

Kant on Unity in Experience

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The Purpose of the Transcendental Deduction

In the B Edition of the Transcendental Deduction of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant seeks to establish that the pure concepts of the understanding (or categories) are “conditions of the possibility of experience” and thus “valid a priori of all objects of experience” (B161). Although his arguments for this conclusion are often opaque and confusing, it is a critical step in the development of his critical philosophy. After all, even if the categories were fully established as a priori concepts in the Metaphysical Deduction by their connection to the universal forms of judgment, that fact alone would not exclude the possibility that they are nothing more than fanciful constructions of the understanding without any substantive or necessary connection to experience. As Sebastian Gardener observes, “nothing in what has been said so far [i.e. up to the Transcendental Deduction] justifies the application of a priori concepts to empirical intuition.”¹

Kant himself articulates this concern in Section I of the Transcendental Deduction by contrasting the status of the pure intuitions of space and time with that of the pure concepts of the understanding (A89/B121-2). Relying upon the conclusions of the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant observes that with respect to the forms of intuition “since an object can appear to us only by means of such pure forms of sensibility [i.e. in time and/or space], ... space and time are thus pure intuitions that contain a priori the conditions of the possibility of objects as appearances, and the synthesis in them has objective validity” (A89/B121-2). In contrast, even after the Metaphysical Deduction “the categories of the understanding... do not represent to us the conditions under which objects are given in intuition at all” (A89/B122). Consequently, “objects can indeed appear to us without necessarily having to be related to the function of the understanding, and therefore without the understanding containing their a priori conditions” (A89/B122).

So in the Transcendental Deduction, Kant must demonstrate that the pure concepts of the understanding, already shown to be “subjective conditions of thinking” in the Metaphysical Deduction, also have “objective validity” in the sense of being the “conditions of the possibility of all cognition of objects” (A 89-90/B122).² Kant’s basic strategy in the B Edition of the Transcendental Deduction is to argue that the synthesis of the manifold of intuition necessary for the cognition of objects can only be performed by pure apperception via the application of the logical forms of judgment, i.e. the categories. This paper will examine and critically evaluate this line of argument, focusing on the early discussions of the role of pure apperception in the cognition of objects in §15-16.

The Understanding as the Source of Unity in Experience

Kant develops the substantive arguments of the B Deduction in Section II, starting with an inquiry into the source of unity in our experience of objects in §15. He claims that although “the manifold of representations can be given in an intuition that is merely sensible,... the

¹ Sebastian Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 136.

² Ibid.

combination of a manifold can never come to us through the senses” (B129). So although our intuitions contain a complex multiplicity of sensory data ordered in space and time, they are intrinsically confused and disconnected from one another. By themselves, they lack the orderly internal connections required for the cognition of objects qua unities. For example, sensibility might provide me with an endless series of visual sensations of black on white encased by blue, of tactile sensations of heft, and auditory sensations of fluttering, but it does not and cannot unite them for me into the single object that is the *Critique of Pure Reason*. According to Kant, such orderly combination of intuitions can only be imposed through “an act of the spontaneity of the power of representation,” i.e. an act of synthesis by the understanding. Or, as one commentator summarizes: “The understanding is required to turn the jumble of sense-data into a coherent and unitary world of objective experience.”³

The idea of a necessary combination of the manifold is critical to the later arguments of the B Deduction in two related ways. First, Kant hints at his forthcoming turn to judgment by observing that such combination is a precondition of the “dissolution” involved in analysis (B130). As Paton persuasively argues, this synthesis must be understood as grounding all judgments, not merely analytic ones, since the forms of analytic judgment are the same as those of synthetic judgments.⁴ Analytic and synthetic judgments, after all, differ in the relationship between subject and predicate, not in their basic logical forms (A154-5/B193-4). Ultimately, Kant will claim that “a judgment is nothing other than the way to bring given cognitions to the objective unity of apperception,” i.e. to the form of self-consciousness designated in §16 as responsible for the synthesis of the manifold of intuition. Second, Kant defines combination as “the representation of the synthetic unity of the manifold,” yet denies that the concept of unity contained in the concept of combination is the “category of unity” (B130-1). In fact, the two types of unity could not be equivalent without rendering the function of and justification for the other eleven categories wholly mysterious. Instead, the representation of unity involved in the synthesis of the manifold is far more basic than the category of unity (B131). The categories represent the range of possible forms that the synthesis might take—meaning that unity qua synthesis is the determinable, whereas unity qua category is a determinate standing under it (B143).⁵ Taken together, these two seemingly minor points connect Kant’s opening discussion of the combination of the manifold of intuition with his later arguments about the necessary forms of judgment.

