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SENSIBILITY, UNDERSTANDING, AND KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL DEDUCTION: FROM EPISTEMIC COMPOSITIONALISM TO EPISTEMIC HYLOMORPHISM

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Kant famously holds that our capacity to know is constituted from “two stems [...], namely *sensibility* and *understanding*.”¹ Sensibility is our capacity to be presented with objects through intuitions that depend on sensory affection. The understanding is the capacity to judge about those objects by means of concepts that depend on intellectual acts.² While this division is essential to Kant's epistemology, he does not explicitly discuss it at length. Consequently, there is little consensus on how exactly to understand the interplay between sensibility and understanding. A key question is whether sensibility can be understood independently of the understanding: Can we understand ourselves as able to enjoy sensory presentations of objects that in no way depend on our ability to judge about such objects?

This question has philosophical rather than merely psychological significance as our answer to it reflects our very conception of objectivity. Furthermore, it matters for three more specific reasons. Most obviously, the division between sensibility and understanding structures the account of our capacity to know that Kant presents in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is thus central to an overall

¹ *CPR*, A15/B29. References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (*CPR*) are to the pagination of the first (A) and/or second edition (B). References to other works of Kant are given with volume and page numbers of the Akademie-Ausgabe (AA). Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1900–). All English translations of Kant's works are from Immanuel Kant, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen William Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (CUP), 1992–).

² *CPR*, A19/B33, A50–51/B74–75, A68–69/B93–94.

understanding of that work. Second, the question looms large in the reception of Kant in the canon.³ Third, the philosophical issues persist. Different interpretations of Kant's position are invoked on opposing sides of debates about the conceptuality of sensory presentations.⁴ Moreover, how we understand the cooperation between sensibility and understanding has implications for the long-running dispute about the scope and effectiveness of anti-skeptical transcendental arguments.⁵ By better understanding Kant's view, we can therefore get clearer simultaneously on the merits of his arguments and on their historical and systematic implications for epistemology and the philosophy of mind.

Kant tells us that a key motivation for his epistemological project is reflection on traditional empiricism. Specifically, he considers what I call *Hume's Insight*: the insight that *empiricism* does not entitle us to understand certain concepts, such as <substance>⁶ and <causation>, to be

³ The evaluations of Kant's first *Critique* by both Hegel and Heidegger, for example, turn on readings of the interplay between sensibility and understanding. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trs. Walter Cerf & Henry Siltan Harris (New York: State University of New York Press, 1977); Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, tr. Richard Taft (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997). Similarly, early 20th century British realists, at least in part, react to a perceived Kantian overemphasis of the understanding's role in sensory presentation. George Edward Moore, "Kant's Idealism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 4 (1903): 127–40; Harold Arthur Prichard, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909); John Cook Wilson, *Statement and Inference, with Other Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926). Lastly, American philosophers, such as Lewis and Sellars, make reflection on the relation between sensibility and understanding central to their accounts of human knowledge. Clarence Irving Lewis, *Mind and the World Order: Outline of a Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956); Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968).

⁴ This debate turns on whether the understanding is involved in sensory presentations of objects, that is, in intuitions. For conceptualist interpretations see John McDowell, "The Woodbridge Lectures 1997. Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality," *The Journal of Philosophy* 95, no. 9 (1998): 431–91; Paul Abela, *Kant's Empirical Realism* (Oxford: OUP, 2002); Anil Gomes, "Kant on Perception: Naïve Realism, Non-Conceptualism, and the B-Deduction," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 254 (2014): 1–19 and "Naïve Realism in Kantian Phrase," *Mind* 126, No. 502 (2017): 529–78; for non-conceptualist readings see Robert Hanna, "Kant and Non-Conceptual Content," *European Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 247–90; Clinton Tolley, "The Non-Conceptuality of the Content of Intuitions: A New Approach," *Kantian Review* 18, no. 1 (2013): 107–36; Lucy Allais, "Transcendental Idealism and the Transcendental Deduction," in *Kant's Idealism*, eds. Dennis Schulting & Jacco Verburt (Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer, 2010): 91–107 and *Manifest Reality: Kant's Idealism and his Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press (OUP), 2015); Christian Onof & Dennis Schulting, "Space as Form of Intuition and as Formal Intuition: On the Note to B160 in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*," *Philosophical Review* 124, no. 1 (2015): 1–58; Collin McLearn, "Two Kinds of Unity in the *Critique of Pure Reason*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53, no. 1 (2015): 79–110.

⁵ This dispute originates with Strawson and Stroud. Peter Frederick Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Routledge, 1959) and *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Barry Stroud, "Transcendental Arguments," *Journal of Philosophy* 65, No. 9 (1968): 241–56. For recent discussion see Robert Stern, ed. *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (Oxford: OUP, 1999).

⁶ I use angle brackets to indicate a concept of what the term enclosed by the brackets refers to.

objectively valid, that is, to be exemplified by what the senses present.⁷ Kant aims to address this insight by moving beyond empiricism. Concretely, he aims to show in the *Critique's* Transcendental Deduction that we can understand the relevant concepts, or *categories*, to be objectively valid on *a priori transcendental* grounds.⁸

According to Kant, sensibility provides intuitions that present objects, and the understanding makes judgements that, by being true of the presented objects, qualify as knowledge.⁹ Against this commonly accepted background, my purpose is to question the claim that *sensibility is intelligible independently of the understanding*. This claim prevails in contemporary readings of Kant and in epistemology and the philosophy of mind more generally. It is characteristic of what I call *epistemic compositionism*.^{10, 11} Against this claim, I contend that Kant sees that *sensibility and understanding can be understood only together*, and that he thereby simultaneously rejects compositionism and develops a valuable, but largely underappreciated, alternative account of knowledge.

To substantiate this, I argue for three related interpretative claims. The first two are:

⁷ AA, 4: 257–60; CPR, B19/20, B127–28, A764–67/B792–95; AA, 5: 50–52.

⁸ AA, 4: 260; CPR, A85/B117; AA, 5: 52–54.

⁹ CPR, A50-51/B74–75.

¹⁰ The outlined account constitutes the *sensibilist variety* of epistemic compositionism, which claims that sensory operations are independently intelligible, while intellectual acts depend for their intelligibility on sensory operations. While there might be other varieties that privilege the intelligibility of intellectual acts over that of sensory operations or take each to be intelligible independently of the other, I here only consider the sensibilist variety.

¹¹ Epistemic compositionism is assumed not only by non-conceptualist readers of Kant (see n.4), but also by some conceptualists, for example, Gomes, “Kant on Perception” and “Naïve Realism in Kantian Phrase,” and by interpreters who do not take a stand on this debate, for instance, Strawson, *Bounds of Sense*; Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics*; Lewis White Beck, “Did the Sage of Königsberg Have No Dreams?,” in *Essays on Kant and Hume* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978): 38–61; Robert Pippin, *Kant's Theory of Form: Essay on the Critique of Pure Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Lorne Falkenstein, *Kant's Intuitionism: A Commentary on the Transcendental Aesthetic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); Henry Edward Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). Beyond Kant interpretation it is common in epistemology and the philosophy of mind. See Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: OUP, 1982); John David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); Quassim Cassam, *The Possibility of Knowledge* (Oxford: OUP, 2007); Tyler Burge, *The Origins of Objectivity* (Oxford: OUP, 2010); John Campbell & Quassim Cassam, *Berkeley's Puzzle* (Oxford: OUP, 2014).

