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The Subjective Deduction and Kant's Methodological Skepticism

Abstract: The deduction of categories in the 1781 edition of the *Critique of the Pure Reason* (A Deduction) has “two sides”—the “objective deduction” and the “subjective deduction”. Kant seems ambivalent about the latter deduction. I treat it as a significant episode of Kant's thinking about categories that extended from the early 1770s to around 1790. It contains his most detailed answer to the question about the origin of categories that he formulated in the 1772 letter to Marcus Herz. The answer is that categories are generated *a priori* through a kind of intellectual “epigenesis”. This account leaves unexplained why precisely such and such categories should be generated. While this observation caused Kant to worry about the hypothetical status of the subjective deduction in 1781, he would come to acquiesce in the recognition that the ground of the possibility of categories is itself inscrutable. I call this his “methodological skepticism”.

1 Introduction

In the preface to the 1781 edition of the *Critique of the Pure Reason* (A Preface), Kant distinguishes “two sides” of the deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding or categories.¹ One, the objective deduction, demonstrates their objective validity *a priori* by considering “the objects of the pure understanding”. The other, the subjective deduction, “deals with the pure understanding itself, concerning its possibility and the powers of cognition on which it itself rests”. Kant states that, while the first side “belongs essentially” to his end, the second does not. The latter pertains to the question “How is the *faculty of thinking* itself possible?” and is “something like the search for the cause [*Ursache*] of a given effect [*Wirkung*]”. Kant grants that this deduction is “of great importance” with respect to his “chief end”, namely “getting to the bottom [*Ergründen*] of that faculty we call the understanding” and simultaneously (*zugleich*) determin-

¹ I treat “pure concepts of the understanding” and “categories” as interchangeable, while recognizing that Kant does not always view them as equivalent (e. g. *Met-Vigil* 29: 984).

ing “the rules and boundaries of its use”. But he insists that whether his version thereof is convincing will not affect the objective deduction (Axvi–xvii).²

This account of the deduction leaves much to be clarified, especially concerning the subjective side.³ Kant does not specify where to find it in the A Deduction, and interested commentators have never been able to reach a consensus about its precise location. On a broadly granted reading, the subjective and objective deductions correspond to sections 2 (A95–114) and 3 (A115–127) of the A Deduction, respectively. As Nathan Bauer has noted, however, this reading became “standard” not so much on the strength of textual evidence as thanks to “the authority of tradition” (Bauer 2010: 436–444). Meanwhile, Bauer’s proposal to reverse the order and locate the subjective deduction in section 3 (Bauer 2010: 448–450) has itself been called into question.⁴

The difficulty of locating the subjective deduction has fundamentally to do with the fact that we cannot be sure about its exact task, since Kant never explains what it takes to account for the possibility of the pure understanding or the faculty of thinking in relation to other faculties. On one reading, the subjective deduction “investigates the ‘*transcendental*’ constitution of the subjective sources’ [A97] that underlie the exercise of this faculty and function as a priori conditions of the possibility of experience” (Allison 2015: 201, my italicization to reflect Allison’s emphasis that the subjective constitution under investigation is transcendental *rather than empirical*). On an opposite reading, it is “an undertaking in [empirical] psychology” intended to establish, against the then-popular Wolffian view, “the independence of the cooperating faculties with regard to their respective, necessary contributions to cognition” (Dyck 2008: 53, 161). Both parties have enough resources to make sense of Kant’s assertion that the subjective sources in question – sense, imagination, and apperception – “make possible even the understanding” (A97, see A115).⁵ It is not obvious which, if either, party is right.⁶

2 For the English translations of Kant’s works quoted in this chapter, I use the Cambridge editions listed in the Bibliography.

3 For helpful overviews of what is at stake, see Carl (1992: 42–54); Allison (2015: 197–202).

4 Schulting (2012: 279n.15); Kemp (2018).

5 Allison (2015: 202–204); Dyck (2008: 162–175).

6 Bauer observes, disapprovingly, that “a concern with the psychological character of the subjective deduction” – be the relevant psychology transcendental or empirical – is a major feature of the standard reading (Bauer 2010: 437). On Bauer’s own reading, the subjective deduction concerns the “mysterious fit” between the understanding and sensibility, explaining “how our seemingly independent capacities for thinking and being given objects can be coordinated” (Bauer 2010: 444, 450). For criticism, see Kemp (2018).

In this chapter, I argue for a literal reading of Kant's account of the subjective and objective deductions as "two sides [*Seiten*]" of a transcendental deduction of the categories, which are intermingled throughout the A Deduction without being confined to a particular section thereof. They share the same ultimate goal, namely to establish the objective validity of the categories. What separates the subjective side from the objective one is the route by which it approaches that goal. It does so by probing the faculty of the understanding, investigating the conditions under which it can cognize something a priori. The categories being part of such conditions, the central task of the subjective deduction is to explain their possibility in a way that also indicates their relation to the objects a priori.⁷

In arguing for this interpretation, I treat the subjective deduction as a significant episode of Kant's Critical thinking about the categories that extended from the early 1770s to around 1790. It contains Kant's most detailed answer to the question about the possible origin of the categories that he formulated in the 1772 letter to Marcus Herz (section 2). The answer is roughly as follows: the categories, as representations, are neither innate nor empirically derived, but *acquired a priori* on the occasion of experience and by the same understanding that contains their germs (section 3). In other words, the categories are generated through a kind of intellectual "epigenesis", as Kant initially put it in the early 1770s and then again in the B Deduction. This account leaves unexplained, however, why precisely such and such pure concepts of the understanding should be generated for the sake of experience. While this observation caused Kant to worry about the hypothetical status of the subjective deduction in 1781, he would, I argue, come to acquiesce in the recognition that the ground of the possibility of the categories is itself inscrutable (section 4).