Kant’s most obvious reason for locating the source of synthesis in the understanding is clearly an implicit application of his division between sensibility and understanding.⁶ Sensibility is nothing more than “the receptivity of our mind to receive representations insofar as it is affected in some way,” while understanding is “the faculty for bringing forth representations itself, or the spontaneity of cognition” (A51/B75). Because the combination of the manifold of intuition is the act of synthesis, Kant’s division of mental faculties requires it to be performed by the understanding (B130). In Kant’s own words, “combination... is not given through objects, but can be executed only by the subject itself, since it is an act of its self-activity” (B130). But of course, Kant’s division between and account of our mental faculties is not beyond question or

³ George MacDonald Ross, *Notes on the Transcendental Logic and the Transcendental Deduction* (2003 [cited November 12 2004]); available from <http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/modules/kant0304/notes/transdeducnotes.html>.

⁴ H. J. Paton, “The Key to Kant’s Deduction of the Categories,” *Mind* 40, no. 159 (1931).

⁵ *Ibid.*: 328.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 325.

doubt. Even if sensibility seems completely passive and inert from the inside, the transformation of simple sensations into integrated objects of experience could still be the product of wholly unconscious and mechanistic brain processes associated with our sensory systems rather than any pure concepts of the understanding. Kant also argues that the “dissolution” possible via conceptual analysis implies that the understanding is responsible for the combination of the sensible manifold because “where the understanding has not previously combined anything, neither can it dissolve anything” (B130). However, the warrant for such a general principle is murky at best, since it seems quite plausible that one mental faculty could dissolve a unity created by another. For example, imagination can decompose a whole man and a whole horse given in perception into the man parts and horse parts necessary to visualize a centaur.

More revealingly, however, Kant’s account of the origin of the synthesis of the sensible manifold may be understood as part of his general strategy of containing the sensationalist and representationalist empiricism of Locke and Hume within a rationalist structure of a priori categories necessary for the experience of objects. In comments added to Section I of the B Edition of the Transcendental Deduction, Kant indicates that his Transcendental Deduction will attempt to “successfully steer human reason between [the] two cliffs” of Lockean “enthusiasm” and Humean “skepticism” (B128).⁷ From Kant’s perspective, Locke wrongly sought to derive the categories empirically due to his “neglect” of the transcendental uses of sense, imagination, and apperception, whereas Hume failed to consider the possibility that “the understanding itself, by means of [the categories], could be the originator of the experience in which its objects are encountered” (B127). By failing to adequately limit reason to its proper domain, Locke opened the door to enthusiasm (B128). Hume stripped reason of its proper authority and thereby slid into skepticism (B128). Kant’s transcendental idealism proposes to correct these two errors by “assign[ing reason] its determinate boundaries” (contra Locke) and “keep[ing] open the entire field of its purposive activity” (contra Hume)—thanks to the structure imposed upon the sensible manifold by the pure concepts of the understanding (B128). In so doing, Kant retains the sensationalism and representationalism critical to Locke and Hume’s account of perception, even while rejecting their empiricist foundationalism. As we shall see, that commits him to locating the source of coherence, order, and stability in experience in the understanding.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke develops and defends a representationalist, foundationalist, and sensationalist account of perception. It is representationalist in that ideas, not features of the world, are the immediate objects of awareness (Locke *Essay* II:8:8). It is foundationalist in that the sole source of our ideas is experience, whether sensation or reflection (Locke *Essay* II:1:2). And it is sensationalist in that we are not directly aware of entities and their properties as “united and blended” wholes, but rather only of the “simple,” “unmixed,” and “uncompounded” ideas of sensible qualities, such as green, hard, loud, rough, cold, and sweet (Locke *Essay* II:2:1). Given that understanding of perception, both the existence and nature of the unified substances which are supposed to cause our simple ideas must be inferred from the ebb and flow of our sensory experience, as Locke explicitly argues:

⁷ With respect to Kant’s charge that Locke opened the door to enthusiasm, Ross writes, “In a philosophical context, ‘enthusiasm’ means divine inspiration, or, more generally, a belief in one’s private ability to arrive at transcendent truth independently of empirical experience or logical proof. One can accuse Locke of many things; but although he did believe he could prove the existence of the soul and of God, his hypotheses about the nature of transcendent reality were extremely tentative. It is quite unfair of Kant to accuse him of opening the door to enthusiasm — the so-called rationalists provided much better examples.” See Ross, *Notes on the Transcendental Logic and the Transcendental Deduction*.

The mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of the simple ideas, conveyed in by the senses as they are found in exterior things, or by reflection on its own operations, takes notice also that a certain number of these simple ideas go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing, and words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called, so united in one subject, by one name; which, by inadvertency, we are apt afterward to talk of and consider as one simple idea, which indeed is a complication of many ideas together: because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom ourselves to suppose some substratum wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call substance (Locke *Essay* II:23:1).

So because only isolated visual sensations of gray, tactile sensations of fluffiness, and the auditory sensations of meowing are immediately given in sensation, the organism that is my cat Oliver must be inferred from the regular coincidence of those simple ideas. As Locke so infamously admitted, that substratum which unifies our simple ideas is wholly “obscure,” merely “a supposed I know not what, to support those ideas we call accidents” (Locke *Essay* II:23:15).

In his *Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume accepts Locke’s representationalist, foundationalist, and sensationalist account of perception—yet persuasively argues that such cannot adequately ground the knowledge claimed by Locke and other empiricists. In the *Treatise*, he writes:

I wou’d fain ask those philosophers, who found so much of their reasonings on the distinction of substance and accident, and imagine we have clear ideas of each., whether the idea of substance be deriv’d from the impressions of sensation or of reflection? If it be convey’d to us by our senses, I ask, which of them; and after what manner? If it be perceiv’d by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or sound, or a taste. The idea, of substance must therefore be deriv’d from an impression of reflection, if it really exist. But the impressions of reflection resolve themselves into our passions and emotions: none of which can possibly represent a substance. We have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it.’ (Hume *Treatise* I:1:6)

In essence, Locke was wrong to think that an idea of substance—even an obscure one—could be empirically gleaned from either sensation or reflection; despite our habit of doing so, we have no rational grounds on which to unify our simple ideas into a distinct substances. In these ways, among others, Lockean empiricism leads to Humean skepticism.

Kant clearly embraces the sensationalism and representationalism common to both Locke and Hume as concerns the faculty of intuition. Although ordered in space and time, the sensible manifold given in intuition is a chaotic flux of sensations, not an orderly awareness of objects and their properties. Moreover, we are not aware of the properties of the world itself, but rather only “our way of perceiving them”—meaning that “even if we could bring this intuition of ours to the highest degree of distinctness, we would not thereby come any closer to the constitution of objects in themselves” (A42-3/B59-60). The result is that, as Kant writes in the A Deduction, sensible manifolds without the unity imposed by the understanding “would belong... to no experience, and would consequently be without an object, and would be nothing but a blind play of representations, i.e. less than a dream” (A112). Despite that “blooming, buzzing confusion” of ideas given in intuition, Kant avoids falling prey to Humean skepticism by appealing to a necessary order imposed by the pure concepts of the understanding.

