

## Shared Experience and Sensibility

### I: Introduction

One of the most well-known and influential theses of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophical period is his doctrine of Transcendental Idealism. This doctrine, when reduced to its essentials, makes a single bold and influential claim: we can know appearances but not things-in-themselves. However, the details of Transcendental Idealism often result in more division among scholars than agreement. At the heart of Kant's theoretical philosophy are two important claims about how human beings structure experience, and one about how they do not. First, humans have two forms of sensibility in which all sense data must be presented: space and time. Thus, all intuitions<sup>1</sup> are intuitions of objects *in* space and time. Second, humans structure and *think* about their perceptions (i.e. make objective judgements of experience) by making use of the a priori Pure Concepts of the Understanding, or the *categories*. The categories provide *rules* for experience; for example: Every alteration has a cause (CPR, B4-5)<sup>2</sup>. Together, the forms of intuition and the categories provide *conditions on the possibility of experience*. Put another way, all experience is experience of objects in space and time which are in accord with the categories. Experience is *not* experience of things-in-themselves.

This essay deals with shared human experience—that is, experience of the same object(s) or event(s) shared by two different individuals. In particular, it seeks to investigate what is required for a *numerically-identical* experience of the world. Throughout Kant's early and critical writings, the topic is seemingly important, though seldom, if ever, brought to the foreground of discussion. For example, he distinguishes numerical and qualitative identity regarding a drop of water that one knows “in all its internal determinations;” even if “the whole concept of any one drop is identical with that of every other [...] difference of locations, without any further conditions, makes the plurality and distinction [...] necessary” (CPR, B328). This

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<sup>1</sup> Naturally, intuition is a rather loaded word in a Kantian essay (though the phrase used here is hardly one any Kantian scholar would disagree with). Undoubtedly, the distinction between intuitions and concepts is critical to Kant's philosophy. My goal will be to avoid entering into the long-running debate about the role (or lack thereof) of the understanding in synthesis of intuitions. For relevant passages, see: B75, B104-105, B122, B129-130, B137, B151-152. See also writings by Wilfrid Sellars (Sellars 1967) and Lucy Allais (Allais 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Citations from writings by Kant are given with an abbreviated name and page from the *Akademie* edition. Citations from the Critique of Pure Reason (CPR) are usually given from the second (B) edition—though occasionally from the first (A) edition—translated by Norman Kemp Smith, as (CPR, B##). Other Kantian works are cited by *Akademie* page number (Work, Ak. ##). [See bibliography for full citations]

passage, however, refers to numerical identity among *different objects of experience*, not the *experiences of different observers*.

Indubitably, the shared human cognitive apparatus—the forms of intuition and the categories—provides one requirement for numerical identity of experience. Kant speaks of judgements of experience as those in which a “perception [is] subsumed under some [...] concept of the understanding” (Prol, Ak. 301). He also says that “empirical judgements, so far as they have objective validity, are judgements of experience,” and, further, that “objective validity and necessary universal validity (for everybody) are equivalent concepts” (Prol, Ak. 297-298). However, these passages do not clearly indicate whether further requirements exist—specifically, requirements regarding the perceptions which are the constituents of the judgements. This essay argues that the details of perceptions (or sense impressions) *are* necessary for numerical identity of experience in Kant’s critical philosophy by seeking answers to two (related) questions in this regard. To do so, it traces Kant’s thinking on the subject of a shared world and shared experience from his early pre-critical period, through his highly-influential *Critique of Pure Reason*, and briefly touches on his moral philosophical writings.

The first question assesses the nature of Kant’s idealism in his critical work: Does Kant want or require that individuals have shared experience of numerically-identical objects? This essay will argue that he does, by arguing that both Kant’s strong commitment to empirical realism and his later focus on moral accountability require that humans are able to experience numerically (not simply qualitatively) the same set of objects. In particular, it argues against a purely-phenomenalist reading of Kant (à la George Berkeley). Under such a *subjective idealist* view, true shared experience of numerically-identical objects is impossible by the relevant definition of the term. Specifically, since empirical reality is entirely dependent on perception by an individual, perceived objects can be qualitatively similar, but not numerically identical (because agent A’s perceptions are not agent B’s perceptions).