2 Kant on the Pure Concepts of the Understanding circa 1772

In his 1772 letter to Herz, Kant asks about the possibility of the pure concepts of the understanding as "intellectual representations", i. e. as what "must have their origin in the nature of the soul" and yet "*represent* something, that is, have an object". His initial question asks "how a representation that refers [*be-*

⁷ Dennis Schulting suggests a similar interpretation: the subjective deduction addresses the question of "how the categories are acquired", by deriving them from the faculty of thinking itself (Schulting 2012: 2).

zieht] to an object without being in any way affected by it can be possible". He then asks: "if such intellectual representations depend on our inner activity [Thätigkeit], whence comes the agreement that they are supposed to have with objects – objects that are nevertheless not possibly produced thereby?" (*Briefe* 10: 130 f.). This question is in turn followed by another:

as to how my understanding may, completely *a priori*, form [*bilden*] itself concepts of things [*Dingen*] with which the things [*Sachen*] should necessarily agree, and as to how my understanding may draw up [*entwerfen*] real principles [*Grundsätze*] concerning their possibility, with which experience must be in exact agreement and which nevertheless are independent of experience – this question, of how our faculty of the understanding achieves this agreement with the things themselves is still left in obscurity. (*Briefe* 10: 131, modified translation)

In raising these questions, Kant takes himself to be getting at something that "constitutes the key to the whole secret of metaphysics, hitherto still hidden from itself" (*Briefe* 10: 130). But it is not obvious how the questions relate to one another. It seems that we can tease apart two issues about the pure concepts. One concerns the possibility of their *origination* *a priori*. The other is about their *objectivity* or reference to the objects. We shall see that the two are intricately connected, however, when we examine Kant's remarks, inserted amidst the afore-mentioned questions, about his previous treatment of the same concepts in the Inaugural Dissertation (1770).

In the Dissertation, Kant reports, he was "content to explain the nature of intellectual representations in a merely negative way, namely, to state that they were not modifications of the soul brought about by the object" (*Briefe* 10: 130). To be clear, he did make a positive claim about the source of "the concepts met with in metaphysics" such as possibility, substance, and cause: they are "sought [...] in the very nature of the pure understanding [...] as concepts abstracted from the laws inherent in the mind [*legibus menti insitis*] (by attending to its actions on the occasion of an experience)" (*De mundi* 2: 395). More specifically, provided metaphysics comprises certain intellectual concepts, there is a question as to how they are possible in the first place. Kant saw three alternatives: such concepts are either innate, or abstracted from experience, or acquired *a priori*. He argued for the third account. This, as he put it in a related note, is an explanation "on the basis of epigenesis from the use of the natural laws of reason", which markedly differs from Christian A. Crusius's "on the basis of the *systemate praeformationis* (from subjective *principiis*)" (*Refl* 4275 [1770–1771] 17: 492); see *Refl* 4446 [1772? (1769–1770?)] 17: 554).

The oversight of the Dissertation was not that Kant offered no positive explanation of the possibility of the intellectual concepts at all, but that he failed to

treat this issue in a way that takes their representational character into account. Accordingly, his move in the letter to Herz is not simply to add a new question about the objectivity of those concepts to a previously introduced one about their possible origin. Rather, in raising the concern about objectivity, Kant has effectively transformed the origination question into one about whence we could obtain the intellectual concepts *so that they would necessarily agree with the objects*.⁸ In this way, the objectivity issue is folded into the origination question, wherefore an adequate theory of how the intellectual concepts can arise a priori must also indicate the possibility and nature of their reference to the objects.

With this analysis, it is not surprising that, having formulated various questions in the letter, Kant apparently boils them down to a single one (as is suggested by the phrase “this question”) and takes himself to be “searching [...] for the sources of intellectual knowledge [*Erkenntnis*], without which one cannot determine the nature and limits [*Grentzen*] of metaphysics” (*Briefe* 10: 131f.). Having already ruled out experience as a source of intellectual cognitions, he proceeds to reject two accounts of their non-empirical origin. One is the Hyperphysical Influx Theory attributed to Plato and Nicolas Malebranche, which posits some sort of “intuition of divinity as the primary source of the pure concepts of the understanding”. The other is Crusius’s “Pre-established Intellectual Harmony Theory”, according to which there are “concepts that God implanted in the human soul just as they had to be in order to harmonize with things” (*Briefe* 10: 131). By Kant’s analysis, both theories amount to invoking *deus ex machina*, which is “the greatest absurdity one could hit upon in the determination of the origin and validity of our cognitions” (*Briefe* 10: 131). But he gives no detail about the true alternative.

