

SYNTHESIS AND REGRESS

Dennis Schulting

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In the preamble to the transcendental deduction of the categories proper, in ¶15 of the B-Deduction, Kant makes a *prima facie* puzzling statement about the relation between the concepts ‘unity’, ‘combination’ and ‘manifold’. Kant writes:

[D]er Begriff der Verbindung führt außer dem Begriffe des Mannigfaltigen, und der Synthesis desselben, noch den der Einheit desselben bei sich. Verbindung ist Vorstellung der synthetischen Einheit des Mannigfaltigen. Die Vorstellung dieser Einheit kann also nicht aus der Verbindung entstehen, sie macht vielmehr dadurch, daß sie zur Vorstellung des Mannigfaltigen hinzukommt, den Begriff der Verbindung allererst möglich. (B130–1)

This at first blush confounding passage contains a lot that is crucial to an understanding of Kant’s project in the Deduction, and beyond. It seems to suggest circularity: combination or synthesis is the representation of the very unity that first brings forth synthesis. Synthesis is the central notion that mediates unity and plurality from early on in Kant’s thought. It is therefore key to the analysis of knowledge of particulars. I provide some brief historical background from Kant’s early work. What I want to do in this paper is to examine the following claims relating to this statement:

- (1) Combination (or synthesis) and unity, and so *representation of* unity and unity, are equiprimordial, co-determining features of one multifaceted *original* act of synthesis of the understanding.
- (2) A priori synthesis as original ground is a regress blocker: there are no multiple sets of a priori synthesis that ground one another.
- (3) ‘Unity’ and ‘combination’ relate to ‘manifold’ asymmetrically. There cannot be unity without combination and vice versa, nor unity and combination without a manifold. However, a manifold of representations doesn’t eo ipso necessarily require ‘unity’ and ‘combination’.
- (4) A priori synthesis *is* categorial determination of the manifold.
- (5) Synthesis is a ‘Verstandeshandlung’ (B130), and figurative synthesis or synthesis of the imagination is ‘an effect of the understanding’ on the sensible manifold (B152), not a separable synthesis, one which categorial unification by the understanding supposedly latches on to, nor a fortiori one which grounds a categorial unification of the manifold or the understanding’s synthesis, on pain of inviting a regress.

This reading of a priori synthesis puts into question the standard reading of the relation between the understanding and sensibility, between categorial determination by the understanding and figurative synthesis, shared by conceptualists and nonconceptualists alike. It proposes a new unified understanding of a priori synthesis that is not vulnerable to an infinite explanatory regress, but can explain in which sense, and in which sense only, the understanding and sensibility are necessarily related.