

Clinton Tolley

# The Meaning of ‘Perception’ in Kant and His Historical Context

## 1

Kant’s writings give many clear signals that ‘Wahrnehmung’ (typically rendered ‘perception’) is a technical term for a ‘representation [Vorstellung]’ standing between ‘intuition [Anschauung]’ and ‘experience [Erfahrung]’. For example, the *Critique*’s Analytic places Principles which govern Wahrnehmung (anticipations) between those directed at mere intuition (axioms) and those governing experience (analogies). The *Prolegomena*’s Part II likewise accords ‘judgments of Wahrnehmung’ a mediating role in the transition from intuition to experience – a role also highlighted in both editions of the Transcendental Deduction as well.

Despite such signals, however, even careful and sympathetic readers have not spent much time analyzing what ‘Wahrnehmung’ means or how it is distinguished from experience and especially intuition.<sup>1</sup> Even more unfortunately, recent interpreters have offered accounts of Kant’s views on ‘perceptual experience’ that depend almost entirely on *ignoring* the distinct significance of ‘Wahrnehmung’ – perhaps on the assumption that, for Kant, ‘Wahrnehmung’ and ‘intuition’ both mean more or less what is meant nowadays by ‘perceptual experience’. This neglect has led, on the one hand, to ‘conceptualist’ interpretations of *intuitional* content as well as of Kant’s strategies in the Deduction, based on claims Kant makes about *Wahrnehmung*.<sup>2</sup> It has also led, on the other hand, to ‘naïve direct realist’ interpretations of outer intuition, Wahrnehmung, and experience, as *all* consisting in immediate acquaintance-like relations to ordinary

---

1 Partial exceptions: Prauss, Gerold: *Erscheinung bei Kant*. Berlin 1971; Longuenesse, Béatrice: *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*. Princeton 1998; and Allison, Henry: *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*. New Haven 2004 – though none provides a unified, systematic, or historically contextualized treatment of Kant’s use of ‘Wahrnehmung’.

2 Both Griffith, Aaron: *Perception and the Categories*. In: *European Journal of Philosophy* 20/2 (2012), 193–222; and Gomes, Anil: *Kant on Perception*. In: *Philosophical Quarterly* 64/254 (2014), 1–19, argue for conceptualism about *intuition* by drawing on claims from the Deduction where Kant speaks only of the involvement of concepts in *Wahrnehmung*. Cf. Ginsborg, Hannah: *Was Kant a Nonconceptualist?* In: *Philosophical Studies* 137/1 (2008), 65–77. McDowell, John: *Mind and World*. Cambridge 1996; at times runs both together with *experience*.

---

**Clinton Tolley**, University of California, San Diego, ctolley@ucsd.edu

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110467888-330>

*physical objects*, rather than as constituted by an immediate relation only to something mental or representational (namely: an appearance).<sup>3</sup>

Here I aim to combat both trends by providing an account of what Kant means by ‘*Wahrnehmung*’ that is both sensitive to the term’s distinctive use (along with ‘*perceptio*’) in Kant’s historical context (§ 2), and builds on this to clearly mark its difference in Kant’s system from both intuition and experience (§ 3). I conclude (§ 4) by clarifying Kant’s aim in one especially influential passage (the ‘*Stufenleiter*’) whose typically decontextualized analysis has stood as one of the main roadblocks to appreciating the importance of the distinction between *Wahrnehmung* and intuition.

## 2

One important source for Kant’s distinctions is Rudolph Goclenius’s treatment of ‘*cognitio* [cognitio]’ in his *Lexicon*.<sup>4</sup> Goclenius defines cognition ‘in the proper sense’ as a spiritual ‘act [actus]’, ‘actualization [energeia]’, or ‘quality [qualitas]’ which ‘represents an object’<sup>5</sup>. Goclenius then identifies two species of cognitions of objects: sensitive and intellectual. Significantly, sensitive cognition is explicitly distinguished from any of the three main intellectual ‘acts [operationes]’ that are constitutive of the various forms of intellectual cognition, including act of ‘simple apprehension’ by the intellect. Rather, apprehension is said to come ‘out of the preceding sensitive cognition’.<sup>6</sup> From this ‘first’ intellectual cognition, the intellect then goes on to perform acts of ‘composition and division’ to achieve a second ‘complex’ cognition out of what is initially ‘simply’ apprehended.<sup>7</sup> This step is also said to involve not just the senses but also memory and ‘experience [experiential]’.

