The Proof-Structure of Kant’s A-Edition Objective Deduction

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Kant’s A-Edition objective deduction, which begins at A116 and ends, for all intents and purposes with the paragraph beginning at A123, is naturally (and has traditionally been) divided into two arguments. The first argument, which has been dubbed the “argument from above,” commences with Kant’s pronouncement that “we must begin with pure apperception” in order to discern how representations obtain that unity which makes them suited to a possible experience, and proceeds through the pure synthesis of the imagination to the dependence of the manifold of representations upon the unity of apperception and ultimately the categories. The second argument, by contrast, proceeds “*von unten auf*” in that it begins with appearance as given to perception and, in the course of documenting the empirical syntheses through which it is integrated into an experience, reveals its reliance upon the understanding.

Such a division of the argumentative labour of the objective deduction strikes me as both well-founded and useful for understanding Kant’s argument, which likewise explains its widespread acceptance. However, a number of commentators take a further step, in claiming that there is no essential difference between the arguments, that they represent “progressive” and “regressive” presentations of the same argument,[[1]](#footnote-1) or that they have “*dasselbe Beweisziel*”[[2]](#footnote-2) but simply proceed in “opposite directions.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This would seem to offer a picture of Kant’s procedure in the objective deduction as first descending and ascending the same ladder, the better, perhaps, to test its durability or to thoroughly convince the reader of its soundness. There are obvious obstacles to such a reading, however; for instance, in the argument from above, Kant does not mention perception nor any empirical synthesis, and the argument from below makes no explicit mention of the categories—even in the concluding paragraph, they are only implicitly referred to as “*a priori* rules” that ground the synthesis of the imagination (A123). Indeed, both arguments seem to concern different levels or layers of cognition, with the first focusing on the inter-connection of the transcendental functions of the mind, and the second on the co-operation of its empirical functions.

In this chapter I will argue that the arguments from above and below constitute different, albeit importantly inter-related, proofs. Rather than drawing on the differences in their premises, however, I will highlight what I take to be the different concerns addressed and, correspondingly, the distinct conclusions reached by each. In particular, I will show that both arguments can be understood to address distinct *specters*, with the argument from above addressing an internal concern generated by Kant’s own transcendental idealism, and the argument from below seeking to dispel a more traditional, broadly Humean challenge to the understanding’s role in experience. These distinct concerns also imply that these arguments yield distinct conclusions, though I will show that they are in fact complementary and (though this is less surprising) that the joint conclusion of the objective deduction proves to be of vital importance for Kant’s broader aims in the Transcendental Analytic. To this end, I will begin with an elaboration of the specter at issue in the argument from above, where I will show that Kant’s primary concern regarding the categories is one largely internal to his idealistic project, namely, defending the coherence of the very notion of objectivity given the results of the Transcendental Aesthetic. In the second section I will turn to a presentation of the principal moves made in the argument from above that are made in order to address this concern. In the third section, I will turn to the argument from below, and show what motivates the distinct specter that still looms even if the first argument goes through, and then briefly outline how Kant addresses it.

1. The First Specter of the Objective Deduction

In an oft-cited article on Henrich’s seminal discussion of the two-steps-in-one proof structure of the B-edition Deduction, Jean-Claude Evans introduces the notion of a ‘specter’ by way of elucidating the task of a transcendental deduction. According to Evans, the specter is a device intended to represent a “threatening possibility” structurally comparable to the “Evil Genus” invoked at the outset of Descartes’ Meditations and through the refutation of which he will ground the complete certainty of our knowledge (1990:560). Similarly, the work of the deduction cannot be understood to be complete until the specter it confronts is completely dispelled. Indeed, that Kant conceived of his task in the Deduction along these lines is not unlikely, as is suggested in an apparent reference just before the objective deduction proper to the Cartesian sceptical scenario that our experience cannot be distinguished from dream. There, he characterizes the possibility that the categories do not bear application to appearances as follows:

without that sort of unity, which has its rule *a priori*, and which subjects the appearances to itself, thoroughgoing and universal, hence necessary unity of consciousness would not be encountered in the manifold perceptions. But these would then belong to no experience, and would consequently be without an object, and would be nothing but a blind play of representations, i.e., less than a dream. (A112)

We will return to this passage in detail below, but what bears noting for now is that despite Kant’s apparent invocation of the Cartesian problematic, the specter that the deduction seeks to dispel is not typically taken to be identical to Descartes’. Indeed this point is already suggested by Kant’s apparent raising of the stakes with respect to Cartesian doubt, as he here claims that a failure to dispel the specter would leave us in a cognitively-worse-off situation—one that is even *less* than a dream—than that threatened by the Cartesian evil genius.

Part of the reason why the arguments from above and below are viewed as essentially similar is that they are viewed as addressing the same, *single* specter. In terms of a positive characterization of the principal specter addressed by a transcendental deduction, Henry Allison, taking up Evans’ analysis, has recently cast it in terms of a distinctly Kantian “worry about a cognitive fit between two species of representation,” namely concepts and intuitions or appearances, which threatens a “cognitive chaos” where the former are not subsumable under the latter such that they can generate cognition (2015:8-9). What makes this a distinctly Kantian (and not a Cartesian) problematic is the fact that, according to Allison (2015:9), it is grounded on Kant’s novel contention of the radical heterogeneity between understanding and sensibility, which is to say it is not a problem that was foreseeable for the Leibnizian rationalist or Lockean empiricist (both of whom deny the heterogeneity thesis, albeit in different ways).

