

Kant on the Problem of Knowing the Past

Kant sobre el problema de conocer el pasado

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Abstract

Can we ever know the personal past as it really was? This is a question debated in contemporary philosophy of memory and one which, I argue, Kant grappled with centuries ago. My aim in this paper is to show that Kant's first-edition Transcendental Deduction deals with the problem which today might be called that of objectively knowing my own personal past. The threefold synthesis expounded there sets up a structure for verifying representations as objective depictions of previous experience. As I will show, Kant's enumeration of the process of apprehension, reproduction, and recognition provides a fruitful framework for solving the problem of knowing the personal past and explaining the subjective sense of remembering.

Key Words: Kant, memory, threefold synthesis, transcendental deduction, philosophy of mind

Resumen

¿Podremos alguna vez conocer el pasado personal tal como realmente fue? Esta es una cuestión debatida en la filosofía contemporánea de la memoria y que, sostengo, Kant abordó



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hace siglos. Mi objetivo en este artículo es demostrar que la Deducción Trascendental de Kant, en su primera edición, aborda el problema que hoy podríamos llamar el de conocer objetivamente mi propio pasado personal. La triple síntesis allí expuesta establece una estructura para verificar las representaciones como descripciones precisas de la experiencia previa. Como mostraré, la enumeración que hace Kant del proceso de aprehensión, reproducción y reconocimiento proporciona un marco fructífero para resolver el problema de conocer el pasado personal y explicar el sentido subjetivo del recuerdo.

Palabras clave: Kant, memoria, triple síntesis, deducción trascendental, filosofía de la mente

1. Introduction

The insights of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)¹ still reverberate through contemporary debates in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. Yet while Kant's theories of perception, consciousness, and self-consciousness have been rigorously explored, his significance for the philosophy of memory has been conspicuously overlooked. Recent scholarship on Kant's philosophy of mind has revitalized interest in his account of cognition, but the role of memory in his transcendental framework remains unexplored. My objective here is to fill this gap with an account of Kant's philosophy of memory and a sketch of why Kant is relevant to contemporary philosophy of memory.

There are very few explicit references to Kant in the philosophical literature on memory. Russell (2014) marks the exception for having highlighted the influence of Kant's analysis of experience on current theories of episodic memory. In cognitive science, Brook (2014) has shown the findings of cognitive science to broadly confirm Kant's findings with respect to the distinction and relationship between sensory input and conceptual processing. The claim I want to make here is that elements of Kant's thought prefigured and decisively impacted the philosophy of memory in particular. To do so, I will provide some preliminary materials for a Kantian theory of memory.

Kant does not explicitly delineate memory (*Gedächtnis*) as a distinct cognitive faculty in the *Critique*. Instead, references to memory remain implicit, emerging primarily through Kant's terminological choices ("*Reproduction*", "*ohne die Gegenwart des Gegenstandes*", "*einen Uebergang des*

¹ Henceforth *Critique*. For reasons of breadth, I focus on the first-edition of Kant's *Critique*. Although I take the cognitive theory developed in both editions to be broadly equivalent, this is not at all established in the literature. Consideration of the second-edition *Critique* as an origin for contemporary philosophy of memory might be an interesting undertaking, but is ultimately out of the scope of this paper.

Gemüths”, “*die reproducibilität der Erscheinungen*”). Furthermore, it is well-established (though contentious nonetheless) that transcendental philosophy relies on numerous psychological preconditions, including the very vocabulary that is being criticized (Vaihinger 1922). It is thus surprising, given the reliance on the old Wolffian faculty-psychology, that Kant never explicitly mentions this cognitive faculty. Several Kant scholars, however, have pointed out an implicit account of memory involved in Kant’s arguments but tend to deflate the importance of such remarks (e.g., Paton 1936, ch. 19; Brook 1994, ch. 6; Longuenesse 1998, ch. 2). I argue, on the contrary, that a close reading of the first-edition Transcendental Deduction (henceforth Deduction) – particularly the threefold synthesis of apprehension, reproduction, and recognition – reveals an implicit philosophy of memory woven into the very fabric of Kant’s cognitive subject. Far from a peripheral concern, memory emerges as a transcendental condition for the possibility of experience. This paper contends that Kant’s account of synthesis presupposes mnemonic processes, and offers a novel framework for understanding the constitutive role of episodic memory in the structure of experience.

At a first glance, the absence of explicit references to memory in Kant’s Critical project might seem to foreclose such a reading. Yet Kant’s silence here is instructive: his aim is not to catalog empirical mental faculties but to uncover the *a priori* principles that govern them. By analyzing the threefold synthesis through the lens of memory, this paper demonstrates that Kant’s account of cognition and its conditions hinges on the transcendental function of memory. I argue that memory is implicit here because apprehension functions as an *uptake and storage* of representations, reproduction as a *recollection* of previous representations, and recognition as a *comparison* of past and present representations, each of which is a function of memory. Together, these acts form a veridical process that mirrors the uptake, storage, retrieval, and orientation towards the past that is characteristic of memory – described by Kant as operating at both an empirical and transcendental level.

The implications of this reading extend beyond Kant scholarship. Contemporary philosophy of memory grapples with questions of the objectivity, epistemic authority, and nature of remembering.² By reframing Kant’s threefold synthesis as a deliberate, rule-governed process of verifying representations of the past, I suggest that his transcendental framework provides a foundation for addressing these issues. If memory is not merely a storehouse of ideas but an active synthesis governed by categories, then errors in memory (misrecognition, fragmentation, distortion) arise not from mechanical failure but from the misapplication of the *a priori* concepts that govern experience (such as causality and modality). Objective memories would thus involve the application of pure concepts to their proper objects, while false memories would misapply such concepts and make the same mistake in reasoning that Kant outlines in the Paralogisms: the misapplication of the categories beyond the bounds of possible experience. Such a reading improves our understanding of the Deduction by showing

² For a review of pertinent problems in contemporary philosophy of memory, see Landesman (1962) and Bernecker (2009).

that memory is not of secondary concern but rather has a transcendental basis in the necessary structure of experience. It also clarifies how the syntheses work together – apprehension without reproduction would mean no retention, and reproduction without recognition would mean no unity between past and present experiences and so no application of general concepts. Further, this account proves favorable for tackling issues on the objectivity and epistemic authority of memories: Kant’s view makes memory objectively verifiable because its fundamental processes are rooted in the *a priori* conditions of cognition. To say that a memory is objective would be, on this account, to say that it involves certain concepts, obeys certain rules, and refers to a certain object.

