SYNTHESIS AND CONSCIOUSNESS

by Elizabeth F. Potter

If, in counting, I forget that the units, which now hover before me, have been added to one another in succession, I should never know that a total is being produced through this successive addition of unit to unit, and so would remain ignorant of the number. For the concept of the number is nothing but the consciousness of this unity of synthesis.

The word 'concept' might of itself suggest this remark. For this unitary consciousness is what combines the manifold, successively intuited, and thereupon also reproduced, into one representation. This consciousness may often be only faint, so that we do not connect it with the generation of the representation, but only with the outcome. . . . But notwithstanding these variations, such consciousness, however indistinct, must always be present; without it, concepts, and therewith knowledge of objects, are altogether impossible. (A 103–104)

In these remarks Kant suggests that a consciousness connected with the generation of a representation is necessary for the possibility of knowledge in addition to consciousness of the outcome of the generation, that is, consciousness of the representation itself. Synthesis is the title for this generation of our knowledge, and many commentators have interpreted synthesis as a process of which we are conscious. The interpretation is encouraged by references such as the ones to synthesis as an "act" (Handlung); for example, at B 130, Kant says that combination, or synthesis, is an act of spontaneity of the faculty of representation, and it is difficult to imagine that he used the term without realizing that it entails the notion of an agent and that an agent must always in some sense be conscious or aware of his own acts.

Commentators inclined to this interpretation have given many cases of synthesis in which we do consciously perform an act or go through a process of apprehending, associating and/or remembering, and finally, recognizing an object. Thus R. P. Wolff describes the case of someone coming to realize that what is before him is a forest; he sees first an oak, then a birch (and says to himself, "there is a birch; and there is an elm, plus the birch which I remember, etc."1 Having the concept 'forest,' he knows what counts as part of a forest, and after apprehending individual trees, he recognizes them as a forest.

Difficulty first arises, however, over those cases such as the one H. J. Paton presents,2 in which he says that when I recognize a body, I apprehend first extension, then impenetrability, etc., and recognize a body. The concept 'body'

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tells us which properties to associate as a body. Clearly Paton does not mean to suggest that we recognize the properties of a body before recognizing a body, for that would be impossible; he seems to be pointing, instead, to that group of cases in which we take note of the features of an object before we are able to recognize it. Such cases usually occur when we are uncertain whether the object before us is one to which a particular concept applies (perhaps because it is difficult to tell whether this is an X, or because we have only just learned the concept ‘X’).

But what about cases in which we are not aware of such a process, and indeed, have no reason to believe that such a process occurs? These are the common cases. Puzzling objects and new concepts are relatively infrequent in our lives; we do not puzzle over our children’s faces or our furniture; we recognize these, and indeed most things in our lives, instantly.

When the investigation reaches this point, we can go in either of two directions: 1) we can argue as Locke does in a similar connection that such a process must go on, but “so constantly and so quick” that we never notice it, or with Kemp-Smith that the process is preconscious and that we can be aware only of its outcome, or 2) we begin anew and read Kant’s doctrine of threefold synthesis as a series of remarks about the necessary relations between certain concepts. The twin objections that the majority of cases of knowing or recognizing things are not ones in which we come to recognize them and that preconscious synthesis as Kemp-Smith presents it is unverifiable in principle have led many, with Strawson, to draw back from what he terms the “myth” of “transcendental idealism” and from “the imaginary subject of transcendental psychology” and to take the second alternative above.

These objections to reading Kant as offering a theory of mental activity of a certain sort are well taken. We do not, as P. F. Strawson points out, have “empirical knowledge of the occurrence of that which is held to be the antecedent condition of empirical knowledge,” and one may, as Jonathan Bennett notes, assign properties to an object without “enduring a period of agnosticism which is ended by my coming to realize that . . ., or coming to the conclusion that . . .”; Nor, as Graham Bird shows, need we engage in any act or series of acts of recalling to mind either individually or as a whole our cigarettes while counting them, or our past perceptions of a room when we recognize it as the same room we saw before.