Looking at Kant’s basic strategy from that historical perspective, we might observe the critical role of sensationalism in driving the progression from Locke to Hume to Kant. As David Kelley writes in his defense of a realist theory of perception, *Evidence of the Senses*:

...we have in effect started by taking the awareness of the qualities for granted, and then noticed that in perception certain qualities in the field [of awareness] to go together and others do not. We are then lead to ask Hume’s question, What is it that binds the qualities together? And we are more or less forced to

Hume's answer: nothing—that is, nothing that is given perceptually. On this approach, Hume was right that we have “no [perceptual] ideas of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities.” We see the colors of the shirt, its shape and texture, but we do not see any metaphysical substrate—any bare particular or prime matter—that underlies and holds them together. We are then faced, it seems, with a choice between the historical alternatives. We can follow Hume and say that our perception of qualities as going together is guided by past experience of what qualities have usually appeared in conjunction with each other. Or we can follow Kant and say that the perceiver imposes an organizing structure—a category of substance—on the sensory manifold, so that he experiences qualities as going together because he himself has joined them.⁸

Given the presumption of sensationalism in all three philosophers, a fair evaluation of Kant's solution to Humean skepticism about Locke's claims to empirical knowledge depends upon an evaluation of sensationalism itself. So are the primary objects of sensory awareness persisting, integrated entities and their perceptible attributes against a background (e.g. books, clouds, glasses) or momentary, isolated qualities (e.g. redness, smoothness, warmth)?⁹ Kelley persuasively argues that entities and their attributes, not solitary sensations are “the given” in sensory awareness.¹⁰ Sensationalism is false because “we begin with the awareness of a whole nature, a thing standing out from its background,” whereas “the isolation of individual qualities... is a more sophisticated and derivative ability, the result of our capacity to focus selectively on aspects of what is already perceived.”¹¹ According to Kelley, the integration of sensory data into perceptions of wholes is physiological, i.e. “not to [be] conceived on the model of... conscious processes of integration,” as with Kant's pure concepts of the understanding.¹² Of course, my purpose here is not to argue for Kelley's form of direct realism, although I do regard it as a correct account of sensory experience, but rather merely to cast doubt upon Kant's critical claim that the combination of the sensible manifold can only be unified by the understanding by sketching a plausible alternative to his presumption of sensationalism.

Interestingly, Henry Allison rejects this line of criticism of Kant's opening arguments of the B Deduction on the grounds that Kant is not attempting to unify sensations to each other, but rather unify them with the self:

Such criticism... is misguided because it neglects the fact that in the Second Edition, Kant explicitly abstracts from any considerations of the manner in which the manifold must be given. The only assumption is that we are dealing with a mind for which the manifold must be given, that is, with a discursive rather than intuitive intellect. As Kant makes clear [in the first paragraph of §15], the problem is to explain how such a mind can *represent to itself* its data as combined, that is, as constituting a synthetic unity. This problem is generated by the preceding analysis of apperception, not by any assumptions about the manner in which the data is given to the mind. Thus, even if we assume that the data is somehow given to the mind in an organized or unified fashion, the mind must still represent to itself or think, that is, conceptualize, this ‘given’ unity.¹³

Yet Allison's counter-argument seems to miss its target. Most obviously, Kant does not “abstract from” the nature of the given manifold at all, but rather claims that the manifold is and must be given as disordered and uncombined, since such combination could only result from the activity of the understanding (B130). If indeed the data of the sensible manifold were given as combined, it's not clear why the mind would need to take additional steps to “represent to itself its data as combined” in order to make the cognition of any and all objects possible. On such a

⁸ David Kelley, *The Evidence of the Senses: A Realist Theory of Perception* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 156-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-80.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 156-7.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 141.

premise, the pure concepts of the understanding would seem applicable only to abstract thought, not all cognition—and thus Kant would be unable to justly claim that the categories must “precede all experience and first make it possible as far as its form is concerned” (A130).