I agree with both Evans and Allison that the device of the specter proves helpful in clarifying the proof-structure of Kant’s Deduction, in both the A and B edition versions (to which they both apply it), and indeed that the principal specter facing the deduction is ultimately a problem of Kant’s own making rather than a concern straightforwardly identifiable with a traditional sceptical worry. Nonetheless, I find their positive characterization of the specter problematic for a couple of reasons. First, this characterization of the specter as threatening the possibility of a lack of “cognitive fit” does not capture the high stakes of the argument for Kant. For instance, the cognitive scenario in which categories fail to subsume appearances does not obviously threaten a case where we know “less than a dream”; moreover, it is not even clear that the specter of “cognitive chaos” is all that threatening, given that we might (and perhaps Hume *did*) happily carry on with our cognitive lives in the absence of the categories so referring. Second, and more importantly, the radical heterogeneity of cognitive faculties hardly serves to motivate the specific problematic of the transcendental deduction., given that this heterogeneity already obtains on the empirical level, that is, between *empirical* concepts and empirical intuitions or appearances. There is, of course, no doubt that Kant eventually confronts such a heterogeneity problem, though I take it that this is done in the Schematism chapter rather than the Deduction.

Significantly, a specter that meets these criteria is conjured by Kant in section II of the Deduction chapter, and specifically concerning the third of the threefold syntheses. The paragraph runs as follows:

And here then it is necessary to make understood what is meant by the expression ‘an object of representations.’ We have said above that appearances themselves are nothing but sensible representations, which must not be regarded in themselves, in the same way, as objects (outside the power of representation). What does one mean, then, if one speaks of an object corresponding to and therefore also distinct from the cognition? It is easy to see that this object must be thought of only as something in general = *X*, since outside of our cognition we have nothing that we could set over against this cognition as corresponding to it. (A103)

This passage introduces the beginning of the argument for a transcendental function of the synthesis of recognition, and specifically that all cognition stands in need of a pure concept (of the transcendental object) which in turn presupposes the categories. Even so, this passage raises a larger issue that is foundational for Kant’s broader aims in the Analytic and indeed in the *Critique* as a whole, a fact signalled in the second sentence where Kant connects the need to clarify the notion of an ‘object of representations’ and his doctrine of transcendental idealism. Kant now turns to a previously unrecognized consequence of this doctrine for our ordinary (and non-Kantian) intuitions about objectivity. On a rather flatfooted reading, what it means to think of a representations as related to an object is to take it as distinct from but corresponding to my (or any other) representation of it. Indeed, as Kant makes clear later in the section, that a representation should relate to an object, so understood is analytic to the concept of ‘representation’: “All representations, *as representations*, have their object” (A108). However, the distinction between appearances and things in themselves introduced in the Aesthetic generates a complication for this claim, as the only “object” that would qualify would be the thing in itself, which is no doubt external to our representations but is nonetheless distinct from the (empirical) object to which we normally take our representations to relate.[[4]](#footnote-4) In addition, we cannot simply identify the object of our representations with an empirical object since the Aesthetic has shown that these have the status of appearances, or mere *representations* of sensibility, and as such do not obviously “stand apart” from our intuitions of them. Kant makes this clear later in the same section:

Appearances are the only objects that can be given to us immediately, and that in them which is immediately related to the object is called intuition. However, these appearances are not things in themselves, but themselves only representations, which in turn have their object, which therefore cannot be further intuited by us (A108-9)

The problem, then, of vindicating the transcendental idealist’s conception of objectivity is designated by Kant as that of finding that “something in general = X” through which we can think the relation of given representations to an object.

While Kant does not introduce this with the fanfare we might expect, the prospect that the transcendental idealist cannot account for the objectivity of our representations constitutes the principal specter to be addressed by the transcendental deduction, and I will refer to it as the ‘Cartesian’ specter, because of its *resemblance* to the familiar Cartesian sceptical worry.[[5]](#footnote-5) Specifically, the worry is that there are no conditions under which we can coherently *think* the relation of our representations to an object. Clearly, like the specter identified by Allison and Evans, this is a problem of Kant’s own making, one that follows directly from his novel distinction between appearances and things in themselves, even if Kant did not immediately realize that this problem was posed by his mature doctrine of sensibility.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yet, such a characterization of the specter does not suffer the same faults as that presented by Allison and Evans. First, failing to dispel this specter does not yield a cognitive scenario that even the most stubborn transcendental idealist could live with. That we could not coherently think objects for our representations would mean that *intuitions* (empirical and pure) could not be taken to relate to appearances, considered as the “undetermined *object* of empirical intuition” (A20/B34). That this might be the case has, to say the least, far-reaching consequences as it would entail that we must also deny the objective reality of *empirical* concepts since these only obtain reference to objects through the subsumption of object-intending intuitions under them; as Kant notes the concept of the object = X is also “that which in all of our *empirical* concepts in general can provide relation to an object, i.e., objective reality” (A109—my emphasis). Indeed, it is precisely by way of trying to capture the radical character of the resulting cognitive scenario, and the unprecedentedly high-stakes, that Kant refers to it as “*less* than a dream.” The familiar scenario in which we are dreaming only presumes the contestability of the existence of the objects referred to by our representations, or the *actuality* of objects of our representations, whereas the scenario facing the idealist would, if un-dispelled, seem to rule out all possible reference to objects in advance.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Even admitting all this, it is not clear how the objective validity of the categories specifically is implicated by this specter. So, while the objective validity of the categories (*qua* representations) is obviously threatened by the specter so long as it persists un-dispelled, this is only because it challenges the relation of *all* of our representations to objects, not merely that of the categories. In the paragraphs that follow our initial passage, however, Kant explains why the categories in particular are at issue. The next paragraph, actually a single sentence, initiates a reconceptualization of objectivity on terms more favourable to the idealist:

