

Prescribing Unity to Intuition: Sensibility and Understanding in the Transcendental Deduction

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I. Introduction

The goal of the Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding is to establish that the categories have objective reality. To achieve this, Kant has to show that they apply to all objects. In the context of Transcendental Idealism this implies that he must prove that nothing can be given in intuition to which the categories do not apply. As Kant puts it, it has to be shown that no appearances can be given in intuition, which are “so constituted that the understanding does not find them in accord with the conditions of its unity” (A90/B123). For short, the goal is to show that the categories apply to all possible intuitions.

Exactly what the argument is by which Kant tries to achieve this goal is controversial. With regard to the second-edition version of the Deduction, on which I am going to focus, there is not even unanimity among commentators on what the structure of the argument is. Kant explicitly indicates that it contains two distinct steps. But there has been controversy over what the relation between these two steps is; whether, for instance, they constitute two separate arguments to the same conclusion, or whether Kant makes a different point in each half. In a well-known article, Dieter Henrich argued that the argument should

be understood as a single proof in two steps. While this view is now widely accepted, Henrich has been criticized for his account of what the two steps consist in.¹

Kant himself describes the issue as follows: In §21 he claims that the first half of the Deduction showed that the categories apply to “the manifold of a given intuition in general” (B145).² But he immediately goes on to characterize this conclusion as preliminary. It constitutes only “the beginning of a deduction of the [categories]” (B144). The goal of the Deduction, which is to show that the categories are valid of “all objects of our senses” (B145), has not yet been accomplished. An additional step in the argument is needed, and Kant indicates the reason for this when he says that in the first half, he had to “abstract from the manner in which the manifold for an empirical intuition is given, in order to attend only to the unity that is added to intuition through the understanding by means of the category” (B144). In the second half, this abstraction is going to be removed, and this will make it possible to achieve the intended goal.

According to this characterization, the chief difference between the two halves lies in the level of abstraction at which they operate. Presumably, the distinction between, on the one hand, “intuition in general”, and, on the other, “all objects of our senses” reflects this difference. These terms, it seems, are intended to mark the difference between a claim that applies to any kind of intuition, as long as it is finite, and a claim that applies only to our specifically human kind of intuition. Kant of course holds that we can conceive the idea of a being that has forms of intuition other than space and time. A claim about intui-

¹ Cf. Dieter Henrich, “The Proof-Structure of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction,” *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969), 640-59. – There are a number of different positions on the structure of the B-Deduction. For an excellent survey see Peter Baumanns, “Kants transzendente Deduktion der reinen Verstandesbegriffe (B): Ein kritischer Forschungsbericht,” parts I, II, *Kant-Studien* 82 (1991), 329-348, 436-455; parts III, IV *Kant-Studien* 83 (1992), 60-83, 185-207.

² References to the *Critique* use the pagination of the first two editions, as customary, and are given in the text. Translations are based on Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1998, with my own modifications.

tion in general would apply to such a being as well, while a claim about our spatio-temporal intuition would not, at least not without further argument.

It seems, however, that any claim about intuition in general should apply also to a specific kind of intuition, by simple instantiation. If the categories are valid of intuition in general, then *a fortiori* they are valid of spatio-temporal intuition. But it is clear that the second half of the Deduction does not consist in a simple step of instantiation. Rather, Kant presents an argument of considerable complexity. This confronts us with an exegetical challenge. He seems to think that the move from intuition in general to our form of intuition has the potential of causing problems for a successful deduction. But it is not at all clear why it has this potential. The challenge for any interpretation, therefore, is to explain why it does.