(i) The compositional reading of Kant cannot make sense of the Transcendental Deduction as a response to Hume’s Insight. For it entails that the Deduction can, at most, show that *we must impose the categories on what the senses present*, not that *what the senses present actually exemplifies the categories*.

(ii) Kant deepens Hume’s Insight into what I call *Kant’s Insight*: the insight that empiricism does not entitle us to understand the senses as able to even seem to present objects.

These two claims make it implausible to attribute epistemic compositionism to Kant. Furthermore, I contend that we should read the Deduction, not just as incompatible with compositionism, but as overcoming it in favor of an alternative account of knowledge. This leads me to my final claim:

(iii) Kant endorses what I call *epistemic hylomorphism*, on which sensibility and understanding are aspects of a single capacity to know, each of which depends for its intelligibility on the other: sensibility provides the determinable, *material* aspect, while understanding provides the determining, *formal* aspect of intuition.

I am not here attempting to give a comprehensive interpretation of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction. This would require detailed systematic and textual considerations that are beyond the scope of this paper.¹² My goal is simultaneously more programmatic and more strategic. My negative aim is to show, on systematic grounds, that the attribution of epistemic compositionism to Kant makes it impossible to interpret him as able either to respond to Hume’s Insight or to develop his own. My positive goal is to make it plausible that for Kant to address both these insights—which, I argue, is part of the project of the first *Critique*—we need to read him as committed to epistemic hylomorphism.

This project is worthwhile because even those who read Kant hylomorphically do not explicate the systematic and historical relationship of Hume’s and Kant’s Insights to each other, much less to compositionism and hylomorphism.¹³ Elucidating these relations enables us to appreciate that,

¹² For a more detailed discussion of the issues raised in this paper, including a discussion of skepticism, a criticism of a concrete instance of the compositional reading, and an interpretation of the Transcendental Deduction, see Maximilian Tegtmeier, “Overcoming Epistemic Compositionism by Appreciating Kant’s Insight: Skepticism, Givenness, and Mind-Independence in the Transcendental Deduction,” *Synthese* 200, no. 44 (2022): 1–37.

¹³ For hylomorphic readings see Stephen Engstrom, “The Transcendental Deduction and Skepticism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (1994): 359–80, “Understanding and Sensibility,” *Inquiry* 40, No. 1 (2006): 2–25, and “Self-Consciousness and the Unity of Knowledge,” in *11/2013 Bewusstsein/Consciousness*, eds. Dina Edmundts & Sally Sedgwick (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016): 25–48; John McDowell, “Hegel’s Idealism as a Radicalization of Kant,” in *Having the World in View* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009): 69–89 and “Rationalism without Dogmas,” in *Giving a Damn: Essays in Dialogue with John Haugeland*, eds. Zed Adams & Jacob Browning (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2017): 311–28; James Conant, “Why Kant is not a Kantian,” *Philosophical Topics*

rather than being a mere alternative to compositionality, Kant's hylomorphism is the result of his thinking through and ultimately overcoming the shortcomings of compositionality.

My argument has four steps: First, I sketch the elements of Kant's account of knowledge (§I) and motivate the prevailing compositional reading of it (§II). Second, I recover Hume's Insight (§III), and explain how the Deduction responds to it (§IV). Third, I put epistemic compositionality into question. To this end, I bring out its difficulty with making sense of the Deduction as a response to Hume's Insight, thus establishing my first interpretative claim (§V). Furthermore, I substantiate my second interpretative claim by arguing that Kant deepens Hume's Insight into Kant's Insight, which further undermines the intelligibility of compositionality (§VI). Fourth, I develop epistemic hylomorphism and explain how it evades the difficulties facing compositionality. Specifically, I show that the Deduction explains that sensibility and understanding can be understood only together (§VII). I then sketch hylomorphism as a way to understand this mutual dependence, establishing my third interpretative claim (§VIII). Lastly, I reconsider the motivation for reading Kant compositionally in light of the above (§IX). I conclude by summarizing my findings (§X).

I

At the outset of the Transcendental Logic, Kant writes:

Our knowledge¹⁴ arises from two fundamental sources in the mind, the first of which is the reception of presentations¹⁵ (the receptivity of impressions), the second the capacity to know an object by means of these presentations (spontaneity of concepts); through the former an object is given to us, through the latter it is

44, no. 1 (2016): 75–125; Andrea Kern, “Spontaneity and Receptivity in Kant’s Theory of Knowledge,” *Philosophical Topics* 34, no. 1 & 2 (2006): 145–62 and “Die “ursprüngliche” Form der Erkenntnis: Über Kants Hylomorphismus,” *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 125. Jahrgang / II (2018): 222–40; Matthew Boyle, “Kant’s Hylomorphism,” (unpublished manuscript).

¹⁴ I translate *Erkenntnis* as “knowledge,” rather than the more common “cognition.” For a defense of this see Stephen Engstrom, *The Form of Practical Knowledge: A Study of the Categorical Imperative* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009): 21 n.2. I prefer “knowledge” because it implies that *Erkenntnis* in its basic sense entails truth.

¹⁵ The German word that I translate as “presentation” is *Vorstellung*, standardly translated “representation.” “Presentation” is, however, etymologically defensible and not implausible. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* tr. & ed. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996): 22 n.73. I prefer “presentation” because there is a tendency to reserve “representation” for *Vorstellungen* that involve the understanding, and I want to avoid prejudging whether *Vorstellungen* involve the understanding.

thought [...]. Intuition and concepts therefore constitute the elements of all our knowledge, so that neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield knowledge. Both are either pure or empirical. [...] Only pure intuitions or concepts alone are possible a priori, empirical ones only *a posteriori*. If we will call the receptivity of our mind to receive presentations insofar as it is affected in some way sensibility, then [...] the capacity to bring forth presentations itself, or the spontaneity of knowledge, is the understanding.¹⁶

Kant here introduces the idea of the cooperation between sensibility and understanding.

He goes on to explain that for judgement to be knowledge, rather than mere thought, sensibility must present the understanding with objects.¹⁷ Knowledge consists in sensibility presenting intuitions of objects to the understanding and the understanding judging truly about the presented objects.

Kant emphasizes the difference in kind of sensibility and understanding, writing: “[T]hese two [...] capacities cannot exchange their functions. The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything, and the senses are not capable of thinking anything. Only from their unification can knowledge arise.”¹⁸

This difference in kind of sensibility and understanding is reflected in Kant’s distinction between the a priori forms of unity of operations of sensibility and understanding respectively. A capacity is individuated and understood as the capacity it is by the form of unity of its characteristic operation. This form unites the disparate sub-operations of that capacity as instances of the characteristic operation of that capacity. Kant treats the a priori forms of unity of operations of sensibility and understanding in the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Transcendental Analytic respectively.¹⁹

¹⁶ CPR, A50–51/B74–75, my translation & underlining; see also B1–2, A15/B29, A19/B33, A68/B93.

¹⁷ CPR, A51/B75, A62/B87, A155–56/B194–95, A239/B298. Mere thought differs from judgement (and knowledge) in that it can be arbitrary—“I can *think* whatever I will, provided only that I do not contradict myself” (CPR, Bxxvi n.)—while judgement cannot be arbitrary but must involve “something of necessity” and essentially aims at truth which is judgement’s agreement with the object (CPR, B104–05; see also A58/B82; AA, 9: 50).