We find, however, that our thought of the relation of all cognition to its object carries something of necessity with it [*etwas von Nothwendigkeit bei sich führe*], since namely the latter is regarded as that which is opposed to our cognitions being determined at pleasure or arbitrarily rather than being determined *a priori*, since insofar as they are to relate to an object our cognitions must also necessarily agree with each other in relation to it, i.e., they must have that unity that constitutes the concept of an object. (104-5)

Kant here turns to the analysis of what is contained in the thought of the relation of our representations to an object, the result of which is that it “carries something of necessity with it.” There are, however, two sorts or senses of ‘necessity’ that come into play in this passage, which Kant does not carefully distinguish. The first occurs in the contrast with a merely haphazard or arbitrary determination of our representations, which should be understood as the sort of determination that pertains to merely subjective “unities” of representations. Since such conjunctions of representations are not ordinarily taken to relate to objects, Kant concludes that part of what is involved in thinking our representations as relating to an object is that they evince a *non-arbitrary* unity, or that they are connected in a rule-governed as opposed to a merely haphazard fashion. Kant unhelpfully characterizes such a non-arbitrary unity as “being determined *a priori,*” which (as we will see) is strictly speaking correct but wrongly implies that all such unities involve a strictly necessary connection of their elements. However, it is not sufficient for the relation of representations to an object that they evince a non-arbitrary unity, since such a unity could occur merely accidentally. Accordingly, Kant additionally contends that in representations that relate to objects this unity is itself *necessitated*. As Kant phrases it in the last clause of the above passage, our representations “*must* have that *unity* that constitutes the concept of an object.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This is to say, then, that what it means to think the relation of our representations to an object is for a non-arbitrary unity to be necessary for those representations.

Ordinarily, of course, we would hold that the non-arbitrary unity of our representations would be *causally* necessitated by the object standing apart from our representations, and that it was this causal necessitation that distinguished the order of our representations from one merely dependent on our will. Unfortunately, the transcendental idealist cannot have recourse to such an explanation since the spatio-temporal object that would serve as the necessitating ground of this unity is itself a representation (an appearance), and so we would need to seek the necessitating ground of *its* unity as well, and so on. Since the transcendental idealist cannot posit a ground in *objects* in order to account for the necessity of the unity of representations, the *only* alternative is to seek a ground in the subject, and this is precisely what Kant claims at the outset of the next paragraph of the section:

It is clear, however, that since we have to do only with the manifold of our representations, and that *X* which corresponds to them (the object), because it should be something distinct from all of our representations, is nothing for us, the unity that the object makes necessary can be nothing other than the formal unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of the representations. Hence we say that we cognize the object if we have effected synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition. (A105)

Given that reference to extra-representational objects is not an option, the only way for the transcendental idealist to account for the relation of representations to objects would therefore be by identifying the object-tokening non-arbitrary unity of representations as a “formal unity” of consciousness, and finding some ground *in the subject* in light of which such a unity is rendered necessary. Demonstrating the latter point—the *subjective ground for the necessity of unity*--will be the key step in the objective deduction as we will see, but for now we can focus on Kant’s exhibition of what is involved in the “formal unity” of representations, and it is at this point that a role for the categories becomes clear:

But this [i.e., synthetic unity[[9]](#footnote-9)] is impossible if the intuition could not have been produced through a function of synthesis in accordance with a rule that makes the reproduction of the manifold necessary *a priori* and a concept in which this manifold is united possible. (A105)

This sentence restates the result of the previous considerations, though now the synthetic unity of the manifold, which is to be necessitated through some ground in the subject, is related to “functions of synthesis.” I take this to be a straightforward reference to the categories which Kant had identified, in the Metaphysical Deduction, as functions that give unity “to the mere synthesis of different representations *in an intuition*” (A79/B104-5).[[10]](#footnote-10) Indeed, it should be obvious that within the mind’s inventory nothing but the categories could possibly serve in this way—the forms of intuition of space and time, are likewise available *a priori* but sensibility cannot alone yield a synthetic unity or combination of representations.[[11]](#footnote-11) This would be to say, then, that the only way in which the transcendental idealist can make sense of the thought of the relation of representations to an object is by demonstrating that the categories *must* apply to the manifold of intuition.

We can now return to our characterization of the specter threatening the transcendental deduction, and account for why it demands a deduction of the *categories* specifically. The specter that we cannot coherently think the relation of representations to objects on transcendental idealist terms might be equivalently phrased in terms of the worry that we cannot show that the categories must apply to the manifold of sensible intuition. This worry is moreover quite consistent with the canonical form in which Kant expresses the task of the deduction, namely, in terms of demonstrating the “objective validity” of the categories (A90/B122), since insofar as it could be demonstrated that the categories must be applied to the manifold of intuition, it follows that the categories bear some relation to the objects whose thought they first make possible. Moreover, while it remains the case that the objective validity of all representations is at issue, the onus is on the categories as it will only be insofar as they can be shown to bear this conditioning relation to objects that the objectivity of the others will be vindicated. Given this account of the specter facing the transcendental deduction, we can now turn to the so-called “argument from above” which, I take it, directly addresses it through demonstrating the *necessity* of the unity produced by the categories in the manifold of intuition.