To make matters worse, when we look at the argument that concludes the Deduction in §26, we find a move that looks very much like a step of instantiation from ‘intuition in general’ to ‘our forms of intuition.’ After he has argued that all empirical intuition involves a synthesis of apprehension, which is subject to the synthetic unity of apperception, Kant says: “This synthetic unity, however, can be none other than that of the combination of a manifold of a given *intuition in general* in an original consciousness, in accordance with the categories, *only applied to our sensible intuition*” (B161, my emphasis). What are we to make of this? On the one hand, Kant seems to think that the conclusions reached in the first half with regard to intuition in general cannot be applied directly to our form of intuition. On the other hand, he seems to derive the claim that the categories are valid of our forms of intuition from the claim that they apply to intuition in general. One possible suggestion is that Kant thinks that the instantiation-step is sound, and that he wants to rely

on it at a certain point, but that for some reason it is not available at the end of the first half; that further work has to be done before this step can be taken. The fact that he packs four dense sections between the conclusion of the first half in §21 and the conclusion of the second half in §26 might count as *prima facie* evidence for a view of this form.

In light of these considerations, we can formulate two criteria of adequacy on an interpretation of the Deduction: First, the interpretation has to explain why lifting the abstraction in place in the first half has the potential of generating difficulties for a successful deduction, which make the instantiation-step from intuition in general to our forms of intuition unavailable, at least initially. Second, the interpretation must also show how the argument of the second half does eventually make available a move that looks very much like such a step. In this paper I develop the outline of an interpretation that meets these demands.

II. The Isolation Thesis

In his original article, Henrich focuses on the fact that Kant expresses the result of the first half by saying that the categories apply to an intuitional manifold “insofar as it is given in a *single* empirical intuition” (in *Einer empirischen Anschauung*, B143). Kant’s emphasis on singularity here leads Henrich to suggest that the conclusion of the first half is restricted to a certain class of intuitions, viz. to those that possess the unity of a single intuition. But the fact that the categories apply to all intuitions belonging to this class does not imply that they apply to “all objects of our senses.” On Henrich’s view, the second half secures the goal of the Deduction by providing an argument to the effect that everything that can be given in sensibility possesses the unity of a single intuition.

A number of objections have been raised for this view.³ Of particular importance to my present concerns is the objection that Henrich's view is difficult to square with Kant's claim about the levels of abstraction in place in each of the two halves.⁴ Henrich suggests that the first half operates under a restriction (the categories are considered only in relation to intuitions which are already unified), which is then removed in the second half. This means that the scope of the conclusion reached in §20 is narrower than that of the result achieved in §26. But if the first half is situated at a higher level of abstraction than the second half, one would expect just the opposite: viz. that the first half makes a more general claim, while the second half contains a more specific claim, a claim of narrower scope. This objection is supported by the fact that, as I pointed out above, Kant himself describes the final step in the argument of §26 as one of applying a claim about intuition in general to our particular form of intuition, which clearly has the form of moving from a broader claim to a narrower one.

I do not want to consider what resources Henrich might have for fending off this objection. What matters to me is that it points us in the right direction for an alternative interpretation. For it suggests that to get clear on the difference between the two halves we should consider more closely how Kant characterizes the levels of abstraction in place in each half. He provides such a characterization when he describes the limitation of the result reached in §20:

In the above proposition, therefore, the beginning of a *deduction* of the pure concepts of the understanding has been made, in which, since the categories have their source in the understanding alone, *independently of sensibility*, I had to abstract from the way in which the manifold for an empirical intuition is given, in order to

³ Cf. Baumanns for an overview.

⁴ This objection was first raised by Hoke Robinson in his "Anschauung und Mannigfaltiges in der Transzendentalen Deduktion," *Kant-Studien* 72 (1982), 140-148.

attend only to the unity that is added to intuition through the understanding by means of the category. (B144)

Kant goes on to clarify that he did *not* abstract from the fact that the kind of understanding at issue is a discursive, as opposed to intuitive, understanding. The salient difference between these two types of understanding is that a discursive understanding is, while an intuitive understanding is not, dependent on a faculty of sensibility. The reason is that an intuitive understanding creates the objects of its thought in the very act of thinking them. As a consequence, there is no gap between what such an understanding thinks and what is the case. Contrast a discursive understanding. Because a discursive understanding does not create the objects of its representations, it is an open question whether they exist, and are as the understanding represents them. In short, the objects of a discursive understanding are independent of it. To make contact with objects, therefore, a discursive understanding is dependent on a receptive faculty, a faculty through the operations of which objects are, as Kant puts it, “given” to the mind.⁵ As a consequence, the representations of a discursive understanding have content only if they apply to the representations of the receptive faculty, the faculty of sensibility.