Furthermore, the interpretation of Kant’s argument in the First Critique as an analysis of the dependence and interdependence of certain concepts is not to be denied. The doctrine of synthesis offers a wealth of such insights. Strawson argues for example that the concept of ‘experience’ entails the concept of ‘objectivity’ which entails a ‘necessary connectedness of experiences.’ This, in turn, entails certain concepts, ‘substance,’ ‘cause,’ and ‘person,’ which provide the necessary connectedness of experiences. When he discusses the doctrine of synthesis specifically, he suggests that included in this doctrine is the point that
we could not take any one perception as a perception of an object unless we can and do take other possible perceptions as perceptions of that object, or as he puts it, "there would be no question of counting any transient perception as a perception of an enduring and distinct object unless we are prepared or ready to count some different perceptions as perceptions of one and the same enduring and distinct object." In his article, "Imagination and Perception," however, Strawson further suggests that one role of imagination in synthesis is, as he puts it, to represent non-actual (that is, past or possible future) perceptions in a present perception. In an attempt to describe this presence of non-actual perceptions in a present perception, he says that past perceptions are "alive" in the present one, or "the actual occurrence concept of an enduring object as an object of a certain kind, is, as it were, soaked with or animated by, or infused with . . . the thought of other past or possible perceptions of the same object." Although he does not give a hard argument for the further point, one is sympathetic to it. When I see, with a feeling of annoyance, the dog in my garden, that is, when I make the judgment "there is a dog," perhaps even before I make the judgment, "there is that wretched dog again," the feeling of annoyance incident upon my perception arises because memories of that dog digging up my garden are somehow hovering at the edges of, somehow present, though unattended, in my perception of the dog.

In his discussion, Strawson is concerned with the synthesis or combination of various perceptions of an object (that is, perceptions of the same object at different times) and with the sense in which we are conscious of non-actual perceptions of an object when we are conscious of or having a present perception of it. However, if we begin to examine the possible cases of synthesis, we find that Kant is concerned with more than one kind. We can, I think, distinguish at least four possible kinds of synthesis: 1) Cases of the combination of perceptions of different objects to yield a complex object. Wolff's example in which one successively apprehends, remembers, and associates various trees as a forest is a case of this sort. 2) Cases of the combination of perceptions of parts of an object to yield the object; for example, one has only just learned the concept 'broom' and must pause and consider whether this object has a handle and straws before deciding that it is, indeed, a broom. (Cases of this kind are a species of case 1 above.) 3) Cases of the combination or association of various perceptions of an object as perceptions of one enduring object (this is the kind of synthesis with which Strawson is concerned, as was noted above). 4) Cases of the combination of (perceptions of) properties of an object to yield the object. Cases of this sort will be discussed below.

The first three sorts of case can be characterized as syntheses of perceptions of objects, whereas case 4 is a synthesis of perceptions of properties of objects. Perhaps we should also note that the third group of cases are those of combination according to the category of Substance; that is, being able to carry out a
synthesis of this sort is necessary for recognizing something as a substance (= an enduring object). The others are descriptions of syntheses for which empirical concepts serve as the rules. Kant's exposition of threefold synthesis is an outline of both empirical synthesis (synthesis necessary for the application of empirical concepts) and pure synthesis (that necessary for the application of categories).

In the following, I will attempt to draw together the issues mentioned above and to show that an empirical synthesis of properties of objects is necessary for the knowledge or recognition of any object (synthesis 4 above) and that this synthesis involves consciousness connected with the generation of a representation, different from consciousness of the representation, though not, as some commentators have thought, a consciousness of the generation process itself. The argument is intended to account for the synthesis involved in the instantaneous recognition of objects and should clear up some of the confusion regarding exactly what we are conscious of when we synthesize objects instantly.

In the exposition of the unity of synthesis at A 104ff, Kant points out that the concept 'object' (the object in general = X) is the concept of a necessary unity of representations and that only when we have produced synthetic unity in the manifold of representations can we be said to know an object. This remark holds for all empirical concepts of specific objects; they are all concepts of a necessary unity of representations, and only when we have produced a unity in the manifold of representations can we be said to know an object as a specific kind of object. In his discussion, Kant presents the concepts 'triangle' and 'body' as rules for the unity of properties. When we think of a triangle as an object, he says, we are conscious of the combination of three straight lines (in certain relations), and the concept 'body,' he says, necessitates the representations of extension, impenetrability, shape, etc. (A 105–106).

