to the object means to make progressive qualitative distinctions between things which in themselves are indirect [*Vorrang des Objekts bedeutet die fortschreitende Unterscheidung von in sich Vermitteltem*]; it means a moment in dialectics—not beyond dialectics, but articulated in dialectics.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, within the course of experiencing, the constitutive aspects of our sensible capacity for cognition differentiate themselves from themselves progressively, namely such that receptivity (to objects) takes precedence over spontaneity. But because both aspects form a unity of reciprocal mediation, the process of experiencing does not simply separate spontaneity (the activity of judging) from receptivity (the passivity of intuition), but rather differentiates *two modes of actualizing their unity*: spontaneous receptivity in the

164

<sup>27</sup> See Andrea Kern, “Wahrnehmung, Anschauung, Empfindung,” in: *Theodor W. Adorno: Negative Dialektik*, ed. A. Honneth and C. Menke, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006, pp. 49–68, here p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 192.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

sense of a spontaneity invested in sensibility (i.e. imagination as the synthetic presentation of intuitive objects), on the one hand, and receptive spontaneity, that is, a spontaneity essentially related to sensibility (i.e. empirical concept formation and experiential judgment), on the other. To understand this differentiation in materialist terms means to understand the relation of both moments as an asymmetrical dependence with normative consequences: The actualization of the spontaneity of judgment depends on the actualization of the spontaneous receptivity of sensibility, i.e. of imagination, and not *vice versa*. This is a relation of “ontological” dependence: The spontaneity of the understanding becomes actual on condition of the actuality of (spontaneous) receptivity. On account of this dependency, the understanding remains essentially orientated at sensibility. And since the actualization of the latter conditions the actualization of the former, it marks the very point of experience, that is, the “preponderance of the object” with respect to the judging of the subject.<sup>31</sup>

Is it possible to introduce this dialectical differentiation and the materialist preponderance of the object with regard to Kant’s theory of experience? As a first step, we should concede that it is indeed essential to Kant’s approach that spontaneity and receptivity describe aspects of one and the same capacity for sensible cognition: Only on the basis of the insight that both the act of judgment and the act of intuition are actualizations of one capacity we will be able to understand the unity of spontaneity and receptivity.<sup>32</sup> This seems to be the very point that Kant makes in the famous passage in § 10 of the first *Critique*: “The same function that gives unity to the different representations *in a judgment* also gives unity to the mere synthesis of representations *in an intuition*.” (KrV, B104f.)<sup>33</sup> In this sentence we can discern two accentuations: According to the first and obvious emphasis, Kant makes a claim for the sameness of the function being

<sup>31</sup> This does not contradict the “transcendental priority” of the conditions of spontaneity (i.e. the unity of apperception and categorical determinacy) with regard to receptivity, since it is precisely because of the “existential priority” of the (spontaneous) receptivity to objects that the spontaneity of judgment remains essentially oriented at sensibility—and counts hence as *experiential* judgment.

<sup>32</sup> See Christopher P. Long, “Two Powers, One Ability: The Understanding and Imagination in Kant’s Critical Philosophy,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XXXVI (1998), pp. 233–253, especially p. 234 and p. 240; see also Andrea Kern, “Spontaneity and Receptivity in Kant’s Theory of Knowledge,” *Philosophical Topics* 34:1/2 (2006), pp. 145–162, especially pp. 155–158.

<sup>33</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 211.

at work both in the synthesis of sensible manifolds and in empirical judgments; and because of this, the ability of sensible synthesis and the ability of judgment take root in the same function (i.e. the synthetic unity of apperception). But with regard to the second emphasis in this passage, Kant also holds that “the same function” appears twice, and obviously *must* appear twice: “in a judgment” and “in an intuition.” Spontaneity, therefore, is operative not only in judging, but also in sensibility, namely “under the name of the imagination.” (KrV, B162)<sup>34</sup> A materialist interpretation of this doubling would maintain that the “function” of spontaneity accomplishes the unity of sensibility and the understanding only to the extent that it *divides* or even *splits itself from itself*, and thus encounters itself “in intuition” in an estranged shape.

