



ON THE AMBIGUOUS ORIGIN OF TIME- A CRACK INTO IMMANUEL KANT'S EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE *CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON*

François Ngoa Kodena, PhD.ⁱ

ⁱLincoln University

Abstract

In his transcendental analysis of the concept of time, Immanuel Kant holds the problematic view that time is not an empirical concept. In other words, time is not engendered by “experience,” but rather conditions the latter. Assuming this statement to be true, would time then be the most universal intuition imposing its magnitude on the mind? That is the critical question examined in this contribution. I start by looking at the historical context of Kant’s theory of time. I then proceed by examining the status of experience in the genesis of time. In a third moment I turn to the role of the mind in the emergence of time. This point leads me to the so-called Copernican Revolution in Kant’s epistemology. Finally, I endeavor to show that Kant’s exploration of time is an image of his general theory of knowledge, which appears as a constant oscillation between intuitions and concepts.

A transcendental analysis of time leads the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) to the following problematic assertion: “time is not an empirical concept.”¹ This negative definition of time in the “Transcendental Aesthetic” can be interpreted in at least two different ways, raising different types of problems. First, to attempt a definition of time is to situate the latter within the horizon on the thinking subject. In this context, time would be the construct of her/his mind. It is the “inner state” of the mind which produces time, making it the “*a priori* formal condition of all appearances in general.”² Obviously, there is a kind of purity here surrounding time such that one cannot but wonder about Kant’s motivations for seemingly preserving time from the stain of experience.

Why is Kant suspicious of experience in his definition of time? If he keeps it aloof, there is certainly a history that informs his distrust of the empirical realm as the source of knowledge. He accepts the general Humean point that knowledge cannot be *a-posteriori* and, therefore, cannot emerge from experience. In a word, the progenitor of time would then be the subject. If such were the case, Kant would line up with the subjectivist and the idealist traditions retrospectively rooted in René Descartes and Plato.

Secondly, the “not” in Kant’s definition (“time is not an empirical concept”) appears as a call for the avoidance of a “reality” (matter) that cannot be erased when dealing with time. In other words, if Kant mentions experience, this may be due to the stubbornness of the latter to resist erasure when dealing with time. But is the fact of being called or identified as “experience” not an indirect way of acknowledging its tremendous input in the advent and the survival of time? Put bluntly, can time be totally disconnected and removed from phenomenological and objective conditions? Assuming the response to be positive, the following quote would not support such strong and radical abstraction, since Kant nuances his position in declaring that time is “a pure form of sensible intuition.”³ And since intuition indicates the receptive character of the mind, that is the way the said mind is affected by spatial objects,⁴ it would suggest that experience is the immediate progenitor of time.

Kant, of course, contends that time is not engendered by experience but is rather its condition. The affection of the mind certainly expresses its passivity as the active external objects somehow “act” on it. Would time then rather be the most universal intuition imposing its magnitude on the mind?

This is the ambiguity that I explore in this chapter. I will begin by looking at the historical context of Kant’s theory of time. Afterwards I will proceed by examining the status of experience in the genesis of time. In a third moment I will turn to the role of the mind in the emergence of time. This point will lead me to the so-called Copernican

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 162. I will be using the alphabetic letters A and B found in Kant’s text for references. So, footnotes will be referred to following the pattern of this first one: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 46.

² *Ibid.*, A 34.

³ *Ibid.*, B 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, B 75.

Revolution in Kant's epistemology. Finally, I will attempt to show that Kant's analysis of time is an image of his general theory of knowledge, which appears as a constant oscillation between intuitions and concepts.

Keywords

Empirical Concept, Immanuel Kant, Theory of Time

Background of Kant's Theory of Time

Kant's theory of time does not arise *ex nihilo*. It is rather a synthesis of the antecedent philosophical heritage. Kant appropriates and reviews the different solutions given to the general problem of knowledge. From the Greeks right to the time Kant writes his *Critique of Pure Reason* and afterwards, the following key metaphysical question has resisted the erosion of time: how do we know the world? A version of the same question is: how are our cognitions possible? A range of answers were given to this question. There seemed to be no common ground as traditional metaphysics operated with dividing lines between those identified by Kant as "dogmatists" and "indifferentists".⁵ In fact, different contradicting systems and schools of thought have arisen in the course of the history of philosophy, claiming each to offer the solution to the causal problem of knowledge: idealists, empiricists, skeptics, etc.⁶ For Kant, only an initial auto-critique of reason can liberate metaphysics from "the ridiculous despotism" of the aforementioned schools and ground it as a science.⁷

It is therefore not surprising that Kant's theory of time be a critique of antecedent theories from Plato⁸ to Leibniz. Plato sees time as an image of eternity,⁹ while Leibniz understands it as a reality abstracted from perceived relations of objects.¹⁰ In-between both positions, English empiricists hold with Newton that time is something substantial and absolute or "a property of any substance."¹¹ As it is, Kant embraces neither the subjectivist view that time derives immediately from the mind nor from independent-mind objects. This said, let us examine how experience relates to time in Kant's epistemology.