2. Dispelling the Cartesian Specter: The Argument “From Above”

Having set the stage, we can turn to a consideration of how this specter is addressed in the objective deduction, and particularly in the argument presented in paragraphs 3-6 (and the long footnote at A117) of the third section of the deduction chapter.[[12]](#footnote-12) While I will, as an accommodation to the literature on the section, likewise refer to this as the argument “from above” it should be noted of course that Kant never refers to it as such, and indeed for good reason as this title gives the mistaken impression that the argument proceeds from the highest point of cognition and *descends* to the manifold of intuition. Yet this is not the case as Kant rather sets out from the consciousness of the subject that accompanies all cognition and ends up, not at the manifold of sensible intuition, but with the categories of the pure understanding as necessarily implicated in that consciousness. Indeed, the paragraphs of this argument rather represent an analysis of what Kant calls pure apperception, which analysis is then put to use when Kant goes on to “follow the inner ground of this connection of representations up to that point in which they must all come together” in the subsequent argument “from below up” (as we will see).

The argument from above begins with the incredibly dense third paragraph (and accompanying footnote). While the passage itself raises interpretative issues that go to the heart of the deduction, not to mention Kant’s account of consciousness, self-consciousness, and identity, we will for present purposes have to settle for the following overview of the main argument:

1. For any manifold of representations, it must be possible for me to be conscious of it (i.e., to think it in relation to *my* consciousness)

2. *My* consciousness is identical across any possible manifold of representation that can be ascribed to me.

3. For any intuition that does figure into cognition, it must be thought in relation to an identical subject. [= “transcendental principle of the unity of all the manifold of our representations”]

4. The identity of the consciousness to which my representations are related cannot be thought other than through bringing the manifold into a synthetic unity [= “principle of the synthetic unity of the manifold in all possible intuition”]

We might briefly consider the support, textual and otherwise, for each of the steps in this argument. The first premise, I take it, is what Kant expresses when he frequently contends that representations, or intuitions specifically, are “nothing for us” if they cannot be taken up in, or accompanied by consciousness (see for instance A111). Such a claim, as has been noted by others, should be taken as limited to representations that might enter into a cognition, and does not exclude the possibility of representations, so construed, that we are not conscious of; rather, it only excludes the possibility of such representations which we *could not possibly* become conscious of. Moreover, such a claim would appear to be analytic inasmuch as Kant simply takes the relation to consciousness as definitional of ‘cognition.’ The second premise expands upon the consciousness, or subject, to which our representations relate inasmuch as they constitute cognition, that is to say, it details a key feature of the *me* in the claim that representations must be something *for me*. In particular, Kant claims that this subject is necessarily identical across all representations that might belong to it. This claim is, like the first, analytic holding as it does simply in virtue of the identification of a set of representations as *mine*.[[13]](#footnote-13) I take it that our consciousness of ourselves *as* a single, identical subject is just what Kant designates as ‘pure apperception,’ the purity of which consists in the fact that it is the conscious *of* a subject whose identity can be known *a priori*, rather than being a special sort of consciousness (as Kant sometimes unhelpfully suggests when he characterizes it in terms of our being “conscious *a priori*”).

The third and fourth steps in the argument name two principles which follow from the above considerations but which, despite their similar-sounding names, must be kept distinct. The first principle is directly entailed by the previous two premises, inasmuch as it states that any manifold of representations that is to figure in cognition must be thought in relation to the identical subject. This would suggest that this principle is likewise analytic (since it follows from the previous two), though Kant’s formulation of this principle in terms of the “*unity* of all the manifold of our representations” brings out a new element, namely, that to think a manifold of representations in relation to the identity of the subject is just to introduce a unity into that manifold; so, to think a manifold of representations, x, y, z as relating to the same subject, is (just) to think x, y, and z together. The second principle, and final step in this argument, concerns the type of unity that is thereby effected in the manifold of representations, which it specifies as a *synthetic* unity. In contrast with the previous principle, this one does not follow directly from the previous premises; rather it draws on an additional limitation of our mode of access to ourselves, namely, that the identity of the cognitive subject is not given through inner sense (cf. A107). Rather than simply reading off the relation of the identical self from the manifold of representations itself (which would require that the identity of the subject were given as a datum in the manifold itself), we can only *think* the relation of a given manifold to the subject by *effecting* a unity in the manifold, or *combining* the manifold into a single representation. As Kant had previously claimed, “the mind could not possibly think of the identity of itself in the manifoldness of its representations [...] if it did not have before its eyes the identity of its action” (A108). Since this unity is effected in the manifold not in virtue of some shared mark or feature of the content of the representations so combined (which would make it an analytic unity), it follows that it must be a synthetic unity (or a unity of heterogenous elements). And because this principle only holds on the basis of this extrinsic limitation of our form of inner sense (that it does not disclose the identity of the subject), it follows that this principle is *synthetic* which is of course just how Kant characterizes it in the footnote appended to his statement of it: “The synthetic proposition that every different *empirical consciousness* must be *combined* [my emphasis] into a single self-consciousness is the absolutely first and synthetic principle of our thinking in general” (A117n).[[14]](#footnote-14)

Kant next proceeds, in the fourth paragraph of the third section, to draw the obvious consequence of the last principle, namely, that the synthetic unity that is *effected* in the manifold in accordance with the unity of apperception “presupposes or includes” a synthesis on the part of the imagination. The fact that this synthesis must be *a priori* (which is to say, performed in accordance with an *a priori* principle) already distinguishes it from an empirical synthesis. Yet, the fact that this synthesis also *introduces* a new unity into the manifold, namely the synthetic unity of apperception, rather than merely reproducing a given unity, justifies Kant’s identification of this act as a *productive* synthesis. This yields another principle, the “principle of the necessary unity of the pure (productive) synthesis of the imagination” (A119), though this is clearly equivalent to the previous principle as it merely further spells out what is “included” in the synthetic unity.