Perhaps a more promising response to the anti-sensationalist objection of Kelley is that precisely because of the order imposed by the categories, Kant’s theory predicts that perception will be of unified, persisting, and orderly objects, not the flux of sensation given in intuition. So it might seem that we cannot choose between the two accounts merely on the basis of observing that integrated, persisting entities are given in perception. Although the realist account of perception might be far more parsimonious, the simplicity of an explanation does not guarantee its truth. As such, the plausibility of Kant’s account of the unity and order in experience is perhaps best considered in light of his particular arguments for apperception as the source of that unity.

Pure Apperception as the Source of Unity

In §16, Kant identifies the particular source of unity in experience as pure apperception, the form of self-consciousness which alone enables us to attach an “I think” to any representation (B132). Without that capacity for higher-order reflection upon our representations, Kant claims that “something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me” (B131-2). The connection between intuition and self-consciousness is a necessary one, for “all manifold of intuition has a necessary relation to the I think in the same subject in which this manifold is to be encountered” (B132). More generally, the capacity to think X is absolutely required for any representation of X as an object, whether in thought, imagination, or perception.

Unfortunately, Kant’s reasons for asserting the capacity for self-consciousness as a requirement for the representation of objects are rather opaque. At first glance, the critical argument seems to be found in this passage:

For the manifold of representations that are given in a certain intuition would not all together be *my* representations if they did not altogether belong to a self-consciousness, i.e. as my representations (even if I am not conscious of them as such) they must necessarily be in accord with the condition under which alone they can stand together in a universal self-consciousness, because otherwise they would not throughout belong to me (B132).

Yet in fact, that passage merely twice repeats the same basic claim—that a person’s representations would not be his own without the capacity of self-consciousness to recognize them as such—without providing any substantive justification or even explication. As A.C. Ewing notes, “the presupposition of all consciousness is self-identity (the transcendental unity of apperception)... is treated almost as an axiom by [Kant]” in that “the proof of it given in the second edition deduction is little more than a statement of the doctrine to be proved.”¹⁴

The key to Kant’s identification of pure apperception with the synthesis of the sensible manifold seems to be the necessity of a single subject of all objects of cognition, i.e. the connection of “the empirical consciousness that accompanies different representations” with “the identity of the subject” (B133). That connection is the synthesis of intuitions in self-consciousness; it “does not yet come about by my accompanying each representation with consciousness, but rather by my adding one representation to another and being conscious of their synthesis” (B133). Significantly, such synthesis excludes the problem of the Humean self, in which “I would have as multicolored, diverse a self as I have representations of which I am

¹⁴ A.C. Ewing, “Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of the Categories,” *Mind* 32, no. 125 (1923): 53.

conscious” (B134). Thus Sebastian Gardner’s summary of Kant’s basic claim seems apt: “it is necessary, with regard to all representations which are to qualify as ‘mine,’ that they be attributable to a single subject: something ‘has necessarily to be represented as numerically identical’ (A107) in the flux of inner appearances.”¹⁵ However, a critical evaluation of Kant’s identification of pure apperception as the source of the synthesis of the sensible manifold indicates that it suffers from far worse problems than Hume’s bundle theory of the self.

First, Kant’s general claim that consciousness is dependent upon self-consciousness is quite strange on its face. After all, any higher-order mental state is generally understood as dependent upon the relevant lower-order mental states, not vice versa. So if I am to realize that I believe P, I must first believe P. If I wish to stop desiring X, I must first desire X. In essence, my capacity to consciously identify and reflect upon some mental state seems to presuppose the prior existence and sufficient clarity of that mental state. Yet Kant’s Transcendental Deduction reverses that relationship, in that my capacity for reflective consideration of my representations is said to be what makes them my representations in the first place. Moreover, Kant’s view seems to imply that animals incapable of reflective thought (i.e. young children and beasts) do not and cannot experience objects at all, but merely “a blind play of representations” that is “less than a dream”—even though their complex and comprehensible behavior indicates quite the opposite (A112).