The sparking function of experience vis-à-vis time and knowledge

As I observed in the introduction, Kant manifests some reluctance linking time to experience. He warns us that the concept of time cannot be derived from experience. The reason he gives to sustain his view is that experience "yields neither strict universality nor apodictic certainty."¹² For him these two metaphysical criteria are the grounds upon which rests all empirical judgments a priori. This is the central motivation in my view, which underlies Kant's conception of time. But before moving further, it is important to know what Kant understands by experience.

Experience in Kant

The concept of experience is not very clear as exposed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In Howard Caygill's view, experience is "one of the main areas of critical contention in the interpretation" of Kant's philosophy.¹³ In numerous passages, Kant identifies experience with empirical knowledge.¹⁴ Experience is the sparkle of time and therefore of knowledge as Kant writes: "as far as time is concerned, then, no cognition in us precedes experience, and with experience every cognition begins."¹⁵

Here, experience seems to refer to the outer world as it exists apart from and outside the subject. It is the objective world, the horizon of objects distinguishable from one another and from the mind. The concept of experience expresses the "reality" of multiplicity and separateness in Kant's epistemology. It posits the existence of transcendental objects, the *noumena* (things in themselves) as distinct and unknown entities that cannot possibly be confined to the mind. Rather the *noumena* are demarcated from the subject. They enjoy an independent existence of

⁵ *Ibid.*, Preface <A>, 99-100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Preface , 119.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, B 9.

⁹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d-38b

¹⁰ Kant, *op. cit.*, Introduction, 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, B 47.

¹³ Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996), 187.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, B 147 & B 166.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, B 1.

their own and withdraw in their unknowability as they are in themselves. It is from that reserved distance that *noumena* affect the mind through their appearance.

In other instances, however, Kant is more obscure as he seems to make experience synonymous to consciousness. He uses expressions like “actual experience” to substantiate his point. This is what he writes in this regard:

Actual experience, which consists in the apprehension, the association (the reproduction), and finally the recognition of the appearances, contains in the last and highest (of the merely empirical elements of experience) concepts that make possible the formal unity of experience and with it all objective validity (truth) of empirical cognition.¹⁶

Two observations are important, following the preceding argument. First, if experience means the recognition of the existence of a distinctive order of things as separated from the mind, the implication would be that external objects are not in time, since time “is not an empirical concept.” Second, if experience were to mean consciousness, the outer world would be negated and only the mind would subsist. The subject and the outer world would form but one single consciousness. Turning around within consciousness would be the epistemic result.

Kant’s endeavor to critique antecedent dogmatic¹⁷ schools and to defend apodictic synthetic a priori knowledge would immediately vanish. What we would be left with is a consciousness of consciousness, a pure self-consciousness in short. The notions of empirical intuition¹⁸ and representation (given in intuition)¹⁹ would disappear, leaving metaphysics in the greatest disarray. Skepticism would prevail and solipsism would be the surest alternative possibility likely to “save” metaphysics from chaos.

However, in the overall context of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant seems to value experience. He is of the view that the faculty of understanding operates through sensible intuition; a formulation he certainly draws from the well-known adage flowing from Greek philosophers (Aristotle specially) downward according to which *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*.²⁰ It is this same principle that Kant coins differently at the very beginning of various sections of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: the two introductions,²¹ the Transcendental Aesthetic,²² the Transcendental Logic,²³ etc.

But then the question remains. If Kant so much values experience as basic source of knowledge, why does he all the same maintain that time is not an empirical concept? In other words, why is Kant reluctant to build his causal theory of time on the phenomenon? Behind these questions lies a fundamental working assumption that there is no knowledge without the active involvement of the mind in the determination of the a priori conditions of knowledge and in its relation to phenomena.