At this point, it will be useful to take stock of what has been demonstrated thus far. In showing that the manifold of representations, insofar as it is to amount to a cognition, must be brought together through the productive synthesis of the imagination guided by the unity of apperception into a synthetic unity, Kant has demonstrated the *necessity* of a *unity* in that manifold, where just this was what was required for the relation of the manifold to an object. As it happens, Kant draws this very conclusion in the next paragraph of the argument from below (the fifth paragraph of the section). There, after bestowing “transcendental” status on both the “synthesis of the manifold in imagination” (insofar as it only concerns the connection of the manifold *a priori*) and the “unity of this synthesis” (insofar as it is none other than the “original unity of apperception”—A118), he spells out the relevance of the foregoing to the specter:

Now since this latter [*diese letztere*, i.e., the original unity of apperception] is the ground of the possibility of all cognitions, the transcendental unity of the synthesis of the imagination is the pure form of all possible cognition, *through which, therefore, all objects of possible experience must be represented a priori*. (A118)

However, while the *necessity* of unity has been proven to Kant’s satisfaction, he has yet to show that this is a *non-arbitrary* unity, that is, that it is a unity grounded in the categories; moreover, until he shows that the categories are implicated here, he will not have delivered on the stated aim of the deduction in demonstrating the objective validity of the categories.

Accordingly, at the beginning of the remaining paragraph of the argument from above, Kant turns to the involvement of the understanding and, by extension, the categories.

*The unity of apperception in relation to the synthesis of the imagination* is the *understanding*, and this very same unity, in relation to the *transcendental synthesis* of the imagination is the *pure understanding*. In the understanding there are therefore pure *a priori* cognitions that contain the necessary unity of the pure synthesis of the imagination in regard to all possible appearances. These, however, are the *categories* (A119)

The argument here, if indeed there is an argument, asserts the involvement of the categories on the basis of, first, the abrupt identification of the unity of apperception with the understanding and the characterization of the categories as “pure cognitions” proper to the understanding. The key step here is obviously the former, and it bears noting that this identification of the unity of apperception with the understanding, which is mentioned here for the first time in more than 20 German pages,[[15]](#footnote-15) is not an aberration on Kant’s part since he would later assert just the same thing in §16 of the B Deduction (though again without illuminating the grounds for this assertion).[[16]](#footnote-16) However, I think that Kant does have a sound basis for this identification, though it only becomes clear once we return to the first chapter of the Analytic of Concepts (the “Clue”) and re-consider his account of the understanding in light of the intervening discussion of the unity of apperception. There, Kant had offered a positive characterization of the understanding as a *faculty for judging*, given that all of its actions in its logical use could be traced back to the employment of judgments, through which a multiplicity of representations are comprehended under a “higher one” (A69/B94). Given this account of judgment, Kant identifies them with functions, which are likewise defined as “the unity of the action of ordering different representations under a common one” (A68/B93). The point, then, is that to take the understanding to be a faculty of judging, is just to take it to be, generally speaking, a faculty of bringing different representations together through their subordination to a higher representation.

Turning back to the final step of the argument from above, it is just this general characterization of the understanding that underlies Kant’s identification of it with the unity of apperception and, consequently, implies the involvement of the categories. The result of the activity required by the unity of apperception on the manifold of representations amounts to an ordering of this manifold under a common “representation”. As we have seen, the unity of apperception, in the guise of the identity of the subject, entails a synthesis of the manifold of intuition. Yet, it is only in virtue of thinking the elements of the manifold as belonging to a common (identical) subject that a synthetic unity is effected in the manifold.[[17]](#footnote-17) The activity, therefore, involved in the unity of apperception can be quite appropriately described as bringing different representations under a common one. Moreover, this is not a special case of the understanding’s activity, one distinct from its other, more mundane acts of judging; rather, this is the *form* of every such act on the part of the understanding, which is to say that every judgment properly so-called involves bringing a given manifold to the unity of apperception.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, when we consider the unity of apperception only in relation to the pure, productive synthesis of the imagination, we find that there are different *ways* in which that synthesis can bring the manifold to the unity of apperception, or think that manifold as belonging to the same subject, just as there are different ways in which representations can be ordered under a common one in a judgment. These different *functions* of the understanding, considered in relation to a pure manifold of intuition are the categories (cf. A79/B104-5), and this implies that in requiring that the manifold be brought to a synthetic unity, the unity of apperception thereby makes *necessary* a synthetic *unity* in accordance with the categories.