¹⁸ CPR, A51–52/B75–76, my translation.

¹⁹ CPR, A52/B76.

Kant explains in the Aesthetic that the a priori forms of our *sensibility*, as our capacity to intuit, are space and time. Thus, any intuition, as such, consists in a manifold of sensory affections that are unified in accordance with these forms of our sensibility. These forms also enable the construction of the *pure intuitions* that Kant mentions at A50-51/B74-75, quoted above. Pure intuitions are presentations of objects as spatial or temporal that do not depend on any specific sensory affection: for instance, the intuition of a triangle that is a subject matter of geometry.

Kant explains in the *Leitfaden* of the Analytic²⁰ that the a priori forms of the *understanding*, as the capacity to judge, are the a priori forms of judgement. Thus, any judgement, as such, consists in a manifold of conceptual presentations that are unified in accordance with these forms of judgement. These forms—for example, the form of subject-predicate judgement, which Kant calls “categorical judgement”—are part of the subject matter of general logic.²¹

Kant contends that the forms of judgement provide a “guiding thread” to the discovery of what he calls “categories,” that is, the *pure concepts* that he mentions at A50-51/B74-75, quoted above. The *categories* are a priori concepts of an object in general that correspond to the forms of judgement.²² For example, the category of substance corresponds to the form of categorical judgement (cf. §VII). Any concept of a specific object, as such, consists in a manifold of presentations that are unified in accordance with one or more of the categories. The categories are conceptual presentations of an object in general that do not depend on any specific sensory affection: for instance, the concept of substance, which is part of the subject matter of what Kant calls transcendental logic.²³

²⁰ This section—titled “On the Guiding Thread (*Leitfaden*) for the Discovery of all Pure Concepts of the Understanding” (*CPR*, A66/B91; my translation)—is commonly referred to as the *Metaphysical Deduction*. I prefer *Leitfaden* to avoid confusion with the *Transcendental Deduction*.

²¹ *CPR*, A70/B95, A76/B102, A130–31/B169–70.

²² *CPR*, A79–80/B105, B128, B158; *AA*, 4: 303.

²³ *CPR*, A76-77/B102, A130–31/B169–70.

II

The difference in kind between operations of sensibility and understanding leaves open the possibility that these operations depend on each other for their intelligibility. The operations of the kidneys are different in kind from those of the heart, for instance, but the intelligibility and thus the concept of the former depends on the intelligibility and thus the concept of the latter, and vice versa.

We have already seen that the intelligibility of acts of the understanding that claim to be knowledge depends on operations of sensibility. For, if judgement is to be knowledge, rather than mere thought, sensibility has to present the understanding with objects. However, there is no obvious indication that something parallel is true of the operations of sensibility. This makes it a live option that operations of sensibility are intelligible independently of acts of the understanding, as maintained by epistemic compositionism.

The structure of the *Critique* itself can seem to provide textual motivation for attributing compositionism to Kant. He investigates sensibility and understanding separately, with the Transcendental Aesthetic explaining intuition, and the Transcendental Analytic explaining knowledge on the basis of intuition.²⁴ Compositionists might take the fact that Kant expounds the Aesthetic prior to and thus independently of the Analytic to imply that its analysis of sensibility is intelligible independently of the Analytic's analysis of the understanding.²⁵

There is also a key systematic motivation for assuming epistemic compositionism. It turns on the thought that, *if the intelligibility of sensibility depended on the understanding, then operations of sensibility would essentially involve acts of the understanding.*

This thought makes it tempting to argue as follows: The understanding is responsible for judging, which is a subjective act; sensibility is what presents a judging subject with objects to judge about,

²⁴ *CPR*, A15–16/B30, A51–52/B76.

²⁵ *CPR*, A16/B29.

and so provides for the objectivity of judgment—the objectivity that is required for judgement to be knowledge. But if sensibility depended for its intelligibility on the understanding, then operations of sensibility would essentially involve acts of the understanding, which are as such subjective. And in that case intuitions, that is, sensory presentations of objects, would at least in part depend on subjective intellectual acts, thus rendering them insufficiently mind-independent to provide for the objectivity of judgement that is required for judgement to be knowledge.

Consequently, we are left with a choice between compositionism and a form of intellectual projectivism, on which the understanding at least in part shapes the sensory presentations of objects.²⁶ And we must choose compositionism because (a) Kant explicitly rejects the material idealism that goes along with intellectual projectivism, and (b) intellectual projectivism is an implausible account of knowledge, so that, if possible, we should avoid attributing it to Kant.²⁷

III

The central touchstone for understanding the interplay between sensibility and understanding, and thus a key test case for the compositional reading, is Kant's Transcendental Deduction, which is directly concerned with the relationship between operations of sensibility and understanding.²⁸ Kant is explicit that it is Hume's skeptical empiricism that is a primary motivation for his

²⁶ This projectivism should not be conflated with Kant's transcendental idealism. Transcendental idealism claims that what sensibility presents are not things-in-themselves but appearances, but the outlined projectivism questions whether we can even know the appearances presented by sensibility, as such.

²⁷ CPR, B274; Prichard, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*; Gomes, "Naïve Realism In Kantian Phrase." There are further arguments for assuming compositionism that turn on the sketched systematic thought. One such argument contends that, if sensory presentation of objects essentially involved the understanding, then non-human animals, who, for Kant, lack the understanding, would be unable to enjoy sensory presentations of objects. But Kant takes animals to enjoy such presentations, hence we need to read him compositionally. AA, 9: 64/65; AA, 2: 59; Collin McLear, "Kant on Animal Consciousness," *Philosophers Imprint* 11, No. 15 (2011): 1–16. Another argument contends that the understanding's involvement in operations of sensibility would undermine the difference in kind between the forms of unity of intuitions and of concepts, so that in order not to flout this Kantian doctrine we must opt for compositionism. McLear, "Two Kinds of Unity in the *Critique of Pure Reason*;" Onof & Schulting "Space as Form of Intuition and as Formal Intuition;" Allais, *Manifest Reality*, Ch. 7. Like the argument I consider, these arguments dissolve once we appreciate Kant's epistemic hylomorphism (cf. §IX).

²⁸ CPR, A85/B117, A128.

epistemology in general, and the Transcendental Deduction in particular.²⁹ Here, I reconstruct this skeptical empiricism and recover what I call Hume's Insight as its source.

According to Hume, empiricism holds that all mental content derives exclusively from operations of the senses by themselves.³⁰ Sensory affection yields sensory impressions.³¹ Simple sensory impressions are states of sensory consciousness that seem to present sensible qualities. These sensible qualities would, were they actually presented, have to be qualities of objects.³² The only role of the understanding is to help order these impressions and to retain them as ideas that represent impressions.³³ The understanding connects simple impressions into complex ones that, by seeming to present collections of qualities, seem to present objects; it connects particular ideas to general terms, thus allowing those ideas to figure as concepts; and it connects ideas or concepts into judgements.³⁴ Ideas or concepts are validated as objective, and basic empirical judgements are validated as knowledge, by objects that are presented in sensory impressions.³⁵

This empiricism is a variety of epistemic compositionism, for it holds that objective validity and empirical knowledge are the products of operations of the senses and the understanding, and it conceives the senses as intelligible independently of the understanding: the senses by themselves at least seem to present objects, and empiricists tacitly assume that when all goes well they do actually present objects, while the understanding performs acts of concept formation and judgment that are validated by those objects.

