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Pure Understanding, the Categories, and Kant's Critique of Wolff*

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The importance of the pure concepts of the understanding (i.e. the categories) within Kant's system of philosophy is undeniable.¹ They provide the basis not only for our synthetic *a priori* cognition of nature articulated in the Analytic of Principles of the first *Critique* and the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* but also for the claims about the supersensible that Kant argues are proper objects of rational belief in all three *Critiques*, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, and the essays "On the old saying that it may be good in theory but doesn't work in practice" and "What Real Progress has Metaphysics made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff".

As I hope to make clear in this essay, the categories are also an essential part of Kant's critique of Christian Wolff, whose system of philosophy dominated German philosophy in the eighteenth-century.² In particular, I shall argue that Kant's development of the categories (as well as their forerunners in the 1770 *Inaugural Dissertation*) represents a decisive break with the Wolffian conception of the understanding and that this break is central to understanding the task of the Transcendental Analytic. However, this break is not merely that Kant affirms while Wolff and his followers deny a sharp distinction between sensibility and the understanding, which is the aspect of Kant's rejection of Wolff that scholars have frequently noted.³ Rather, this break concerns differences in their views about the understanding itself. For while Wolff conceives of the understanding as a mental capacity to extract and make distinct content already present in the senses, Kant conceives of the understanding in its "real use" as a capacity to produce purely intellectual content.

In the *Inaugural Dissertation*, then, Kant affirms what he will subsequently call the spontaneity of the understanding, and it is this aspect of his break with Wolff that I wish to focus on in this essay.⁴ Appreciating this aspect of Kant's break with Wolff is not merely relevant to a proper understanding of the *Inaugural Dissertation*, however, but also, as I hope to show, for Kant's views in the *Critique*. For the intellectual concepts whose existence Kant affirms in the *Inaugural Dissertation* are the forerunners to the pure concepts of the understanding he introduces in the *Critique*, and Kant's comments about the nature of these concepts have tended to suggest one of two mutually inconsistent readings. The first, which I shall call the *intellectualist reading*, is that the categories are

*When available, I have used translations from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, in some cases with slight modifications. The remaining translations are entirely my own with the exception of those from the *Psychologia empirica*, which were completed with the assistance of Gerard Keiser.

¹ Throughout this essay, I shall use the terms "pure concepts of the understanding" and "categories" as synonyms. For an intriguing argument against this practice, see de Boer, forthcoming.

² For a general discussion of this dominance, see Beck 1969: 276-305. The most extensive discussion of Wolff's influence during the early part of this period is still Ludovici 1737.

³ See, e.g., Wolff 1963: 15f. and Laywin 1993: 104f.

⁴ Cf. A51/B75

products of the understanding alone that introduce a purely intellectual content into what is given both in sense and in *a priori* intuition.⁵ The second, which I shall call the *sensibilist reading*, is that while in part products of the understanding, it is not the understanding but *a priori* intuition that supplies the *content* of the categories and that this content is *constitutive* of their being categories.⁶ To take but one example, Kant claims that his “analysis of the entirety of our *a priori* cognition into the elements of the pure cognition of the understanding” will show that the concepts of the understanding “belong not to intuition and to sensibility, but rather to thinking and understanding” but also that it is only the “*a priori* manifold of sensibility” whose existence has been established by the Transcendental Aesthetic that “provide[s] the pure concepts of the understanding with a matter, without which they would be without any content [and] completely empty” (A65/B89 and A77/B102).

Comments of this latter sort thus represent a serious challenge to the intellectualist reading of the categories, and it is here that I believe a more detailed understanding of the nature of Kant’s break with Wolff is especially helpful. For the account of the understanding Kant rejects in the *Inaugural Dissertation* has much in common with the account of the understanding’s role in relation to the categories suggested by passages such as A77/B102, and the account of the understanding he endorses in the *Inaugural Dissertation* has much in common with the account of the understanding’s role in relation to the categories suggested by passages such as A65/B89. Moreover, once the nature of Kant’s break with Wolff in the *Inaugural Dissertation* is made clear, it is easy to see that much of Kant’s subsequent terminology in the *Critique* serves to emphasize this break. For when Wolff and his followers deny the possibility of purely intellectual concepts, they do so by denying the possibility of what they call a “pure understanding”; and the pure understanding is, of course, precisely what Kant proposes to analyze in the Transcendental Analytic.⁷ Moreover, when Kant describes the understanding as the “ability to bring forth representations itself” and then glosses this ability as the “**spontaneity** of cognition”, he is asserting of the understanding precisely what Wolff and his followers deny when they assert that there can be no pure understanding (A51/B75).

The structure of this essay is as follows. In section one, I elaborate on the details of the Wolffian account of the understanding and, especially, the Wolffian denial of a pure understanding. While my focus is on Wolff, I also briefly discuss these views as they are found in Gottsched, Baumgarten, and Meier. In section two, I then consider the two main phases of the pre-critical Kant’s rejection of the Wolffian account, beginning in his 1762 essay *On the False Subtlety of the Four Syllogistic Figures*,

⁵ See Kemp Smith 1918: lil, 182f., and 195f.; Paton 1936 (vol.1): 259; Wolff 1963, 60, 71, 130, and 177; Guyer 1987, 97-100; Guyer 2010, 121 and 125-129; and Tolley 2012. Each attributes a purely intellectual origin to the categories, although some would not endorse the further claim that the categories are purely intellectual concepts, as opposed to, say, identical to what Kant calls the “functions of judgment”.

