

Reimagining the Notion of Imagination: A Kantian Perspective

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Human beings are active receivers of external stimuli/representations and at the same time they are active builders of new images and concepts through the external stimuli/representations. Active receiver of external stimuli shows the participation of the agent in order to collect a finite set of stimuli out of infinite set of stimuli/representations. The finite set of stimuli/representations shows the relevance of them in act of experiencing, that is, an active cognitive being is inclined to grasp a particular object. The representations or stimuli itself do not have any faculty to unite themselves and can present themselves as a self-woven concept, hence they depend on some other faculty which can synthesize them. The “other faculty” is called as “Imagination” by Kant. In the first section, the paper will engage with the role of Imagination in Kant’s epistemological enquiry and show the reciprocal relationship between imagination and faculty of understanding. In the second section, it will offer a general role of imagination¹ in the aesthetic experience where imagination works to explore many possibilities and relation of these possibilities in creation of a piece of art. It also offers a continuation of the role(s) of imagination from epistemic enquiry to Aesthetic creation, which, in turn, will broaden up the definition of imagination and fill the gap between epistemic and aesthetic explanation.

I

In the first critique, Kant responds to the position propounded by the skeptic philosopher, David Hume, that human subjects passively receive impressions and thus is devoid of any spontaneity. Contrary to Hume, Kant establishes the spontaneity in the mind to attain any sort of knowledge after the synthesis of the sense data. He states,

“Our knowledge springs from the two fundamental sources of the mind. The first is the capacity of receiving representations; the second is the power of knowing an object through representation.”²

The notion of “spontaneity” not only demonstrates the intimate and immediate relationship between subject and object but also brings Copernican revolution where mind takes the central place in order to acquire knowledge. It shows that we, minds of human beings, approach to objects. With the external stimuli/representations, we ultimately come to know about them.

The question still remains unanswered – what makes us to experience the object lying outside in the world? Kant suggests that human beings have pure sensuous intuitions “space” and “time” which allows us to experience things. In order to explicate it further, he delineates that “time and space, taken together, are the pure forms of sensible intuitions, so are what make a synthetic *a priori* propositions possible.”³ One may infer that Kant

exhibits space and time the very first foundation to have any representation of the object. He further writes,

“Space and Time contain a manifold of pure a priori intuition, but at a same time, are the conditions of the receptivity of mind- conditions under which alone it can receive representations of objects”⁴

The appearances never come to us as a unified picture. They always come to us separately and individually. They come to us in a large scale of unstructured *sensa and images*.⁵ Kant further urges,

“Since every appearance contain a manifold, and since different perception therefore occur in mind separately and singly, a combination of them, such as they cannot have itself, is demanded”⁶.

“Combination” here can be termed as synthesis, as Kant wields. So, it becomes imperative to understand what Kant means by synthesis. Kant very straightforwardly demonstrates that if “this manifold of appearances is to be known, the spontaneity of our thought must be required that it must be directed through in a certain way and connected”⁷. He further explains,

“By *synthesis* I understand the act of putting different representations together, and of grasping what is manifold in them in one [act of] knowledge.”⁸

Let me explicate it with a simple example. A girl, G, perceives a street play in the afternoon. This afternoon is quite noisy and crowded. The play itself emits many visual senses and images, and at the same time it also produces numbers of audio *sensa*. All these senses, audio and visual, are not similar in quality. In sort, they are not alike. These noises occurred along with other simultaneous sounds in the auditory field and the visual *sensa along with other color-expanses* in the visual field. Now, an active cognitive being first discriminates some *sensa* from other *sensa* in every field; auditory and visual field. When one is aware of one kind of *sensum* it calls up the associated *sensa* of the other kinds, and so on. This is how the process of synthesis occurs in Kantian epistemology. Through the process, the cognitive being receives one kind of unified sense experience in the form of image that is categorically different from simply sense data and stimuli. Once the cognitive being forms the unified image, multiple categories of understanding will be applied to discern the object. Now, they are ready to be conceptualized. Kant may call it “empirical synthesis”⁹.