While the Latin ‘*perceptio*’ does not appear in Goclenius’s taxonomy here (and has no entry in the *Lexicon*), in Leibniz<sup>8</sup> the French ‘perception’ comes to play a central and quite technical role in his account of the mind. In his 1714

---

<sup>3</sup> For naïve realist interpretations which fail to distinguish the objects of *Wahrnehmung* (appearances) from those of experience (things), compare Allais, Lucy: *Kant’s Idealism and the Secondary Quality Analogy*. In: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45/3 (2007), 459–484; McLear, Colin: *Kant on Perceptual Content*. *Mind* forthcoming; and again Gomes.

<sup>4</sup> Goclenius, Rudolph: *Lexicon Philosophicum*. Frankfurt 1613. (L)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Goclenius: L 381.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Goclenius: L 381.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Goclenius: L 381.

<sup>8</sup> Leibniz, Gottfried: *Philosophische Schriften*. Ed. Gerhardt. Berlin 1875–. (G)

*Principles of Nature and Grace*, for example, Leibniz draws a distinction between the most elementary sensory states – ‘impressions’ which are ‘received’ by each mind – and the ‘representation’ of these states, which he calls ‘perceptions’.<sup>9</sup> Perception as the initial representation of impressions is then distinguished from acts of ‘accompanying’ perceptions ‘with memory’ in the way that allows the perception to ‘make itself noted or understood [se faire entendre]’, in order to achieve ‘feeling [sentiment]’ of the perception.<sup>10</sup> Finally, both mere perception and feeling are distinguished from the further ‘apperception’ of such perceptions, which Leibniz identifies with our understanding’s actual noting of the perception in ‘reflective cognition [connoissance]’ (cf. *New Essays* G 5.47).

While Leibniz’s progression parallels Goclenius’s in important respects, despite differing in its terminology, it also goes beyond Goclenius in key ways. First, Leibniz begins with an earlier stage of mental states (impressions) present in the mind not just prior to their being cognized but even to their even being represented at all. Second, Leibniz also emphasizes the fact that both mental states and acts, and even their representations (perceptions), occur in the mind prior to the conscious awareness of them.

Heinrich Köhler’s 1720 translation<sup>11</sup> of some of Leibniz’s writings, including the *Monadology*, gives us important clues as to what German words were understood as equivalents to these Latin/French terms. What is of special note is: first, Köhler’s rendering of Leibniz’s ‘perception’ as both ‘sensation [Empfindung]’<sup>12</sup> and ‘representation [Vorstellung]’<sup>13</sup>; secondly, his use of ‘thought [Gedanke]’ to render ‘sentiment’, glossed now as ‘Empfindung’ which is ‘connected with memory [Gedächtnis]’<sup>14</sup>; finally, his use of ‘wahrnehmen’ to render, not ‘percevoir’, but ‘appercevoir’<sup>15</sup>. The latter is especially striking, and it gives clear indication of the difference understood to obtain between what Leibniz meant by ‘perception’ and what was then meant by ‘wahrnehmen’ in early modern German philosophy.

This distinction between ‘perception’ (or the Latin ‘perceptio’) and ‘wahrnehmen’ continues to be manifest in the terminology of the later Leibniz-Wolffians. Consider the German glosses that Baumgarten gives in his Latin *Metaphysica*

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Leibniz: G 6.599–600.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Leibniz: *Monadology* § 19, G 6.610.

<sup>11</sup> Köhler, Heinrich: *Lehrsätze über die Monadologie*. Frankfurt 1720. (K)

<sup>12</sup> Köhler: K 7, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Köhler: K 11.

<sup>14</sup> Köhler: K 10–11.

<sup>15</sup> Köhler: K 7.