For clues to how Kant would tackle the newly formulated origination question after the 1772 letter to Herz, we may consider two notes from 1772–1773. In *Refl* 4633, Kant revisits the question:

How can cognitions be generated [*erzeugt*] in us the objects of which have not yet been exhibited [*dargestellt*] to us[?] [...] It is therefore the possibility of every *a priori* cognition which is constant for itself without having been created by the objects themselves that constitutes our first and most important question. (*Refl* 4633 17: 615f.)

In *Refl* 4634, Kant casts about for an answer. The following passage captures his main strategy.

⁸ Commentators disagree about whether the “objects” here are objects of experience. For a helpful overview of different interpretations, see Allison (2015: 98–100).

If certain concepts in us do not contain anything other than that by means of which all experiences are possible on our part, then they can be asserted *a priori* prior to experience and yet with complete validity for everything that may ever come before us. In that case, to be sure, they are not valid of things in general, but yet of everything that can ever be given to us through experience, because they contain conditions by means of which these experiences are possible. (*Refl* 4634 17: 618)

Kant's design, in brief, is to account for the possibility of the pure concepts by limiting them to what *merely* contains certain conditions of all possible experiences. This strategy will also prove pivotal to Kant's subjective (as well as objective) deduction of the categories in the *Critique*.

3 The Subjective Deduction as an Answer to the Origination Question

On my reading, the subjective side of the A Deduction is centrally concerned with explaining how the categories may be generated *a priori*, in a way that at the same time indicates the possibility and nature of its relation to the objects. Thus, it answers the origination question formulated in Kant's 1772 letter to Herz. This picture will manifest itself when we consider what it means for Kant to investigate the grounds that "make possible" the faculty of the (pure) understanding in the larger context of the "Analytic of Concepts", where the deduction is situated.

To begin, note that Kant characterizes the Analytic as an "*analysis of the faculty of understanding*, in order to research the possibility of *a priori* concepts by seeking them only in the understanding as their birthplace and analyzing its pure use in general" (A65f./B90). In a manner that resonates with his previous account of the possibility of the intellectual concepts in biological terms (recall that, in the early 1770s, Kant characterized his own position in terms of "epigenesis"), he continues:

We will therefore pursue the pure concepts into their first germs [*Keime*] and predispositions [*Anlagen*] in the human understanding, where they lie ready, until on the occasion of experience they are finally developed [*entwickelt*] and, by the very same understanding, [...] exhibited [*dargestellt*] in their clarity. (A66/B91, modified translation)

In Kant's theory of biology, *Keime* and *Anlagen* make up the preformed ground that determines the possibility for an organic being to develop in a certain way

under particular material conditions.⁹ In that connection, his claim at A66/B91 seems to be that certain germs and predispositions in the human understanding – something akin to “the laws inherent in the mind” (*De mundi* 2: 395) that he invoked in the Dissertation – constitute the preformed ground that determines the possibility for the pure concepts to be generated a priori on the occasion of experience.

The human understanding at issue here is a spontaneous and discursive faculty of thinking or judging, which is an “action [*Handlung*]” of unifying a multitude of given representations by means of concepts (A68f./B93f.). Now, to Kant, all concepts are acquired. Some, the categories, are acquired originally and a priori (more on this claim in section 4). The understanding is a “pure understanding” precisely because it “contains in itself *a priori*” such concepts, by which alone can it “think an object” for a given manifold of intuition so as to produce a proper cognition (A80/B106). The understanding does not contain them qua innate representations, though. Rather, it contains the innate ground – in the form of “germs” and “predispositions” – that makes it possible for them to be *generated* as representations on the occasion of experience. If categories, like all other concepts, are “grounded on the spontaneity of thinking” (A68/B93), it is because, when a manifold of intuition is given, “[o]nly the spontaneity of our thought requires that this manifold first be [synthesized, namely, be] gone through, taken up, and combined in a certain way in order for a cognition to be made out of it” (A77/B102). More specifically, the pure concepts first “arise [*entspringen*]” as the “actions [*Handlungen*]” by which the understanding brings synthetic unity into a given manifold of intuition so as to give it a “transcendental content [*Inhalt*]”, i. e. to think an object for it in abstraction from the manner in which it may be given (A79/B105).¹⁰

⁹ *VvRM*, 2: 434–436; *BM* 8: 96–99, 101–103.

¹⁰ The A79/B105 passage is notoriously obscure. Three points are key to my reading. First, it is not unusual for Kant to treat the pure concepts as *Handlungen* (*Refl* 4276 [1770–1771] 17: 492; *MAN* 4: 475; A57/B81). Second, *Inhalt* in the present context means a relation (*Beziehung*) to the object (A55/B79). Third, Kant qualifies the *Inhalt* here as “transcendental”, which pertains to intuition *überhaupt* (A79/B105), presumably because he is considering the intuition *in abstraction* from the manner of its givenness. Kant says something to this effect later in the *Critique*: “Thinking is the action of relating given intuitions to an object. If the manner of this intuition is not given in any way, then the object is merely transcendental.” In that case, the concept whereby the understanding brings about the relation is only a “pure category”, through which “only the thought of an object in general is expressed in accordance with different *modi*” (A247/B304).