I will proceed by first reconstructing Kant’s doctrine of the threefold synthesis, arguing that it constitutes a coherent, although unspoken, philosophy of memory. I do so by comparing Kant’s terminology with that of his predecessor, Baumgarten, and show how the latter’s doctrine of memory was adopted by Kant. I then outline Kant’s anthropological definition of memory, followed by his Critical description of memory, and argue that this later text can clarify several difficulties in Kant’s earlier work. Finally, I demonstrate how this theory can reframe contemporary debates about the role of memory in knowledge and the possibility of objectively representing the past. By bridging Kant’s Critical project with contemporary philosophy of memory, I aim to recover a neglected dimension of his cognitive theory while offering new tools to confront the problem of objectively knowing the past that is still discussed today.

2. Baumgarten’s Philosophy of Memory

Kant’s transcendental idealism revolutionized philosophy in claiming that our representations make objects possible rather than objects making representation possible, which is to say, that the knowing subject shapes the known object. This ‘Copernican revolution’, though wholly original, did not pop out of thin air. The development of Kant’s Critical philosophy would have been impossible without the context of rationalist and empiricist trends in 18th-century Germany. An accurate reading of Kant must acknowledge the intellectual soil from which he sprouted.

Before laying out Kant’s own doctrine of memory, it will thus be informative to touch upon a key source of this doctrine: Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762). The influence of Baumgarten upon Kant is sufficiently established in the literature (e.g., Fugate *et al.* 2018). However, I would like to point out a precise term that Kant clearly borrowed from his predecessor. The term is “recognition” (*recognitio*), which Baumgarten deliberately links with the idea of “remembrance” (*memoria*). In this section, I will argue that Kant’s assumption of the faculty of memory is in fact directly based on Baumgarten’s explication, which Kant often presented to his students.

Kant adopted several definitions from Baumgarten, this can be seen most readily with regards to the concept of imagination (Staton 2019). Baumgarten describes the imagination as the perception of things that were formerly present (Baumgarten 1739, §558). Completely independent of this “reproductive” imagination, Baumgarten then presents memory as the capacity which recognizes the representations reproduced by the imagination *as those which were formerly present in consciousness* (Baumgarten 1739, §579). Staton has shown that Kant borrowed his conception of the reproductive imagination from Baumgarten. Parallel to Staton’s treatment of the imagination, I show a structural correspondence between these two thinkers with regards to their respective treatments of memory.

I will now argue that Kant’s conception of memory is also indebted to this predecessor. Kant composed several preparatory sketches of his own metaphysics in the margins of his copy of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* (Fugate & Hymers 2013).³ In fact, Kant wrote “recognized” beside “remembered” throughout his copy of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*, suggesting a reading of recognition as remembrance (Fugate & Hymers 2013, p. 217). Upon closer inspection of the *Metaphysica*, the cognitive theory developed there serves as the basis for the arguments Kant puts forward in the Transcendental Deduction. In Kant we find the same terms with the same meanings as developed in Baumgarten. Take the following passage of the *Metaphysica* that anticipates Kant’s threefold division of sense, imagination, and apperception, which produce, reproduce, and recognize representations, respectively:

A perception that becomes less obscure in the soul is produced (it is explicated) [...]. And when a perception that was once wrapped up is produced, it is reproduced (it recurs). Already, things that were sensed are produced by imagination, and hence they were once produced and afterwards wrapped up. Therefore, perceptions are reproduced through the faculty of imagination. (Baumgarten 1739, §559)

Here Baumgarten explains how perceptions are produced and retained in the mind through an act of the imagination. Wolff had already defined memory as “the faculty of recognizing reproduced ideas (and consequently the things represented through these)” (Wolff 1738, §175). But note Baumgarten’s metaphorical use of “wrapped up” (*involutur*) in connection with retention.⁴ An idea is “wrapped up” in an analogous way to a scroll being rolled up into a compartment in a library, it is put away and “obscured by time” (Baumgarten 1739, §550). This would have carried the same weight for readers as Locke’s famous metaphor for memory as the ‘storehouse of ideas’. Perceptions are themselves fleeting, just as paper withers away, and require something else in the mind to organize and observe them after the fact. This is the function of memory for Baumgarten, to ensure the *unity* of consciousness through separate moments in time: “I perceive a reproduced representation to be

³ All translations of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* (1739) are my own but stick closely to those of Fugate & Hymers (2013).

⁴ I would like to thank Kristina Engelhard for her suggestion on this choice of translation.

the same as one I had formerly produced; i.e. I recognize (recall) it. Therefore, I have a faculty of recognizing reproduced perceptions, or memory, and it is either sensitive or intellectual.” (Baumgarten 1739, §579).

For Baumgarten, memory (*memoria*) is the faculty of recognizing a reproduced mental representation as identical to one previously produced by oneself. To “remember” is to recognize that a current representation (a recalled image, thought, or experience) refers to one that I previously generated. Recognition is the awareness that I myself originally produced the representation now being reproduced. Memory, so understood, is a necessarily self-referential act: I become aware that I am the source of both the original and reproduced representation. Memory is thus self-conscious reproduction. It requires not just similarity between past and present representations but an explicit acknowledgement of my authorship of both. Finally, Baumgarten calls the *inability* to recognize something *forgetting*. Accordingly:

If a perception recurs, either I am able to recognize it clearly and then I am said to hold its object in memory, or I am not, and I have forgotten its object. Hence the inability to recognize reproduced perceptions is forgetting. (Baumgarten 1739, §582)

Forgetting is not merely the absence of a representation but a failure of recognition – the inability to re-identify a reproduced perception as one previously produced by myself. This, however, points to a tension in Baumgarten’s account (a tension that is only resolved in Kant): why does recognizing sameness depend on an awareness of the self? It is clearly not enough to identify two things as the same simply because both were produced by the same act or agent. Baumgarten conflates numerical identity (this representation is the same one I had before) with causal origin (I know this is the same because I made it). But two representations produced by the same agent are not necessarily identical in content. Baumgarten’s account struggles to explain how I recognize them as the same representation despite potential differences, and risks collapsing memory into a form of self-attribution rather than an epistemic relation to the past as such. This raises the question: is memory reducible to recognizing my own authorship over a representation, or does it require something more (such as accuracy, continuity, temporal indexing, etc.)?