With this result, a key threat to transcendental idealism is dissolved. Kant has vindicated the coherence of objectivity, on idealist terms, by showing that our representations must have the sort of unity characteristic of the relation of representations to an object. Significantly, we can make sense of the objectivity of our representations without reference to a thing in itself, as something standing outside of representations altogether, but can make do with a conception of objectivity that has been “internalized”[[19]](#footnote-19) to the sphere of our representations. In addition, though hardly as an after-thought, Kant has also shown that the *categories* bear a relation to objects, so understood. Since the functions expressed by the categories are just the ways in which the manifold is brought to the unity of apperception, it follows that the categories relate to objects in virtue of making the thought of those objects possible in the first place. Indeed, this is just how Kant characterizes the principal aim of the deduction:

Now these concepts, which contain *a priori* the pure thinking in every experience, we find in the categories, and it is already a sufficient deduction of them and justification of their objective validity if we can prove by means of them alone an object can be thought. (A96-7)

With this result, Kant has likewise vindicated the objective reality of intuitions and empirical concepts. However, the foregoing brings to light an important difference between categories, as pure concepts of the understanding, and their empirical counterparts. While both are, generally speaking, representations through which an object is thought, it should nonetheless be clear, that objects are *thought* in accordance with categories in a rather different sense than they are *thought* by empirical concepts. So, in contrast with empirical concepts, in accordance with which thinking an object is just to *determine* it with respect to that concept, the pure concepts of the understanding serve to make the very thought of an object possible in the first place—that is, it is “only by means of them can any object of experience be *thought* at all” (A93/B126).[[20]](#footnote-20) All told, then, and with due deference to Henrich, the argument from above might be appropriately characterized as a “two-birds-with-one-stone” proof given its simultaneous vindication of objectivity on transcendental idealist terms and its demonstration of the categories’ objective validity as conditions for the very thought of objects.

3. The Humean Specter and the Argument “*von unten auf*”

Of course, the objective deduction does not stop here, as Kant proceeds to offer an argument “from below up” in paragraphs 7-11 of the third section. It is tempting to view this argument as simply re-running the argument from above in the opposite direction; so, starting from perception, which is subject to the synthesis of apprehension and reproduction in turn, Kant proceeds to show how the categories are presupposed by any association with a putatively objective ground. However, the differences which I detailed at the outset of this chapter would suggest that the argument from below might be better understood as an *extension* of the previous argument, one in which the major results of the argument from above are deployed for a further purpose, rather than simply a different version of the same argument. Indeed, as I will present it here, what ultimately distinguishes the argument from below is that it addresses a distinct specter, albeit one that has a clear connection to the previous specter when considered from Kant’s distinctive perspective. As opposed to the previous specter, which ultimately challenged whether categories can serve as conditions for the *thought* of objects, the specter of the argument from below raises a challenge to whether the categories can be said to gain application in our *experience*.[[21]](#footnote-21) As Kant recognizes, one might accept the results of the argument from above and allow that the transcendental idealist is able to account for objectivity, or something near enough, by means of the categories; yet, one can still deny that the categories could ever gain application in our experience insofar as the account of our experience of those objects need not draw on any resources in the understanding.

That there might be more work to do on Kant’s part on this score can be seen as, at least in part, the consequence of the sharp distinction he draws between the empirical and transcendental contributions of our cognitive faculties in the subjective deduction.[[22]](#footnote-22) So, at the outset of the third section, he summarizes the result of the foregoing subjective deduction in terms of expounding “separately and individually” the empirical contributions of sense, imagination, and apperception on the one hand, and the transcendental contributions of these same faculties on the other, without considering both of these sets of contributions as “unified and in connection” (A115). It could, therefore be the case, that while we might concede the necessity of the categories on the “transcendental level,” that is, in terms of making the thought of an object possible in the first place, we could nonetheless deny that this influences what takes place on the “empirical level,” that is, that the categories play any necessary role in our *experience* of those objects.

This unresolved empirical-transcendental distinction leaves the door open for doubt as to whether the categories apply in our experience, yet I take it that it is the unprecedented role Kant assigns to the empirical *imagination* in his account of the generation of experience that ultimately ushers that doubt through. The imagination’s indispensable contribution to cognition is made clear in the first three paragraphs (paragraphs 7-9 of the third section) of the argument from below itself. Very briefly, Kant there contends that since every appearance (which is to say, intuition—cf. A99) contains a manifold that stands in need of combination to count as a perception, and because sensibility itself, as a passive faculty, cannot itself combine the manifold, we require a synthesis of apprehension and a faculty of imagination that actively functions in the formation of an *image* (*Bild*), or the imagination’s distinctive contribution to experience. In addition, and strikingly, Kant carves out a key role in the formation of our experience for the “reproductive faculty of imagination” and the “law” of association that he takes to ground this faculty. Thus he notes the insufficiency of the synthesis of apprehension for generating an image unless it is accompanied by the reproduction of absent perceptions which are needed to exhibit “the entire series of perceptions” (A121). While this much is familiar from Kant’s previous discussion of these syntheses, he now identifies the subjective ground of the reproduction of perceptions, or the “rule” in accordance with which the reproduction of the appropriate representation takes place, namely, the “*association* of representations” (A121). Kant refers to the result of the operation of the reproductive imagination as a “unity of association” (a phrase that to my knowledge occurs nowhere else in his writings), but his point is clearly that the resulting connection is not entirely arbitrary but governed by the “law” (A100) or “empirical rule of *association*” (A112).