The second is the primary focus of this essay: What is—by Kant’s own lights—necessary for experience of numerically-identical objects? Naturally, this question is closely tied with the discussion of the first. This essay primarily argues against the idea that the *shared cognitive apparatus* of human beings (the forms of intuition and the categories) is sufficient to ensure numerical identity of experience. To do so, it highlights, first, Kant’s commitment to the importance of sensibility in experience, and, second, the continued presence of Kant’s pre-critical claims about the metaphysical requirements for shared and disparate worlds. Again,

the opponent is an arrant phenomenalist reading of Kant wherein the forms of sensibility plus the categories are not only all that is *available* for creating one's experience of the world, but all that is *required* for true, justified judgements. Kant forcefully asserts, even in his pre-critical period, that *qualitative* identity of *appearances* (based purely on internal properties of the substances) is not sufficient for their *numerical* identity—this is the mistake made by his predecessor, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who mistakenly “compared the objects of the senses with each other merely in regard to understanding” (CPR, B327). Now, the previous sentence is riddled with obscurity (in no small way due to its mixing of pre-critical and critical Kantian terminology); clarifying Kant's critique of Leibniz and the development of his own position on this topic is partly the topic of the following two sections.

## II: Pre-critical Kant

Kant's work is often separated into two periods, commonly referred to as his pre-critical and critical periods<sup>3</sup>. There can be no doubt that Kant's early philosophy is heavily influenced by the Leibnizian tradition in which he was educated. Throughout the pre-critical period, Kant is wrestling with very traditional Leibnizian metaphysical topics regarding the ultimate constituents of reality: substance, Monads, God, grounds of existence, and first principles. Through his critiques of the Leibnizian philosophy<sup>4</sup>, Kant paints a picture of the metaphysical requirements for substances to be part of the same world. This section is specifically focused on Kant's arguments in *A new elucidation of the first principles of metaphysical cognition* (New Elucidation).

One important core Leibnizian principle Kant attacks in his early work is the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles (PII). Kant defines this principle thus: “there is no substance in the entire totality of things which is in all respects like any other substance” (New Elucidation, Ak. I:409). Note that Kant's discussion of the PII in his early work is a clear precursor to his refutation of this principle and his doctrine of space in the *Critique*, as highlighted later in this

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<sup>3</sup> The publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR) is often considered to be the pivotal work in which Kant fully transitions from his pre-critical, Leibnizian philosophical ideas and undergoes a *Copernican revolution* marked by a transition to transcendental idealism (see: CPR, Bxvi and Bxxii footnote). Naturally, the transition is much more gradual and less total in reality. Indeed, this essay touches on both cases of traditionally pre-critical ideas remaining in Kant's later work, and early hints of Kant's mature arguments in his pre-critical period.

<sup>4</sup> Citation styles for Leibniz's works differ. Citations from *Discourse on Method* (Leibniz 1686) are given by page number; citations from *The Monadology* (Leibniz 1714) are given by numbering in the original text.

essay. In the *Elucidation*, Kant directs his attack against the traditional mode of proof for the PII. He agrees with the claim that “all things which agree perfectly [...] and are not distinguished by any difference must [...] be taken for one and the same thing” (New Elucidation, Ak. I:409). However, the move to say that all things “perfectly alike are nothing but one [...] thing, to which a number of different places are ascribed” is invalid: “The complete identity of two things demands the identity of all their characteristic marks or determinations, both internal and external. Is there anyone who has excluded place from this complete determination?” (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 409). Note that, from this passage, a key difference emerges between the early Kantian philosophy and that of Leibniz. Recall that, for Leibniz (and the Kant of this era), *space* and *place* are nothing but relations among substances<sup>5</sup>. For Leibniz, the PII asserts that no two substances are alike, building on an *assertion* that place and space are not primary features of things. For Kant, though, the *external* determinations of a substance (e.g. its place) are not, in any real sense, secondary features of the substance—they are sufficient to distinguish it from other substances with identical inner determinations.

This point leads into a topic of more direct importance for the present discussion: Kant’s attack on the Leibnizian doctrine of pre-established harmony<sup>6</sup>. For Leibniz, the ultimate constituents of reality are unextended, simple substances called Monads (Leibniz 1714, 1-3). These Monads, being simple substances, have the ground of their changes in perceptions within themselves as a consequence of their internal properties (Leibniz 1714, 7 and 11). Put another way, “each substance is like a world apart, independent of all other things, except for God” (Leibniz 1686, 15). Thus, correspondence between the perceptions of substances is the result of a *pre-established harmony* among the substances, as established by God. This means that “one particular substance never acts upon another,” since each already “contains all its predicates [...] and expresses the whole universe” (Leibniz 1686, 15-16).

Kant directly challenges this doctrine in his pre-critical work, and, in its place, substitutes a doctrine of mutual or reciprocal interaction among substances. He states this proposition as:

Proposition XII: No change can happen to substances except in so far as they are connected with other substances; their reciprocal dependency on each other determines their reciprocal changes of state (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 410)

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Leibniz’s correspondence with Samuel Clarke (Clarke 1956) and (New Elucidation, Ak. I:414).