But what compels us to grasp this doubling of spontaneity in the sense of a *Selbstentzweiung* (“self-diremption”)? Why would it not be sufficient to read this point along the lines of McDowell’s approach by claiming that judgment is the result of an active actualization of our sensible capacity for cognition, while sensible intuition is equivalent to the passive mode of actualization of the same capacity? In this interpretation, spontaneity and receptivity would simply describe two different modes of actualizing the same cognitive capacity; and the actualization of the receptive mode would count as the result of an impact of empirical objects on the subject’s senses and hence as something that the subject (due to the lack of spontaneity) cannot be accountable for.<sup>35</sup> However, the problem of this interpretation lies in its incapacity to account for the very possibility of the “passive” actualizing of our cognitive capacity of experience. For this is precisely the achievement of Kant’s notion of imagination. If we simply stay with this interpretation and let it go at that, the idea of the imagination does not seem to carry much actual weight within Kant’s theory of experience—and many scholars see it that way: For most readers, it is rather the concept of the understanding that accomplishes the whole explanatory work in Kant’s account of receptivity.<sup>36</sup> But this cannot be true, for how is it possible

<sup>34</sup> “It is one and the same spontaneity that, there [i.e. in the synthesis of apprehension] under the name of imagination and here [in the synthesis of apperception] under the name of understanding, brings combination into the manifold of intuition.” (*Ibid.*, p. 262).

<sup>35</sup> See McDowell, “Having the World in View,” p. 440; see also Kern, “Wahrnehmung, Anschauung, Empfindung,” p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, Peter Strawson holds that Kant’s use of the notion of imagination is, although “worth considering,” rather “metaphorical,” see his “Imagination and Percep-

that the spontaneity of our “faculty of concepts” is actualized as a result of the impact that objects have on our senses, namely such that it is *due to this impact* that specific (demonstrative) concepts are actualized in sensibility? This is possible only if we conceive of the manner in which receptivity is “mediated” with spontaneity such that the receptivity of the subject is vested with the “active” power to draw on concepts, and this presupposes a mode of spontaneity that *pertains to receptivity itself* and *distances itself* at the same time from the spontaneity of judging (and, with it, from the activities of abstraction, comparison and reflection that judging presupposes). For as Adorno writes: “An object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than the subject.”<sup>37</sup> To guarantee that the experiential consciousness of an object is at the same time consciousness of the otherness of the object, the condition of receptiveness (of being-determined) must be the very characterizing feature of sensible consciousness. But since receptivity necessarily involves spontaneity, the latter should be defined as *sustaining the receptive characteristic* essential to sensibility, and must therefore describe a capacity to determine one’s sensible representations such that their receptive nature is maintained throughout.

Thus, in order to preserve the “otherness” of the experiential object, the “otherness” of the sensible mode of spontaneity with regard to its intellectual mode must be guaranteed. And in order to elucidate such “self-diremption” of spontaneity, Kant’s theory of the imagination as a peculiar mode of understanding is pertinent. Against the background of this duality in the actualization of the understanding, Kant’s hovering between conceiving of the power of imagination as a third basic faculty of the mind<sup>38</sup> and conceiving of the power of imagination as a “function of the understanding”<sup>39</sup> becomes accessible, since the

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tion,” in: *Kant on Pure Reason*, ed. R. Walker, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 82–99, here p. 89. John McDowell leaves “only one task” for productive imagination in perception: “The productive imagination generates representations with conceptual content partly expressible by phrases of the form ‘this such’,” see his “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars,” *Philosophical Topics* 34.1/2 (2006), pp. 311–326, here p. 323. And Beatrice Longuenesse (in her *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason*, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 207) emphasizes that we are dealing in fact with an “‘appropriation’ of imagination by understanding.”

<sup>37</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 183.

<sup>38</sup> See KrV, A115 and A124 (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 236 and p. 241).

<sup>39</sup> See KrV, B103 (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 210).

hovering underscores both the proximity and the distance between imagination and the understanding. In other words, the manner in which the understanding is actualized in sensibility is clearly distinguished from the manner in which the default actualization of understanding in judgments is realized. The idea I would like to pursue below is accordingly that the mode of actualization called “imagination” precisely describes the *non-normative* manner in which receptivity is provided with its normative significance for judgments.