Sensa and images themselves do not have any faculty from which they can unite themselves. So, there must be a faculty exists within our mind that can synthesize different sorts of *sensa* and impressions to form a unified picture. Kant titles this faculty “Imagination”¹⁰. Kant further clearly describes,

“Synthesis, in general, as we shall hereafter see, is the mere result of the power of imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious.”¹¹

Imagination functions as the unifier of the all the appearances, *sensa* and images. Before the sense data encounters the faculty of imagination, objects are just there, unknown to the knower. Imagination distinguishes it from other sense data and brings them together to make a platform to form a new knowledge of the particular object. This is the first condition in order to get knowledge, as Kant argues. Therefore, imagination plays a fundamental role in Kantian epistemology.

A close look at the usage of 'blind function of soul', one can infer that Kant at least have two points in his mind. First, in order to synthesize all the appearances, imagination is neither rule guided, nor law governed. Or at least, Kant does not have any intention to make any rule for functioning of imagination. So, it can freely officiate. Another reason is that our experiences happen, in Kant's view, in a very systematic and categorical way. In order to have such systematic and seamless experience, imagination has to perform in a particular manner to bring all the diverse impressions and images. It seems that imagination works through certain inner systematic scheme for which imagination itself is not conscious of. Not being conscious means, he is blind to follow other sort of synthesis which does not necessary represent the same object, hallucination, for instance. To explain synthesis Kant, further, says,

"Synthesis of manifold is what first gives rise to knowledge, and therefore in need of analysis. Still the synthesis is that which gathers the element for knowledge and unites them to form certain content. *It is to synthesis, therefore, that we must direct our attention, if we would determine the first origin of our knowledge*". (emphasis added)

Faculty of understanding through which concepts can be applied to intuitions in the form of thoughts¹² can only become functioning when imagination makes all the manifolds unite and are presented to faculty of understanding. This shows that faculty of imagination officiates in the very first, primal level in order to form a knowledge. This does not only answer the objection¹³ raised by Zizek but also establishes the autonomy of imagination in terms of its functioning.

Kant calls activity of imagination as an "apprehension". The faculty of imagination synthesizes in the spontaneous and immediate manner without following any pre-given principle. It can be well observed after analyzing the distinction between productive and reproductive imagination. Productive imagination is spontaneous and a priori (the imagination is itself a faculty of a priori synthesis; we assign to it the title, productive synthesis¹⁴). On the other hand, reproductive imagination is subject to the empirical laws like of association, which he calls is "association of representations". Kant dismisses the reproductive imagination by saying that it does not falls in the domain of transcendental philosophy but of psychology. With this line of thought, he also decries the view of Hume on imagination where he allows imagination to associate the impressions only in order to form complex ideas.

If the association of apprehension does not have any objective reality, then it would be impossible for imagination to synthesize all the appearances. It becomes very accidental for appearances to come and unite. So, there must be an objective ground which Kant terms as "affinity"¹⁵. Affinity also shows the belongingness of the knowledge to a particular experiencer who is in the process of understanding the object. "The objective unity of all empirical impressions of the object in one consciousness, that of the original apperception, is thus the necessary condition of all possible perceptions"¹⁶. "The affinity of all appearances is a necessary consequence of a synthesis in imagination which is grounded a priori on rules."¹⁷

Imagination also functions to maintain a relationship between faculty of sensibility and faculty of understanding. In this sense, after unifying all the *sensa* and impressions, it sends them to the particular categories. The process is known as schematization. Kant specifically takes up the problem of relation between the two faculties in the chapter on *Schematism*, where he argues that there must be a "third" category which is homogeneous to the faculty of understanding on the one hand and the faculty of sensibility on the

other and makes possible the employment of the former into the latter. Kant entitles this faculty “Transcendental schema”. It is argued that imagination is the faculty which solves Kant’s biggest problem to deal with the multiple relationships of these faculties. From this line of thought, it would not be wrong to call imagination as a “mediator” and this particular function “the principle of mediation”. Imagination does work alone but it does not discount the fact that it cannot take any assistance from other pure intuitions. It takes enough assistance from the inner intuition, time. While dealing with imagination, one can also sense the existence of space and time. Kant writes,