⁶ See Allison 2004, Waxman 2005, and Longuenesse 2006. Allison (2004, 156) holds that “a reference to sensible intuition (though not to a particular type thereof) is an *essential component* of the *very concept of a category* for Kant, whereas it is completely alien to the concept of a logical function” (my emphasis); Waxman (2005, 28) holds that the “manifold [of sense] and its synthesis have to be added to the logical functions [of judgment] before these concepts [i.e. the pure concepts of the understanding] can arise” and that these concepts cannot “be deprived of their relation to the manifold and its synthesis without thereby [...] reverting to their purely logical, nonobjective character as forms of judgment”; and Longuenesse (2006, 151) holds that “all that remains” of the categories absent pure intuition are the logical functions of judgment and that they “become categories [...] only when the understanding’s capacity to judge is applied to sensible manifolds”. See also Waxman 2008: 181-84 and Greenberg 2001: 138.

⁷ Cf. A65/B90.

and the relationship between this rejection and the questions announced in the famous 1772 Herz letter. Together, these sections constitute an indirect defense of an intellectualist reading of the categories. In section three, I turn to a direct defense of this reading by considering Kant's comments about the understanding and the categories in the *Critique*. In the first part of that section, I elaborate on the ways in which the terminology of the *Critique* suggests that Kant is continuing to position himself against the Wolffian denial of a pure understanding that he targeted in the *Inaugural Dissertation*. In the remainder of that section and against the background of the previous two, I discuss the passages that support the intellectualist reading and attempt to show how the many passages that appear to support a sensiblist reading can be made consistent with it.

1. The Wolffian Account of the Understanding

Wolff and his followers discuss the understanding in their writings on logic, empirical psychology, and rational psychology. At the most basic level, they conceive of the understanding as one of the mind's many cognitive capacities, all of which are grounded in its fundamental power of representation.⁸ These capacities are examined in detail in empirical psychology, and one of the main goals of rational psychology is to show how they are all grounded in the mind's power of representation. For its part, the subject matter of logic is continuous with empirical and rational psychology insofar as logic examines our mental capacities, but it is also separate from both insofar as its focus is on the use of these capacities to cognize truth and not on them merely as such.⁹

In their various discussions of the understanding, Wolff and his followers consistently characterize it as the capacity to distinctly represent the possible.¹⁰ To unpack this characterization, however, we must first say something about what Wolff means by "distinctness" as well as the cognate term "clarity."¹¹ Both are properties of thoughts, and both are defined in terms of the relationship between a thought and its object. A thought, which Wolff defines as an "alteration" or "effect" of the mind of which we are conscious, is clear just in case it allows us to recognize its object and distinguish our thought of it from thoughts of other objects and is otherwise obscure.¹² Thus, I can

⁸ For a discussion of this as well as the difference between a capacity (*Vermögen*) and a power (*Kraft*) in Wolff's psychology, see Dyck 2014: 32-4.

⁹ See, for example, Wolff's *Discurses praeliminaris de philosophia in genere*, §88-91. Empirical and rational psychology are two of the five traditional divisions of metaphysics in the Wolffian tradition, the other three being ontology, cosmology, and natural theology.

¹⁰ For Wolff's characterization, see his *Vernüfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (hereafter *Deutsche Metaphysik*), §277. Wolff sometimes describes the understanding as merely the capacity to think the possible, but in the *Deutsche Metaphysik*, §284 and the subsequent *Der vernüfftigen Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt, anderer Theil, bestehend aus ausführlichen Anmerkungen*, §90 he makes clear that this broader meaning is not the proper one. Wolff's *Psychologia empirica*, §275 gives a slightly different definition: "Facultas res distinct repraesentandi dicitur *Intellectus*". What is most important for our purposes, however, is that the understanding (*Verstand* or *Intellectus*) is associated with distinct cognition. Gottsched *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit* vol. 1, §1 and §915; Meier *Metaphysik* §626; and Baumgarten *Metaphysica*, §624 all follow Wolff in this regard.

¹¹ As Wolff makes clear in the Preface to the *Vernüfftige Gedanken von den Kräften des menschlichen Verstandes und Ihrem Gebrauch in Erkänntnis der Wahrheit* (hereafter, *Deutsche Logik*), these distinctions are influenced heavily by Leibniz's "Meditationes de Cognitione, Veritate et Ideis".