Inquiring about the possibility of the pure understanding, then, partly comes down to investigating the possibility of the concepts that allow it to “understand something”, completely *a priori*, in a given manifold of intuition (A80/B106).¹¹ In the A Deduction, this investigation is intertwined with the task of establishing the objective validity of such concepts. What grounds the possibility of the categories – insofar as they, as representations, are to originate *a priori* from within the understanding – and what explains their objective validity come down to the same principle, namely that they contain nothing other than the “*a priori* conditions of a possible experience” (A 96). Otherwise, “not only would nothing at all be thought through them, but also they themselves would, without data [*Data*, i. e. what is given through sensibility], not even be able to develop [*entstehen*] in thinking at all” (A96, modified translation). This remark echoes Kant’s proposition at A66/B91, quoted above, that the pure concepts are first developed and clearly exhibited on the occasion of experience and by the same understanding that contains the relevant “germs” and “predispositions”. It is also telling that, in the summary at the end of the A Deduction, Kant returns to the question “whence should we obtain [the categories]?” (A128). These concepts, he concludes, are “*a priori* possible, indeed necessary in relation [*Beziehung*] to experience, only because our cognition has to do with nothing but appearances [as opposed to things in themselves]” (A130, modified translation).

If Kant has thus concluded the A Deduction by bringing together the possibility of the categories and their objective validity or necessary relation to experience, he already made this connection in section 2. There, after expounding the threefold synthesis involving sense, imagination, and apperception (A98 – 110), Kant ends with a segment titled “Provisional explanation of the possibility of the categories as *a priori* cognitions” (A110 – 114). Here, he asserts: “the *categories* that have just been adduced [*angeführten*] are nothing other than the *conditions of thinking in a possible experience*”; to that extent, they are “fundamental concepts for thinking objects in general for the appearances, and they therefore have *a priori* objective validity” (A111). He then adds: “the possibility, indeed even the necessity of these categories rests on the relation that the entire sensibility, and with it also all possible appearances, have to the original [transcendental] apperception.” It would be “entirely vain and futile”, he contends, to “derive these pure concepts of the understanding from experience and to ascribe to them a merely empirical origin”. For they can have objective validity only insofar

¹¹ To Kant, thinking, in which consists the “entire capacity” of the understanding, is “the action of bringing the synthesis of the manifold that is given to it in intuition from elsewhere to the unity of apperception”. The categories serve as the rules for this action (B145).

as they are generated as the concepts in accordance with which alone can we encounter a “thoroughgoing and universal, hence necessary unity of consciousness [...] in the manifold perceptions” and thereby refer the manifold to an object (A111–112).

By this analysis, the subjective side of the A Deduction addresses the origination question that Kant formulated circa 1772: it investigates the possibility for the understanding to generate certain concepts entirely a priori, in a way that also indicates the possibility and nature of their relation to the objects. This generation depends on two grounds. One is the *innate ground* that the understanding contains in itself, now characterized in terms of “germs” and “predispositions”. The other is the trio of “subjective sources of cognition” (sense, imagination, and apperception) that work together, through the threefold synthesis, to occasion the development of those germs and predispositions into *a priori representations*. In this way, the three subjective sources may be said to “make possible even the understanding” (A97). For the understanding would not be able to discharge its essential function of discursive thinking without first being confronted with a manifold of sensible data for which it, being a faculty of spontaneity, would then seek to think an object – by going through, taking up and combining the given manifold, and bringing a necessary unity into the combination by means of concepts.¹²

This analysis also bears on Kant's concern that the subjective deduction, being “something like the search for the cause of a given effect”, may seem like a “hypothesis”, whereby he is merely “expressing an *opinion*”. He promises to show “elsewhere” that “this is not in fact how matters stand” (Axvii). We cannot tell whether, or where, he would make an explicit effort to deliver this promise. But this much is clear: insofar as Kant accounts for the possibility of the categories by presupposing certain “germs” and “predispositions” in the human understanding to be developed into exactly those concepts on the occasion of experience, one cannot help but wonder as to whether or how he may *ascertain* such a presupposition so that it is not a mere hypothesis.

To get some perspective on how Kant might address this concern about the hypothetical appearance of the subjective deduction and how this could be a highly significant matter to him, it will be instructive to examine some of his writings about the deduction of the categories after 1781.

¹² For a detailed analysis of this process, see Allison (2015: 204–242).

4 An Inscrutability Thesis and Kant's “Methodological Skepticism” toward the Subjective Deduction

There is no explicit reference in the 1787 *Critique* to the distinction between subjective and objective deductions of the categories. Does this mean that the subjective deduction simply disappeared after 1781? My analysis below will suggest otherwise. If anything, the most significant new development is that, thanks to what Dieter Henrich calls a “methodological skepticism toward the subjective deduction” (Henrich 1994: 39), Kant would no longer be unsettled by its hypothetical status as he seemed to be in 1781.