“The (space and time) ... cannot be apprehended, viz., taken up into the empirical consciousness except through that synthesis of the manifold whereby the representations of the determinate space or time are generated.”¹⁸

Let us recollect what we have discussed in the earlier paragraphs in order to form a basic understanding of the notion of imagination in Kantian philosophy. Imagination officiates to assemble all the bare appearances and send them to the particular categories with the help of inner sensuous intuitions, that is, time. It establishes the autonomy of imagination and shows its role as a mediator among faculties. However, there are certain serious second order questions which are completely ignored in the first part of discussion in Kant. Let us pen down them first.

Can the contents of understanding itself be any object for further experiences? More concretely – can concept be an object of further synthesization in order to form a new concept? Can term “blind” be taken into more seriously in order to broaden up the understanding of imagination? In order to explain all these questions, let us take an example. Person P is sitting in front of her table and reading Kant’s critique of pure reason. She reads all the words of its title, but she seems a bit confused about the usage of “reason”. She reads “reason” because of her visual field. It is recognized as written in the book, but “reason” as a concept becomes an object for further analysis, namely, how it is used. It implies that an impression in the mind can be used for further analysis. In this case, “blind” in association with imagination seems very significant as it does not follow any prior rule to synthesize. Thus, it provides us the possibility to put these concepts again in different categories to make a blueprint of all possible arrangements of *sensa* and images. From that perspective, it works as reciprocal with understanding.

II

“Here I sit, making men
In my images,
A race which shall be like me,
To suffer, to weep,
To enjoy and be glad,
And to ignore you,
As I do”¹⁹

These lines of the poem, indubitably, are the result of Goethe’s creative imagination. It might occur to many to understand the activity of writing a poetry; what actually goes in the mind of a poet when she pens down the beautiful lines of a poetry? The intention to use “activity” is to say that imagination itself is a kind of action that Daya Krishna rightly pointed out. “Imagination is an integral part of action.”²⁰ It seems that we can agree to Daya Krishna to a certain limit, but we must question the limits he sets up for imagination.

Here, imagination plays a reverse activity. Being a part of an action, not only it produces one sort of action, but it also facilitates another action. For another action, it just plays a role as stimulus, as a trigger to move something which can be physical or mental in nature. Discerning the nature of the activity, it is not only imaginative but also contains a desire to go beyond this, to go beyond the absurdity²¹ of the pre-given world. It seems to us that the desire to go beyond assists us to consider "concept" as a mere representation in its primal level for imagination to develop a new concept. The desire can only happen if and only if one has some primary knowledge of a particular concept as Naiyayikas put it very clearly in their epistemic enquiry. So, unless and until we don't have any knowledge of object, it cannot be object of our desire. Thus, in any aesthetic creation, sense data and concepts, can be treated as a mere representation for the imagination to further develop new concepts.

What is the current situation of humans, at least, in epistemic sense? Is it not the current concept which human establishes in order to understand the world and play with it? This is the world; world with full of concepts, full of the values, functions attached to a particular object, at least in our epistemic practicality. Other than this, the actual world allows us to brood over diverse possibilities to replace the prevalent things, concepts and values. The possibility is mere a result of imagination. In Aesthetics, these possibilities are termed as non-conceptual because most of the aesthetic concepts are related to "unshared" concepts. An artist imagines a new concept which she employs in her different works of art, is also unshared in terms of its objectivity. Therefore, the observer can also put her imagination into works and can feel it, sense it. If the concept is only to be felt, to be sensed, and to determine it by some values would be an injustice to it as it will prioritize the concept over and above the work of art. Hence, it does not qualify as a conceptual concept.