Baumgarten’s account of memory leaves much to the imagination and fails to fully explain the phenomenon of episodic memory. The *Metaphysica* only dealt with memory insofar as it contributes to the human cognitive faculty outlined in a section on empirical psychology. This section catalogs the different observable mental phenomenon and infers different cognitive faculties from inner experience. Baumgarten believes that introspection leads one to such a conclusion about memory, and that this is simply one of the mysterious things that the mind can do. He can thus be characterized as a kind of fundamentalist about memory in asserting that we have such a capacity and cannot explain it any further. Memory is here understood as a fundamental power, a basic fact about our mental life that explains the possibility of our experience of continuity, but that we cannot explain the possibility of any further. The key feature of remembering for Baumgarten is *recognizing* reproduced perceptions. This definition prefigures Kant’s later account of the threefold synthesis that produces,

reproduces, and recognizes representations. For Kant, recognition is not only about self-ascription but also about subsuming representations under *a priori* concepts that impart objective validity. As we will see, memory, in a Kantian framework, is also bound up with a self-aware recognition, but ultimately depends on the subject's capacity to synthesize temporal order.

3. Kant's Anthropological Definition of Memory

The concept of "memory" in Kant's Critical work is not an exclusively psychological matter (despite what the term might seem to indicate). Nor is it of a purely epistemological nature, which could be understood solely by means of the transcendental method. Since both tendencies, the psychological and the epistemological, intermingle in the *Critique* in a peculiar way, one should approach the faculty of memory from both angles. Kant's later writings and lectures, insofar as they have a psychological-anthropological tendency, provide the appropriate ground for a preliminary investigation into the empirical version of the concept of memory in Kant.

The *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798) is the only work in which Kant explicitly develops a theory of memory. Here, Kant states that "the faculty of deliberately visualizing the past is the *faculty of memory*" (Kant 2006, 75).⁵ Kant distinguishes memory as *deliberate* in comparison to the *involuntary* acts of the reproductive imagination. Both retrieve fragments of the past, but only the purposeful or intentional act of consciously representing past states of affairs is termed "memory". Visualization of the past is based on the association of past representations with the present. For example, I represent some sequence of events and associate this representation with a former time. Memory is understood here as the faculty "where one is conscious of one's ideas as those which would be encountered in one's past or future state" (Kant 2006, 75).⁶ Crucially, for Kant the "visualization" of the past is not a direct encounter with bygone events but an awareness that a current mental state *refers to* the past. This account aligns with his broader representational model of perception, which holds that we have no direct access to objects but only mediately, through our representations of them. Yet this representational framework raises a challenge for how visualization of the past is possible: if we lack direct access to the past (which, by definition, is no longer present and cannot be intuited in the present), how is deliberate, or willful, memory even possible? I argue that Kant's answer lies in the transcendental machinery of the threefold synthesis elaborated in the *Critique*, which I turn to in the next section.

⁵ "Das Vermögen sich vorsetzlich das Vergangene zu vergegenwärtigen ist das Erinnerungsvermögen." (AA XV: 145).

⁶ "Da man sich seiner Vorstellungen als solcher, die im vergangenen oder künftigen Zustande anzutreffen wären, bewußt ist." AA XV: 145).

The requirement that memory be “deliberate” or “voluntary” may seem too stringent and to exclude the phenomenon of Proustian memory, where memories seem to flood in involuntarily at the behest of some taste or smell. Further, the definition of memory as a “visualization” of the past seems too strict in excluding the possibility of remembering sounds, smells, and tastes, things that cannot, strictly speaking, be visualized. However, considering Kant’s concern with objective knowledge and the historical privilege of visual experience as objective, we can infer that Kant is speaking of *objective* representations of the past. Sounds, smells, and other subjective sensations can indeed be remembered, but the validity of such representations can never be objective or verifiable, since such sensations refer to the constitution of the subject rather than the object in question (if I remember the taste of madeleine cake, for example, I remember my relationship with the cake, not the cake itself). The involuntary reproduction of former representations is solely the work of the reproductive imagination. If memory were to be mixed with this power of imagination, “then memory would be *unfaithful*” (Kant 2006, 76).⁷ What Kant identifies with the qualifier of “deliberate” visualization is the idea that true, objective memory must be more than the involuntary surge of pictures from one’s past. Instead, as we will see, Kant holds that there must be something necessary in memory, given the role it plays in the cognition of objects and the *a priori* conditions of that cognition.

Kant goes on to say that although memory is not so much a perception “as *a connecting of perceptions in time*, [it] serve[s] to connect in a coherent experience what *no longer exists* with what *does not yet exist* through what *presently exists*” (Kant 2006, 75, my emphasis).⁸ This conception of memory as a connective tissue of consciousness resonates strikingly with contemporary philosophy of memory, particularly theories that treat hindsight and foresight as part of the same mechanism such as Mullally & Maguire (2014). Their work suggests that both processes rely on shared neural mechanisms for mentally constructing a scenario, whether anchored in the past or projected into the future. Kant’s framework anticipates this insight by grounding memory in the *a priori* form of time – a cognitive structure that enables the mind to organize representations into a linear, causal sequence of before and after.⁹

Yet in contrast to contemporary views of memory as perception of the past (such as Howard 2018), Kant here differentiates perception from memory as first- and second-order levels of processing. Perception is the empirical representation of an object. Memory, on the other hand, is a relation between or means of connecting perceptions. This nuance is often

⁷ “Denn dadurch würde Gedächtniß untreu.” (AA XV: 146).

⁸ “Nicht selbst Wahrnehmungen, dienen sie zur Verknüpfung der Wahrnehmungen in der Zeit, das, was nicht mehr ist, mit dem, was noch nicht ist, durch das, was gegenwärtig ist, in einer zusammenhängenden Erfahrung zu verknüpfen.” (AA XV: 145).