To begin, consider Kant's famous footnote about the categories in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786). The note is attached to the proposition “the schema for completeness of a metaphysical system [...] is the table of categories”. It addresses “doubts, which are not directed against this table of pure concepts, but rather against the inferences drawn therefrom to the determination of the limits of the entire faculty of pure reason, and thus all metaphysics”. Kant's basic response is that, given a few “granted propositions”, it “follows” that the use of pure reason can never extend beyond the objects of possible experience, an inference that alone suffices for the determination of the limits of pure reason (*MAN* 4: 474 f.). The first of the granted propositions is

that the table of categories contains all pure concepts of the understanding, just as it contains all formal actions of the understanding in judging, from which they differ only in that, through the concepts of the understanding, an object is thought as *determined* with respect to one or another function of judgment. (*MAN* 4: 475)

In other words, the logical functions of judging “become *pure concepts of the understanding*” when we seek to determine the objects so as to cognize them. Kant takes it to be “incontrovertibly certain *that* [experience] is possible solely through these concepts, and, conversely, that these concepts are capable of meaning and use in no other relation than to objects of experience”. Meanwhile, he believes that he should say more to forestall any need for invoking “a preestablished harmony to explain the surprising agreement of appearances with the laws of the understanding”. No such invocation could, Kant contends, establish “the *objective necessity* that characterizes the pure concepts of the understanding”, a necessity that can come only from “the principles lying *a priori* at the basis of the possibility of *thinking itself*, through which alone the cognition of objects whose appearance is given to us [...] becomes possible” (*MAN* 4: 475 f.).

This last remark, which connects the objective necessity of the categories with the possibility of thinking itself, resonates with my analysis of the subjective deduction in section 3. We can detect a similar connection in §27 of the B Deduction, entitled “Result of this deduction of the concepts of the understanding”. Here, Kant talks about the objective validity of the categories in connection with the question of what “makes these concepts possible” and, much as he did in the early 1770s, employs biological analogies. To be specific, he compares three ways of conceiving the possibility of the categories to make sense of their necessary agreement with experience. The first option is that “experience makes these concepts possible”. That is, they have an “empirical origin”. Given the a priori character of the categories, Kant rejects this theory as “a sort of *generatio aequivoca*”, the generation of one thing from another of an essentially different kind. The second, Kant’s own account, is that the categories are “self-thought” a priori concepts of the understanding – through “as it were a system of the *epigenesis* of pure reason” – as what contain none other than the intellectual grounds of all possible experience. Yet another alternative is “a kind of *preformation-system* of pure reason”, which treats the categories as “subjective predispositions for thinking, implanted in us along with our existence by our author in such a way that their use would agree exactly with the laws of nature along which experience runs”. This is basically what Kant, in the 1772 letter to Herz, referred to as Crusius’s Pre-established Intellectual Harmony Theory. Its main problem, Kant argues, is that one cannot account for the necessity – ergo, the universality or objectivity – that is essential to the categories by appealing to how the thinking subject happens to be “constituted” (B167f.; see *Prol* 4: 319).¹³

It is not immediately clear how forceful this argument is against the preformation theory in favor of the epigenetic account. After all, in the previously cited passage from A66/B91, Kant himself uses the language of preformation – “germs” and “predispositions” – to describe the yet undeveloped manner in which the categories are rooted in the human understanding. He thereby seems to be echoing his claim in the Dissertation that the intellectual concepts are derived from certain laws inherent in the human mind. In the *Critique*, these laws presumably take the form of the logical functions presented in the Table of Judgments (A70/B95). In the B Deduction, Kant asserts that he has established the “origin of the a priori categories in general” through their “coincidence [*Zusammentreffung*]” with those logical functions (B159). But he also admits to have no reason (*Grund*) for “why we have precisely these and no other functions for

13 I explicate Kant’s epigenetic account of the categories in Lu-Adler (2018).

judgment” and, ergo, no reason for why our understanding can bring synthetic unity to a given manifold of intuition “through precisely this kind and number” of categories (B145f.). Does Kant take it as a brute fact, then, that our understanding is by its nature just so constituted – preformed with certain germs and predispositions – that it operates precisely in accordance with such and such logical functions or categories? In that case, how is he to ascertain all this about the human understanding? And in what sense would his presupposition of the said constitution introduce any less contingency than Crusius’s account allegedly did into the agreement between the categories and experience?

Kant would be directly confronted with such questions, as posed by Salomon Maimon. In a letter to Herz in 1789, Kant summarizes Maimon’s challenge as follows.

How do I explain the possibility of agreement between a priori intuitions and my a priori concepts, if each has its specifically different origin [...]. And vice versa, how can I prescribe, for example, the law of causality to nature, that is, to objects themselves, by means of my category (*whose possibility in itself is only problematic*). Finally, how can I even prove the necessity of these functions of the understanding *whose existence is again merely a fact*, since that necessity has to be presupposed if we are to subject things, however conceived, to those functions. (*Briefe* 11: 50, my italicizations; see 11: 15–17)

Kant’s response is two-fold. Stressing the distinction between things in themselves and appearances, he repeats that the specific a priori intuitions and concepts are necessary and must agree with each other insofar as we are to have empirical cognitions of the objects (*Briefe* 11: 51). Meanwhile, he submits an *inscrutability thesis* as to why our sensibility and understanding have exactly such and such forms and why the two agree in the making of experience.