¹² *Deutsche Logik* 1.2 and *Deutsche Metaphysik* §194. I cite the *Deutsche Logik* by chapter and section number.

have a thought of an object simply by looking at it or recalling it in memory, but for my thought of it to be clear I must also be able to distinguish it from other objects, i.e. to identify it as a cup, or a book, or my cat. As Wolff puts it, thoughts are clear when “we know very well what we think and can distinguish them [i.e. the thoughts in question] from others”.¹³ More generally, he writes that clarity arises through the “observation of a difference in what is manifold” while obscurity arises though the lack of such observation.¹⁴

Similarly, a thought is distinct just in case it contains clear representations of the parts of its object in virtue of which it is that object and no other. Wolff introduces distinctness by observing that we are sometimes able to “determine the difference in what [i.e. the object] we think and when prompted can thus convey it to others”.¹⁵ As becomes apparent in Wolff’s example, the “difference” in question is anything that distinguishes the object of the thought from some other objects. Thus, “when I think of a triangle and a square, I can determine the difference of the triangle and square, and when someone asks me in virtue of what I distinguish these figures from each other and from all others, I can name this difference.”¹⁶ As Wolff puts it, thoughts “always encompass a plurality” and distinctness arises “when our thoughts are clear with respect to their parts or the manifold which is to be encountered in them”.¹⁷

When Wolff and his followers characterize the understanding as the capacity to distinctly represent the possible, then, the feature of our mental landscape they mean to pick out is our ability to discriminate objects or kinds of objects according to criteria that we ourselves recognize and, at least in principle, can articulate. And, as Wolff emphasizes, this somewhat technical conception of the understanding is grounded in a garden variety colloquial one:

Thus when a person can tell us nothing about a thing, despite being able to imagine it, that is, when he has no distinctness in his thoughts (§206), we generally say that he has no *understanding of it* or he does not *understand* it; whereas when he can tell us what parts of the thing he represents, we say that he has an *understanding of it* or that he understands it. At times we quite explicitly present distinctness as the reason someone has not understood something, such as when we say, “How can he say that? He understands nothing about it”, even though we know that he perceives the thing and can imagine it. (*Deutsche Metaphysik* §277, emphasis in original)

Thus, to understand something is not merely to correctly categorize it, either as a particular or a kind, but to do so with an awareness of what makes the categorization correct; and having this awareness is simply what it means to have a distinct concept of whatever one has categorized. Moreover, just as a distinct representation is the product of the understanding, an indistinct representation, whether clear or obscure, is the product of the lower cognitive capacities of perception (*Wahrnehmung*) and imagination (*Einbildungskraft*).

¹³ *Deutsche Metaphysik* §198.

¹⁴ *Deutsche Metaphysik*, §201.

¹⁵ *Deutsche Metaphysik*, §206.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Deutsche Metaphysik* §207.

Importantly, however, Wolff also believes it is impossible for human beings to make their concepts completely distinct and, hence, that these concepts will always have some connection to perception and imagination. And while it is perhaps not surprising that this would be true of our concepts of things that are uncontroversially encountered only in experience, it is also true of more abstract concepts, such as our concepts of numbers. For these concepts according to Wolff are all reducible to our concept of unity (*Einheit, Unitas*), and abstract though it may be, Wolff holds that this concept is still confused.¹⁸ Moreover, the terminology in which Wolff chooses to express this point is that of purity and impurity. In the *Deutsche Metaphysik*, for example, he writes that the understanding is “pure” when it is “separated from the senses and imagination” and impure when it is “still connected” to them or, what is the same, when “indistinctness and obscurity are still to be found in our cognition”.¹⁹ Similarly, in the *Psychologia Empirica* he writes that the understanding is “said to be pure if no sort of confused and no sort of obscure thing is mixed into the concept of the object which it has” and impure “if there are in the concept of the object things that are perceived confusedly or completely obscurely”.²⁰ And in both, he asserts quite clearly that our understanding is “never completely pure”.²¹

Moreover, the nature of Wolff’s rejection of the possibility of a pure understanding makes clear that even our fundamental ontological concepts are ineluctably tied to sense and imagination. For when Wolff discusses our concepts of numbers in the *Psychologia Empirica*, he does so because he believes these concepts are the closest approximation we as human beings have to pure concepts. Thus, he writes that algebraic formulae “serve to illustrate the pure understanding” but that they do so despite the fact that “the notions corresponding to them are not completely of the sort that the pure understanding requires”.²² If even these concepts are ineluctably connected to sense and imagination, so Wolff’s implicit conclusion in the *Psychologia Empirica* goes, our fundamental ontological concepts can fare no better.²³ This latter point emerges more clearly in Wolff’s discussion of concept acquisition in the *Deutsche Logik* and *Philosophia rationalis, sive Logica*, where he lists “reflection, abstraction and arbitrary determination” as the three ways in which concepts are formed. Thus, although it might be thought to invalidate his Leibnizian credentials, Wolff endorses a form of concept empiricism, albeit only with respect to the origin of the content of our ideas not their causal origin.²⁴

¹⁸ In §314 of his *Psychologia Empirica*, for example, he writes, “In the doctrine of numbers we suppose no primitive notion, except that of unity, and so there is no need for any confused concepts [*notio*] to be supposed, *except that of unity*” (my emphasis).

¹⁹ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* §282. Cf. *Psychologia Empirica*, §313.

²⁰ Wolff, *Psychologia Empirica*, §313.

²¹ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* §284. Cf. *Psychologia Empirica* §315 the heading of which is “why our understanding is never completely pure”.

²² Wolff, *Psychologia Empirica*, §313.

