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Image and Imagination: Kantian Paradox of Aesthetic Perception

In this paper, I examine one of the more puzzling aspects of Kant's philosophy, namely his doctrine of the "free play between imagination and understanding". Kant held that objects do not exist completely independently of our cognitive faculties. As an idealist, he had to paint a fairly complex picture of these faculties, consisting (roughly) of intuition, imagination, understanding and reason. One of the most difficult issues in interpreting Kant is how these faculties constitute the phenomenal world. I try to show that part of the difficulty is that the role of imagination is not fully recognized. I first examine the role Kant assigns to imagination in the case of theoretical cognition. Then, I compare it to the way imagination works in the case of perceiving aesthetic objects. The crucial distinction between the two is that the former yields objective knowledge *via* our application of *a priori* concepts, whereas the latter lacks the possibility of such an application, yielding only particular judgments, while still, paradoxically, purporting to be universally valid. I conclude that once we fully understand the way imagination works in the aesthetic case, we will be able to resolve the seeming paradox and remove many of the interpretative dilemmas.

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