The attention Kant draws to the unprecedented role assigned to the imagination already in perception, in the form of the synthesis of apprehension, should not distract us from noting that it is the role of the reproductive imagination, and the “law” of association in forming our experience that conjures the new specter. The general worry is that on account of the involvement of the imagination, the resulting associative “connections” among our perceptions will not be apt for subsumption under the pure concepts of the understanding. One example of this that was obviously on Kant’s mind is the category of causality. In involving a “necessary” connection between perceptions, namely, that “the effect [...] is posited *through* it and follows *from it*” (A91/B124), that concept clearly finds nothing in the product of the “merely empirical law” (A100) of association, in accordance with which the effect “merely come[s] along with the cause” (A91/B124), to which it might apply. Generalized to the remaining categories, this introduces a specter that is distinctly Humean in character (albeit viewed through Tetens’ interposing lens),[[23]](#footnote-23) which is invoked by Kant in the following, well-known passage:

For appearances could after all be so constituted that the understanding would not find them in accord with the conditions of its unity, and everything would then lie in such confusion that, e.g., in the succession of appearances nothing would offer itself that would furnish a rule of synthesis and thus correspond to the concept of cause and effect, so that this concept would therefore be entirely empty, nugatory and without significance (A90/B123)

Unlike the previous Cartesian specter, this new Humean specter does not introduce a problem entirely of Kant’s own making, though the threat that it poses is no doubt strengthened by Kant’s reliance on the imagination in his account of experience. The challenge in this case comes closer to one of “cognitive emptiness” (and so Allison’s and Evans’ characterization of the specter is more appropriate here), which is to say that instead of an internal challenge for transcendental idealism it rather threatens a lack of fit between our sophisticated conceptual resources and the relatively crude products of the mind’s initial operations on the sensible given.

The remainder of the argument from below, the bulk of which is contained in a single paragraph (the tenth of the third section) is devoted to dispelling this distinct Humean specter, though in doing so it will deploy some of the same conceptual resources brought to bear on the first, Cartesian specter. We might divide the argument into two steps, where the first involves the claim that the operation of the law of association presupposes an “objective ground” in the regularity of natural occurrences. By way of clarifying Kant’s own argument, it will be helpful to turn to a similar argument presented by Tetens in the course of his extensive treatment of the law of imagination of which Kant was no doubt aware:

This law of association, when *Phantasie* is operating *alone*, determines no more than the order in which ideas follow upon one another. It does not determine the entire actual order in which representations succeed [...]. Does the rule actually determine no more than which idea *could* generally follow upon another? Namely, for an idea A, one of the ideas similar to it or one of the co-existing ideas *can* follow on it, but then what sort will it be? That depends on the causes, by which the imagination is steered and directed while it is active. (Tetens, 1777:I, 110-11 [I.xiv])

Here, Tetens argues, as I take Kant to, that the imagination’s activity in accordance with the law of association requires, first, that the perceptions at issue be *associable*, which is to say that they are such that the imagination can identify them as of the appropriate sort for the intended association. Kant will term the associability of perceptions their (empirical) *affinity*, but the important point here is that, for any association of perceptions, the imagination stands in need of a *further* rule that tells it which of the many resembling perceptions to reproduce in the intended association. So in Tetens’ case the law of association on its own only supplies a vast reservoir of ideas that, generally, speaking resemble or co-exist with the stimulus-perception; what is needed in addition is some rule that allows the imagination to select which of these ideas would be most appropriate. Tetens’ answer to this, again as I take Kant’s to be, is that it is the regularity of nature, and specifically its ordering in accordance with causal laws, that supplies the imagination with the means to make a determination. Without the regularity of nature, so understood, the imagination would be at a loss in its associative function, which possibility Kant dramatically characterizes in terms of the imagination being a “dead and to us unknown faculty” (A100). The point, then, is that if the imagination is to function in its associative capacity in our cognition, as Kant (but also Tetens and Hume) clearly thinks it does, then we presuppose at the very least a regularity in natural occurrences, and so an objective ground for this functioning. Kant suspects that the empiricist, and specifically Hume, cannot account for this objective ground of the law of association (A113), a shortcoming that Hume tries to obscure through his notorious claim of a “kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas” (Hume, 1999:12).

In contrast with his predecessors, Kant thinks that he can make sense of the objective ground of the associative component of our experience, and the second step of his argument provides his account. Kant’s argument, in brief, proceeds first by showing that the empirical affinity or associability of the manifold of representations also presupposes that manifold’s transcendental affinity or associability, where this is understood as the bare availability of the involved perception to consciousness in the first place. Kant takes this as equivalent to the claim, which provided the starting point of the argument from above, that it must be possible to be conscious of all of our representations insofar as they are to figure in our experience, and Kant’s next moves draw on the results of his previous considerations. So, taking the transcendental affinity of the manifold in terms of the availability of the manifold of perceptions to consciousness, Kant contends that this consciousness must be an identical consciousness (insofar as the perceptions to be reproduced all belong to me); as he writes, “For only because I ascribe all perceptions to one consciousness (of original apperception) can I say of all perceptions that I am conscious of them” (A122). From this “original unity” of consciousness, Kant infers the necessity of a synthesis of the manifold, and indeed the necessity of bringing the manifold into a *synthetic unity* insofar as we think our identity with respect to it, which is to say that “this identity must necessarily enter into the synthesis of all the manifold of appearances” (A113). Finally, in order for Kant to draw his desired distinction with empiricist accounts of association and demonstrate how he can account for an *objective* ground of association, Kant relies on the close connection between the unity of apperception, as the form of the synthetic unity of the manifold, and the categories, understood as ways of bringing a given manifold to the unity of apperception. That the manifold of perceptions is thus subject to a combination in accordance with the categories yields an *objective* ground for the operation of the imagination inasmuch as Kant has shown, in the argument from above, that categories are conditions for the thought of objects. Accordingly, the categories, when their employment is necessitated by the unity of apperception, yield the sought-for objective ground of the affinity of appearances, which result serves to dispel the Humean specter.