and *Acroasis Logica*.<sup>16</sup> Baumgarten begins his account of the mind with ‘*sensations* [sensationes]’, a term which he then aligns in a footnote with the German ‘*Empfindungen*’. Sensations are ‘representations of the present state of the world’, representations that Baumgarten also calls ‘appearances [apparitions]’.<sup>17</sup> Baumgarten takes sensations to form a ‘ground [fundus; Grund]’ of the soul’s ‘higher’ intellectual operations, something he also describes as a ‘complex’ of relatively ‘obscure perceptions [perceptiones]’,<sup>18</sup> which is what he calls a ‘total perception’.<sup>19</sup> Our intellect then acts, first of all, in ‘*attention*’ to what is contained in our sensations.<sup>20</sup> This attention can either be directed ‘successively’ to the parts of the total perception in intellectual ‘*reflection*’, or be directed to the whole perception itself after such reflection, in what Baumgarten calls ‘*comparatio*’, in the sense not of comparing something with something else but rather of ‘taking’ parts ‘together’, in the sense of ‘*Zusammenhalten*’, as Baumgarten himself notes.<sup>21</sup> Reflection and comparison both require the ‘reproductive’ imagination and memory, in order to keep in mind the relevant now-past perceptions.<sup>22</sup> The result of this process of attention, reflection, and comparison is what Baumgarten, too, calls an ‘*apperceived* perception [perceptio appercepta]’.<sup>23</sup>

Baumgarten also takes the transition to apperception to require ‘distinguishing [distinguere]’ or ‘perceiving diversity’ in a perception, by ‘being conscious [esse conscium]’ of it, or ‘apperceiving [appercipere]’ it – or, as Baumgarten’s German gloss has it: one must ‘nimt es wahr’.<sup>24</sup> Putting this together: *wahrnehmen* consists in becoming conscious of a representation of sensation – literally: ‘taking’ it up ‘with awareness [wahr-nehmen] – rather than the merely ‘having’ of a ‘*sensatio*’ or ‘*perceptio*’, or the having of a mere ‘*Vorstellung*’, as Georg Meier’s German translation<sup>25</sup> of the *Metaphysica* also renders ‘*perceptio*’.<sup>26</sup>

16 Baumgarten, Alexander: *Acroasis Logica*. Halle <sup>2</sup>1773 (AL); Baumgarten, Alexander: *Metaphysica*. Halle <sup>7</sup>1779 (M).

17 Baumgarten: M § 534.

18 Baumgarten: M § 511.

19 Baumgarten: M § 514.

20 Baumgarten: M § 625.

21 Baumgarten: M § 626.

22 Baumgarten: M § 557, § 579.

23 Baumgarten: AL § 3.

24 Baumgarten: AL §§ 2–3.

25 Meier, Georg Friedrich: *Baumgartens Metaphysik*. Halle 1766 (GM).

26 Cf. Meier: GM § 375, § 378.

As a final example, consider Johann Tetens' *Philosophische Versuche*.<sup>27</sup> Tetens' account of the mind is organized around the threefold distinction between 'sensation [Empfindung]', 'representation [Vorstellung]', and 'thought [Gedanke]'.<sup>28</sup> Sensations are 'states of mind' which arise due to 'impressions [Eindrücke]' upon the mind from external or internal causes.<sup>29</sup> Through repeated association, other subsequent states of mind come to function as 'signs' of these sensations, and thereby 'represent' these sensations to the mind.<sup>30</sup> What Tetens himself calls '*Perception*' is the first 'activity of representation [Vorstellungstätigkeit]' by means of which we 'take up [nehmen auf] the original representations out from the sensations in us' and 'secure' them as 'signs' for what has been previously sensed.<sup>31</sup> The 'first original representations' are 'representations of sensation [Empfindungsvorstellungen]',<sup>32</sup> in the sense that these are 'representations or images [Bilder] that are achieved *out of* [aus] sensations', *rather than* things that are *identical with* sensations or impressions.<sup>33</sup>

Tetens then sharply distinguishes 'thoughts [Gedanken]' (and 'ideas [Ideen]') from both sensations and representations. Representations of sensation only provide the 'material' for thoughts, but cannot be identified with thoughts, because 'for themselves' such representations 'contain' *only* an 'image' of something; *over and above* such images, thoughts also contain 'a consciousness [Bewußtsein]' and a 'distinguishing [Unterscheiden]', and 'presuppose comparisons [Vergleichungen]' – and, finally, involve a 'taking with awareness [Gewahrnehmen]'.<sup>34</sup> Though the 'original representations of sensation are the basic material [Grundstoff] of all the others',<sup>35</sup> only some representations will 'be taken up with awareness with consciousness [mit Bewußtsein gewahrnommen]'.<sup>36</sup> Like Leibniz himself, Tetens thus identifies 'perception' with the act of *representing* sensation, but then like Baumgarten, Tetens uses 'Gewahrnehmen' to refer instead to the act of *apperceiving* (also: 'becoming-aware [Gewahrwerden]' of) such representations, rather than merely having or possessing them in the mind.<sup>37</sup> What