But it is utterly impossible for us to explain further how such a sensible intuition (as space and time), the form of our sensibility, or such functions of the understanding as what logic develops [*entwickelt*] from it are themselves possible, or how it happens that one form harmonizes with the other into a possible one [*zu einem möglichen*]. (*Briefe* 11: 51, modified translation)

Lacking the said explanations does not seem to trouble Kant. He finds it “entirely unnecessary” to offer them in the first place. For his purpose, he insists, it suffices to demonstrate that experience is possible for us only under the sensible and intellectual conditions as he has presented them in the *Critique*. If we do want to investigate the “origin” of our sensibility and understanding as two faculties that “harmonize to form empirical cognition”, Kant suggests that we should be content with what he takes to be the gist of Leibniz’s theory of pre-established harmony between sense and intellect. That is, due to the limits of

human reason, we can name no “further ground [*Grund*] than our divine creator” for the possibility of those faculties. Nevertheless, “once they are given”, we can fully explain their objective validity (*Briefe* 11: 51f., modified translation).

Kant makes similar claims in *On a Discovery Whereby Any New Critique of Pure Reason Is to Be Made Superfluous by an Older One* (1790). Here, he clarifies his account of the possibility of the categories while responding to Johann A. Eberhard's remarks about pure intuitions. According to Eberhard, Kant's account of the latter is either absurd or unoriginal: he either treats space and time “as themselves original, not created in their founding [*Gründung*]”, in which case he “conceives a *qualitas occulta*”, or sees them as implanted, a view already “wholly or partially contained in the Leibnizian theory” (*Entdeckung* 8: 221, modified translation). Kant replies:

The *Critique* admits absolutely no implanted or inborn *representations*. One and all, whether they belong to intuition or to concepts of the understanding, it considers them as *acquired*. But there is also an original acquisition [...] and thus of that which previously did not yet exist at all, and so did not belong to anything prior to this act [*Handlung*]. [...] [O]ur cognitive faculty [does not get the pure intuitions or pure concepts] from objects as given therein in-themselves, rather it brings them about, *a priori*, out of itself. There must indeed be a ground for it in the subject, [...] and this ground at least is *innate* [*angeboren*]. (*Entdeckung* 8: 221f.)

Kant specifies what he means by “the ground of the possibility of a pure sensory intuition” as follows. The original acquisition of the pure intuition of space, for instance, depends on two conditions. First, there must be an innate ground in us, namely the “mere receptivity” of our sensibility. Second, “impressions would always be required in order to determine the cognitive faculty to the representation of an object (which is always a specific act) in the first place. Thus arises the formal *intuition* called space”. As for the pure concepts of the understanding, “their *acquisitio* [...] is no less *originaria* and presupposes nothing innate save the subjective conditions of the spontaneity of thought” (*Entdeckung* 8: 222f.). This remark echoes my analysis in section 3, according to which the possibility of the pure concepts, insofar as they are to arise as representations *a priori*, presupposes a certain innate ground in the human understanding. In fact, this ground not only “makes it possible that these representations can arise in this and no other manner”, but also makes it intelligible that they “be related to objects which are not yet given” (*Entdeckung* 8: 221).

Kant again acknowledges that we can have no insight into the supposed ground itself or, for that matter, the ground of the harmony between sensibility and the understanding that makes experience possible.

But we could still provide no reason [*Grund*] why we have precisely such a mode of sensibility and an understanding of such a nature, that by their combination experience becomes possible; nor yet, why, as otherwise fully heterogeneous sources of cognition, they always conform so well to the possibility of empirical cognition in general[.] (*Entdeckung* 8: 249f.)

If “Leibniz termed the ground [*Grund*] of this agreement [...] a *pre-established harmony*”, Kant adds, he thereby neither explained nor intended to explain the agreement in question (*Entdeckung* 8: 250).

[Leibniz] was merely indicating that we would have to suppose thereby a certain purposiveness in the arrangement of the supreme cause, of ourselves as well as of all things outside us; and this indeed as *something already lodged in creation* (predetermined), albeit a pre-determination [...] only of the mental powers in us, sensibility and understanding, each in its own way for the other. (*Entdeckung* 8: 250, my italicization)

In this way, the agreement between our sensibility and understanding – as well as the specific constitution of each faculty – “for us at least is contingent, and comprehensible only through an intelligent world-cause” (*Entdeckung* 8: 250). The appeal to pre-established harmony affords us with no insight into what makes that agreement possible. Nor, again, does Kant find it necessary for us to obtain any such insight. As he puts it in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), if the accord between our sensibility and understanding is “inexplicable for us insofar as it is precisely thus and not otherwise” and yet we are so curious as to suspect that there is something supersensible in which its “ultimate ground” might be encountered, it is neither possible nor necessary for us to know this ground if the said accord is “merely a matter of the formal purposiveness of our *a priori* representations” (*KU* 5: 365; see 363f., on the relevant sense of purposiveness).