### 3. Imagination as Spontaneous Receptivity

The passage in § 10 where Kant introduces the concept of synthesis and where he defines the latter as an act of imagination, already suggests that the entrance of the understanding as a power of imagination equals a sort of understanding-without-understanding: “Synthesis in general is [...] the mere effect of the imagination, a blind though indispensable function of the soul”—in his own copy of the first *Critique*, Kant replaces this clause with “function of the understanding”—“without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious.” (KrV, A78/B103)<sup>40</sup> Thus, we are dealing with a blind and unconscious functioning. In virtue of being a non-self-conscious actualization of the understanding, the subject cannot be conscious of this functioning *as a spontaneity* or even as its own activity. And in virtue of its un- or preconscious character, the operation of imagination is “blind,” i.e. it is primarily not governed by a rule of synthesis or a concept. But this does not imply that the activity of imagination is arbitrary or just a habitual mechanism, since if we have to conceive of it as a function of the understanding, then we should assume that a principle of spontaneity is implicitly actualized in its being-at-work. For this reason, Kant maintains that the synthesizing imagination possesses a *transcendental* dimension—i.e. that it performs an a priori synthesis, which makes the reception of sensible manifolds possible in the first place. This a priori synthesis resides in the very *form* of its activity: to “bring into combination the manifold of intuition on the one side and the condition of the necessary unity of apperception on the other.” (KrV, A124)<sup>41</sup> For Kant, then, the “synthesis of the manifold in imagination [is] transcendental if, without distinction of the intuitions, it concerns nothing but the connection of the manifold a priori,” which means

168

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

that this synthesis refers to the pure forms of receptivity, i.e. space and time, but in such a way that it establishes a relation a priori “to the original unity of apperception.” (KrV, A118)<sup>42</sup> The unconscious and blind synthetic activity of imagination, in other words, consists in actualizing the forms of space and time by bringing the manifold received through sensible affection into a “minimally” unitary connectedness—that is, into the nexus of *one* space and *one* time. Thereby, imagination presents this manifold in a “figurative” way: as spatiotemporally extended within one spatiotemporal connectedness. And the power of imagination is actually able to accomplish this insofar as it counts as an actualization of original apperception. Yet obviously we are concerned with a quite peculiar actualization of apperception, since it is a matter not of the unified coherence of one self-consciousness but rather of a unitary nexus lying *solely* in the “blind” activity of imagination: We find a sense of apperception in the coherent “acting,” in the sameness of both the pre-conceptual and pre-categorical ways in which the imagination *proceeds* with affections.

In order to see how this minimally or quasi-apperceptive functioning of imagination relates to the question of receptivity, we should be aware of the *peculiar characteristic of its activity*, which in the transcendental deduction of the A edition Kant describes with reference to the three basic forms of synthesis (i.e. apprehension, reproduction, and recognition). Initially, Kant attributes only the synthesis of reproduction to imagination—and he obviously has in mind the traditional definition of imagination as a reproductive capacity: “*Imagination* is the faculty for representing an object even *without its presence* in intuition.” (KrV, B151)<sup>43</sup> Subsequently, however, in the deduction chapter in the B edition, Kant condenses the three syntheses into a unified threefold synthesis called “figurative synthesis,” and holds that it belongs to the power of imagination.<sup>44</sup> I will briefly discuss the reason why the capacity for representing something absent is the very capacity that concurrently constitutes the presence of something for the subject. The important thing to note first is why the power of imagination is essentially actualized “in intuition”: because in its most basic form, imagination’s activity becomes actual due to the affection of the senses—namely in order to facilitate the subject’s exposure to affections. The synthetic activity

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>44</sup> KrV, B151 (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 256).

of imagination is hence passively induced: It is the affection of our senses that determines the actualization of synthetic imagination.

As soon as we take Kant's description of the particular characteristic of this synthetic activity into consideration, it becomes clear that these syntheses sustain the necessary relation to receptivity *continuously*—without “substituting” receptiveness with spontaneity. Kant characterizes the activity of apprehension as “running through” an affective manifold, thereby taking it together and differentiating it (KrV, A77, A99)<sup>45</sup>—that is, holding a manifold together by keeping its moments different. Such differentiating and taking-together presupposes that in advancing from impression to impression, past affections are not forgotten but kept together anytime (KrV, A102).<sup>46</sup> And such a reproduction of past impressions would in turn not be possible if there were not a sense of sameness of the repeated elements that are involved, namely some primitive synthesis of “recognition.” (KrV, 103f.)<sup>47</sup> But such recognition does not amount to grasping something particular as an instance of something general; rather, in taking-up and reproducing impressions, the imagination detaches impressions from their affective presence, they gain an independent actuality in or as the subject, which provides these impressions with a certain generality—the generality of “images.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, imagination brings present impressions *virtually* together with the totality of every impression the subject ever had, thereby *contracting* present impressions with past ones, but not in the sense of a simple association or juxtaposition, but rather of a superimposition of a bunch of impressions, i.e. in the sense of *letting present and past impressions pervade each other*.<sup>49</sup> Thus, imagination constitutes a sense of non-conscious sameness, yet not “in a concept” but “in an image.” It is hence because of such a holding-together, of such a charging of present impressions with past ones, that the intuition of a present appearance becomes permeated with absence; and this is the reason why the

170

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210, p. 228f.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230f.

