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KANT ON COLOURS

*Abstract*

Kant has not a real theory of colour. Nevertheless, in this paper it is suggested that his loose and sometimes very confuse remarks about colours in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and in the *Critique of Judgement* are an intriguing aspect of the evolution of both his philosophy of science and theory of knowledge.

Apart from some differences between the two editions of the first *Critique*, in the *Transcendental Aesthetics* Kant modifies Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities by finding three kinds of qualities: ontological and physical properties of a body (substance, force, etc.), sensory properties (impenetrability, colour, etc.); properties which depend on an intuition *a priori* (extension and *Gestalt*). Therefore, against Newton's point of view, colour is a *psychophysiological* fact and not an object of physics: it is only a subjective "modification", in relation to which phenomena are things in themselves "in an empirical sense". In such a way no question about the spectral structure of light can arise.

In the *Analytics of Principles* Kant considers colours to be phenomenal realities. Since they are intensive *quanta*, their evaluation is an *aesthetical* (intuitive and emotional), and not a *mathematical* (constructive) one. Furthermore, because of the principle of continuity, no visual perception can be achromatic.

In the *Critique of Judgement* Kant wavers between two different opinions: after distinguishing between objective (perceptive) and subjective (emotional) colour sensations, he surprisingly considers colours (and sounds) to be ether vibrations and, therefore, physical phenomena. His claims about this topic lead to the following consequences. From an aesthetical point of view, chromatic or tonal beauty is founded on the correspondence between the "regular play" of colour or sound sensations and the harmonic frequency of their natural sources. From a theoretical point of view, the preference for Euler's (and Huygens') undulatory theory gives a new scientific status to colours and is consistent with Kant's extreme and unfinished attempt at finding a passage way "from the metaphysical principles of physics to physics".