

Kant's Transcendental Turn to the Object

KU Leuven

karin.deboer@kuleuven.be

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Abstract

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* and elsewhere, Kant uses the term 'object' in various ways and often without clearly signaling its different meanings. As a result, it is hard to gauge the extent to which Kant's account of the object of cognition breaks new ground. In this article, I take the *Critique* to establish what is required to generate an object of cognition *per se* solely by examining the various ways in which the human mind can objectify the content of its representations. To clarify this endeavor, I distinguish four different ways in which the term 'object' is used in the *Critique*, namely, to refer to (1) material things, (2) the content of any type of thought, (3) the mind-immanent correlate of a cognition in the broad sense of the term, and (4) the mind-immanent correlate of a cognition in the strict sense of the term. On my reading, the fourth meaning of the term 'object' is key to the Transcendental Deduction and completes Kant's unprecedented conception of the cognitive acts by means of which the human mind produces objects of cognition out of a manifold of representations.

Keywords

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, object, object constitution, *Stufenleiter*, transcendental idealism

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1. Introduction

In his 1772 letter to Herz, Kant famously asks how a representation that «refers to an object without being in any way affected by it» is possible.¹ The «intellectual representations» (*Br*, AA X 131) at stake cannot refer to objects on account of producing the latter: unlike God, the

¹ Kant to Herz, February 21, 1772 (*Br*, AA X 130). Kant's works are cited by volume and page numbers of *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*KrV*) which is cited by the first (A) and second (B) editions. Where possible, I quote from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* edited by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood.

human mind lacks the capacity to create things.² The question is, thus, how we can account for the alleged agreement between «concepts belonging to completely pure reason» – i.e., categories – and objects not created by such concepts (*Br*, AA X 132). According to Kant, metaphysicians had so far ignored this key question, let alone answered it (*Br*, AA X 131).

Although Kant's letter does not solve the riddle, his comparison of metaphysical and mathematical cognition arguably offers a clue to the solution he was to provide in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Mathematical objects, he tells Herz, «can be represented as quantities only because it is possible for us to produce their mathematical representations».³ The concepts that result from this «inner activity» (*Br*, AA X 131) necessarily refer to objects because they produce the latter. Kant's letter invites us to conceive of categories along similar lines, i.e., as concepts that refer to objects insofar as they are constitutive of the latter without therefore creating them in an absolute sense.⁴

While these passages are well known, I hold that the gist of the letter has not been given its due. Commentators seem to have shied away from the thought that, for Kant, the human mind produces objects even in a qualified sense. This also holds true of a recent article by Stang titled *Kant and the concept of an object*, which goes against the trend by addressing the issue at all. Stang frames Kant's account by distinguishing between objects qua things that exist independently of the mind and objects qua content of our representations.⁵ While this distinction is pertinent, I take it to represent merely a preliminary step. In line with the realist tradition, moreover, Stang takes Kant's endeavor to revolve around the question as to whether we are warranted to assert that objects of type x or y exists. On my account, this question is marginally relevant to the *Critique* at most.⁶

² Since, according to Kant, empirical representations refer to objects simply because they are produced by the latter (*Br*, AA X 130), the problem only concerns representations that stem from the mind, i.e., pure concepts. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant contrasts human and divine cognition along similar lines (cf. B 139, B 145).

³ Kant to Herz, February 21, 1772 (*Br*, AA X 131), cf. *Refl*, AA XVII 615-616, 4633, dated 1772-1773; *KrV*, B xv-xviii.

⁴ As Kant puts it in the *Critique*, while a pure concept, qua representation, «does not produce its object as far as its existence is concerned», it determines the object a priori insofar as «it is possible through it alone to cognize something as an object» (*KrV*, A 92 B 124-125). Elsewhere, he notes that the act of unifying appearances, based on the categories, makes possible experience «as regards its form» (*KrV*, A 130, cf. A 49 B 66, B 147).

⁵ N. F. STANG, *Kant and the Concept of an Object*, «European Journal of Philosophy», 29/2, 2021, pp. 299-322: 300.