Second, Kant emphasizes that the synthesis of the “I think” need not be actual, but only potential. He writes that “the thought that these representations given in intuition all together belong to me means... the same as that I unite them in a self-consciousness, or *at least can unite them therein*... only because I can comprehend their manifold in a consciousness do I call them altogether my representations” (B134, emphasis added). As Gardner observes, Kant is not claiming that “each of my representations must be actually accompanied by the reflection that it is mine, nor that I must be able to form a single thought comprehending all of my representations in one grand totality: Kant’s claim is just that *each* of my representations must be such that it is *possible* for me to recognize it as mine in an act of reflection.”¹⁶ Yet it’s unclear how the mere potential to unify my representations via pure apperception avoids the problem of a Humean “multicolored, diverse” self (B134). The unsynthesized representations would not seem to belong to a single self, but rather form their own independent bundles. In addition, if the categories are “nothing other than [the logical] functions for judgment” and judgment is “the way to bring given cognitions to the objective unity of apperception,” then it would seem that the mere potential to synthesize a manifold via pure apperception would not subject that manifold to the categories (B143, B141). Of course, for Kant to require the actual synthesis of the sensible manifold would be implausible, in that “I think X” would be required for the cognition of any X at all. In fact, that might lead to an infinite regress of “I think X.”

Third, Kant seems to conflate two distinct notions, namely that of representations being mine and that of being aware that representations are mine. As already quoted, Kant claims that “for the manifold of representations that are given in a certain intuition would not all together be *my* representations if they did not altogether belong to a self-consciousness” (B132). In other words, self-consciousness of the representations as mine is treated as equivalent to them being mine. The equivocation is perhaps more clear in Henry Allison’s comment on a similar passage about the necessity of “I think” to accompany my representations:

¹⁵ Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*, 145.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

This [principle] applies to each of my representations taken individually; it asserts that in order for any of these to be anything to me, that is, to represent anything for me, it must be possible for me to be aware of it as mine. This is equivalent to the possibility of reflectively attacking the 'I think' to it. Any representation for which this is not possible is *ipso facto* not a representation for me.¹⁷

Surely, awareness of a representation as mine does require a capacity for reflective self-consciousness, but the mere fact of a representation that is mine does not. After all, our heads are not routinely filled with representations belonging to other people, such that genuine cognition requires us to identify certain representations as our own. Any representation I experience is automatically my representation; nothing need be added to it to make it so.

Fourth, Kant claims that the unity of the sensible manifold is pure rather than empirical, yet he never justifies this claim by ruling out the possibility of an empirical synthesis of the self.¹⁸ Kant seems to presume that Hume has definitively shown that a unified self is impossible on empirical grounds, but it seems plausible that Hume's bundle theory of the self (like his skepticism about substances) is a result of his sensationalism and representationalism. Gardner's anti-Humean argument, for example could be just as easily made with an empirical self as with a pure self, in that he observes that "to the extent that Hume's ideas are taken as a domain of objects for us, they must be conceived perspectively and so must contain an 'I' implicitly"—meaning that "Hume has... employed his 'I' to create his bundles in thought, and then incoherently attempted to delete it."¹⁹

More Arguments from the Transcendental Deduction

Although Kant's arguments in §15 and §16 of the B Deduction do not constitute the core of his argument, they are necessary preconditions of it. Without pure apperception as the sole giver of unity in the sensible manifold of intuition, Kant's claim that judgment and its associated categories make cognition possible cannot even get off the ground. After all, the unity provided by pure apperception is the determinable under which the logical forms of judgment stand as determinates. Yet in the course of our present examination of these two early sections of the B Deduction, we have found ample reason to doubt critical elements of Kant's argument for the categories as the "conditions of the possibility of experience" and thus "valid a priori of all objects of experience" (B161). The empiricism of Locke and Hume may be a dead end, but Kant is not our only plausible alternative.

¹⁷ Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, 137.

¹⁸ Paul Guyer, "The Transcendental Deduction of the Categories," in *Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 150.

¹⁹ Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*, 146.