⁹ Kant’s doctrine of time is no less difficult to parse out. Kant distinguishes between time as a *form* of intuition given by sensibility and time as a *formal* intuition grasped by the understanding. Both faculties seem to be involved in the representation of time, but which faculty contributes what to this representation is unsettled in the literature.

overlooked today. Rather than having the same directedness towards an object or event that characterizes perception, memory operates at a second-order level, taking past perceptions as its object and connecting them in an irreversible order.

According to Kant, time is a form of intuition, so that all human experience occurs in time and must be organized temporally (as successive to, or simultaneous with, other experiences). As a connecting of different perceptions across time, memory allows the subject to have a continuous experience over time, which is necessary for anything like cognition to arise. For without memory, each moment of time would be isolated and, as it were, an island on its own. Experience is, for Kant, a series of connected and compared perceptions brought under certain concepts (i.e. empirical cognition). This sort of temporal continuity would not be possible without memory, which is thus, on Kant's account, a necessary condition of human cognition.

One further clue to the connection between Kant's Deduction and memory is suggested in the *Anthropology*. Kant states that “to grasp something quickly in memory, to recall it to mind easily, and to retain it for a long time are the formal perfections of memory” (Kant 2006, 75, my emphasis).¹⁰ These formal perfections of memory perfectly align with each aspect of the threefold synthesis: apprehension simply means *grasping* something, reproduction is the same as *recalling* something, and recognition is akin to the thoroughgoing *retention* of something. Even in Kant's anthropological sketch, he is not concerned with the phenomenology of remembering but rather its epistemic force. Memory is, for Kant, a “connecting of perceptions in time”, connecting what no longer exists with what presently exists *in a coherent whole*, or in a timeline. The exact same connection in time is what Kant addresses in the Deduction's doctrine of the threefold synthesis: recognition connects an apprehension (which is no longer present) with a reproduction (which is present to the mind), resulting in “one experience, in which all perceptions are represented as in thoroughgoing and lawlike connection” (Kant 1998, A110).¹¹

The Latin phrase “*tantum scimus, quantum memoria tenemus*” (as much as we have in our memory, so much do we know) is cited by Kant in the *Anthropology*. Why, then, does Kant make no explicit reference to memory in his major work on knowledge? In the following section, I will determine that such a saying is indeed true of Kant's Critical theory of knowledge, although, in the *Critique*, Kant is concerned with memory only insofar as it is involved with objective cognition, and so is couched in epistemic rather than strictly psychological language.

¹⁰ “Etwas bald ins Gedächtniß fassen, sich leicht worauf besinnen und es lange behalten, sind die formalen Vollkommenheiten des Gedächtnisses.” (AA XV: 146).

¹¹ “Die immer in einer Erfahrung beisammen sein können, einen Zusammenhang aller dieser Vorstellungen nach Gesetzen.” (AA IV: 83).

4. Kant's Critical Description of Memory

The main goal of the Deduction is to show that the pure concepts of understanding apply to sensory experience, and Kant does so by arguing that only through such concepts is experience possible. Kant's method in this project is the transcendental method: determining what the mind must be like and what capacities it must have in order to represent things as it does. Application of this method led Kant to a number of principles he thought to be necessarily true about the mind. One is that representation requires concepts as well as intuitions – rule-guided acts as well as something given to the senses. As he puts it, “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (Kant 1998, A51/B75).¹² Cognition requires, as we might say today, concepts and percepts. To cognize objects, we need sense information, but for information to be useful, we must organize the information. The functions that organize sensory and conceptual data into experience are called *syntheses*. In the first-edition of the *Critique*, Kant postulates three kinds of synthesis. The *synthesis of apprehension* takes up and locates the given materials of experience in space and time. The *synthesis of reproduction* associates spatiotemporally structured objects with other such objects. The *synthesis of recognition* categorizes objects using the pure concepts of understanding. In this section, I will argue that the entire threefold synthesis serves as the mechanism of memory, such that remembering is a three-step process of synthesis. Kant defines synthesis as “the act of putting different representations together” (Kant 1998, A77/B103).¹³ This could not be achieved without the *retention* and *recollection* of an earlier representation to combine with some present one. Recognition could not occur without prior apprehension and reproduction, just as true memory is impossible without the prior storage and recollection of previous experiences. Any act of synthesis is therefore mnemonic in nature.

As previously mentioned, memory seems to play no explicit role in Kant's *Critique*. This work was intended to explain the necessary conditions and limits of human reason, so the apparent absence of memory comes as a surprise. However, if we take Kant's later definition of memory from the *Anthropology* (“the faculty of deliberately visualizing the past”) in conjunction with Baumgarten's definition (“a faculty of recognizing reproduced perceptions”), we come up with a general *description* of memory as the faculty of deliberately visualizing the past through recognizing reproduced perceptions, which can in fact be found in the background of Kant's threefold synthesis. Importantly, Kant does not offer an explicit *definition* of memory in the *Critique*, but only a *description* of cognitive capacities that are broadly *mnemonic*. Kant's implicit remarks on memory appear in the core argument of the *Critique*, namely, the Transcendental Deduction. The Deduction attempts to demonstrate that certain *a priori* concepts (categories) correctly apply to objects of experience, and thereby serves as a

¹² “Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind” (AA IV: 48).

¹³ “Die Handlung, verschiedene Vorstellungen zu einer hinzuzuthun.” (AA IV: 64).



justification of their validity. Kant pursues this task by asking how there could be objects of experience at all.

The Deduction argues that the faculty of thinking is itself possible only because of a “threefold synthesis, which is found in all cognition” (Kant 1998, A97).¹⁴ Our access to the external world and objects is through perception. Reflection on the logical structure of perceptual experience reveals, for Kant, a threefold synthesis present in all perception and cognition of objects: the manner in which a series of representations are apprehended, reproduced, and recognized in the mind. The result of this synthetic process is the perception of spatiotemporally structured objects in empirical reality.