⁶ Much of Stang's reading hinges on what I regard as the widespread yet misguided assumption that the term 'noumenon' refers to mind-independent things of which we can ask whether they exist or not (310), disregarding the many passages in which Kant uses the term to denote objects of mere thought such as the soul, freedom, and God (cf. *KrV*, B xxvi-xxviii, A 254 B 310, A 541 B 569). On this, see my *Kant's*

Authors who are more sympathetic to Kant's transcendental idealism – most notably Allison – likewise tend to downplay the radicality of Kant's conception of the object. Thus, at a crucial juncture of his interpretation of the B-Deduction in *Kant's Transcendental Deduction*, Allison considers the term 'object' to refer to either the «object of thought or intentional object» or the «actual empirical object» and claims that Kant regards only the former as constituted by transcendental apperception.⁷ By doing so, he precludes the key question as to the sense in which objects of intuition and, hence, objects of experience, are constituted by the mind as well. While Allison puts forward this «deflationary account» in defense of the B-Deduction,⁸ various German commentators who treat the issue of object constitution at length, including Thöle, tend to reject Kant's understanding of the object qua product of cognitive activity. However, they do so for the same reason as Allison, namely, to salvage the epistemological import of mind-independent things.⁹

Reform of Metaphysics: The Critique of Pure Reason Reconsidered, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 101-126. Given the complexity of Kant's conception of the object, I refrain from engaging with the extensive literature on adjacent issues such as non-conceptualism, things in themselves, and transcendental apperception. I hold, however, that both conceptualist and non-conceptualist readings of the *Critique* tend to undervalue Kant's distinction between, e.g., objects of intuition, objects of cognition in the broad sense, and objects of cognition in the strict sense. Kant's account of objects of volition and practical reason in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and related texts falls outside the scope of the present article as well.

⁷ H. E. ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction, An Analytical-Historical Commentary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 353, cf. pp. 189-190 (see also H. E. ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism, An Interpretation and Defense*, revised and enlarged edition, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 173-176). Distinguishing between objects in a «thin» and «thick» sense, Allison assumes that Kant uses terms such as 'object of intuition' and 'object of experience' at least partly to refer to mind-independent things (ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction*, p. 353). This assumption does not sit well with his defense of Kant's transcendental idealism and key passages in the *Critique* (which will be discussed in what follows). The same can be said of Schulting's more recent defense of Kant's idealism in D. SCHULTING, *Kant's Radical Subjectivism. Perspectives on the Transcendental Deduction*, London, Palgrave, 2017; see also A. DICKERSON, *Kant on Representation and Objectivity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 168-169; E. WATKINS and M. WILLASCHEK, *Kant's Account of Cognition*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 55/1, 2017, pp. 83-112: 102.

⁸ ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction*, p. 355.

⁹ Hossenfelder holds that the theory according to which «objects are constituted by the knowing subject» is «the weakest point of the Kantian doctrine» (M. HOSSENFELDER, *Kants Konstitutionstheorie und die transzendente Deduktion*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1978, p. 5). Similarly, Thöle claims that it «does not follow from Kant's analysis of the concept of object that the objective unity of our representations is a necessary unity in the sense that the objects themselves are subjected to necessary laws» (B. THÖLE, *Kant und das Problem der Gesetzmäßigkeit der Natur*, Berlin / New York, De Gruyter, 1991, p. 232, cf.

On my reading, by contrast, Kant deliberately brackets the role of mind-independent things so as to shift the focus entirely to the relationship between representations and their mind-immanent objects.¹⁰ I aim to show, more specifically, that the *Critique* seeks to answer the question as to how pure concepts can refer to objects by investigating *the full range of acts by means of which the human mind generates objects of cognition as far as their form is concerned*. I claim that Kant considers the ‘referent’ of such cognitive acts to be established by these acts themselves and, moreover, that the mind-immanent objects thus produced are the only ones that matter to transcendental philosophy.

My interpretation draws on the so-called Herz question in a second respect as well, namely, by arguing that the *Critique* develops this unprecedented analysis in order to identify the conditions under which the *a priori* cognitions of objects generated by the human mind are warranted and, hence, to determine the extent to which metaphysics is capable of such cognitions. Alluding to his 1772 letter, Kant assigns the task of assessing to what extent such cognitions – i.e., synthetic *a priori* judgments – are warranted to transcendental logic:

In the expectation, therefore, that there might be concepts that may refer to objects (*Gegenstände*) *a priori* . . . , we provisionally formulate the idea of a science of the cognitions of the pure understanding and reason by means of which we think objects completely *a priori*. Such a science, which would determine the origin, the domain, and the objective validity of such cognitions, would have to be called transcendental logic.¹¹

194, 235). In my view, their negative assessment is based on a misguided interpretation: both authors wrongly take the term ‘object’ to denote the mind-independent things assumed in the natural sciences. Hoppe analyzes Kant’s analysis from a broader perspective, namely, the act, carried out by the pure understanding, of referring representations to objects at all (H. HOPPE, *Synthesis bei Kant*. Berlin, De Gruyter, 1983, p. 119, 126). While I agree with his analysis in various respects, his focus on intentionality covers over the difference between the act of intending an object and the act of producing the same. My reading converges with Stern’s account in *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object* insofar as he takes Kant to «investigate the constitution of the object from the inside» (14) and to contend that «the unity of the object rests on the unity of the subject» (R. STERN, *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object*, Routledge, 1990, p. 25). As I see it, however, the object qua object of cognition is nothing *but* a unity produced by the human mind. Moreover, Stern does not elaborate on Kant’s distinction between the various ways in which representations can be objectified.