So what Kant is saying in the quoted passage is that he did not abstract from the fact that for the representations of a discursive understanding to have content there has to be a faculty of receptivity through which objects are given to the mind. The specific nature of this faculty, however, beyond the mere fact that it is a receptive faculty, is not in view. More specifically, it is not in view that the form of human sensibility is spatio-temporal; neither, presumably, is the fact that human sensibility has a pure form, which “lies ready in

⁵ Cf. A19/B33 and A50/B74.

the mind a priori” (A20/B34).⁶ Since the way in which sensibility figures in the first half of the Deduction is thus limited to what is contained in the very concept of a discursive understanding, it seems appropriate to characterize the first half as being concerned with the understanding in isolation, independently of sensibility. Call this the Isolation Thesis.

Consideration of the Transcendental Aesthetic supports this Thesis. The Aesthetic illustrates what it is to investigate sensibility in its own right. If we abstract from the remarks about mathematics, the two most salient claims of the Aesthetic are that sensibility has a pure form, and that this form is constituted by space and time. Neither of these claims figures in the first half of the B-Deduction; both, however, enter at crucial junctures in the second half.⁷

It might be objected to the Isolation Thesis that the first half contains claims that go beyond the mere idea of a receptive faculty, as it is contained in the notion of a discursive understanding. The summary of the argument given in §20 makes this clear. In it Kant puts forth a claim about the unity of empirical intuition (cf. B143). And this, the objection goes, is surely something that cannot be derived from the bare notion of a receptive faculty. Rather, it depends on consideration of the particular nature of our human intuition and its pure form.

But I think that, in fact, this passage supports rather than undermines the Isolation Thesis. First, as Kant points out in §21, in a passage that explicitly refers back to §20, the claim about intuition is a claim about intuition *in general*.⁸ Since the term ‘intuition in

⁶ It is an open question whether the claim that sensibility has a pure form already follows from the fact that sensibility is a distinct faculty. But Kant certainly talks as if this claim is not under consideration in the first half, since he explicitly introduces it as a new premise in his argument in §24, at B150.

⁷ Cf. B150 for the first claim and B160, including the footnote on B160f, for the second.

⁸ This is the passage in which he talks about the unity that “the category prescribes to the manifold of a given intuition *in general* according to the preceding §20” (B145, emphasis added).

general' marks a contrast with 'our forms of intuition,' the reference to intuition in general is consistent with the claim that what is in view is only the bare idea of a receptive faculty, as implied by the notion of a discursive understanding. Second, the claim about the unity of intuition, on which the objection relies, is put in conditional form. In §20 Kant says that the manifold of intuition has certain properties "*insofar as* it is given in a single [and therefore unified, T.L.] empirical intuition" (B143, my emphasis). Furthermore, in §21 he characterizes the conclusion of §20 as saying that the category "prescribes" (B145) this unity to intuition. This, it seems to me, is strong evidence to the effect that the claim about the unity of intuition is not intended as a claim about the particular nature of our intuition. The claim is rather that certain facts are true of intuition *if* intuition is given as unified. But whether or not it is so given can only be determined, as §21 suggests, when we consider the specific nature of our intuition. Since all other cases in which the unity of intuition is mentioned in §§20 and 21 are consistent with this claim, we have every reason to uphold the Isolation Thesis.