Obviously, I have only outlined what I take to be the principal argumentative moves of Kant’s A-edition objective deduction. It should be kept in mind, however, that the contentious details notwithstanding, my overarching aim has been to lay bare the distinctive and complex proof structure of the arguments from above and below, which we can now summarize by way of conclusion. As I have contended, the arguments from above and below can be taken as distinct arguments insofar as they address rather different challenges, in spite of drawing upon many of the same theoretical resources. The argument from above seeks to dispel a novel specter that threatens precisely on account of Kant’s freshly-minted doctrine of transcendental idealism; by contrast the argument from below addresses a more familiar specter, albeit one that finds a new basis in Kant’s sharp separation between the faculties and the central role assigned to the imagination in empirical cognition. Moreover, and significantly, both arguments can now be seen to draw distinct *conclusions*. Generally put, the conclusion of the argument from above is that the categories are conditions of the thought of *objects*, whereas the comparable conclusion of the argument from below is that the categories are conditions of our *experience* as well, insofar as the account of our empirical cognition must likewise invoke them.

Yet, despite yielding different conclusions, the arguments from above and below can be seen as working together to in the service of the broader aim of the Deduction chapter. Indeed, that this is so is crucial since there is, in the end, only a *single* transcendental deduction with, presumably, a single conclusion.[[24]](#footnote-24) Having shown, with the argument from below that the categories serve as the conditions for our experience, and having shown in the argument from above that the categories also serve as the conditions for the thought of objects, it follows that the same representations, namely the categories, are conditions of our experience and of the objects of that experience. As Kant himself frames this general conclusion just before the outset of the objective deduction, “the *a priori* conditions of a possible *experience* in general,” namely the categories, “are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the *objects* of experience” (A111). In this way, then, we can see that with respect to this broader, common aim, which we can now see constitutes the “core” *conclusion* of the transcendental deduction,[[25]](#footnote-25) the arguments from above and below constitute a single, progressive proof, with neither step indispensable nor redundant.

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1. See Paton (1936:I, 457ff). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Klemme (1996:156). Compare also Erdmann (1878:25), who claims that “Der Beweisgang der Deduction bildet nämlich keine fortlaufende Reihe, sondern eine viermalige Wiederholung einer und derselben Argumentation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is Allison’s claim (2015:253). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See A30/B45: “objects in themselves are not know to us at all, and that what we call outer objects are nothing other than mere representations of our sensibility, whose form is space, but whose true correlate, i.e., the thing in itself, is not and cannot be cognized through them, but is also never asked after in experience.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more on how the original Cartesian problematic was discussed among Kant’s predecessors, see Dyck (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For an account of Kant’s grappling with this problem from the Dissertation onwards, see de Vleeschauwer, (1962:57-74). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Prol* 4:290: “Der Unterschied aber zwischen Wahrheit und Traum wird nicht durch die Beschaffenheit der Vorstellungen, die auf Gegenstände bezogen werden, ausgemacht, denn die sind in beiden einerlei.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Compare Paton (1936: I 384-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘*Diese’*, which evidently refers to ‘synthetische Einheit’ in the previous sentence. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also de Vleeschauwer (1936:94). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This claim is familiar from the B-edition deduction (cf. §15), but is already present at A120 where Kant refers to a “combination of [perceptions], which they cannot have in sense itself” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For the basis of my distinction between the objective and subjective deductions, and the rationale behind my location of the former in the third section, see Dyck (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As Kant writes in the footnote: “It is therefore absolutely necessary that in *my* cognition all consciousness belong to one consciousness (of *myself*)” (A117n—emphases mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For discussion of the syntheticity of this principle and related issues, see Guyer (1980) and Dyck (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ‘*Verstand’* is mentioned in the title of the third section, but its last occurrence in the body of the text is at A98 (“die Erörterung dieser Elemente des Verstandes”). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See B134: “And thus the synthetic unity of apperception is the highest point to which one must affix all use of the understanding, even the whole of logic and, after it, transcendental philosophy; indeed, this faculty is the understanding itself.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Contrast Paton (1936:I, 386), who claims that no sense can be made of the identification of identity and synthetic unity [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This of course is captured in Kant’s definition of judgment in B edition: “a judgment is nothing other than the way to bring given cognitions to the *objective* unity of apperception” (B141). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The phrase is Longuenesse’s (2000:20ff) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kant likewise identifies categories as “fundamental concepts for thinking objects in general for the appearances” (A111). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In this, I depart from de Vleeschauwer, who claims that “The problem of objectivity is identical with the transcendental deduction” (1962:75). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Contrast Bauer (2010) who construes the results of the subjective deduction as preparing for the argument from above. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For more on this see Dyck (2011:481-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. As Carl notes (1992:44), Kant only speaks of a *single* deduction in the “Summary Representation” of the argument at A128. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This characterization is in contrast with Allison who contends that this principle constitutes a “core claim” of the deduction rather than a conclusion (Allison, 2015:270). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)