The first of these syntheses, the synthesis of apprehension in intuition, is that through which we “run through and then take together” a manifold of intuition (Kant 1998, A99).¹⁵ This can be read as the original uptake of sense input into the mind, for, as Kant argues, “every intuition contains a manifold”, but this would remain an incoherent ‘buzz of impressions’ without the capacity to “distinguish the time in the succession of impressions” (Kant 1998, A99).¹⁶ Kant believes that we can become aware of only one thing at a time, such that experience is always successive. In order for any unity to come from the manifold of successive appearances, an active process of ‘running through and taking together’ is thus necessary. But, Kant argues, apprehension is not only exercised empirically but also *a priori*, as it underlies the very possibility of representing space and time themselves, “since these can be generated only through the synthesis of the manifold that sensibility in its original receptivity provides” (Kant 1998, A100).¹⁷ The transcendental synthesis of apprehension thus imposes organization upon the pure manifold of time, while the empirical synthesis of apprehension organizes appearances within time.

The second synthesis, the synthesis of reproduction in imagination, is that through which we recall and associate previous representations. By the empirical law of association, representations that frequently accompany or follow one another become linked, allowing the mind to transition from one to the other. This empirical process, however, presupposes a deeper order: appearances themselves must adhere to rules of accompaniment or succession, without which the imagination could not function. The empirical capacity for reproduction thus depends on some *a priori* ground – a transcendental synthesis of reproduction that unites representations according to necessary rules. This becomes all the more clear with Kant’s example of drawing a line in thought, which requires that “I must necessarily first grasp one

¹⁴ “Einer dreifachen Synthesis, die nothwendiger Weise in allem Erkenntniß vorkommt” (AA IV: 76).

¹⁵ “Das Durchlaufen der Mannigfaltigkeit und dann die Zusammennehmung desselben” (AA IV: 77).

¹⁶ “Jede Anschauung enthält ein Mannigfaltiges, welches doch nicht als ein solches vorgestellt werden würden, wenn das Gemüth nicht die Zeit in der Folge der Eindrücke auf einander unterschiede.” (AA IV: 77).

¹⁷ “Da diese nur durch die Synthesis des Mannigfaltigen, welches die Sinnlichkeit in ihrer ursprünglichen Receptivität darbietet” (AA IV: 77).

of these manifold representations after another in my thoughts. But if I were always to lose the preceding representations [...] from my thoughts and not reproduce them when I proceed to the following ones, then no whole representation [...] could ever arise” (Kant 1998, A102).¹⁸ Without this capacity to, so to speak, retain and recall previous elements while progressing to new ones, unified representations of space, time, and number would be impossible. The synthesis of apprehension is therefore inseparably linked with the synthesis of reproduction. Since the former grounds all cognition, including *a priori* knowledge, Kant concludes that the reproductive synthesis must also be a transcendental action of the mind, necessary to generate the unity required of experience.

The third synthesis, the synthesis of recognition in the concept, is that through which we can cognize a series of representations as pertaining to the same object and produced by the same act of synthesis. Recognition, on the face of it, is simply an awareness of the identity of separate syntheses, or as Kant puts it, the “consciousness that that which we think is the very same as what we thought a moment before” (Kant 1998, A103).¹⁹ But crucially, for Kant, recognition is a function of apperception (self-consciousness). I recognize the fact that what I think now is the same as what I thought in the past. This is equivalent to saying that it is *myself* that I recognize in my *action* of running through, holding together, and reproducing, just as Baumgarten held memory to be a self-referential act. I recognize some thought as the same as an earlier thought because I recognize myself as having previously produced it. The idea of the self must thus be presupposed if any other concept is to give rise to a unity of successive representations, and it is actually this condition of unity (the idea of the self) that unifies the succession of representations. In Kant’s terms, the synthesis of recognition determines the manifold of inner sense in accordance with the unity of apperception.

Kant’s anthropological definition of memory as “deliberately visualizing the past” is in fact commensurate with this theoretical definition of recognition as the “consciousness that that which we think is the very same as what we thought a moment before” (Kant 1998, A103). Such visualization is simply an awareness of a present representation as identical to a previous representation, through a recognition that both fall under the same self-conscious act.

Ultimately, for Kant all cognition presupposes the transcendental unity of apperception –the self-conscious “I think” that accompanies all representations and unifies experience. Memory (understood as actualized through the threefold synthesis) facilitates this unification

¹⁸ “Ich erstlich nothwendig eine dieser mannigfaltigen Vorstellungen nach der andern in Gedanken fassen müsse. Würde ich aber die vorhergehende [...] immer aus den Gedanken verlieren und sie nicht reproduciren, indem ich zu den folgenden fortgehe, so würde niemals eine ganze Vorstellung [...] entspringen können.” (AA IV: 78-79).

¹⁹ “Bewußtsein, daß das, was wir denken, eben dasselbe sei, was wir einen Augenblick zuvor dachten.” (AA IV: 79).

by integrating past experiences (reconstructed through reproduction) with present perceptions and anticipations of the future. Without this ongoing reconstruction of the past, each moment of time would be isolated, and no consciousness or objective judgement would be possible. Objective experience, for Kant, depends on universally valid syntheses. Memory ensures that past perceptions inform present judgements (i.e. recognizing a sequence as cause and effect), grounding the necessity of natural (and psychological) laws. Without this temporal synthesis, experience would lack any identifiable causal connection required for objectivity.

The threefold synthesis, and thus the act of remembering, must be presupposed in any self-conscious subject. As the threefold synthesis is required for any representation of an object, it is also required for the representation of oneself. For, Kant says,

The mind could not possibly think of the identity of itself in the manifoldness of its representations [...] if it did not have before its eyes the identity of its action, which subjects all synthesis of apprehension (which is empirical) to a transcendental unity, and first makes possible their connection in accordance with *a priori* rules. (Kant 1998, A108)²⁰

Here, Kant aligns the awareness of one's *act* with the broader awareness of the *self*, suggesting that recognition and apperception are inseparable. The awareness of the identity of one's act is not merely a reflection on discrete mental operations but the very ground of self-consciousness. Without this unity, the mind could not synthesize a manifold of representations into a coherent experience, nor could it recognize past representations as *its own*. Memory, in the *Critique*, depends on the *a priori* rules that govern synthesis (categories), which in turn depend upon the unity of apperception. To remember is thus to re-enact the unity of one's earlier act of synthesis, binding past apprehensions to present reproductions through the same rules that first rendered them intelligible. In this way, Kant's threefold synthesis demonstrates that memory is a structured continuity of representations, reflective of the self's enduring identity. The capacity to remember, like the capacity to think, is constitutive of what it means to be a self-conscious subject – a being capable of grounding its temporal experience in the unity of its own acts.