Undeniably the concept 'body' entails the concepts 'extended,' 'impenetrable,' etc., and further, anyone able properly to apply the concept 'body' must be able to apply the concepts 'extended,' 'impenetrable,' and so on. But is this the whole story here? Part of what is meant by saying that we cannot apply 'body' unless we can apply these further concepts is that we cannot recognize a body unless we can recognize the properties of extension, etc. But is it sufficient for the application of 'body' that we merely be capable of applying 'extended,' etc.? Is it not also necessary that we in fact apply the concepts 'extended,' 'impenetrable,' or 'having shape' to a phenomenon when we recognize it as a body? The supposition here is that we recognize an object by (some of) its properties: its shape, its size, color, texture, and so forth. Of course, we need not apprehend all of its properties (indeed, we need not know them all) in order to recognize an object, but we must apprehend some, for if we do not perceive the shape, or the size, or the color, or anything else, we cannot recognize the object. In seeing (or otherwise perceiving) an object, we must see some of its properties.
Seeing properties in seeing an object is a species of experience of which we are not explicitly aware or conscious, a problem approached by Kant, I believe, in his discussion of the necessary consciousness of the generation (Erzeugung) of representations. The cases which present themselves as candidates for the description "experience of which we are not (explicitly) conscious" cover a wide range. The obvious ones are feelings such as jealousy of which we are unaware. Related to these are cases of physical unease such as a vague feeling of discomfort which becomes specific when the chess game ends (I am thinking here, not of a case in which I am totally unaware at time A of a pain and at time B suddenly become aware of it, but of a case in which I am inclined to say afterwards, "I was bothered by a nagging feeling during the game and the moment it ended I realized that my back ached miserably"). Comprising perhaps the largest group are cases of what might be referred to as negotiating one's way through the world without constantly attending it. These are the myriad cases of walking up stairs while thinking about something else entirely, holding pen in hand and writing with it while concentrating upon the argument I am constructing, etc. These cases are sometimes described as "automatic" or "unconscious," but clearly they are nothing like the blinking of the eyes or breathing which better deserve that description.

I offer as candidates for the description "experiences of which we are not (explicitly) conscious" those cases of perceiving and recognizing objects in virtue of certain of their features or properties without making explicit judgment about (being explicitly aware of) those properties. The following would be such a case: taking a walk, I come upon a field of daffodils; I recognize them as such, but make no judgment regarding their shape or size. Though I do not attend their size or shape, however, I surely must, at some level, be conscious of them, for they are features distinguishing daffodils from buttercups. If I were totally unaware of their size or shape (if I were, for instance, too far away to distinguish these features), I would not make any judgment as to what species of yellow flower I see (though I might decide that these are daffodils, even though I cannot see them clearly, on the basis of my knowledge that the only yellow flowers growing in this area are daffodils).

The point can be made by falling back on specific verbs of perception; we can use any verb of perception, for example, "see," in (at least) two ways: I can be said to see₁ a chair when, looking at a chair, I make the judgment,₁₅ "This is a chair"; my attention is taken up by this judgment. But I can also be said to see₂ some of the properties of the chair in seeing₁ the chair. In this usage, I do not make intentional judgments such as "this is a seat," "this is brown," or "this has legs," and so on. I am not, so to say, explicitly aware of the properties as I am of the chair. I do not, in traditional terminology, intend its properties when I judge this to be a chair (though I might upon occasion). In order to recognize an object, I must perceive some of the properties of that object.
It follows then, as Kant tells us in his discussion of concepts as rules, that part of having a concept is knowing certain of the properties of the objects to which the concept applies. The characterization of concepts as "rules" (Regeln) indicates that concepts provide order and regularity. A concept provides order by determining which representations or properties shall be united and recognized as an object, and it provides regularity inasmuch as it necessitates that the same properties be synthesized as properties of an object more than once. Representations cannot go together now in one order, now in another. We cannot, if we are to recognize an object, see it as being now one shape, now another, now one color, now another.16

