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Perceiving Distinct Particulars

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Kant is often thought to hold that we cannot perceive distinct particular things without applying concepts to our experience, and, in particular, without applying the \textit{a priori} concepts he calls the categories. I argue that, once we draw a distinction between the \textit{perception} of a distinct \textit{particular} and \textit{cognition} of an \textit{object} in the full-blown Kantian sense of an object, we can allow that Kant does not see concepts as necessary for the basic intentionality of perception – the fact that perception presents us with distinct particular things.\(^1\) Rather, he thinks it is an \textit{a priori} and non-conceptual representation of space which enables us to perceive particulars which are distinct from ourselves and from each other. I argue that this reading straightforwardly makes sense of Kant's account of the separate and essential contribution to cognition made by intuition and concepts, and, in particular, of the contribution made by intuition.\(^2\) I then look at the implications this account has for how we think about transcendental idealism, the relation between transcendental idealism and the Transcendental Deduction of the categories, and Kant's argument for transcendental idealism in the Aesthetic.

Kant says that the categories are \textit{a priori} concepts of an object in general, and in the Deduction he argues that they are conditions of the possibility of experience, and that they are necessary conditions of thinking about objects. The Deduction contains much apparent support for the standard reading of Kant, which sees him as saying that we cannot perceive particular things without applying concepts to our experience. There are a number of places in the text where Kant says that we cannot \textit{experience an object} without both the concepts of an object in general, and the concept of the self. For example, Kant says
that the Deduction will show that without the categories ‘nothing is possible as object of experience’ (A93/B126), and he says that:

The synthetic unity of consciousness is therefore an objective condition of all cognition, not merely something I myself need in order to cognize an object but rather something under which every intuition must stand in order to become an object for me, since in any other way, and without this synthesis, the manifold would not be united in one consciousness. (B 138, see also B 137)

These texts might be thought to be unequivocally against the idea that we can perceive distinct particulars without concepts, since they say that without the categories we are not presented with an object. But I think the situation is not so clear. It is crucial to see that, when Kant talks about experience of an object in the Deduction, both ‘experience’ and ‘object’ have very specific senses. Kant says that experience is empirical knowledge or empirical cognition (A176/B218); it is not mere thing-involving perception. And an object is something which we recognize as a persisting causal unity, made up of stuff which is conserved, and which is in causal interaction with all other existing objects, which interactions fall under causal laws. In contrast, a distinct visual particular may be a shadow or a patch of light. If the point of the Deduction is that the categories are necessary to cognize an object as an object in this sense, then it is far less clear that it is inconsistent with Kant’s position to say that perception of distinct particular things is not possible without the categories.

To bring out the difference between experience of an object in the full-blown Kantian sense, and the mere perception of a particular, consider an animal whose actions indicate that it sees a located, relatively spatially unified thing, which it can discriminate from other things, which (following spatial boundaries) it can track, and with respect to which it has some expectations of how it will act. Think, for example, of an animal following a moving insect. What capacities do we need to attribute to the creature? Thinking that it can perceptually discriminate the thing clearly does not require thinking that it can think of the thing as a persisting and causally unitary substance, that it can make general use of and attribute to other animals thoughts about the thing and its interactions in a general causal order, or that it thinks of the particular it is tracking as being made up of stuff which cannot go out of existence absolutely. Denying that it has these thoughts need not force us to say that the animal does not perceive a spatially bounded