Time As the Activity of The Mind

Kant can rightly be seen as a creative interpreter of the philosophical tradition. He does not ignore his predecessors’ metaphysical working assumptions that knowledge is the correspondence of the intellect with the objects (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*). In that sense he writes: “the nominal definition of truth, namely that it is the agreement of cognition with its object, is here granted and presupposed.”²⁴ In other words, knowledge is nothing but an “outside-in” process in which objects cause passive perceivers to have sensations (Locke) or impressions (Hume). Kant undertakes to overthrow this empiricist understanding of truth by initiating a science focused “not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible a priori.”²⁵

Instead of seeing the subject as emerging from the world, Kant suggests that we see things the other way around. The subject is the agent of knowledge. The mind is the condition of the conditions of knowledge: it establishes the principles or the categories a priori (before the objects are given) to make sense of the world. It means that causality is rooted in human understanding and is then applied to metaphysical objects, those of pure understanding. Note that this is a kind of relative a priori, that is an a priori with respect to the nature of the human mind, hence based on the human condition.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, A 125.

¹⁷ Kant understands dogmatism as “the prejudice that without criticism reason can make progress in metaphysics”. Cf. *Ibid.*, B XXX.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, B 147.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, A 84.

²⁰ Nothing is in the understanding that was not earlier in the senses.

²¹ *Ibid.*, A 1 and B 1.

²² *Ibid.*, A 19/B 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, A 50/B 74.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, A 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, B 25.

From this perspective, Kant's claim that "time is not an empirical concept" becomes clearer. He wants to prove that the concept of time cannot be based ontologically on the nature of objects. It is on the side of the subject that time is to be sought. As already said, this position challenges the traditional empiricist theory of causality²⁶ and

announces Kant's revolutionary turn, which is a revisionary structure, independent from experience and called a priori. All that there is at the beginning of apodictic (necessary) and universal knowledge is consciousness. Kant shifts from a representationalist view²⁷ of knowledge to a constructivist one. He clarifies this point as he maintains:

objects of sensible intuition must accord with the formal conditions of sensibility that lie in the mind a priori is clear from the fact that otherwise they would not be objects for us; but that they must also accord with the conditions that the understanding requires for the synthetic unity of thinking is a conclusion that is not so easily seen.²⁸

This shift marks the so-called Copernican Revolution²⁹ in Kant's thought. Let us then look at how time is defined in this new theory, how it is articulated, and how it relates to phenomena.

Time and Its Relatedness to Experience

In the perspective of the Copernican Revolution, Kant defines time as "an a priori condition of all appearance in general, and indeed the immediate condition of the inner intuition (of our souls), and thereby also the mediate condition of outer appearances."³⁰ The following other definitions of time are given in the "Transcendental Aesthetic": "time is nothing other than the subjective condition under which all intuitions can take place in us;"³¹ "Time is nothing other than the form of inner sense, i.e., of the intuition of our self and our inner state;"³² "Time is the a priori formal condition of all appearances in general."³³

There are three central elements in these definitions: time is a priori, subjective, and formal. For Kant, time is a priori because it is somehow isolated from experience. It is characterized by a certain purity that separates it from sensation. This claim refers us back to the introductory remark that "time is not an empirical concept." Having pointed out that the latter claim is supported by Kant's endeavor to ground time on the principles of necessity and universality, I now suggest the following reverse view: experience and knowledge are grounded in the subjective nature of time.

Time is subjective because it is the activity of the perceiver as she/he turns to the empirical world different from her/him. The outer world is passively affected by the mind which, through the understanding, generates time in the act of synoptically apprehending something external. Time is this unity of the synthesis of the manifold made possible by the imagination, a function of the understanding. It follows that Kant is not totally rejecting experience, but just making it secondary with respect to time. External objects serve the cause of consciousness in general by making time-consciousness possible. There is no time-consciousness in a Husserlian sense in Kant. This said contradictions are still very much present on this point as Kant claims that "no cognition in us precedes experience, and with experience every cognition begins."³⁴

One may rightly ask which is really prior to the other. Is it experience or the mind? Considering the ambiguity surrounding the notion of experience as noted earlier (experience as outer world or as consciousness), Kant seems to be saying that experience is not knowledge itself but rather something with which knowledge begins; that "something" being consciousness. Objects of experience are products of a synthesis we perform, that is, of a mental combinatorial activity operating on mental representations. He uses "experience" in at least two senses. First, experience is the source of knowledge. This view makes Kant sound empiricist-like. The second sense is that experience is a particular result of a sensory input (as distinguished from perception) since it can be brought under the categories and a knowledge that is both universal and necessary.