Accordingly, empiricism can be captured in the following three theses:

²⁹ *CPR*, B19/20, B127–28, A764–67/B792–95; *AA*, 4: 259/60; *AA*, 5: 52/53.

³⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge (Oxford: OUP, 1976), 4, 7.

³¹ *Treatise*, 1/2, 84.

³² *Treatise*, 19, 192, 366, 647.

³³ *Treatise*: 3/4, 37; David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Buckle (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 19. Impressions, which Hume associates with the feeling of present sensory affection, are more forceful and livelier than sensory ideas, which he associates with memories of past sensory affection (*Treatise*: 1–3; *Enquiry*: 18).

³⁴ *Enquiry*, 17–25; *Treatise*, 22.

³⁵ *Enquiry*, 25–27; *Treatise*, 70–75.

(1) [*Compositional thesis*] Operations of the senses *by themselves* at least seem to present objects, and when all goes well actually do present objects.

(2) [*Empiricist semantic thesis*] For any idea or concept to be objectively valid it must derive its content exclusively from specific operations of the senses by themselves.

(3) [*Epistemic thesis*] For any judgement to be empirical knowledge it must agree with what the senses present.

In line with (2), Hume holds that for any supposed concept to be objectively valid, that is, able to be exemplified by what the senses present, it must derive its content exclusively from impressions.³⁶ He argues that for neither of the supposed concepts of *substance* or *causation*, which both seem to have content, we can identify corresponding sensory impressions. Accordingly, he contends that the resources of empiricism cannot enable us to vindicate these supposed concepts as objectively valid.³⁷

I restrict my reconstruction to <substance>, but Hume presents a parallel argument for <causation>.³⁸ He defines <substance> as “*something that may exist by itself*,” that is, something that continues to exist independently of our impressions.³⁹ But, for empiricists, sensory consciousness is an intermittent series of momentary impressions that seem to present sensible qualities. Thus, nothing in sensory consciousness could provide content to the idea of something that continues to exist independently of one or a series of those momentary impressions. There is no impression of something continuing to exist independently of these impressions.⁴⁰ “We have therefore no idea [or no concept] of substance, distinct from a collection of particular qualities.”⁴¹ Empiricist resources cannot enable us to understand <substance> as objectively valid. This is *Hume’s Insight* regarding <substance>, which applies *mutatis mutandis* to <causation>.

³⁶ *Enquiry*, 22; *Treatise*, 65, 74/75, 648/49.

³⁷ *Treatise*, 16, 87–92, 219–22.

³⁸ *Treatise*, 88–92.

³⁹ *Treatise*, 233.

⁴⁰ *Treatise*, 67, 187–89.

⁴¹ *Treatise*, 16.

Hume contends that <substance> and <causation> *seem* to be objectively valid because they are expressions of ingrained mental habits of the association of impressions. Specifically, our imagination projects its habits on to the objects that our impressions seem to present, thereby making our impressions seem to present *substances* that stand in *causal relations*.⁴²

<Substance> and <causation> are constituent concepts of the concept of something—an object—that continues to *exist independently* of our impressions and is the *causal ground* of them.⁴³ Accordingly, Hume notes that we require objectively valid concepts of <substance> and <causation> to be able to understand the sensible qualities that our impressions seem to present as the sensible qualities of objects that continue to *exist independently* of our impressions and that are the *causal ground* of them.⁴⁴ He sees that it is only if we are entitled to attribute objective validity to these concepts that we can understand the impressions constituting our sensory consciousness as actually presenting *mind-independent* objects that can vindicate our empirical judgements as genuine knowledge.

However, Hume's Insight shows that empiricism cannot entitle us to attribute objective validity to <substance> and <causation>. So given empiricism, these concepts cannot inform our understanding of impressions in the requisite way. With <substance> and <causation> being mere projections of our imagination our impressions can at best be understood to seem to present sensible qualities of what *merely seem* to be mind-independent objects. Consequently, our empirical judgements are at best judgements about *mind-dependent* objects. This makes it impossible for us to understand those judgements as genuine knowledge.

Hume's Insight, which results from reflection on (2), the empiricist semantic thesis, thus undermines (3), the epistemic thesis. For, absent objectively valid concepts of substance and

⁴² *Treatise*, 165–67, 220, 222, 265–67, 657; *Enquiry*, 75.

⁴³ For Kant the concept of an object in general also involve the rest of the categories (*CPR*, A80/B106).

⁴⁴ *Treatise*, 187–99, 211–17.

causation, empirical judgement's agreement with what the senses present does not amount to its being genuine knowledge. As Hume acknowledges, this undermines empiricism as a viable account of empirical knowledge and entails epistemic skepticism.⁴⁵

IV

As we just saw, Hume's Insight underlies Hume's skeptical empiricism, which Kant credits with motivating his Transcendental Deduction.⁴⁶ The Deduction aims to dissolve this skepticism by arguing for an alternative to (2), the empiricist semantic thesis, as the thesis that underlies Hume's Insight.⁴⁷

Kant suggests in the *Leitfaden* that <substance>, <causation>, and the other categories are *a priori* concepts. This reconceives these concepts as having their origin in the understanding, rather than the senses, but it leaves open how they can be vindicated as objectively valid.⁴⁸ The Deduction is concerned with this further task.

Kant holds that for any concept, including the categories, to be objectively valid, sensibility has to be able to present objects that exemplify that concept.⁴⁹ Hence, he does not argue that the categories somehow derive their objective validity exclusively from the understanding.⁵⁰ Instead, he contends that, if we can show a priori that the categories are exemplified by what sensibility

⁴⁵ *Treatise*, 167, 265–67, 657; *Enquiry*, 159. For Hume, the impossibility of an account of empirical knowledge and the concomitant epistemic skepticism are mitigated by the fact that it is impossible for us to refrain from making empirical judgements that we take to be knowledge (*Treatise*, 187, 269; *Enquiry*, 55, 160).

⁴⁶ Kant argues that the Deduction is needed to forestall Hume's skeptical empiricism from generalizing from metaphysical knowledge, the impossibility of which Hume acknowledges, to mathematical knowledge, which Hume—wrongly according to Kant—takes to manifest actual a priori knowledge (*Treatise*, 70, 95, 180; *Enquiry*, 25, 165; AA, 4: 272/73; AA, 5: 52).

⁴⁷ CPR, A92–95/B124–28.

⁴⁸ CPR, A66/B91, A94–95/B127–28.

⁴⁹ CPR, A51/B75.