With this overview of some of Kant’s post-1781 remarks about the possibility of the categories, we can now return to the subjective side of the A Deduction. As I explained in section 3, it determines the possibility of pure understanding by investigating how the categories may *arise as representations* a priori through the threefold synthesis. This corresponds to the epigenetic account of the possibility of the categories in the B Deduction. The intellectual epigenesis at issue, much like its biological counterpart, presupposes a kind of preformation in the human understanding. The relevant preformation, which Kant figuratively describes in terms of *Keime* and *Anlagen* in both editions of the *Analytic of Concepts*, refers to the logical functions of thinking represented by the Table of Judgments. This preformation seems to be what Kant has in mind while invoking an innate ground in the controversy with Eberhard to account for the possibility of

the categories as originally acquired representations that can nevertheless be related to the objects.

There are two takeaways from this reading. First, the subjective deduction did not entirely disappear after 1781, even though Kant would no longer refer to it as such. In particular, Kant would continue to hold the following position: provided the categories first arise through a kind of intellectual epigenesis, as none other than the self-thought conditions of all possible experience on the part of the understanding, it follows that they are valid for and only for the objects of experience. Indeed, from Kant's perspective, no alternative account of the possibility of such concepts could make intelligible their necessary agreement with the objects. This connection between the original acquisition of the categories and their objective validity was already manifest in how Kant, in his 1772 letter to Herz, framed the questions that supposedly held the key to the whole secret of metaphysics, and it continued to figure in his subsequent deductions of the categories. At one point in both editions of the *Critique*, Kant captures the connection with this statement:

the peculiar thing about transcendental philosophy is this: that in addition to the rule [...] given in the pure concept of the understanding, it can at the same time [*zugleich*] indicate [*anzeigen*] *a priori* the case to which the rules ought to be applied. [...] [I]t deals with concepts that are to be related to their objects *a priori*. (A135/B174–175)

It makes sense, then, that Kant should characterize the subjective and objective deductions as two “sides” of the A Deduction. They are two ways of approaching the same end-goal of the deduction of the categories, namely establishing their objective validity. The difference is that, while the objective deduction seeks to reach the goal from the side of the object, the subjective one does so by probing the faculty of pure understanding, a probe that centers on a query about the possibility of the categories. The latter deduction, in showing how these concepts may arise entirely *a priori*, as rules of synthesis, from within the understanding in consortium with some other subjective conditions, *at the same time indicates* what relation they can have to the objects. As Kant reportedly puts it in the *Metaphysik L₂* (c.1790–1791),

The explanation of the possibility of pure concepts of the understanding we call *deduction*. The deduction is actually the answer to the question, what is right <*quid juris*>? The deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding is a proof of the validity of the pure concepts of the understanding. (*Met-L2* 28: 548)

If the first sentence of this passage roughly corresponds to what I have interpreted as the central task of the subjective deduction, then Kant's suggestion is that

this deduction, while showing how the categories may be generated a priori on the occasion of experience, thereby also points to their objective validity.

The second takeaway from my reading concerns Kant's methodology. Recall that, in the A Preface, Kant raised the concern that the subjective deduction, being like an investigation of the cause for a given effect, may seem to give us no more than a "hypothesis". He promised to show that such was not in fact how the matter stood. It was not clear before, nor is it definitively certain now, whether he ever managed to deliver this promise or what it would mean for him to do so. My analysis has nonetheless indicated a way to make sense of Kant's initial concern and how he might have come to acquiesce in it, so to speak, out of what Henrich calls his "methodological skepticism".

To elaborate, here is one way to characterize the "effect" that Kant sought to explain through the subjective deduction, which resembles how, back in the early 1770s, he framed the questions key to his Critical take on metaphysics: that there are such and such concepts by which the understanding can cognize the objects a priori and in virtue of which the understanding is a faculty of pure thinking. On Kant's account (as I explicated it in section 3), the cause or reason (*Ursache*) for this effect has two components. One is an innate, preformed ground in the human understanding, which corresponds to the logical functions presented in the Table of Judgments. The other is the trio of subjective sources – sense, imagination, and apperception – making it possible for the same understanding, as a faculty of spontaneity, to develop those functions into pure representations for the first time.

If, in the *Metaphysical Foundations*, Kant suggested that this a priori generation of the categories could be somehow "granted" without ruling out that what was granted might in turn require an explanation, in subsequent writings he would explicitly reject both the possibility and the need to provide any such explanation due to the limits of human reason. Were one to press Kant for further reasons as to why the understanding has precisely such pure concepts as corresponding to the logical functions of judgment or why these concepts necessarily harmonize with our senses to make experience possible, he might say something along the lines of his comments about the "common but to us unknown root" from which sensibility and the understanding, as two "comparatively fundamental powers" of human cognition, "may perhaps arise". Even if one must seek the absolutely fundamental power that unifies the two faculties in a single radical "for the benefit of reason", that is, in order to "bring systematic unity into cognition", one cannot assert that this power is to be actually found. Rather, the unity of reason signified by the idea of such a power is "merely hypothetical" (A15/B29; A649f./B677f.). This "renunciation of an answer" to the question of what fundamentally unifies sensibility and the understanding, as Henrich puts

it, marks a crucial methodological move on Kant's part. For, unless we acknowledge that what is declared unknown is also *unknowable* or "entirely closed to us", reason would never be brought into harmony with itself but would always be tempted to venture into a realm that is "in principle inaccessible", agitating to gain insights that it can never have (Henrich 1994: 32f.).