²³ For further discussion, see Kuehn 1997: 229-50 and Dyck 2011. I thus find my self in disagreement with Dyck (2011, 478f.) who finds in Wolff’s *Ontologia* an alternative account of the acquisition that applies exclusively to ontological concepts. While a complete examination of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, it does not appear to me that Wolff’s discussion of the linguistic origin of these concepts is incompatible with the three-fold account in the *Deutsche Logik* and *Philosophia rationalis, sive Logica*. Moreover, even if it were to be, it does not seem to me that Wolff is presenting an alternative account of concept acquisition in the passages Dyck cites.

²⁴ Wolff’s commitment to pre-established harmony as the most likely account of the mind-body relation precludes his being an empiricist with respect to the causal origin of our ideas but not with respect to the content of those ideas

While space prevents me from tracing these views among Wolff's many followers, they generally agree with him on these issues. In his 1755 *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*, the most successful textbook of Wolffian philosophy ever printed in Germany, Gottsched writes, "God alone has an understanding that is completely pure".²⁵ Baumgarten's 1739 *Metaphysica*, the fourth edition of which served as the basis for Kant's own metaphysics lectures, adopts the language of purity to describe the degree to which our understanding is distinct.²⁶ And in the 1757 volume of Meier's *Metaphysik* on empirical psychology, he refers to the "famous question" of whether the "human understanding can be a pure understanding", which he answers in the negative, and argues that all of our distinct cognition is "in part sensible".²⁷

2. Kant's Rejection of the Wolffian Account

It is against these background assumptions about the human understanding and the terminology used to describe it that Kant writes the *Inaugural Dissertation*. Now that these assumptions have been made explicit, we are in a position to appreciate a point that to my knowledge has been entirely overlooked by previous commentators, namely that Kant's account of the "real use" of the understanding in the *Inaugural Dissertation* is an overt and fundamental rejection of the Wolffian denial of a pure understanding. Moreover, as I will suggest at the close of this section, it is Kant's affirmation of the spontaneity of the understanding, its ability to be a source of purely intellectual concepts, that forces him to address the array of questions that lead ultimately to the main problematic of the *Transcendental Analytic*: the task of explaining that and how the pure concepts of the understanding apply to objects given in intuition.

Since Kant's discussion of the real use of the understanding itself occurs against the background of an earlier phase of his break with Wolff, however, it will be helpful to begin our discussion with a brief account of this earlier phase. In his 1762 essay *On the False Subtlety of the Four Syllogistic Figures*, Kant tacitly endorses some aspects of the Wolffian account of the understanding while rejecting others. In particular, he agrees with Wolff and his followers that the understanding alone imparts distinctness to representations, but he also attempts to ground this capacity in the more general capacity to judge. The view Kant endorses in the *False Subtlety* is thus that the understanding is fundamentally a capacity to judge and that that Wolffian tradition errs in holding that the

themselves. On the question of Leibniz's innatism as it was understood throughout most of the eighteenth-century, see Tonelli 1974. For our purposes, the most important part of Tonelli's analysis is that the more sophisticated psychological account of the origin of ideas found in the *Nouveaux Essais* did not gain much traction after its first publication in Raspe's 1765 edition of Leibniz's works and that the accounts of the origin of ideas in the works known to Wolff and his followers emphasized the *causal* origin of our ideas rather than the origin of their content. From Wolff's early eighteenth-century perspective, then, and even well into the second half of the century, there would have been no obvious conflict between being an Leibnizian and endorsing the form of concept empiricism I attribute to Wolff. That Wolff frequently decried the suggestion that he was a mere follower of Leibniz, is only further reason to conclude that his relation to Leibniz provides no evidence against the view I attribute to him here.

²⁵ Gottsched, *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*, §918. Gottsched's book went through seven separate editions before his death in 1766, far more than either Baumgarten's or Meier's.

²⁶ Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, §§634-7.

²⁷ Meier, *Metaphysik*, §631 and §526.

understanding is fundamentally capacity to render concepts distinct since this latter capacity is, unbeknownst to them, simply derivative of the former.

Kant's justification for this view is compelling. My concept is distinct just in case I am conscious of the marks in virtue of which it represents its object. Thus, my concept of body is distinct if it includes a clear representation—i.e. one that I recognize as a representation of its object—of impenetrability, which is one of the characteristics in virtue of which something is a body. But this concept, Kant insists, is made possible through the thought “bodies are impenetrable”, which is simply a judgment about body. So the act of making a distinct concept is just the act of judging. As Kant is careful to emphasize, however, this does not mean that concept and judgment are identical; rather, the judgment is the “action by means of which the distinct concept is made real, because the representation that arises from this action is distinct” (2:58, translation modified).

Kant gives a similar argument for complete concepts, which he following the tradition understands as concepts with a particularly high degree of distinctness, in particular ones in which I have a distinct (not merely a clear) representation of the marks in virtue of which a given distinct concept is distinct.²⁸ The possibility of such concepts, according to Kant, depends on the syllogism (*Vernunftschluß*). If my concept of body is distinct and my concept of impenetrability, which is a part of the former concept, is also distinct, then my concept of body is not only distinct but also complete. Yet if my concept of impenetrability is distinct, I must also have a clear idea of one of its constitutive marks, i.e. of one of the properties in virtue of which something is impenetrable, say that it has a repulsive force. If this is all true, however, then the complete concept of body—a distinct concept of body that includes as part of its content distinct concepts of the concepts in virtue of which the concept of body is distinct—arises from something like the following syllogism:

1. All bodies are impenetrable.
2. All impenetrable things have a repulsive force.
3. Therefore, all bodies have a repulsive force.