¹⁰ Since the term ‘intentional object’ does not cover all aspects of Kant’s account and is first and foremost associated with the phenomenological tradition, I will, in what follows, use the more neutral terms ‘object of x’ and ‘mind-immanent object’ to clarify what I take to be Kant’s position.

¹¹ *KrV*, A 57 B 81, translation modified. Other passages that allude to the Herz letter include A 85 B 117 and A 89 B 122.

Seen in this light, the so-called ‘Copernican turn’ carried out in the *Critique* is not only a ‘turn to the subject’ – as is commonly assumed – but also a turn to the object that, qua object of cognition, is generated by the human mind itself.

Obviously, this approach may seem to summon the specter of Berkeleian idealism, as was done for the first time in the Garve/Feder review of 1783. Yet I believe that Kant’s position can be defended against this charge by arguing that the term ‘transcendental idealism’ refers not so much to a doctrine as to a methodological standpoint, i.e., to the decision to investigate the human mind without assuming anything but given representations and the human capacity to unify them. To carry out this task, appearances must «be regarded» as nothing but representations, as Kant puts it in one of his descriptions of transcendental idealism.¹² This methodological principle by no means entails an assertion about the existence or non-existence of mind-independent things and, thus, can easily go hand in hand with the common sense conviction – called ‘empirical realism’ – that such things exist.¹³ On this reading, the term ‘transcendental idealism’ does not pertain to a doctrine on a par with first-order theories about either cognition or reality.¹⁴

¹² *KrV*, A 369, cf. A 104. Kant was exasperated by the way the Garve/Feder review framed the *Critique*. In his attempted defense of his work in the *Prolegomena*, he reiterates that its «real problem» is the possibility of synthetic priori cognition, whereas «[t]he idealism . . . was only taken up into the doctrine as the sole *means* for solving this problem» (*Prol*, AA IV 377, emphasis mine, cf. 288-294). On this, see M. BAUM, *Objects and Objectivity in Kant’s First Critique*, in *Kleine Schriften I, Arbeiten zur Theoretischen Philosophie Kants*, edited by M. Heinz, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 269-287: 276-277).

¹³ *KrV*, A 370-71, cf. A 375. Similarly, Kant in the second edition opposes transcendental idealism to a type of idealism that «denies the existence of external things» (B 159). Whereas Kant does consider such things to leave impressions in us, I hold that his casual remarks in this regard are not part of transcendental idealism, which abstains from either affirming or denying a world made up of mind-independent things. On this, see DE BOER, *Kant’s Reform*, pp. 101-126.

¹⁴ Seen in this way, an assertion such as «objects of experience . . . do not exist at all outside of experience» (*KrV*, A 492 B 521), is not a first-order claim about entities, but follows analytically from the concept of an intentional object, or what I will call ‘object of x’, which is the type of object transcendental philosophy is concerned with. Since Strawson’s *The Bounds of Sense* wrongly assumes that Kant’s transcendental idealism amounts to a metaphysical doctrine, i.e., a version of Berkeleian idealism (P. F. STRAWSON, *The Bounds of Sense*, London, Methuen and Co, 1966, pp. 38-41, 237, 244-245), he is right to reject the latter as a necessary element of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Strawson’s assumption also informs P. GUYER, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987. However, my approach also deviates from Allison’s, who regards transcendental idealism as an epistemological theory about «the conditions under which objects can be cognized by the human mind» (ALLISON, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, p. 35). While Kant indeed refers to transcendental idealism as a «doctrine» (*KrV*, A 369-70, cf. A 491 B 519), I consider Kant to conceive of transcendental idealism first and foremost as a *standpoint* from which epistemic conditions, and the

Relying on this premise, my reconstruction of Kant's original and highly consequential conception of the object hinges on three distinctions, namely, that between (1) affecting objects and mind-immanent objects *of* cognition, (2) cognitions in the broad sense and cognitions in the narrow sense, and (3) a posteriori and a priori cognitions.¹⁵