---

27 Tetens, Johann: *Philosophische Versuche über die menschlichen Natur und ihre Entwicklung*. Leipzig 1777 (V).

28 Tetens: V 1.

29 Tetens: V 13.

30 Tetens: V 16.

31 Tetens: V 105.

32 Tetens: V 23.

33 Tetens: V 23; cf. 32.

34 Tetens: V 26.

35 Tetens: V 104.

36 Tetens: V 13.

37 Tetens: V 262.

is more, Tetens considers ‘Gewahrnehmen’ to be ‘one of the *first*’ and ‘*simplest*’ of the ‘effects of the capacity of the soul by means of which it *cognizes* [erkennt] relations in *things*’ (italics mine) – i.e., the ‘power of thought [Denkkraft]’, or what he also here calls the ‘understanding [Verstand]’.<sup>38</sup>

### 3

Before Kant, then, a sharp divergence emerges between the significance of the Latin/French ‘perceptio(n)’ and the German ‘(ge)wahrnehmen’. ‘Perceptio’ refers to a stage of representation that occurs prior to both *consciousness* of representation and *cognition* of objects through such representations. ‘Wahrnehmen’, by contrast, refers to the taking up of such representations ‘with awareness’, and is a step closer to cognition of objects – though it has as its immediate object a representation (sensation, perceptio, apparitio, something ‘in’ the mind or soul) rather than a thing.

We can now better appreciate how Kant’s own usage of ‘Wahrnehmung’ remains faithful to this tradition. For Kant, too, holds onto the basic distinction between merely having a sensible *Vorstellung* in mind – either merely undergoing a ‘sensation [Empfindung]’ or having a manifold of sensations ordered together in either spatial or temporal form in what Kant calls an ‘intuition [Anschauung]’ – and *Wahrnehmung* as the consciousness of such representations. And Kant thus also views the immediate object of *Wahrnehmung* as something ‘in’ us.

In the A-Deduction, Kant distinguishes between what intuition *contains* per se, which is something manifold, and the *representation* of what intuition contains *as a manifold*.<sup>39</sup> What is more, these two things have different conditions: most importantly, the *representation* of what is contained in an intuition *as manifold* requires that the mind first ‘distinguishes [unterscheide]’ what is so contained.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, whereas each intuition *is* an ‘absolute unity’ per se, for the *representation* of intuition *as unity*, ‘it is necessary first for there to be *the running through* [Durchlaufen] and then the *taking together* [Zusammennehmung] of [its] manifoldness’, an ‘action’ Kant calls the ‘*synthesis of apprehension* [Apprehension]’.<sup>41</sup> This synthesis is ‘aimed directly at the intuition’<sup>42</sup> and its result is to ‘represent appearances empirically in *Wahrnehmung*’.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Tetens: V 295 f.

<sup>39</sup> Kant: KrV, A 99.

<sup>40</sup> Kant: KrV, A 99.

<sup>41</sup> Kant: KrV, A 99.

<sup>42</sup> Kant: KrV, A 99.

At this point Kant's 'Wahrnehmung' might still be brought in line with Leibniz's and Tetens' 'perceptio', as the representation of sensation. Kant goes on, however, to tie *Wahrnehmung* to *consciousness* of sensation (appearance): 'the first thing that is given to us is appearance, which, *if it is combined with consciousness*, is called *Wahrnehmung*'.<sup>44</sup> Kant's 'if [wenn]' here implies that a given appearance per se both is what it is, and is represented in an intuition, *whether or not* it is taken up in a 'Wahrnehmung'. This implication is repeated in the B-deduction (cf.: 'if I make the empirical intuition of a house into a *Wahrnehmung*'<sup>45</sup>). So too is the dependence of *Wahrnehmung* on consciousness, combination, 'composition [Zusammensetzung]', and apprehension.<sup>46</sup>