If we take a clue from Kant's second-edition Deduction, where he says that we can only know time by "*drawing* a straight line", then it seems that we can only visualize the past with a *figurative synthesis*, i.e. with drawing a line in thought (Kant 1998, B154).²¹ Extending this logic, visualizing the past requires a similar act of mental schematization: we map our lived experiences onto an imagined timeline, stretching from birth to the present. To remember

²⁰ "Denn das Gemüth könnte sich unmöglich die Identität seiner selbst in der Mannigfaltigkeit seiner Vorstellungen [...] wenn es nicht die Identität seiner Handlung vor Augen hätte, welche alle Synthesis der Apprehension (die empirisch ist) einer transscendentalen Einheit unterwirft und ihren Zusammenhang nach Regeln *a priori* zuerst möglich macht." (AA IV: 82).

²¹ "Wir können uns keine Linie denken, ohne sie in Gedanken zu ziehen" (AA III: 121).

an event is then to situate it *here* rather than *there* on this line, assigning it a determinate position relative to the *now*. While this mechanized imagery – reducing personal history to points on a line – seems counterintuitive, Kant’s aim is not psychological plausibility but transcendental necessity. For the central puzzle of the Deduction is not how we actually recall the past but how we can cognize it objectively.

The answer lies in the universality of the categories. For Kant, the scaffolding of *a priori* concepts are intended to apply to all objects of experience, which means they can only be justified if they apply to *past*, *present*, and *future* objects. Therefore, to prove that I can have objective knowledge of my past is at the same time to prove that the pure concepts of understanding must apply to all objects. If we can know the past as an objective order, it is only because the categories already legislate over time itself. The act of “drawing a line” in thought, then, is no mere metaphor but a transcendental condition – a demonstration that even the most personal memories are synthesized by the same rules that secure the objectivity of experience.

To tie everything together, a Kantian account sees memory as a synthetic function that connects moments in time, enabling a unified consciousness and objective experience. Memory is not just about recalling the past but structuring experience in time, which is necessary for cognition according to Kant. The threefold synthesis is necessarily involved in any representation of an object. Since objects appear in time, the mind cannot cognize an object (the manifold as a manifold) without holding before itself different representations given at different times and taking these separate representations as referring to the same object, or simply, without *remembrance*. If we take the threefold synthesis as indicative of an implicit mnemonic structure, we can see that Kant explained the phenomena of memory in three moments of a cognitive process involved in all human experience. Each synthesis represents a necessary step of the mind in constructing a unified experience out of a multitude of separate moments.

Considered from the transcendental perspective, the first synthesis presents intuition all together as a manifold (produces an intuition of the time manifold), but can only do so on the basis of the reproduction of prior moments as part of the same object (producing a sort of timeline), which in turn is only possible through the capacity to recognize a succession as unified by means of a concept. The picture Kant paints here does not establish an order of priority one way or the other, either in favor of intuition or of concepts. Rather, there is a “circular relation of dependency between intuition and understanding,” as Angelova suggests (2009, p. 54). Thus there are not three distinct syntheses but only one synthesis “which is analyzed into three aspects or *momenta*” (Allison 1968, p. 173). Perhaps only coincidentally, these three moments of synthesis broadly line up with the three different systems recognized in memory today. Apprehension could be called *the visual system* as it takes up incoming sense data, reproduction could be called *the episodic system* as it reproduces a previous representation, and recognition could be called *the semantic system*, as it unifies a series of representations under a discursive concept.

The continuity of conscious experience through the connection between separate moments is the phenomenon Kant accounts for with his doctrine of the threefold synthesis. For Kant, experience must be continuous and connected to be objective – as this is the mark of causation. Memory maintains this continuity and connection by providing a framework within which past and present representations can be said to refer to the same object. From this formal objectivity flows the standards of truth or accuracy under which a reproduced representation can be judged an objective picture of an original apprehension. The accuracy of memories need not be so strict as one-to-one correspondence between the two representations, or as representing all the relevant aspects of the foregoing experience. Any accuracy of memory could only be possible if the reproduction and the original both referred to the same object, and this reference to the same object (i.e. objectivity) is what makes the reproduction accurate. If both the original representation and its reproduction follow the same rule (cause and effect, for example) and refer to the same object, then the reproduction is an accurate representation of the past. The whole structure of the threefold synthesis therefore mirrors that of episodic remembering, and this schema explains the possibility of objective knowledge of the personal past.

5. Recognition as Remembrance

I have argued that the threefold synthesis contains Kant's theory of memory. Now, I turn to a more in-depth analysis of the synthesis of recognition, which I take to be of primary significance for philosophy of memory. Kant begins the section on the synthesis of recognition as follows:

Without consciousness that that which we think is the very same as what we thought a moment before, all reproduction in the series of representations would be in vain. For it would be a new representation in our current state, which would not belong at all to the act through which it has been gradually generated, and its manifold would never constitute a whole, since it would lack the unity that only consciousness can obtain for it. (Kant 1998, A103)²²

Recognition is here equated with a consciousness of sameness, which Kant describes in terms of a relation between past and present representations, that is, in terms of remembrance. Yet this account differs from Baumgarten's definition of memory as the recognition of sameness in that Kant takes such sameness to be indicative of a deeper, transcendental

²² "Ohne Bewußtsein, daß das, was wir denken, eben dasselbe sei, was wir einen Augenblick zuvor dachten, würde alle Reproduktion in der Reihe der Vorstellungen vergeblich sein. Denn es wäre eine neue Vorstellung im jetzigen Zustande, die zu dem Actus, wodurch sie nach und nach hat erzeugt werden sollen, gar nicht gehörte, und das Mannigfaltige derselben würde immer kein Ganzes ausmachen, weil es der Einheit ermangete, die ihm nur das Bewußtsein verschaffen kann." (AA IV: 79).

