

Department of Philosophy
Problems of Philosophy 1
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Sensibility and understanding in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason

Early in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant tells us that

there are two stems of human cognition, which may perhaps arise from a common but to us unknown root, namely sensibility and understanding, through the first of which objects are given to us, but through the second of which they are thought [A15/B29].

This distinction between sensibility and understanding lies at the heart of Kant's account of human cognition. Indeed, he diagnoses a fundamental mistake of his predecessors to be their failure to recognize its significance:

Leibniz *intellectualized* the appearances, just as Locke totally *sensitized* the concepts of understanding [...]. Instead of seeking two entirely different sources of representation in the understanding and the sensibility, which could judge about things with objective validity *only in conjunction*, each of these great men holds on only to one of them, which in his opinion is immediately related to things in themselves, while the other does nothing but confuse or order the representations of the first (A271/B327).

One goal of this course is to try to understand Kant's distinction between sensibility and understanding, and how he sees them as working together. This will require consideration of the related distinctions between receptivity and spontaneity, and intuition and concept. We will consider how these distinctions bear on certain fundamental questions arising out of the first Critique: what are the basic assumptions of Kant's arguments in the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Transcendental Analytic? What does Kant mean by 'experience'? What role does the imagination play in mediating between sensibility and understanding? How are we to understand Kant's basic claims about synthesis? What implications does all of this have for an interpretation of transcendental idealism?

We will begin with an overview of the Transcendental Aesthetic and parts of the Transcendental Analytic. We will then go through some recent secondary literature that bears on our topic.

Assessment: Students will be expected to give a short presentation on one of the assigned works for 15% of the final mark, and to write a final paper (about 4000 words) on the topic of their choice for the remaining 85%.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity/ for more information).

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.