The level of abstraction in place in the first half of the Deduction, then, can be described by saying that the understanding is considered in isolation from sensibility, with the important reminder that this does not exclude reference to what we might call, echoing Kant, sensibility in general. In the passage from §21, in which he locates the difference between the two halves, Kant also seems to be providing a rationale for his strategy. He says: "[...] *since* the categories have their source in the understanding alone, independently of sensibility, I had to abstract from the way in which the manifold for an empirical intuition is given [...]" (B144, my emphasis). In other words, the abstraction is required by the fact that the categories originate solely in the understanding, independently of sensibility.

In what follows I want to argue that we can understand the argumentative structure of the Deduction if we ask what kind of independence claim is being made here.

III. Independence of Sensibility and Understanding

To begin with, consider Kant's conception of the understanding. He defines it as a capacity to judge, and takes this capacity to be identical to the capacity for cognition through concepts (cf. A68f/B93f).⁹ Cognition through concepts is discursive cognition, as contrasted with intuitive cognition. Now, cognition is of objects. As we have seen, it is an essential characteristic of a discursive faculty of cognition that it does not of itself relate to objects. For its relation to objects, it is dependent on a separate faculty of receptivity.

However, as Kant's division of the Doctrine of Elements into an Aesthetic and a Logic indicates, we can nevertheless isolate the understanding from the receptive faculty and investigate its nature. And we can likewise investigate the nature of the sensible faculty in isolation. If cognition is the product of the joint exercise of these two faculties, we can think of their separate investigation as identifying conditions on this joint product, which derive from the nature of each contributing faculty. Thus, sensibility and understanding each place a set of conditions on what can count as cognition. In the case of the understanding, the investigation yields the conclusion that cognition is possible only if the representations of sensibility have certain features. In particular, they must be such as to be in accord with "the synthetic unity of [the understanding's] thinking" (A90/B123).

We need not, for present purposes, worry what this unity consists in. What is of interest is the idea that the understanding places a condition on sensibility; the idea, in other

⁹ Following Prauss, by 'cognition' (*Erkenntnis*) I take Kant to mean a judgment that is either true or false. In other words, 'cognition' is not equivalent to 'knowledge.' Cf. Gerold Prauss, *Erscheinung bei Kant*, Berlin: de Gruyter 1971, 57-70.

words, that exercises of the understanding yield cognition only if the representations of sensibility meet certain conditions. I call these the conditions of thought. Whether or not sensibility meets these conditions is, at least initially, an open question. As Kant points out in the preamble to the Transcendental Deduction, a scenario in which sensibility does not meet the conditions of thought is certainly conceivable.¹⁰ It follows that without further argument, this possibility cannot be ruled out.

I take it that proving the objective reality of the categories is equivalent to showing that sensibility satisfies the conditions of thought. Space does not permit me to argue the point, but it is clear that the “synthetic unity of [the understanding’s] thinking” is the synthetic unity of apperception. The categories articulate this unity. Therefore, the categories articulate the conditions of thought. Furthermore, since for the categories to be valid of intuitions – in other words, for the categories to have objective reality – is for intuitions to have the unity required for thought, establishing the objective reality of the categories amounts to showing that sensibility meets the conditions of thought.

Now, to claim, as Kant does in §21, that the categories arise solely in the understanding, independently of sensibility, must mean that they can be derived from considerations concerning the nature of the understanding, independently of any facts about sensibility. The unity of apperception, however, is a unity that pertains, in the first instance, to intuitions.¹¹ If the categories articulate the unity of apperception, what they articulate is

¹⁰ “That objects of sensible intuition must conform to the formal conditions of sensibility which lie a priori in the mind is evident, because otherwise they would not be objects for us. But that they must likewise conform to the conditions which the understanding requires for the synthetic unity of thought, is a conclusion the grounds of which are by no means so obvious. Appearances might very well be so constituted that the understanding should not find them to be in accordance with the conditions of its unity” (A90/B122f).

¹¹ Cf. e.g. B136: “The supreme principle of all intuition in relation to the understanding is that all the manifold of *intuition* stand under conditions of the original synthetic unity of apperception” (emphasis added).

likewise a unity of intuitions.¹² But how can a property of intuitions be derived from considerations concerning the nature of the understanding, in isolation from sensibility?