Kant presents an outline (at A 98ff) of two basic sorts of synthesis, empirical and pure, under which fall many kinds of case, among them, we have argued, an empirical synthesis of the properties of an object necessary for its recognition. This kind of synthesis has as its "outcome" consciousness or recognition of some object, but it entails, we have argued, a consciousness, not of the generation "process" itself (that still remains, in a sense, mysterious), but a consciousness connected with the generation, that is, a consciousness of the properties of the objects recognized. In some cases of synthesis, we recognize a complex object by the successive awareness of the objects which comprise its parts. In these cases we may be said to be conscious of the generation of, or the process of coming to recognize, the object. But in cases of the instantaneous recognition of an object, there is no process of generation. How does Kant's remark that there is a consciousness distinct from consciousness of the object, yet connected with the generation of the recognition of that object, apply to these cases? The instantaneous recognition of any object necessarily involves, as we have seen, the (implicit) consciousness, though not the intention (or explicit consciousness) of its properties. The interpretation presented here, I believe, falls between interpretations of synthesis as a conscious or mental process, on the one hand, and as an analysis of the interdependence of certain concepts, on the other. In fact, of course, not even Strawson presents a strictly conceptual analysis of synthesis. In The Bounds of Sense, he never deals with the question of exactly how the special concepts of an 'enduring object' or 'causality,' etc., provide the connectedness necessary for the possibility of experience, but clearly there are only two ways that connectedness of perceptions can arise. Either the perceptions somehow occur or are given in a connected fashion, or they must be connected by the subject of experience. When he later addresses the question of how necessary connectedness arises in our experience, for example in "Imagination and Perception," he too departs from a strictly conceptual analysis and deals with necessary psychological activities. Further, in that article, he remarks that we do not call to mind past or possible perceptions of an object in a present perception of it, but he wants to say, nevertheless, that non-actual perceptions are somehow "alive in"
present ones. It seems to me that he is either making the point that whenever we have a perception of and are explicitly conscious of an object, we are, so to say, implicitly conscious of, or conscious at a different level of, non-actual perceptions of it; or he is pointing out in an odd way that if we forgot absolutely our past experiences of an object and were unable to imagine any possible experiences of it, we would be unable to have a present experience of it. The latter point seems to me an obvious one, but the former needs an argument such as the one presented here for experiences of properties in the perceptions of objects.

NOTES

6. Ibid.
10. Ibid., pp. 40–41.
11. Ibid., p. 40.
12. Ibid., p. 41.
13. This is not to say that we know the terms and their definitions, but only that we must be able to distinguish extended from non-extended things or impenetrable objects from penetrable phenomena.
14. This is not to argue that there are only two ways to use the word, or to argue that "see" is ambiguous.
15. Here the phrase "making a judgment" is reserved for an intentional experience.
16. An experience in which objects had now one set of properties, now another, is impossible if experience is understood as experience of things that are distinct from the experience of them. Knowledge could not be based on such an "experience," for it requires the concepts 'mistaken' and 'correct': one must be able to distinguish things that one knows from things that one may think one knows, but about which one is mistaken. In an "experience" consisting of subjectively or arbitrarily associated properties, one can never check to see whether one's knowledge is in fact knowledge. For example, I decide that a "chair" is an object having the set of properties [a, b, c, . . . n]. The set of properties I have chosen may be different from everyone else's (on this account,
it may be that no two people associate the same properties, thus it is pointless for me to ask whether anyone else agrees that "this is a chair"). Second, on this account, there is no guarantee that the particular set of properties will recur; I can never "look again" and be certain that "this is a chair." On the other hand, I may never be mistaken; a chair has whatever properties I "conceive" it to have; it is whatever I "conceive" it to be. No subsequent experience can prove me mistaken. But if there are no cases of being mistaken, there are no cases of being correct. If there are no false judgments, if "this is a chair" is always true, then there are no true judgments; but then, surely, there is nothing that can be called "knowledge."