⁵⁰ Hume considers whether <substance> and <causation> might be derived *exclusively* from reason, but concludes that this is impossible (*Treatise*, 92, 157). Kant agrees with this assessment (CPR, B127–8; AA, 4: 257–9, 310).

presents, then we will have vindicated them as a priori concepts of an object in general that originate in the understanding.⁵¹

The Deduction's goal therefore is to explain how it is possible for the categories, which originate independently of any specific operation of sensibility, to be exemplified by what sensibility presents.⁵² Kant aims to show that while, in line with Hume's Insight, these concepts cannot be understood as objectively valid on *empiricist* grounds, that is, by appeal to what *specific* operations of sensibility by themselves supposedly present; they can be so understood on *transcendental* grounds, that is, by appeal to the conditions for the possibility that operations of sensibility *in general* can present objects. He argues that reflection on intuition *in general*, via reflection on the mere *form* of intuition, shows that the categories are exemplified by any intuition whatsoever, thereby vindicating them as objectively valid and thus addressing Hume's Insight.⁵³

The Deduction thus argues for the following replacement for (2), the empiricist semantic thesis:

(2*) [*Transcendental semantic thesis*] Certain concepts⁵⁴ can be vindicated as objectively valid by reflection on the conditions for the possibility that operations of sensibility in general can present objects.

The relevant reflection is roughly the following: Kant takes it to be common ground with Hume that there are empirical judgements about objects that at least seem to be mind-independent. The categories, which include <substance> and <causation>, are the concepts of a mind-independent object in general. Therefore, the form of judgements about *objects* that at least seem to be mind-independent must correspond to the categories (cf. §VII). Now, Kant argues that, for it to be possible that there are *empirical* judgements at all, intuitions, as sensory presentations of objects, must be able to be the object of those judgements. For, if what sensibility presents could not be the object of judgements, then there would be no *empirical* judgements at all. But, for what sensibility

⁵¹ CPR, A76–77/B102, B148–49, A155–56/B194–95, A220/B267, A239/B298, B288/89.

⁵² CPR, A85/B117.

⁵³ CPR, A79/B104–05, A92–95/B124–29, A146/B185, A766/B794; AA, 4: 308/09.

⁵⁴ For simplicity I bracket Kant's conception of empirical concepts.

presents to be able to be the object of judgements, it must conform to the forms of judgement. It does so, by exemplifying the categories, as the concepts of a mind-independent object which correspond to the forms of judgement. Hence, for it to be possible that there are empirical judgements at all the categories must be objectively valid.⁵⁵

The Deduction thus addresses Hume's Insight by showing that what sensibility presents must exemplify the categories, on pain of making it impossible for there to be empirical judgements at all. The Deduction thus moves beyond empiricism by replacing (2), the empiricist semantic thesis, with (2*), the transcendental semantic thesis.

V

The compositional reading of Kant holds on to (1), the compositional thesis, and adopts (2*) to be able to hold on to (3), the epistemic thesis.

The compositional thesis asserts that sensibility is intelligible independently of the understanding. This implies that sensory presentations of objects, as what operations of sensibility by themselves provide, can be understood independently of acts of the understanding. Hence, the result of the reflection sketched in the previous section is not that for it to be possible that there are empirical judgements at all *what sensibility presents must exemplify the categories*, but merely that *we must impose the categories on what sensibility presents*. For what sensibility presents can be understood independently of acts of the understanding, so that it could be entirely different from how we judge it to be in our judgements whose form corresponds to the categories. I call this the

⁵⁵ CPR, B143. This line of argument is often taken to be a paradigmatic instance of a *transcendental argument*: an argument that establishes that some undisputed claim, *p*, depends for its intelligibility on another disputed claim, *q*, thereby establishing *q*. Here, *p* is the claim—undisputed by Hume—that there are empirical judgements about objects that at least seem to be mind-independent, while *q* is the claim—put in question by Hume's Insight—that what sensibility presents exemplifies the categories. Strawson, *Bounds of Sense*, Ch. 3; Quassim Cassam, "Transcendental Arguments, Transcendental Synthesis and Transcendental Idealism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no. 149 (1987): 355–78; James Van Cleve, *Problems From Kant* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), Ch. 7; Barry Stroud, "Kant's 'Transcendental Deduction'" in *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason: A Critical Guide*, ed. James R. O' Shea (Cambridge: CUP, 2017): 106–19.

impositionist objection. It notes that, read compositionally, Kant's reflection only succeeds in showing that *we must apply* the categories to what sensibility presents, but not that what sensibility presents itself *must actually exemplify* the categories. Consequently, we do not vindicate the claim that what sensibility presents *exemplifies* the categories—that the categories *are* objectively valid—but merely that what sensibility presents *appears to us to exemplify* the categories—that the categories *seem to be* objectively valid. This contradicts the explicit aim of the Deduction, for it means that the categories fall within the scope of Hume's skepticism.⁵⁶

Faced with this objection compositionals can choose between two equally unattractive options: Either they can accept that Kant fails to respond to Hume's Insight and is open to the impositionist objection⁵⁷, or they can argue that the Deduction does not aim to respond to Hume's Insight by showing that what sensibility presents *must actually exemplify* the categories, but instead merely has the weaker aim of showing that *we must apply* the categories to what sensibility presents for it to be possible that there are empirical judgements at all.⁵⁸

The first option is unattractive because it goes against the supposed motivation for reading Kant compositionally, namely the supposed ability of epistemic compositionism to avoid intellectual projectivism. Granting the objection commits Kant to a categorial projectivism that undermines the intelligibility of our empirical judgments as genuine knowledge. That is, like Hume, he would be unable to hold on to (3), the epistemic thesis.

The second option is unattractive because it is Hume's Insight that underlies Hume's skeptical empiricism which Kant takes to make his Deduction necessary. However, even putting this aside,

⁵⁶ For this objection see Moore, "Kant's Idealism," 134–36; Van Cleve, *Problems From Kant*, 89, 104; Stroud "Kant's 'Transcendental Deduction'," 118/19. Stroud, "Transcendental Arguments" directs a general version of this objection against anti-skeptical transcendental arguments.

⁵⁷ For this interpretation see Van Cleve, *Problems From Kant*, 89, 104; Stroud, "Transcendental Arguments," 256 and "Kant's 'Transcendental Deduction'," 118/19.

⁵⁸ For this reading see Allais "Transcendental Idealism and the Transcendental Deduction," 102–06 and *Manifest Reality*, Ch. 11.

the second option leaves Kant open to the impositionist objection. Beyond the reasons stated, this is unattractive because it does not fit the text. Kant explicitly notes that, if the Deduction's result was vulnerable to the impositionist objection, that would be "precisely what the skeptic wishes most."⁵⁹ As Kant himself acknowledges the threat posed by the impositionist objection, it is implausible to saddle him with a position that is vulnerable to it.

This establishes my first interpretative claim:

(i) The compositional reading of Kant cannot make sense of the Deduction as a response to Hume's Insight, because it entails that the Deduction is vulnerable to the impositionist objection.

Hence it is implausible to read Kant compositionally.

VI

For Kant, Hume's Insight is an insight because it reveals a shortcoming of empiricism that motivates Kant to develop an alternative to it. I want to suggest that Kant, unlike Hume himself, sees that Hume's Insight demands not only moving beyond (2), the empiricist semantic thesis, but also, more radically, beyond (1), the compositional thesis. The reason for this is Kant's deepening of Hume's Insight into what I call Kant's Insight.