However, in crucial circumstances, through a passionate aesthetic enquiry, desirous human beings always try to go beyond the pre-given circumstances. This seems the reason for Fritz Kaufmann to say – "it is imagination through which man lives in devising new possibilities of life and world, transcending each state and dissatisfied even with satisfactions that mark relapse inertia of patterned".²² The crucial role of imagination, here, boils down to devise diverse possibilities of life and world, epistemologically and aesthetically. In this sense Imagination is deemed to show the further possibilities of life-world. Daya Krishna used it in his epistemic enquiry of the society. He explicitly argues that a society which has more utopias with the *possible* consequences is better society, at least, in its future. In this line of thought, the preferable task of imagination is to discover the new possibilities in society, which is nothing but different modes of synthesis of representations, that is, *sensa* images and *concepts*. Thus, it displays the role of imagination nothing but a unifier of representations or manifolds.

Kant is more interested in appreciation of art rather than in creation of art. So, it turns out as a judgment of beauty. In this particular context, Kant says, "When we make such judgments, our imagination and our understanding are in "free play"²³. Free play, one can argue, denotes to synthesizing the representations without having any pre-norms or rule. Here, the role of productive imagination is not merely an association of ideas/impressions/representations but of forming new worlds without any kind of concept attached to it. The second reason might be at conceptual level; imagination may lose his values and becomes mere a part of reason. This comes very close to Coleridge notion of imagination where he distinguishes two types of imagination – primary and secondary

and argues that they are identical in terms of agency but differs in terms of activity and degrees. He focuses more on the subjective power of creativity, and places artists at the center. It is relevant in the sense that in epistemic enquiry imagination works in very primal level but in aesthetics its degree of functioning increases and works as “creative power”. From this perspective, it comes very close to Kant’s own explanation “a blind but indispensable function of soul” but differs only in its degrees. So, from the earlier discussion, it is quite clear that the notions of imagination in Kant, are not two different concepts in his critiques. They function similarly but differ in the degrees of its functioning. Kant never tries to bind the real nature of imagination but put a particular function in his epistemic enquiry, which gets extended in his third critique.

Kant’s way of dealing with imagination in his epistemic enquiry is quite different from the traditional way(s) of engaging with it. One reason is that imagination was not in a fashion to take it as an epistemic faculty. It was Hume who introduced it. And following Hume, Kant just attached a new function to the imagination and differentiate himself from Hume. To understand the notion(s) of imagination differently and assigning its roles in the epistemic inquiry contrasted to the aesthetic inquiry would be a sheer mistake. Instead of comprehending the two notions of imagination different in kinds, the present paper arrayed it in different degrees. In order to understand the real intention of Kant, the usages of “free play” and “blind” must be further analyzed in order to show the coherence in the two understandings of imagination.

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Notes

¹ There are positive and negative roles of imagination, but the paper confines itself only to positive role of imagination. Its negative aspect is raised by Hegel in his book *Janaer Real philosophie*.

² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by, K. Smith, p. 92

³ Ibid, Page no. 80

⁴ Ibid, Pg., 111

⁵ Broad, C.D. *Kant an Introduction*, p. 84

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by, K. Smith, p. 144

⁷ Ibid, p. 111

⁸ Ibid, p. 111

⁹ Broad, C.D. *Kant an Introduction*, p. 84

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by, K. Smith, p. 144

¹¹ Ibid, p. 112

¹² Ibid, p. 65

¹³ Objection is raised in his book, *The Ticklish subject*, p. 29

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by, K. Smith, p. 145

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 145

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 145

¹⁷ Ibid, p.145

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 145

¹⁹ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 48

²⁰ Daya Krishna, *Civilization*, p. 89

²¹ Kant used this term in his critique of judgment in order to show the artist creation. The absurdity always pushes the experimenter to look beyond, to become uncomfortable with what is given.

²² Fritz Kaufmann and Fritz Heider. "On Imagination", p. 370

²³ Sheppard, Anna. "The role of Imagination in Aesthetic Experience", p. 38

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