<sup>6</sup> For a complete description of the doctrine, see, e.g., Leibniz’s *Discourse on Metaphysics* (Leibniz 1991); specifically: pp. 14-18.

The proof of this proposition is largely built on previous propositions dealing with basic metaphysical principles of justification and grounds of existence. The following propositions are especially relevant to the proof of Proposition XII.

Proposition IV: To determine is to posit a predicate while excluding its opposite (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 391)

Proposition V: Nothing is true without a determining ground (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 393)

Proposition VI: To say that something has the ground of its existence within itself is absurd (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 394)

Proposition VIII: Nothing which exists contingently can be without a ground which determines its existence antecedently (New Elucidation, Ak. I:396)

The proof of Proposition XII flows reasonably straightforwardly from these earlier propositions, though a few important comments are in order<sup>7</sup>. Regarding the first few propositions, one should note that what Kant has in mind here could be titled the *antecedent* or *determining* ground; one should understand this as “that which is [...] sufficient to conceive the thing in such and such a way, and in no other” (New Elucidation, Ak. I:393). This conception is what leads Kant, in Proposition VI, to reject the traditional route of establishing God as a *causa sui*, instead asserting that “if anything [...] [exists] necessarily, that thing does not exist because of some ground; it exists because the opposite cannot be thought at all” (New Elucidation, Ak. I:394). The proof of Proposition XII then runs thus: There must be some initial ground which determines the inner predicates of a substance (by Proposition VIII), which exclude their opposites (by Proposition IV). The opposite of the grounds cannot come about from nothing (by Proposition V), or from inner activity of the substance (by Proposition VI). Therefore, if the substance stands in no interaction with other substances, it can have no changes of state. Kant provides three similar versions of this proof (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 411).

Thus, while Kant claims that Leibniz recognized that “a community of substances is utterly inconceivable as arising simply from their existence,” the Leibnizian doctrine of pre-established harmony cannot be correct (CPR, B293). This then leaves an important open question: Why is it that humans experience a connected world of interacting substances? God does not establish harmony between causally-isolated substances; this is impossible by Kant’s argument against pre-established harmony, coupled with the fact that one *does*, in fact, observe changes in the world. As previously mentioned, Kant’s solution to this problem is a doctrine of mutual interaction between substances:

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<sup>7</sup> Kant’s demonstrations for each of these earlier propositions are beyond the scope of this essay. Much of what is given here by Kant will appear to conflict with Kant’s critical philosophy, especially his apparent conflation of concepts, actuality, and existence. However, his final *conclusions* regarding mutual interaction remain very relevant in Kant’s critical philosophy—see section III.

Proposition XIII: Finite substances do not, in virtue of their existence alone, stand in a relationship with each other [...] except in so far as the common principle of their existence, namely the divine understanding, maintains them in a state of harmony in their reciprocal relations (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 412-413)

Put another way, Kant is building on Proposition XII by asserting that “the co-existence of the substances of the universe is not sufficient to establish a connection between them” (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 413).

The key tie-in to the topic of this essay is the relation of this doctrine to Kant’s early understanding of space and time. Taking from Leibniz, Kant says that “place, position, and space are relations of substances,” by means of which substances are “connected together in an external connection” (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 414). Similarly, “time [is] the dynamical sequence of their states” (CPR, B331). This has a significant implication: The existence of space and time cannot be inferred from the mere existence of substances! Indeed, Kant says directly that “if you posit a number of substances, you do not at the same time and as a result determine place, position, and space” (New Elucidation, Ak. I:414). The key claim, then, is that substances that are members of the *same world* must stand in *mutual interaction*. Kant says that it is possible for substances to exist such “that *they are in no place* and that they stand in no relation at all in respect of the things of our universe;” furthermore, if there was such a set of substances that stood in their own causal connections “so as to produce place, position, and space: they would constitute a world banished beyond the limits of the world” (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 414). Hence, “a number of worlds, even in the metaphysical sense, is not absurd” (New Elucidation, Ak. I: 414).

Before leaving Kant’s early work, it is important to highlight conclusions pertinent to the primary topic of this essay. Contrary to the Leibnizian Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles, substances may differ despite possessing identical inner properties. Contrary to the Leibnizian Doctrine of Pre-established Harmony, substances that do not interact are not part of the same world. Thus, one could imagine two otherwise-identical substances that nevertheless stand in completely isolated interactions with observers. The experiences of these observers are clearly not *numerically-identical*. Kant’s focus here, though, is not on requirements for *experience*, but, instead, the most basic principles of ontology. As one moves forward into Kant’s critical period, this focus changes. Kant undergoes what he himself titles the *Copernican Revolution*.

(CPR) Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

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