<sup>48</sup> See KrV, A120f. (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 239).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Hegel's account of imagination in the psychology section in his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* from 1830: G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller, revised M. Inwood, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, § 455, pp. 188–191.



threefold synthesis of apprehending, reproducing, and recognizing essentially describes an activity of imagination.

It is important to note that it is precisely this complex functioning of imagination that *realizes*, or brings off, received manifolds in their receptive character, that is, *as* receptions. For it is first and foremost due to the fact of imagination's synthetic activity that the pure forms of intuition, space and time, are actualized: Because imagination is the activity which takes up a manifold *as a manifold*, that is, which runs through it by keeping the manifold together, as well as its moments different, the spatiotemporal articulation of a manifold becomes apparent. In this sense, transcendental imagination constitutes the spatiality and temporality of the sensible *as determinable through affection* in the first place—by taking-up and sustaining the subject's state of "being-determined" self-actively.

Up to this point, I have attempted to maintain that imagination is every bit an actualization of the faculty of spontaneity as it is an actualization of the faculty of receptivity. And thereby I have tried to preserve the basic non-conscious characteristic of its functioning. But the point is of course that the unconscious activity of imagination realizes the *becoming-aware* of affections in the shape of the appearance of a sensible and "indeterminate" object. This becoming-conscious is an essentially unitary process, it describes the unity of a synthetic activity that brings the sensible under concepts (in the sense of "*auf* Begriffe", not "*unter* Begriffe"<sup>50</sup>) and which lets a manifold of affections become the representation of a synthetic unity of a manifold. But this synthetic activity implies a sudden "change" or "turn"—the turning of non-conscious into conscious, of non-intentional into intentional. It is Kant's concept of *self-affection* that marks this change.

171

The synthesis of imagination describes the activity of "bringing" (or "positing") the manifolds of impressions into the original unity of apperception, namely as something *to apperceive*, as something that *must* be thought as a persistent determination within the objective unity of one self-consciousness. But such "positing" takes place *through affection*—and it is precisely due to this fact that imagination describes a spontaneity that operates as the "agency" of receptivity

<sup>50</sup> See KrV, B135f. (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 248).

in the subject—a spontaneity, thus, *which does not distinguish itself from receptivity*. As far as I understand it, Kant’s story of self-affection (KrV, B150-156)<sup>51</sup> goes, very briefly stated, like this: It is the unconscious, passively active functioning of imagination itself that *affects* inner sense and enforces thereby an actualization of temporality (as the form of inner sense), namely such that this form undergoes what Kant calls “schematization.” It is thus the very activity of imagination, in its very *form* of taking-up and running-through and keeping-distinct and bringing-together, which affects inner sense in such a way that the synthetic characteristic of the *activity of receiving* a manifold *appears* as the synthetic characteristic of *the sensible manifold itself*. And insofar as the activity of imagination possesses a transcendental character, which has its root ultimately in transcendental apperception, inner sense and its form of time also undergo an a priori schematization through auto-affection.

Where does this leave us with regard to the puzzle of receptivity outlined in the first part? Kant’s conception of transcendental imagination allows us to conceive of the receptivity of experience as bearing a *non-normatively constituted normative significance* for empirical judgments. In this way, both conditions of success of experiential judgments can be met and elucidated in their “dialectical” unity—namely through the idea of imagination as an “estranged” actualization of spontaneity. As to the further elaboration of the normative character of the activity of cognitive imagination, I would suggest turning to Kant’s idea of aesthetic experience in the third *Critique*. The lesson to be learned from the analytic of the beautiful would be that aesthetic experience is *the* phenomenon where the normative character of cognitive imagination comes to the fore. Aesthetic pleasure concerns the fact that the subject experiences itself as capable of cognition and judgment precisely because the functioning of the imagination stands in a “free harmony” with the basic conditions of the understanding. In other words, the subject experiences the operation of imagination (which brings the receptivity of the sensible to bear in a spontaneous way) as freely in accordance with the conditions of conceptuality—as in accordance with rules without following a rule, as in accordance with concepts without applying a concept. And this would be, then, a preliminary formula for the normative significance of spontaneous receptivity for experiential judgment.

172

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51 *Ibid.*, § 24, pp. 256–259.