In other words, the judgment “all bodies are impenetrable” gives rise to a distinct concept of body, while the judgment “all impenetrable things have a repulsive force” gives rise to a distinct concept of impenetrability, and the inference made possible by these judgments gives rise to a *complete* concept of body. More importantly, this inference is the same action of judgment that operated at the level of the premises operating now at a higher level.²⁹ Thus, the action of judgment makes possible not only distinct and complete concepts but also judgments and inferences, and each of these products (distinct concepts, complete concepts, and inferences) can be traced back to the understanding's capacity to judge.

The claim that the understanding is the capacity to judge is, of course, central to Kant's mature view in the *Critique*, and it is noteworthy that this aspect of Kant's mature view dates back at least to the

²⁸ See *Deutsche Logik*, 1.16.

²⁹ As Kant puts it “one and the same capacity [Fähigkeit] is used to immediately cognize something as a characteristic mark of a thing, represent in this characteristic mark a further characteristic mark, and thus to think of the thing by means of a more remove characteristic mark” (2:59, translation modified).

publication of the *False Subtlety*.³⁰ For our immediate purposes, however, it is more important to note that this view is also found in the *Inaugural Dissertation* where Kant discusses it under the heading of the “logical use” of the understanding. Initially, Kant merely describes this use as the subordination and comparison of concepts in accordance with the principle of contradiction (2:393). It quickly becomes clear, however, that this subordination and comparison are the same two expressions of the understanding’s capacity to judge that Kant previously discussed in the *False Subtlety*. For in explanation of the claim that the logical use of the understanding is “common to all the sciences”, Kant writes, that “when a cognition has been given, no matter how, it is regarded as contained under or as opposed to a characteristic mark common to several cognitions, and that either immediately and directly, as in the case in *judgments*, which lead to a distinct cognition, or mediately, as in the case in *ratiocinations*, which lead to a complete cognition” (2:396).

To this extent, Kant’s view in the *Inaugural Dissertation* is continuous with his view in the *False Subtlety*. In the *Inaugural Dissertation*, however, Kant also expands his conception of the understanding and, consequently, his break with the Wolffian tradition beyond anything found in the *False Subtlety* by asserting that there is also a “real use” of the understanding. More interesting still, in his discussion of this use, Kant ascribes to the understanding precisely what the Wolffian tradition denies of it when it denies that a pure understanding is possible. For in its real use, the understanding does not merely compare and subordinate concepts to others but is itself a *source* of concepts; and in contrast to his seeming ambivalence in the *Critique*, Kant is absolutely clear in the *Inaugural Dissertation* that these concepts arise solely from the understanding and have no relationship whatsoever to sensibility. For these concepts, Kant writes, are “given by the very nature of the understanding”, “contain no form of sensitive cognition”, and “have been abstracted from no use of the senses” (2:394). Despite their purely intellectual origin, however, Kant is also clear that these concepts are not “innate” but are rather “abstracted from the laws inherent in the mind” and that we abstract them by “attending to its [i.e. the mind’s] actions on occasion of an experience” (2:395). Finally, the examples of these concepts Kant introduces (“possibility, existence, necessity, substance, [and] cause”) make clear that they are precisely the kind of ontological concepts that the mature Kant will introduce in the *Critique* as pure categories of the understanding (2:295).

The similarities between the concepts of the real use of the understanding whose existence Kant asserts in the *Inaugural Dissertation* and the pure concepts of the understanding whose existence he asserts in the *Critique* are thus striking. There are also, however, important questions left unanswered by the *Inaugural Dissertation*. For one, it is not clear whether the characterization of the understanding as the capacity to judge that Kant introduced in the *False Subtlety* and relies on in the *Inaugural Dissertation* can be extended to explain the possibility of the real use of the understanding. If Kant wants to maintain that both capacities are equally aspects of the understanding, he owes us an explanation of how this is possible. For another, Kant’s insistence that the understanding has a real use, especially when viewed as a denial of the Wolffian claim that the understanding is never pure, means that he must explain how the concepts of the real use of the understanding (“possibility, existence, necessity, substance, cause, etc.”) relate to objects that are given in sense.

³⁰ Cf. A69/B94. Indeed, both Longuenesse 1998 and Allison 2004 have argued persuasively that this is Kant’s fundamental characterization of the understanding.

This latter problem is, of course, the one Kant himself raises in his 1772 letter to Herz and that he does not resolve to his satisfaction until the Metaphysical and Transcendental Deductions of the *Critique*. And while it is sometimes thought that this problem arises for Kant as a result of the influence of skepticism, it is equally (and perhaps even primarily) one that arises as a result of his rejection of the Wolffian view.³¹ For if the content of all concepts derives from what is given in sense, and no concept is ever completely divorced from sense and imagination, there is no reason to suspect that our concepts would not correspond in some way to objects. It would, of course, be possible for the imagination to create concepts of fantastical objects, but even in this case, the elements of such concepts would correspond to something real. Once Kant commits himself to the existence of pure concepts, however, it is incumbent on him to explain how they relate to objects given in sense.