As already indicated, I suggest that what Kant is doing in the first half of the Deduction is not to ascribe a property to intuitions, but rather to articulate a condition that intuitions must satisfy if the understanding is to be able to serve its function of generating cognition. What evidence do we have at this point for supporting such a view? First, there is the scenario raised at the outset of the Deduction, that intuitions might not meet the conditions of thought. Second, there are the formulations in §21, most clearly the sentence at B145 in which Kant claims that, according to the preliminary conclusion reached in §20, the categories “prescribe” a certain unity to the manifold of intuition. For the view to be viable, however, it must be plausible for sensibility to possess the kind of independence that is implied by it. To repeat, by the independence of sensibility I mean the idea that sensibility may or may not satisfy the conditions of thought. But what does that mean?

To begin with, for sensibility as a faculty to satisfy the conditions of thought is for all possible intuitions to be in accordance with the unity required for thought. Accordingly, it is sufficient for sensibility to fail to satisfy these conditions that there be *some* intuitions, which do not possess the requisite unity. It follows that it is not as absurd as it may at first seem to suggest that it is an open question whether sensibility meets the conditions of thought. For the – presumably undeniable – fact that *some* intuitions do have the relevant unity does not prove anything one way or the other. So the question does not fly in the face of what we might take to be a well-established fact.

¹² The nominal definition of the categories given at B128 confirms this: “They are concepts of an object in general, by means of which its intuition is regarded as determined with respect of one of the logical functions of judgment.” Thus, the content of the categories is a certain property of intuitions, viz. their being determined in a particular way. And to be determined in this way is to have the relevant unity.

More importantly, to say that sensibility may or may not satisfy the conditions of thought is to deny that it is analytically true that it does (or does not). It may be a fact, and even a fact that can be known a priori, but it is not a conceptual truth. And it seems to me that this is exactly the way it has to be, given Kant's claim that sensibility and understanding are distinct sources of cognition. One way to characterize what it would be to deny their distinctness is to say that the relevant properties of the one can be derived from considerations concerning the other. An instance of this would be the idea that sensible representations are a species of intellectual representations, as, according to Kant, Leibniz holds. If this was the case, it would be analytically true that sensible representations possess the unity of thought, since they would, after all, form a species of thought.

To say that sensibility is independent of the understanding, then, is to say that it is a distinct faculty. And to say this, I suggest, is to say that facts about the one cannot be derived from facts about the other. It follows that any proof that sensibility meets the conditions of thought must come from considerations concerning the nature of sensibility. With regard to the Transcendental Deduction this implies that the second half of the argument must turn on facts about sensibility. In the remainder of this paper, I want to give some evidence to show that it does.

IV. The Second Half

Here is how Kant prospectively describes the task of the second half:

In the sequel (§26) it will be shown from the way in which empirical intuition is given in sensibility that its unity can be none other than the one the category prescribes to the manifold of a given intuition in general according to the preceding §20; thus by the explanation of it's a priori validity in regard to all objects of our senses the aim of the deduction will first be fully attained. (B144f)

Again, my proposal is to interpret the term ‘intuition in general’ as referring to the bare idea of a sensible faculty, as it is contained in the notion of a discursive understanding. In terms of intuition in general Kant articulates the conditions that, as he puts it here, thought “prescribes” to sensibility. By contrast, the expression ‘the way in which empirical intuition is given in sensibility’ refers to our actual faculty of sensibility. To consider the way in which empirical intuition is given in sensibility is to consider what is actually the case with our faculty of sensibility, as opposed to requirements placed on it by the understanding.