sameness, namely, the unity of apperception. What is at stake in the discussion of recognition is the reference of a representation to an object, which, for Kant, is achieved not by a recognition of a reproduced representation as one I formerly produced, but rather, by a recognition that my grasp of the information is the same. For in the *Anthropology* Kant described memory as a deliberate “connecting of perceptions in time”, connecting the past with the future through visualization in the present (Kant 2006, p. 182). Recognition, in this context, is rather the connection of present representations with previous ones through a deliberate, future-oriented, or generative process such as counting. Kant uses the example of counting to illustrate how past and present moments are combined into a single object of representation:

If, in counting, I forget that the units that now hover before my senses were successively added to each other by me, then I would never cognize the generation of the multitude through this successive addition of one to the other, and consequently I would not cognize the number; for this concept consists solely in the consciousness of the unity of the synthesis. (Kant 1998, A103)²³

It is a concept (a rule for organizing experience) that guides the process of counting or any other veridical synthesis of separate moments. The concept of number is that which guides the generation of a multitude through successive addition – it is a universal representation that can be applied to any appropriate representation I have encountered and will encounter in the future.

Kant’s anthropological definition of memory as a connecting of past perceptions with future ones is commensurable with this description of recognition. For the verification of a presently reproduced perception as an accurate copy of a past perception ensures that all future perceptions of the same kind and following the same rule will also be valid.²⁴ This shows that the concept in which a succession of representations is unified (a number in Kant’s example) consists solely in the consciousness of the unity of the synthesis whereby the representations are successively added (i.e. a sort of timeline of the synthesis). As this example makes clear, recognition is essentially the awareness of one’s act of synthesizing, or the consciousness of “the generation of the multitude through this successive addition of one to the other” (Kant 1998, A103).

The concept guiding the threefold synthesis, a number in the above example or a timeline in my own, is thus of a self-reflexive nature, as it is the awareness of one’s act of combining, and because of this Kant invokes apperception as the faculty of recognition. If recognition

²³ “Vergesse ich im Zählen, daß die Einheiten, die mir jetzt vor Sinnen schweben, nach und nach zu einander vor mir hinzugethan worden sind, so würde ich die Erzeugung der Menge durch diese successive Hinzuthung von Einem zu Einem, mithin auch nicht die Zahl erkennen; denn dieser Begriff besteht lediglich in dem Bewußtsein dieser Einheit der Synthesis.” (AA IV: 79).

²⁴ Hyder (2022) excellently shows that the process of recognizing or notarizing a copy is precisely that of a legal “Deduktion” in 18th century Prussia and is therefore central to Kant’s entire argument in his Deduction.

is the awareness of my own act of synthesis, then it is ultimately possible only because I have the capacity for *self-awareness*. This connection between apperception and recognition shows that Kant had memory in mind when writing the synthesis of recognition, for recognition is a self-oriented awareness of my previous acts of synthesis, or remembrance of my own acts. For Kant, memory is not conceived as the ‘storehouse of ideas’ that Locke envisioned, but rather that through which one becomes present to oneself through one’s past. Memory is, in the Deduction, that through which I correctly visualize the past through an awareness of my previous acts.

Recognition is also described as the consciousness of “the generation of the multitude” under a specific concept (Kant 1998, A103). For no connection between an original apprehension and its reproduction could arise if I were not aware that I was the one stringing them together. This is the same as saying that a memory is distinguished from a mere imagination in that I take the former as something I previously underwent (I assign it a determinate time in my lifeline) rather than something I happened to imagine. Of course, I could just as easily assign an imagination some determinate time, or confuse a real memory for a mere imagination. Kant’s point though is that recognition of a causal connection is the only criterion we have for distinguishing the objective from the merely imagined past. If we take apperception as a causal power, we could say that the act of recognition is itself the cause of objective remembrance.

6. Kant and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind

With the broad equivalence between recognition and remembrance established and a sketch of Kant’s philosophy of memory on the table, I now turn to the significance of Kant’s ideas for contemporary debates in philosophy of memory. Today, the exact nature of memory remains an open question. If we take Kant’s threefold synthesis as a mechanism of memory, we find the origins of the constructivist view that the mind plays an active role in structuring memories. Recall Kant’s basic insight that the mind structures experience, from which alone it can be inferred that memory is not just storing representations but organizing them in time.

Today we say that remembering involves representations of past events. Yet there is still disagreement on precisely what the object of memory is and what our relationship to it is. While direct realism holds the object of memory to be the past events *themselves*, indirect realism holds the object of memory to be internal *representations* of past events (Sant’Anna & Michaelian 2019, p. 188). Kant offers a compromise between these two. On his account, when one remembers, one is related to the past *act* of having produced some representation. In this sense, Kant provides a broadly Wittgensteinian account, at least as that described by Moyal-Sharrock, according to which remembering is *doing* something, rather than retrieving stored content (Moyal-Sharrock 2009). For Kant, it is not a stored representation that gives

rise to remembrance, but rather a continuous rule-governed act of synthesis that contributes to the production of both the original experience and the retrieved representation of it. This also overcomes the cotemporality problem, in that it is one and the same rule-governed act that produces and reproduces a representation, which act is then recognized, resulting in remembrance. The knowing subject is directly related to a past act because it is the same act continuing through time.²⁵

Kant's philosophy of memory might also reconcile the representationalist and relationalist debate that some purport "does not have a universal solution" (Nanay 2014, p. 332). While representationalists argue that perception is internal representation, relationists argue that perception is a relation between the subject and an external scene. The debate carries over to and heavily influences the philosophy of memory. Schellenberg (2014) has put forward a capacist account of perception in attempt to integrate both of the above views, however her capacist analysis comes with its own problems (cf. Kelp 2023). Kant's account seemingly integrates both of the above views in combination with a broadly 'capacities-first' methodology, wherein cognitive capacities play both an explanatorily and epistemically basic role in accounting for cognitive phenomena (Schafer 2020).