3. Wolffian understanding and the *Critique*

While the foregoing has, I hope, made a compelling case for both an intellectualist reading of the concepts of the real use of the understanding in the *Inaugural Dissertation* and the importance of these concepts to Kant's critique of Wolff, it has only made an indirect case for an intellectualist reading of the categories in the *Critique* and their importance to Kant's critique of Wolff. This latter case can be summarized as follows:

- (1) The concepts of the real use of the understanding are the forerunners of the categories, so what is true of the former is *caterus paribus* true of the latter.
- (2) The former are clearly intellectual in origin and clearly a rejection of the Wolffian denial of the pure understanding.
- (3) Therefore, the latter are intellectual in origin and a rejection of the Wolffian denial of the pure understanding too.

Clearly, this argument would be weakened considerably if there were evidence from the *Reflexionen* of the silent decade that Kant began to rethink the intellectual origin of the categories. Yet while Kant's views about the number and division of the categories clearly undergo development during this period, I have found no *Reflexionen* that suggest he ever waived about their intellectual origin. Consequently, the next step in my defense of the intellectualist reading of the categories is to consider the evidence in favor of it from the *Critique* itself and to show that the putative evidence against it can be made consistent with that reading. The latter is, perhaps, less than the defender of a sensiblist reading of the categories would hope to hear, but in conjunction with the indirect case I have now made and the evidence from the *Critique* in support of an intellectualist reading I will shortly introduce, I believe it is sufficient to carry my burden.

First, as I suggested in the introduction, many of Kant's terminological choices in the *Critique* are most naturally read as attempts to position himself against the Wolffian denial of the pure understanding that he targets in the *Inaugural Dissertation*. Thus, when Kant describes the understanding in the introduction to the Transcendental Logic as the "ability to bring forth representations itself" and then glosses this ability as the "spontaneity of cognition", he is implicitly contrasting this account of the understanding with the Wolffian one according to which the

³¹ See, for example, Mensch 2007.

understanding is *not* an independent source of representations (A51/B75). Similarly, when Kant asserts in the introduction to the Transcendental Analytic that the subject matter of this portion of the *Critique* will be the “pure understanding” and that such an understanding “separates itself completely *not only from everything empirical, but even from all sensibility*”, it would have only been natural for his readers to interpret these statements as a rejection of the Wolffian doctrines we have been discussing (A64-5/B89, my emphasis). The same is also true of Kant’s comment in the introduction to the Analytic of Concepts (the first book of the Transcendental Analytic) that the subject matter of this portion of the *Critique* is an analysis of the “pure use” of the understanding (A66/B91). Finally, in light of the claims of the previous two sections, it is difficult to see how Kant’s readers would have interpreted his discussion of “pure concepts of the understandings” as anything but an overt rejection of the Wolffian view.

Second, there is no shortage of passages in the *Critique* in which Kant discusses the categories that mirror those passages in the *Inaugural Dissertation* touting the purely intellectual origin of the concepts of the real use of the understanding. In the Introduction to the Transcendental Analytic, for example, Kant claims that his “analysis of the entirety of our *a priori* cognition into the elements of the pure cognition of the understanding” will show that the concepts of the understanding “belong not to intuition and to sensibility, but rather to thinking and understanding” (A64/B89). Similarly, in the introduction to the Analytic of Concepts, Kant writes that he will analyze the understanding itself “in order to research the possibility of *a priori* concepts by seeking them only in the understanding” (A66/B91). In the first section of the portion of the Analytic called “On the Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding”, Kant motivates the project of the Transcendental Deduction in large part by noting that the categories “speak of objects not through predicates of intuition and sensibility but those of pure *a priori* thinking” (A88/B120). And in the crucial transition between the first and second parts of the B Deduction, Kant emphasizes that the categories “arise **independently from sensibility**” and “merely in the understanding” (B144). Moving to the second book of the Analytic, Kant writes that the categories retain a “significance” even “after abstraction from every sensible condition” (A147/B186). Finally, in his summary of the main conclusions of the Transcendental Analytic, Kant again asserts that the “pure categories” have a “transcendental significance” even “without formal conditions of sensibility” (B305).