As we saw, Hume takes impressions to be states of sensory consciousness that seem to present objects. Kant sees that this understanding of impressions implies an understanding of the concepts of substance and causation, that, at least in part, constitute the concept of a mind-independent object. For, to be able to understand states of sensory consciousness as even seeming to present objects we must possess a concept of something that continues to *exist independently* of our sensory consciousness and is the *causal ground* of the states that constitute that consciousness. However, it is Hume's Insight that, on empiricist grounds, it is impossible to vindicate <substance> and <causation>. Kant thus sees that empiricism cannot entitle us to conceive of impressions as even

⁵⁹ CPR, B168.

seeming to present objects. For, (a) understanding impressions to seem to present objects requires entitlement to <substance> and <causation>, and (b) empiricism is unable to entitle us to these concepts. Thus, impressions can at best be understood as mere *sensations*, that is, as states of sensory consciousness which do not so much as purport to provide any awareness of anything other than themselves as modifications of sensory consciousness.⁶⁰ This is *Kant's Insight*.⁶¹

Kant's deepening of Hume's Insight into Kant's Insight undermines the intelligibility of compositionism, which assumes that sensibility by itself provides sensory consciousness that at least seems to present objects. On empiricist grounds, operations of sensibility by themselves cannot be understood to vindicate the objective validity of <substance> and <causation> (Hume's Insight). Yet, these concepts are required to vindicate the idea that operations of sensibility can even seem to present any objects—have any objective purport (Kant's Insight). Hence, on empiricist grounds, it is unintelligible that operations of sensibility have any objective purport.

The shortcoming of empiricist compositionism, revealed by Kant's Insight, is that (2), the empiricist semantic thesis, undermines not only (3), the epistemic thesis, as Hume's Insight implied, but also (1), the compositionist thesis. For, (2) makes it unintelligible that the categories are

⁶⁰ *CPR*, B44, B207–08, A253/B309, A320/B376–77.

⁶¹ Hume himself misses this implication of his own insight because he assumes that impressions seem to present sensible qualities, that is, he helps himself to <quality>, without seeing that his own insight regarding <substance> also undermines his entitlement to <quality>. For <substance> and <quality> are mutually dependent concepts, that is, we cannot understand, and thus be entitled to, one without the other: To be a substance is to be a bearer of qualities, and to be a quality is to be the property of a substance (*CPR*, A186/B229–30, A414/B441). Hume assumes that complex impressions seem to present collections of sensible qualities. For Hume, we are not in a position to know that these qualities themselves do not exist independently of being presented by the senses. For they are things of a kind that would be qualities of substances if there were any substances, and we do not know that there are not any substances. Hence, our inability to vindicate <substance> leaves untouched, Hume thinks, a supposed ability to be presented with items that we would be in a position to attribute to substances as their qualities, if we were entitled to <substance>. Therefore, Hume thinks—falsely according to Kant—that we can understand our supposed concepts of specific objects in terms of collections of sensible qualities, *even though* we cannot vindicate the concept of substance in general; that is, while our supposed concepts of specific objects cannot be understood as being of mind-independent objects in general, they still can be understood as concepts of what seem to be mind-independent objects, but actually merely are collections of sensible qualities (*Treatise*, 16).

objectively valid, which in turn makes it unintelligible that operations of sensibility have any objective purport.

This substantiates my second interpretative claim:

(ii) Kant sees that Hume's Insight implies Kant's Insight: that empiricism does not entitle us to understand the senses as able to even seem to present objects.

Hence, again, it is implausible to read Kant compositionally.

VII

Since epistemic compositionality is untenable as a reading of Kant, we need to find an alternative account of knowledge to credit him with. Here, I want to present enough of an outline of my reading of the Deduction to suggest that it begins to develop this needed alternative.

Given the above, the Transcendental Deduction has two tasks: (α) to establish the objective validity of the categories, thereby addressing Hume's Insight, and (β) to demonstrate the objective purport of operations of sensibility, thus responding to Kant's Insight. I want to suggest that it achieves these tasks simultaneously, by explaining that the categories and the forms of intuition are different manifestations of one and the same fundamental function of the understanding, so that operations of sensibility and understanding can be understood only together.

As we saw, the characteristic act of the understanding is judgement. Kant also describes the understanding more generally as the sole source of unity.⁶² Unity is brought about by acts of "synthesis," so that, more generally, the characteristic act of the understanding is *synthesis*.⁶³ Kant explains that "*synthesis* in the most general sense [is] the action of putting different presentations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one knowing."⁶⁴ As such, synthesis encompasses not only judging—the unification of a manifold of conceptual presentations

⁶² CPR, B129–30, B134n., B134–35, B159.

⁶³ CPR, A68–69/B93–94, A78/B103.

⁶⁴ CPR, A77/B103, my translation.

in a judgment—but also other manifestations of the characteristic act of the understanding: for instance, inferring—the unification of a manifold of judgements in an inference.⁶⁵ Acts of the understanding depend on “functions,” which manifest themselves in “the unity of the action of ordering different presentations under a common one,” that is, in acts of synthesis.⁶⁶

In explaining the categories in the *Leitfaden* Kant writes:

The same function that gives unity to the different presentations *in a judgment* also gives unity to the mere synthesis of different presentations *in an intuition*, which, expressed generally, is called the pure concept of understanding. The same understanding, therefore, and indeed by means of the very same actions through which it brings the logical form of a judgment into concepts [...], also brings a transcendental content into its presentations [...], on account of which they are called pure concepts of the understanding that pertain to objects a priori.⁶⁷

Kant here distinguishes two kinds of synthesis: “Judgement” and “intuition.” *Judgement* unifies a manifold of conceptual presentations in a judgement. The synthetic “function of the understanding” manifests itself in such acts of *judgmental synthesis* as the form of judgements. *Intuition* unifies a sensory manifold in an intuition of an object. The “same function” of the understanding that manifests itself in judgmental synthesis manifests itself in *sensible synthesis* and can be expressed in terms of the categories.⁶⁸

This commonality of function is reflected by the isomorphism between the table of judgements and the table of categories.⁶⁹ These tables, from the *Leitfaden*, express the manifestation of “the same function” of the understanding in judgement and intuition respectively. For instance, the function of the understanding that enables the distinction of subject and properties can equally manifest itself in judgmental and in intuitional synthesis.⁷⁰ In judgmental synthesis it manifests itself in accordance with the *categorical form of judgement*, which expresses the affirmation or denial of properties of a subject, in accordance with the principle that “the subject is never the

⁶⁵ CPR, A69/B94, A77–79/B103–05, A130–31/B169.

⁶⁶ CPR, A68/B93, my translation.

⁶⁷ CPR, A79/104–5, my translation & underlining.

⁶⁸ CPR, A69/B94, B130, B143, A245.

⁶⁹ CPR, A70/B95, A80/B106.

⁷⁰ CPR, B128/29.

property of anything else within *this* judgement.” In sensible synthesis it manifests itself in accordance with the *category of substance*, which expresses the unification of a sensory manifold into an intuition of an object that must always be conceived as the bearer of properties, in accordance with the principle that “the subject is never the property of anything else within *any* judgement.”⁷¹

The Deduction aims to vindicate this commonality of the forms of synthesis that unify judgments and intuitions. Kant seeks to accomplish this by showing that the *same function* of the understanding underlies both the forms of sensory presentations of mind-independent objects—space and time—and the concepts of an object in general—the categories.⁷²

Kant says as much when, halfway through the Deduction in §21, he tells us what still needs to be shown for it to succeed:

[I]t will be shown from the way in which the empirical intuition is given in sensibility [that is, spatio-temporally] that its unity can be none other than the one the category prescribes to the manifold of a given intuition in general [...]; thus by the explanation of its [that is, the category’s] a priori validity in regard to all objects of our senses the aim of the deduction will first be fully attained.⁷³

Kant aims to respond to both Hume’s Insight and his own by establishing simultaneously and reciprocally: (α) that the categories are objectively valid, that is, exemplified in intuitions, because they are an expression of the same function that is manifest in the spatio-temporal unification of intuitions themselves (this is his response to Hume’s Insight); and (β) that intuitions have objective

⁷¹ For this reading see Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, 140.