This last point is also repeated in the Principles as well: '[Appearances] cannot be *apprehended* [apprehendiert], i. e., *taken up* [aufgenommen] into empirical consciousness, except through a *synthesis* of the manifold, i. e., through the *composition* [Zusammensetzung][...] and the consciousness of the synthetic unity of this manifold. Thus even the *Wahrnehmung* of an object, as appearance, is possible only through the same synthetic unity [...]'.<sup>47</sup> The Principles also follows Tetens in distinguishing *Wahrnehmung*, as *consciousness* of *representation*, from the *cognition* of *objects* 'through' such *Wahrnehmung* – i. e., from what Kant calls 'experience [Erfahrung]': whereas 'Wahrnehmung is the empirical *consciousness*, i. e., one in which there is sensation' and which has 'appearances' as its 'objects',<sup>48</sup> 'experience is an empirical *cognition*, i. e., a cognition that determines an object through *Wahrnehmungen*'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as noted at the outset, the distinction between intuition (representation), *Wahrnehmung* (consciousness), and experience (cognition) is highlighted in the very Titles of the Principles themselves. And an examination of Kant's other writings would produce still further evidence of this understanding of the terminology.<sup>50</sup>

43 Kant: KrV, A 115.

44 Kant: KrV, A 119f., italics mine.

45 Kant: KrV, B 162.

46 Kant: KrV, B 160.

47 Kant: KrV, B 202f.; italics mine.

48 Kant: KrV, B 207.

49 Kant: KrV, B 218; italics mine.

50 Cf. Kant: Prol, §§ 18, et seq. AA 04: 288f.; ÜE, AA 08: 217; Anth, § 1, AA 07: 127f.; OP, AA 22: 35–46, 66, 413, 415, 463, 483, 487.

## 4

Aside from neglect of historical context, perhaps the main reason why more attention has not been paid to the distinctive significance of the term '*Wahrnehmung*' is a mistaken, though widely prevalent, interpretation of an often-quoted passage from the *Dialectic*. Here Kant provides what he calls a 'progression [Stufenleiter]' of representations, starting with mere *representation*, moving to representation '*with consciousness*', which Kant aligns with both 'perceptio' and also '*Perception*', then to *cognition* as intuition and concept, before arriving at the ideas of reason.<sup>51</sup> Because 'representation in general' is described as the 'genus [Gattung]' at issue,<sup>52</sup> it is commonly assumed that the distinctions introduced are meant to divide representations into further *sub-species*. In particular, this 'speciation' reading sees *cognition* as a species of perception and then *intuition* as a species of cognition and a hence further sub-species of perception. This, in turn, would leave no room for a sharp distinction in kind *between* intuition and perception, since intuition would seem to be *one kind of* perception.

Yet however inviting this reading may be when the passage is viewed in isolation, once viewed in its broader context, the speciation reading simply cannot be sustained. The most glaring obstacle is the considerable effort Kant spends earlier in the *Critique* arguing that neither intuitions nor concepts (thoughts) on their own amount to cognitions of the objects they represent, and that it is only when they are 'unified' that cognition can arise.<sup>53</sup> He then returns to, and relies upon, this thesis at key points throughout the *Analytic*,<sup>54</sup> the *Dialectic*,<sup>55</sup> and throughout his theoretical writings. The speciation reading, in effect, requires Kant to radically change his mind on a very fundamental point for these two pages.

Fortunately, this reading is not forced on us. Indeed, a natural alternative arises from our analysis above, since like his predecessors, we can see Kant here not as presenting a simple *taxonomic* division into species, but rather as highlighting key 'steps [Stufen]' in the *developmental* 'progression [Stufenleiter]' that obtains among our representations: our minds move from mere representation (sensation, intuition), to accompanying this representation 'with consciousness' (in *Wahrnehmung*), to cognizing or judging about an object 'through' per-

---

51 Cf. Kant: KrV, B 376–377.

52 Cf. Kant: KrV, B 376.

53 Cf. Kant: KrV, B 75f.

54 Kant: KrV, B 125, B 146.

55 Kant: KrV, B 367.



ceptions (in experience). The passage simply means to signal that *Wahrnehmung* that has been made 'objective' in this way (in cognition, in experience) will include *both* intuition *and* concepts, and that the resulting cognition can therefore be analysed into parts or aspects which are *either* intuitions *or* concepts.

This 'progressivist' reading both rescues Kant from straightforward inconsistency and also brings out the deep accord between the *Stufenleiter* and the very similar progressions given in Kant's logic lectures, which likewise chart the development from mere representation, to perception ('with consciousness'), to cognition (as involving conceptual consciousness or 'understanding' of objects) – on, finally, to those representations which depend on reason.<sup>56</sup> This is, of course, the progression which is writ large in the very structure of the *Critique*.

---

56 Cf. Kant: Log, AA 09: 64–65; V-Lo/Dohna, AA 24: 730–731.