What, then, are the facts about sensibility to which Kant appeals in the argument of the second half? In brief, the first relevant fact is that sensibility has a pure form. This claim functions as a premise in the argument of §24, which is intended to establish that the categories can be schematized, that is, given application to the kind of sensibility we have. The idea is that because sensibility has a pure form, we can determine a priori what it is for sensible intuitions to satisfy the conditions of thought. In Kant’s words, the pure form of sensibility allows us to “think a priori the synthetic unity of the apperception of the manifold of sensible intuition” (B150), which unity is, of course, what the conditions of thought amount to. The emphasis here is on ‘think a priori.’ Because sensibility has a pure form, we can specify, independently of any actual empirical intuitions, what it is for empirical intuitions to have the unity required by thought. As the Pure Principles subsequently spell out, empirical intuitions have this unity if they are given as part of a single unified time.

Consequently, §26 contains an argument intended to establish that empirical intuitions are given as part of a single unified time (as well as a single unified space) and necessarily so. This is the second relevant fact about sensibility. Kant argues that because empir-

ical intuitions are given in the forms of space and time, they are necessarily in accord with the unity that space and time have. As he puts it, space and time have a synthetic unity, “with which everything that is to be represented as determined in space or time, must be in accord” (B161). And he continues: “This synthetic unity, however, can be none other than that of the combination of a manifold of a given *intuition in general* in an original consciousness, in accordance with the categories, only applied to our *sensible intuition*” (B161). So here we get the step that looks like a straightforward instantiation from intuition in general to a specific kind of intuition. This returns us to our initial question: Why does the second half of the Deduction not consist in such a step of instantiation, given that the first half seems to establish the objective reality of the categories with respect to intuition in general? It should by now be clear how I want to answer it: The conclusion of the first half is not that the objective reality of the categories has been established for intuition in general. Instead, the reference to intuition in general indicates that the conditions which thought places on sensibility have been articulated. The second half of the Deduction then consists in an argument to the effect that sensibility satisfies these conditions. So, echoing a formulation from §21, I propose the following gloss on the quoted sentence: ‘The synthetic unity of the pure forms of intuition, with which all empirical intuitions must accord, can be none other than that which the understanding, considered in isolation, prescribes to intuition.’

My interpretation thus explains why the Deduction is not complete at the end of §20. It also explains why the remaining steps take the form they do, and thereby shows how the two halves of the argument are related to each other. There is, however, one crucial strand of the argument that I have left out. I believe that my interpretation can accom-

modate this strand, but to show this would take me far beyond the confines of this paper. Let me conclude by identifying this strand and giving a very brief sketch of how one might attempt to deal with it.

If the claim just referred to is to be warranted, Kant has to give a reason why the unity of the pure forms of space and time “can be none other” than the unity required for thought. Why, in other words, should we think that the unity of space and time, which all empirical intuitions must be in accord with, is the unity required for thought? On what grounds are we entitled to assume that space and time have this unity? Kant’s answer is that there is a way of exercising the understanding in pure intuition, which shows that space and time have the unity required for thought. This exercise is what he calls *synthesis speciosa*, the kind of synthesis performed in mathematical construction. *Synthesis speciosa* shows that space and time have the relevant unity by virtue of the very fact that this synthesis can be carried out. Since *synthesis speciosa* is an exercise of the understanding, its performance on some intuition shows that this intuition satisfies the conditions of thought. If it can be performed on the pure intuitions of space and time, then space and time satisfy the conditions of thought.

Now, one might think that this undermines the independence of sensibility, on which the argument of the Deduction depends. But the crucial point is that *synthesis speciosa* here serves only an epistemic function: it *shows* that space and time have a certain unity; it does not *impose* this unity on space and time. The idea seems to be that the synthesis, as it were, actualizes a property, which space and time already have potentially, and independently of any exercises of the understanding. The synthesis, one might say, is the *ratio cognoscendi* of the unity of space and time, but not its *ratio essendi*. The distinction be-

tween the form of intuition and formal intuition, as Kant draws it in the famous footnote at B160f., might seem to support this point. A worked-out interpretation of the argument of the Deduction would have to provide an account of the role of this distinction. My aim here was only to propose a view of the overall structure of the argument.