⁷² *CPR*, A128, B159/60.

⁷³ *CPR*, B144–45, my underlining. Kant promises to accomplish this in §26. For readings of this step of the Deduction see Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Charles T. Wolfe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), Ch. 8; Anil Gomes “Is Kant’s Deduction of the Categories Fit for Purpose?,” *Kantian Review* 15, no. 2 (2010): 118–37; McDowell, “Hegel’s Idealism as a Radicalization of Kant” and “Rationalism Without Dogmas;” Conant, “Why Kant is not a Kantian;” Tegtmeier, “Overcoming Epistemic Compositionism by Appreciating Kant’s Insight,” §8.1.

purport, that is, present objects, because they exemplify the same function that is expressed in the categories qua concepts of an object in general (this is his response to Kant's Insight).⁷⁴

Kant distinguishes the two manifestations of the same function as (a) the *sensible synthesis of the imagination*, which unifies a possible sensory manifold into a *non-conceptual* intuition of a mind-independent object in conformity with space and time as the forms of our sensibility; and (b) the *categorical synthesis of the understanding*, which unifies a possible sensory manifold into a *conceptually reflected* intuition of a mind-independent object in conformity with the categories as expressions of the forms of the understanding.⁷⁵ Moreover, he states that the function that manifests itself in the synthesis of imagination has its origin in the understanding, explaining that the imagination is “a function of the understanding”⁷⁶ and “an effect of the understanding on sensibility.”⁷⁷ Operations of sensibility that provide intuitions do so because they essentially involve an act of the understanding that unifies their sensory manifold into a non-conceptual, yet conceptualizable, intuition. So, while space and time and the categories are forms of unity that differ in kind from each other, both are essentially manifestations of the same original synthetic function of the understanding.⁷⁸

On this reading, Kant's Deduction explicates the cooperation between sensibility and understanding in a manner that is responsive to both Hume's Insight and his own. The Deduction

⁷⁴ *CPR*, A112, B138, A158/B197. This implies that Kant's reflection on the objective validity of the categories, and the transcendental argument associated with it, are only an aspect of the Deduction's overall argument, thus suggesting a reason for why transcendental arguments considered independently of hylomorphism have been found wanting (cf. §V).

⁷⁵ *CPR*, A77–79/B103–04, B151–52.

⁷⁶ Marginal addition at *CPR*, B103.

⁷⁷ *CPR*, B152.

⁷⁸ On my reading intuitions are not unified by the categories, that is, intuitions do not have conceptual form. For, while any form of unity has its source in the understanding, not every such form is conceptually reflected, as the categories are. Intuition is non-conceptual, but since the form governing its synthesis is a manifestation of the same original function of the understanding which the categories are conceptual expression of, the categories are exemplified by intuition, and thus can be used to conceptualize intuitions (*CPR*, B121/22). My reading thus does not conflict with the difference in kind between forms of unity of intuitions and of concepts (see n.27). For similar readings see Thomas Land, “Kantian Conceptualism,” in *Rethinking Epistemology*, Vol. 1, ed. Guenther Abel & James Conant (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011): 197–239; Conant, “Why Kant is not a Kantian,” 113–17.

moves beyond empiricism *not only* by replacing (2), the empiricist semantic thesis, with (2*), the transcendental semantic thesis, but *more radically* by also abandoning (1), the compositional thesis.

Instead, Kant argues for:

(1*) [*Hylomorphic thesis*] Operations of sensibility provide a sensory manifold as the matter, while acts of the understanding provide space and time as the form of sensory consciousness that seems to present objects.

In establishing this, the Deduction overcomes epistemic compositionism in favor of

epistemic hylomorphism, which is captured by (1*), (2*), and (3).

VIII

Having shown how to overcome compositionism, I want to substantiate Kant's hylomorphic alternative.

My reading of the Deduction entails the following: (α) Kant explains how it is intelligible that the categories are objectively valid in terms of their exemplification by what is presented by possible operations of sensibility. (β) He explains how it is intelligible that intuitions have objective purport in terms of the essential involvement of acts of the understanding in their constitution. Kant's account thus explains the objective validity of acts of the understanding, by recourse to the objective purport of operations of sensibility, and vice versa.

Despite this mutual dependence of the intelligibility of operations of sensibility and understanding, the account respects the difference in kind between sensibility and understanding. It does this by endorsing epistemic hylomorphism. As Stephen Engstrom puts it: "Kant characterizes the distinction between understanding and sensibility as one between form and matter."⁷⁹ Even a cursory reading of the first *Critique* reveals the concepts of *form* and *matter* as central to how Kant frames and executes his entire project.⁸⁰ He even states that the intention of

⁷⁹ Engstrom, "Understanding and Sensibility," 21.

⁸⁰ *CPR*, A266/B322.

this project is best captured by calling it “formal idealism,” to emphasize the aspect distinguishing it from material idealism.⁸¹

Kant explains that the concepts of “matter” and “form” signify “the determinable in general” and “its determination” respectively.⁸² As such, the matter and form of something essentially depend on each other for their intelligibility: to be the matter of something is to be that in it that is determined by form, and to be the form of something is to be the determination of its matter. The matter and form of something constitute a *hylomorphic unity*: that is, an *original* unity, whose elements are abstractable *aspects* of that unity, which depend for their intelligibility on that unity and thus on each other. For instance, for something to be understood as the matter of an organism—as organs—is for it to be understood to be determined as such by the form of that organism, that is, by a specific form of living being, and for something to be understood as the form of an organism is for it to be understood as determining the matter of that organism as its organs.⁸³

On the hylomorphic reading, the Deduction exploits a conception of intuition as original unities of given determinable sensory matter and synthetic determining intellectual form. Thus, space and time and the categories are revealed to be distinct abstractable formal manifestations of one and the same original synthetic determining function of the understanding.

⁸¹ CPR, B519 n.; AA, 4: 375.

⁸² CPR, A266/B322.

⁸³ By contrast, Kantian compositionism assumes that <matter> and <form> respectively signify “material” and “structure,” where these two terms signify notions that are each independently intelligible, apart from the compound that their joint combination yields. As such, the matter and form of a specific thing merely accidentally depend on each other for their intelligibility: for something to be the matter of something is for it to be a quantity of a specific material that, while in this instance it happens to be structured by this structure, it can also exhibit different structures, and for something to be the structure of something is for it to be a specific structure that, while in this instance it happens to structure this material, it can also structure different materials. The matter and the form of something constitute a *compositional unity*: that is, a *cumulative* unity, whose elements are *components* of that unity, which can be understood independently of that unity and thus of each other. For instance, for something to be understood as the matter of a specific kind of molecule—as specific kinds of atoms—is for it to be understood as a particular kind of material that, while in this instance it happens to be structured by this type of atomic bond, can also exhibit a different structure—be structured by a different type of atomic bond; and for something to be understood as the form of a specific kind of molecule—as a type of atomic bond—is for it to be understood as a structure that, while in this instance it happens to structure these kinds of atoms, can also structure different kinds of materials—different kinds of atoms. For compositional readings see Cassam, *The Possibility of Knowledge*, 123/24; Campbell & Cassam, *Berkeley’s Puzzle*, 174/75; Falkenstein, *Kant’s Intuitionism*; Moore, “Kant’s Idealism,” 139/40.