Yet as I noted in the introduction, not all of Kant’s comments about the categories in the *Critique* appear consistent with this reading, and it is these comments that have led scholars such as Henry Allison to remark that “a reference to sensible intuition [...] is an essential component of the very concept of a category for Kant”.³² Thus, in the first chapter of the Analytic of Concepts, Kant writes both that the “*a priori* manifold of sensibility” whose existence has been established by the Transcendental Aesthetic that “provide[s] the pure concepts of the understanding with a matter” and that absent this manifold these concepts would be “without any content” and “completely empty” (A77/B102). Prior to this, at least in the B-edition, Kant also claims that we have “no concepts of the understanding [...] except insofar as an intuition can be given corresponding to these concepts” (Bxxvi). Similarly, in the continuation of the A77/B102, Kant defines synthesis as “the action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition” and pure synthesis a synthesis of a manifold that is “given not

³² Allison 2004: 156. This view appears to be in tension with some of Allison’s other comments in the chapter, but it is also the view he chooses to emphasize at the close of his discussion of the Metaphysical Deduction.

empirically but *a priori*”, explicitly including the *a priori* intuitions of space and time as examples of such manifolds, before asserting that pure synthesis “provides the pure concepts of the understanding” (A78/B104, translation modified). In the section of the B Deduction that immediately precedes the one cited in the previous paragraph, Kant then writes that the categories are “nothing other” than the logical functions of judgment “insofar as the manifold of a given intuition is determined with regard to them” (B143).³³ Finally, this claim is also echoed in Kant’s comment in the B Paralogisms that the categories simply “are” the logical functions of judgment “applied to our sensible intuition” (B429).³⁴ How can we reconcile these passages with those from the previous paragraph?

We can reconcile the passage from A77/B102 by appealing to a peculiarity in Kant’s use of the word “content” [*Inhalt*]. For as several commentators have observed, Kant sometimes uses the term to mean the intensional content of a concept, which is how I have tended to use it here, and sometimes to mean its ability to refer to an object.³⁵ Kant uses *Inhalt* in the first way in the *Prolegomena* when he writes that analytic judgments “add nothing to the content [*Inhalt*] of cognition” (4:266).³⁶ But this is certainly not the way Kant uses it at the beginning of the *Transcendental Logic* in his well-known comment that “thoughts without content [*Inhalt*] are empty [*leer*]” since as Rosenkoetter has remarked, it is unlikely that Kant means to inform us of the obvious fact that a thought with no intensional content is empty (A51/B75).³⁷ Since this comment glosses Kant’s previous comment that “no object would be given to us” without sensibility, it thus seems reasonable to interpret *Inhalt* in this particular context as something like reference or potential reference to an object (*ibid.*). And in the third section of this portion of the *Critique*, Kant explicitly glosses the “content of cognition” as its “relation to its object” (A58/B83). Since these are, moreover, Kant’s last discussion of content before the passage from A77/B102, it is reasonable to suppose that it is the referential sense of *Inhalt* that he has in mind, which would allow us to read his claim that the categories would be empty and without *Inhalt* if pure intuition did not provide them with a matter in a way that is consistent with Kant’s various claims about their origin in the understanding alone since we may say that the categories have an intensional content that derives from the understanding alone while denying that is sufficient for them refer to objects.

The passage from the B Preface is more challenging. To begin, however, note its ambiguity. For Kant writes both that we have “no concepts of the understanding” except “insofar as an intuition can be given” and that this intuition must be one “corresponding to these concepts” (Bxxvi). Since Kant cannot mean that there are no categories without intuition *and* that an intuition corresponding to *the very same categories* is what allows them to come into being, it is perhaps better to interpret him

³³ See also 4:324, 116, 4:474, 189, B128 and 20: 272, 363.

³⁴ In addition to a number of these passages, Waxman 2005: 27f. also cites A348-9, A401-2, A321/B378 and A79/B105 in support of the kind of reading I am criticizing. I omit discussion of the first two of these passages because they are not in the B-edition, and I omit discussion of the remaining because they do not strike me as evidence for the view Waxman develops.

³⁵ See Rosenkoetter 2009, and Watkins 2002. For a criticism of this approach, albeit one that focuses on the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, see Roche 2010.

³⁶ Cf. *Jäsche Logic*, 9:95.

³⁷ Rosenkoetter 2009: 215.

as implicitly relying on the distinction between the categories and the schematized categories.³⁸ Moreover, it is clear that Kant does not intend this passage to be inconsistent with a contentful, transcendental use of the categories since he follows it by emphasizing that his view is consistent with our ability to have thoughts of objects as things in themselves and that this ability requires only that our concepts of things not be self-contradictory (Bxxxvi). If there were truly no categories without intuition, it is hard to see what content these thoughts about things in themselves would have. Yet if the categories have an intensional content derived solely from the understanding, the door is open for contentful, albeit non-cognitive thinking about things in themselves, including and especially the objects of traditional metaphysics that in Kant's view are the proper objects of rational belief.

There is also good reason to interpret the passage from B429 as relying implicitly on the distinction between the categories and the schematized categories. In this passage, which is drawn from the end of the B Paralogisms, Kant contrasts representing oneself as a “**subject** of a thought” and a “**ground** of thinking” with representing oneself as a substance or a cause of thinking, and when he writes that “these categories are those functions of thinking (of judging) applied to our sensible intuition”, it is clear that he means “substance and cause” by “these categories” and “subject and ground” by “those functions”. This would appear to support the view that what distinguishes the categories as such from the functions of thinking is the relation of the former to intuition, and this in turn suggests that the categories as such have an essential relation to intuition. When Kant discusses the categories of substance and cause in the phenomena/noumena chapter, however, he suggests, first, that there *are* categories as such absent any relation to intuition and, second, that what the categories of substance and cause are absent such a relation are precisely the concepts of subject and ground. Moreover, what Kant there suggests must be added to these concepts to yield the concepts of substance and cause is precisely what he in the schematism chapter suggests must be added in the pure concepts of substance and cause to yield the corresponding schematized concepts.³⁹