What is unique about Kant's 'capacitism' is that he sees cognitive capacities as causally efficacious. Kant holds what we would today call a causal theory of memory. Robins defines a causal theory of memory as one in which remembering requires a causal connection between an event and its representation in memory (2016, p. 2993). However, rather than a memory trace sustaining this connection, for Kant it is rather the ongoing unity afforded by an act of synthesis.²⁶ Kant was one of the first to espouse such a causal theory of memory. Before him, what distinguished memories from imaginations was commonly agreed to be characteristics such as vivacity and preservation of order (as in Locke and Hume) or the presence of memory traces ('after-sensations' in Tetens). Against these purely subjective memory-markers, Kant attempts to introduce a marker that, although subjective, is nonetheless objectively verifiable. The subjective mental act of recognition is of an objective causal connection – I recognize the correspondence between an original perception and its reproduction by recognizing that both are determined by the same rule. For Kant, the rule of causality is both necessary and sufficient for remembering.

The self-reflective character of its content is what makes the threefold synthesis commensurate with the process of remembering. Kant's view can be understood along the lines of McCormack & Hoerl (2001), who emphasize the subject's grasp of a temporal relationship

²⁵ For Kant, this is possible because experience itself presupposes an act of synthesis on the form of time itself. Synthesis *in* time is only possible because there must be a prior synthesis *of* time, the form of inner intuition. Precisely how such a synthesis *of* time is possible is a matter requiring much more clarification than I can offer here.

²⁶ The doctrine of memory traces can be found in the philosophies of Crusius and Tetens, both of which Kant was quite familiar with and deliberately distanced himself from.

to a remembered event, and Fernández (2006), who emphasizes the subject's grasp of a causal relationship to the event. Time, for Kant, is necessarily causal, for each event is determined to occur by some preceding event. To represent my temporal relation to a remembered event is to represent my causal relation to it.

The difficulty with Kant's view, however, stems from his transcendental method. As his insights are based on inferences to the best explanation and not empirical observation, the cognitive framework he develops is what we must presuppose in the mind, not what the mind actually does in cognizing. Because of this, it is not at all clear how the memory-marker of recognition can work phenomenologically. But an appeal to the second-order nature of memory might clarify this. Kant held what we would today call a second-order content-based approach to memory. The threefold synthesis provides the subject with two types of information: first-order information about an original apprehension and second-order information about the correspondence between the original and the reproduced copy of it. Two-tiered approaches today say that recollective experience is composed of a first-order memory of the past along with a metacognitive feeling or knowing (Dokic 2014). Kant might say that recognition affords the subject with such a metacognitive feeling of pastness. To be sure, Kant would not venture so far into the phenomenology of remembering, for his epistemic theory only treats memory insofar as it contributes to a self-reflective knowledge necessary for human experience.

7. Conclusion

I have shown that the threefold synthesis of Kant's Transcendental Deduction can be used to explain how I can have objective knowledge of my personal past. To sum up Kant's account: memory is a process (composed of three moments), a function of apperception, and a component of the broader system of cognition. Apprehension, reproduction, and recognition constitute three moments of the process of remembrance. I have shown the historical, textual, and exegetical reasons in favor of identifying the threefold synthesis with the mechanism of remembrance.

Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* is the source from which Kant borrowed the terminology for the Deduction - if we look at the Deduction through this 'Baumgartenian' lens (to recognize is to remember), not only can we better understand the meaning behind Kant's words, but also tease out his views on memory, its position and function in the system of our mental capacities, and its lasting significance for debates in philosophy of memory today. Ultimately, Kant shows that our conception of memory cannot be neatly categorized as philosophers attempt today and ought rather to be multifaceted. Memory contains both relational and representational characteristics, systematic, procedural, and functional elements, correspondence and simulation, constructive and reconstructive, preservation and generation.

Memory is, for Kant, implicit in the very rudiments of cognition and thus difficult to discern. Any act of cognition presupposes three separate syntheses which correspond to three moments of the act of remembering. Remembering and cognizing are indeed names for almost the same thing, since memory refurnishes the resources of cognition, and nothing can be cognized that may not reappear in memory. For Kant, cognition (empirical knowledge) implies that something can be remembered, and memory (threefold synthesis) implies the recall and verification of something already known. In any claim of identity or duration attributed to an object, memory resides in the background of such judgement. To call something identical implies that I have considered it twice and that I possess a true memory of my past experience, since I know it presented this very object. Parts of the present (in the reproduction) are interpreted as survivals of a receding past. The threefold synthesis results in this recessionary character of representations

The past, though never directly accessible, becomes intelligible through the mind's capacity to organize representations into a coherent temporal order, so that memory functions not as a mirror of the past but as a constitutive feature of human cognition. Memory is a reconstruction, not a relapse, transporting me to a visualized scene. The reconstruction can be objective nonetheless, as it refers to past experience. After reproducing past perceptions, I recognize those perceptions and regard them as past. When I remember I do not *look at* my past experience, rather I reconstruct it, or imagine something of my own manufacture and attribute it to myself in the past.

Kant's arguments in the *Critique* suggest an understanding of memory as a causal, rule-governed act of synthesis that is objectively verifiable. The process of apprehension, reproduction, and recognition ensures that memories are not mere subjective reconstructions but are anchored in the same *a priori* categories of understanding that legislate experience in general. This means that the temporal ordering of past perceptions is objectively verifiable, for they are systematically connected to past events with the concept of causality, conferring on them an objective status.

Since each moment is, for Kant, nothing but absolute unity, the exact same intuition can never be repeated twice. Although phenomenologically it might seem possible to reproduce almost exactly some earlier experience, this is ultimately impossible. There is, by definition, no absolutely accurate representation of the past. If I run through the same process twice, I should have the same intuition twice; but the precise repetition of the past, from constituting a perfect memory, actually excludes memory. For it is the feeling of pastness, the receding perspective in which memory places its data, that makes remembrance what it is. There can be no perfect recovery of the past, but only an approximate reconstruction of it. The key feature of remembrance, for Kant, lies instead in the projection of some perception to a precise point of relations in the objective past. So understood, memory is objective if the experience it designates actually took place, conforms to some description, and followed the same rule. Questions about the objectivity of remembrance can thus be profitably construed in terms of the reference to its object, that is, in the terms of transcendental philosophy.

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