The unitary activity of the mind makes time formal. It is the inner form of intuition, that is, a condition of the possibility of synthetic knowledge. Without the synthesizing activity of time as a pure form of thought, sensation alone cannot yield objective knowledge. The problem with this position is that even if knowledge begins with consciousness (the transcendental unity of apperception), there is, nevertheless, some sort of ongoing tension

²⁶ The empiricist theory of causality grounds knowledge solely on ideas acquired by individual experiences.

²⁷ The representationalist epistemic standpoint considers that appearances from noumena cause perceptions and are at the basis of sensations.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, B 123.

²⁹ The renaissance astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) is at the origin of the Western heliocentric cosmology, which displaces the Earth from the center of our universe.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, B 51.

³¹ *Ibid.*, A 33.

³² *Ibid.*, B 50.

³³ *Ibid.*, A 34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, B 1.

between the external world and consciousness itself. Inner experience is not possible unless we have immediate consciousness of external things³⁵ and consciousness does exist only by running through and holding the manifold together (synthesis). Kant finds a way of articulating a connection between time and the manifold in the following

formula laconically coined: “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”³⁶ In other words, the universal must be grounded in the particular for it to be significant.³⁷

This is an original way of overcoming the perennial philosophical debate on the relationship between matter and form. Aristotle and mainly Plato before him tended to situate the forms of knowledge in the metaphysical world. Kant, on the contrary, seems to abhor this type of transcendental enthusiasm, arguing for a blend between practical and theoretical philosophies. He plays out conceptual oppositions recurrent in philosophy: transcendence and immanence, purity (form) and impurity (matter), a-priori and a-posteriori, subject and object, etc. That is why Kant calls his method synthetic a priori, meaning that experience is the material for the concepts of pure understanding. What does this say about the genesis and the status of time, as well as about Kant’s epistemology?

Time: A Crack into Kant’s Epistemology

Kant’s claim that “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” captures the foundation of his epistemology. It shows that time can be approached in two ways: it can be known intuitively, and it can be grasped a priori through the contingent manifold. Time assumes a synthetic a priori status, making room for a double primacy. There is, on the one hand, the primacy of the objects, only means through which a priori synthetic propositions are possible. On the other hand, there is the primacy of the mind in its unifying function of the manifold. This is what I see as Kant’s original insight into the grasping of time.

But this is also a source of further obscurities and questions. If time is a concept (a transcendental object of possible experience), it is ultimately related to the knower who grasps the manifold in a synoptic manner. The conundrum here is how to clearly differentiate time (as the form of inner intuition) from the subjective unity of consciousness, “which is a determination of inner sense,”³⁸ in their common relationship to the manifold. In the end, is time not just a disguised name for the transcendental unity of apperception and vice versa? That is the question. But let us now bring this Kantian discussion on time to a close.

Analyzing time enables us explore Kant’s epistemology, which is original and profound, particularly with the so-called Copernican Revolution. Kant seems obsessed and haunted by a series of ontological dualisms: representationalism-constructivism, synthetic-analytic, object-subject, intuition-concept, a posteriori-a priori, outer sense-inner sense, active-passive, etc. Moreover, despite the pertinence of Kant’s epistemic structure, many subtleties surround his thought, making it difficult to grasp.

However, the present analysis has contributed to understanding the concepts of experience and time and how they relate to each other. Time as subjective remains crippled without experience, which is somehow its source. Similarly experience needs the understanding for it to be synthesized. That is why I argued for a two-source theory of time modeled on Kant’s dualistic epistemology oscillating between intuition and sensation.³⁹ Again, the concept of sensation itself seems covered with ambiguity because, although referring to the subject as Kant just pointed out, it does also relate to the object as it affects the subject’s capacity for representation. Kant elaborates:

This consciousness of my existence in time is thus bound up identically with the consciousness of a relation to something outside me, and so it is experience and not a fiction, sense and not imagination, that inseparably joins the outer with my inner sense; for outer sense is already in itself a relation of intuition to something actual outside me; and its reality, as distinct from imagination, rests only on the fact that it is inseparably bound up with inner experience itself, as the condition of its possibility, which happens here.⁴⁰

With these words, we may now part wondering, however, whether Kant can be read otherwise than through a strenuous effort, on our part, to decipher the intricacies involved in his language?

³⁵ But can the mind really intuit things and how?

³⁶ *Ibid.*, A 51.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, A 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, B 140.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, A 19, note “d”. Kant explains that “intuition is related to the object [*Object*], sensation merely to the subject”.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Preface to the second edition, B xl.