In similar terms, if Kant's subjective deduction concerns not just "the structure of subjectivity" – *videre licet* that the understanding is in possession of certain concepts by means of which it can cognize objects a priori – but "the conditions of the possibility of such a structure" (Henrich 1994: 32), there is indeed something hypothetical about it. After all, we cannot penetrate the deepest underpinnings of our cognitive faculties so as to verify or, for that matter, falsify Kant's claim about the preformation of human understanding that, together with some other subjective sources, makes it possible for the same understanding to bring about those concepts on the occasion of experience. If Kant was somewhat concerned about this situation in his initial description of the subjective deduction, he would come to see it as an opportunity to bring home the *inscrutability thesis* that I mentioned earlier or, in Henrich's terms, a *methodological skepticism* about our ability to probe any further, in search of deeper insights about our cognitive faculties, than the subjective deduction has already done.

5 Conclusion

As it is rightly emphasized in Kemp (2018), a positive reading of the subjective deduction must satisfy three desiderata from the A Preface: it (1) plausibly locates this deduction in the text, (2) explains why Kant finds it important and yet dispensable, and (3) makes sense of his worry about its hypothetical appearance. To meet these conditions, I add, the reading must (4) begin with a reasonable interpretation of the chief task of the subjective deduction, in a way that takes seriously Kant's viewing it as one of the two sides of a transcendental deduction of the categories. My analysis in this chapter focuses on (1), (3), and (4). Let me summarize my findings, before ending with a brief note about (2).

The subjective deduction investigates the possibility of pure thinking through explaining *how the understanding may obtain the categories, originally and a priori* albeit only on the occasion of experience, by developing them from the "germs" and "predispositions" that it contains within itself. Kant carries out this task by showing how the categories may take shape through a threefold synthesis that involves three subjective sources of cognition, namely sense, imagination, and apperception, which sources therefore "make possible even

the understanding". This task is not restricted to a single section of the text. Rather, the two sides of the A Deduction seem to intertwine. Most likely, this arrangement is not accidental, but due to the fact that Kant considers the possibility of the categories only *with a view to establishing their objective validity*, a goal common to both sides of the A Deduction.

This approach is not unique to the A Deduction. It was already reflected in how Kant, in the early 1770s, introduced the questions that represented the Critical turn of his approach to metaphysics. Especially in his 1772 letter to Herz, as I observed in section 2, Kant framed the question about the possibility or *origination* of the intellectual concepts in view of their being *a priori representations of the objects*, wherefore he could not address the former without at the same time indicating how to account for the latter. We can detect a similar approach, as I argued in section 4, in Kant's post-1781 accounts of the categories, most notably in §27 of the B Deduction.

Given how, in most of the texts studied here, Kant positions his own account of the *a priori* origination of the categories vis-à-vis the empiricist alternative and such problematic versions of innatism as Crusius's, it makes sense that he, as I quoted him in section 1, takes the subjective deduction to be "of great importance" for his overall project of gauging the faculty of the understanding. But how can Kant be so sure that, were the subjective deduction not entirely convincing, the objective deduction could still obtain "full strength" (Axvii, referring to A92f. as "sufficient by itself" in this regard)? It may even seem that my reading, by making such a close connection between the *a priori* origination of the categories and their objective validity, has only made it harder to substantiate that claim. To respond, let me close with the following remarks.

Recall that, on my reading, the subjective and objective deductions are two *sides* of the A Deduction. This deduction, qua "transcendental", is a deduction of the categories regarding "their entitlement" and an explanation of how they "can relate to objects *a priori*" (A85/B117).¹⁴ So, the final goal of both sides thereof should be the same, namely to establish the objective validity of the categories. The subjective and objective deductions are only two distinct approaches to this goal. The subjective deduction begins by probing the understanding with respect to its capacity for pure thinking, the objective one by considering how the *object* of experience is possible. In the first case, the objective validity of the categories supposedly follows from how they can possibly arise *a priori* in the first

¹⁴ At the end of section 3 of the A Deduction, Kant states that the task of the entire transcendental deduction involves determining the "origin" as well as the "truth", i.e. the objective reference, of the categories (A128).

place: insofar as the understanding must originally bring them about as none other than the self-thought a priori conditions for determining a given manifold of intuition in order to produce experience, those concepts can relate to the objects of possible experience and to them alone. This suggests that Kant's account of the possibility of the categories, *if correct, suffices* to indicate their relation to objects a priori. The latter may nevertheless be established without the former. To the contrary, Kant can carry out the objective deduction regardless of whether he has convincingly explained the a priori origination of the categories. For the sole task of the objective deduction is to show that “nothing is possible as *object of experience*” without the presupposition of such concepts, wherefore they are objectively valid (A93/B126).

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