Consider now the passage from the B Deduction. Here Kant appears to assert what Allison has called the “quasi-identification” of the functions of judgments and the categories.⁴⁰ The former are identified with the latter “insofar as the manifold of a given intuition is determined with regard to them” (B143). On Allison's reading, the categories are quasi-identified with the functions of judgment because the categories are nothing other than the functions of judgment when *those functions* determine a manifold given in intuition. Note, however, that Kant does not say the categories are the functions of judgments *only* insofar as they determine a manifold of intuition. So the passage itself does not suggest, as Allison appears to believe it does, that “reference to sensible intuition” is an “essential component of the very concept of a category”.⁴¹ Further, when we turn §13 of the Deduction, to which the passage from B143 parenthetically refers, we find Kant

³⁸ See Paton 1936 (vol. 1): 260-1, 304 and (vol. 2): 41f., 67f. I also note *en passant* that the distinction between the categories and their schemata would seem difficult if not impossible to draw on the sensiblist reading since *a priori* intuition is precisely what is added on Kant's account to yield the latter from the former.

³⁹ See A242-3/B300-1 and A143-4/B182-3.

⁴⁰ Allison 2004: 155.

⁴¹ Allison 2004: 156.

emphasizing the *intellectual* nature of the categories.⁴² So this passage too can be rendered consistent with the first set of passages.

We are left then with the passages from A78/B105. Here the problem seemed to be that pure synthesis “yields the categories” but that such a synthesis is by definition a synthesis of a pure manifold. Notice, however, that while a pure synthesis may require a pure manifold, it does not follow that *all* the products of that synthesis are constituted by that manifold. Rather, it may be that the presence of a manifold is an occasion, but not a necessary condition, for the actualization of our capacity to judge and that this actualization yields the categories. Since Kant in this passage is looking forward to the arguments of the Transcendental Deduction and Analytic of Principles, it of course makes sense for him to emphasize that pure synthesis “yields” the categories, but everything Kant says in this passage is compatible with the view that *any* exercise of the understanding yields the categories, which is, of course, also the position suggested by the first set of passages.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to illuminate the nature of Kant’s categories by bringing three of his texts into dialogue with the Wolffian tradition. In so doing, my goal has been not only to defend an intellectualist reading of the categories—according to which their content arises from the understanding alone and, in particular, does not include any admixture from sensibility, *a priori* or otherwise—but also to firmly establish the anti-Wolffian roots of this reading and, by extension, of the categories themselves. I have argued that Kant’s assertion in the *Inaugural Dissertation* of a real use of the understanding is a fundamental rejection of the Wolffian account of the understanding and that the first phase of this rejection had already begun in the *False Subtlety*. In the latter work, Kant rejects the Wolffian view that the understanding is fundamentally the capacity for distinct cognition by arguing that the understanding is fundamentally the capacity to judge and that this capacity grounds not only our ability to form distinct concepts but also our ability to make judgments and draw inferences. In the former, he extends his critique of Wolff even further by rejecting the Wolffian denial of the pure understanding and asserting the existence of purely intellectual concepts.

Moreover, I have argued that it was in part the process of working out the consequences of this rejection that led Kant to see the inadequacy of the view he articulated in the *Inaugural Dissertation* and begin the long process of writing the *Critique*. For when one accepts the existence of pure concepts, as opposed to the irreducibly empirical concepts of the Wolffian tradition, it is natural to ask whether these concepts are ever instantiated in experience; and this is precisely the question Kant asks in his letter to Herz and that he does not fully resolve to his satisfaction until the Transcendental Deduction of the *Critique*. Thus, Kant’s rejection of the Wolffian denial of the pure understanding is of crucial importance not only to a proper understanding of the categories themselves but also of the entire problematic of the Transcendental Analytic.

⁴² In his first statement of the problem of the Deduction, for example, Kant writes that a transcendental deduction of the categories is necessary because “speak of objects *not through predicates of intuition and sensibility but through those of pure a priori thinking*” and hence “relate to objects generally and *without any conditions of sensibility*” (A88/B120, my emphasis).

Finally, bringing Kant into dialogue with the Wolffian tradition has also allowed us to see that Kant implicitly identifies the purity of the understanding as I have discussed it here with its spontaneity. For Kant believes this spontaneity consists in the understanding's ability to bring forth representations itself, and this is simply another way of asserting that our understanding is pure (Cf. A51/B75). In this respect, Kant's critique of the Wolffian tradition's account of the understandings mirrors his critique of that tradition's account of reason. For at least on one recent version of this account, the latter consists in Kant's assertion that reason does not merely provide insight into an already existing order, as the Wolffian tradition suggests, but in both its theoretical and practical capacity is able to impose an order on the world.⁴³ And while the implications of this claim cannot be explored here, it is clear that Kant's conception of the spontaneity of the understanding and, hence, its purity is central not only to his broader critique of Wolff but also to the aims of the critical philosophy as a whole.⁴⁴

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⁴³ Guyer 2007: 301.

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