This substantiates my final interpretative claim:

(iii) Kant endorses epistemic hylomorphism, on which sensibility and understanding are two aspects of a single capacity to know, each of which depends for its intelligibility on the other: sensibility provides the determinable, material aspect, while understanding provides the determining, formal aspect of intuitions.⁸⁴

IX

At this point compositionalist might remind us of their systematic motivation for assuming compositionism. This motivation turned on the thought that, if sensibility and understanding could be understood only together, then operations of sensibility would essentially involve acts of the understanding. Compositionalist took this to undermine the intelligibility of the idea that operations of sensibility provide for the objectivity of judgment required for judgement to be knowledge, that is, as entailing an unacceptable intellectual projectivism (cf. §II).

However, my criticism of compositionism has shifted the burden of proof by showing that compositionism is no better off. For, as we saw, it itself is unable to avoid projectivism and thus to hold on to (3), the epistemic thesis (cf. §VI). But what is more important is that the supposed objection in favor of compositionism itself depends on the implicit assumption of a *compositionalist conception of objectivity*, while it dissolves in light of the alternative conception of objectivity that accompanies Kant's hylomorphism.

The compositionalist conception of objectivity equates objectivity with absolute mind-independence. Accordingly, compositionalist read (3), the epistemic thesis that for any judgement to be empirical knowledge it must *agree with what sensibility presents*, as the claim that for any judgement to be empirical knowledge it must *conform to the objects that sensibility by itself supposedly presents*. I call this reading (3_{EC}). It is against this compositionalist background that the

⁸⁴ Kant suggest that sensibility and understanding are originally one, when he writes, reflecting on the systematic nature of pure reason: "We [...] begin only at the point where the general root of our power to know divides and branches out into two stems, one of which is *reason*". By "reason" I here understand, however, the entire higher faculty of cognition [that is, including the understanding]" (*CPR*, A835/B863, my underlining; see also A15/B29).

claim of (1*), the hylomorphic thesis that sensibility and the understanding can only be understood together, seems to entail a projectivism that undermines (3_{EC}) (cf. §II).

However, I have argued not only for the untenability of this compositionalist background (cf. §§V & VI), but also for hylomorphism as the alternative that emerges from insight into this untenability (cf. §§VII & VIII). According to this alternative, while it is true that (α) the understanding can only be understood as able to make empirical judgements at all because of what sensibility presents, (β) sensibility can only be understood as presenting objects because the understanding unites its operations in a manner expressible in terms of the categories. Against this alternative hylomorphic background, (3), the epistemic thesis, merely asserts what the Deduction aims to explain, namely that *the intelligibility of the possibility of empirical knowledge depends on an original agreement between the forms of sensibility and understanding*. I call this reading (3_{EH}).

Kant's epistemic hylomorphism fundamentally reconceives our conception of objectivity, enabling us to read (3) as (3_{EH}), rather than (3_{EC}), thus avoiding the supposed threat of intellectual projectivism: On the hylomorphic reading, even though intuitions *share the form* of acts of the understanding in general, they are still objective because their objects *materially exist independently* of any specific act of the understanding. Thus, while the *possibility* of intuition *in general* depends on the same fundamental synthetic function of the understanding responsible for its determining *form*, the *actuality* of any *specific* intuition depends on specific operations of sensibility providing its determinable *matter*. Kant thus aims to reconcile idealism and realism by distinguishing formal and material conditions of intuition. His goal is to show that a *formal agreement* of subject and object, recognized in the *active synthetic determination* of sensory consciousness, that is, a *formal idealism*, is complementary to a *material difference* of self and other, recognized in the *passive sensory affection* of such consciousness, that is, a *material realism*. According to epistemic hylomorphism, then, intuition is of an object that the subject, from an

intellectual function expressible in the concept of it as the very objects it is *affected by, determines*; so that the object of intuition, although it must be given from elsewhere in order to be intuited, conforms to the subject's concept of it.⁸⁵

Compositionalists might retreat to the textual claim that, since Kant expounds the Aesthetic prior to and independently of the Analytic, he must think that sensibility is intelligible independently of the understanding. However, Kant nowhere says that any part of the *Critique* can be understood independently of any other. Instead, he explicitly notes in the Discipline of Pure Reason that philosophical concepts—such as <intuition>—must gradually come into view over the course of philosophical enquiry.⁸⁶

Moreover, Kant explains that in the Aesthetic we “separate off everything that the understanding thinks through its concepts.”⁸⁷ That we have to “separate off” the understanding from sensibility suggests that sensibility is not originally separate from the understanding. This fits the idea that sensibility and the understanding are aspects of a single capacity to know, which can only be articulated into its subcapacities by philosophical abstraction.⁸⁸ So, while Kant's initial introduction of his epistemology can seem to confirm compositionism, it actually fits better with the hylomorphism that, I have argued, gradually emerges from the progression of the first *Critique*.

X

It is a truism that for judgement to be empirical knowledge it must agree with what the senses present. Furthermore, it is a familiar thought that objectivity involves absolute mind-independence. I have argued that together these two thoughts motivate epistemic compositionism which claims

⁸⁵ Kant suggests this when, against (3_{EC}), the compositional reading of the epistemic thesis, that “our knowledge has to conform to the objects,” he emphasizes that “the objects have to conform to our knowledge,” thus pointing to (3_{EH}), the hylomorphic reading of the epistemic thesis (*CPR*, Bxvi).

⁸⁶ *CPR*, A730–31/B758–59.

⁸⁷ *CPR*, A22/B36.

⁸⁸ *CPR*, A835/B863; *AA*, 9: 92/93.

that operations of sensibility can be understood independently of acts of the understanding, so that for any judgement to be empirical knowledge it must conform to what sensory consciousness by itself presents (cf. §§II & IX). I have contended that it is implausible to attribute this compositionism to Kant for two reasons: First, it fails to make sense of the Transcendental Deduction as a response to Hume's Insight, as it makes the Deduction vulnerable to the impositionist objection (cf. §§IV & V). Second, Kant deepens Hume's Insight into Kant's Insight, which undermines the intelligibility of epistemic compositionism (cf. §VI). Instead, I have argued that Kant aims to address these shortcomings of compositionism by developing a more adequate alternative account of knowledge, on which operations of sensibility and understanding can be understood only together (cf. §§VII & VIII). This hylomorphism transforms the familiar thought about objectivity that underlies compositionism: objectivity involves, not absolute mind-independence, but simultaneously formal agreement with acts of the understanding in general and material independence from any specific such act (cf. §IX). I have thus shown how Kant, by thinking his way from compositionism to hylomorphism, reconceives our very conception of objectivity in a manner that has implications not only for our understanding of Kant, but for epistemology and the philosophy of mind more generally.⁸⁹

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