Section 2 prepares the ground of my reading by considering Kant's crucial shift from the term 'thing' to the term 'object' in view of his criticism of the Leibnizian tradition. Section 3 turns to Kant's distinction between objects qua mind-independent things that affect our senses and objects produced by the human mind as far as their form is concerned, i.e., objects *of* cognition. Sections 4 to 6 deal with Kant's account of how the human mind produces such objects from various angles. Section 4 looks at the ways in which the term 'object of' was used by Kant's predecessors and contemporaries. Focusing on the so-called *Stufenleiter*, Section 5 analyzes Kant's account of the objectifying activity carried out by the human mind insofar as it results in objects of cognition in the broad sense. Section 6 uses this account as a foil to shed light on Kant's account of how the human mind generates cognitions of objects in the strict sense, in particular as regards the cognitive activities it carries out a priori. Section 7, finally, brings together the results of the preceding sections by providing a taxonomy of the types of object that Kant distinguishes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

2. Ding, Objekt, and Gegenstand

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant generally uses the terms 'thing' and 'things as such' in the context of his critique of the Leibnizian tradition. On Kant's account, an overly generic use of the term 'thing' led metaphysicians to believe that things can be known regardless of whether they can be sensibly intuited. Wolff's so-called *German Metaphysics* (1720) indeed refers to the ultimate elements of all composite things as «simple things»,¹⁶ considers the soul to be a «simple thing» (§ 742), and conceives of God as a necessary and independent thing that has the ground of its actuality within itself (§§ 928-29).

cognitive activities carried out by the human mind more generally, can be subjected to a thoroughgoing mind-immanent investigation.

¹⁵ Distinction (1) deviates from STANG, *Kant and the Concept of an Object* and similar readings in that I consider Kant to deal with mind-independent things mostly in view of their capacity to affect us. While distinction (2) has been treated by various commentators, including Watkins and Willaschek (see WATKINS and WILLASCHEK, *Kant's Account of Cognition*, pp. 85-87), my approach differs from preceding accounts by its focus on the problem of object constitution and the relevance it assigns to the *Stufenleiter*.

¹⁶ C. WOLFF, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* [1720], in *Gesammelte Werke I/2*, edited by C. A. Corr. Hildesheim, Olms, 1983, § 76.

Singling out Leibniz, the Amphiboly Chapter challenges this generic use of the term ‘thing’ head-on. By applying concepts of reflection such as sameness and difference to «an object as such» without determining whether the latter is «an object of sensible or intellectual intuition», metaphysics is said to produce judgments that are void of meaning (*KrV*, A279 B 335). Whereas these judgments purport to apply to anything whatsoever, they disregard those features of things that present themselves to sensible intuition alone:

[S]ince in the mere concept of anything whatsoever (*irgendeinem Dinge*) abstraction is made from many necessary conditions of an intuition, . . . that from which abstraction has been made is taken as something that is not to be encountered at all, and nothing is granted to the thing except what is contained in its concept.¹⁷

Instead of making judgments about things as such, Kant holds that one should either abstain from making claims about objects at all, as logicians do, or take into consideration the sensible conditions under which objects can be known (*KrV*, A 279 B 335).

Kant’s shift from the term ‘thing’ to the term ‘object’ has an important advantage: it allows him to distinguish between objects of intuition, objects of thought, objects of experience, etc., and, hence, to investigate the various cognitive activities involved in the production of these objects. Yet he does not thereby abandon Wolff’s conception of the task to be carried out in ontology in all regards.¹⁸

Thus, in the context of his discussion of the categories, Kant repeatedly employs a term that, like the term ‘thing’, abstracts from the question as to whether the cognition at hand involves sensibility or not, namely, the term ‘object as such’. Categories, he writes, are «the only concepts that refer to (*sich beziehen auf*) objects as such (*Gegenstände überhaupt*)».¹⁹ These concepts are «function[s] of thinking» that, at least in principle, «extend further than sensible intuition, since they think objects as such (*Objekte überhaupt*) without attending to the particular manner (of sensibility) in which they might be given».²⁰

¹⁷ *KrV*, A 281 B 338-39, cf. A279 B 335.

¹⁸ Cf. *KrV*, A 247 B 303. See BAUM, *Objects and Objectivity in Kant’s First Critique*, for an insightful account that stresses this point. However, he does not dwell on the distinction between ‘object’ and ‘object of’ that I take to be key to Kant’s analysis.

¹⁹ *KrV*, A 290 B 346, translation modified, cf. A 93 B 125-126. In line with Baum, I will in most cases translate ‘sich beziehen auf x’ as ‘to refer to x’ rather than ‘to be related to x’ to bring out that the term denotes an activity (see M. BAUM, *Kant on Pure Intuition*, in *Kleine Schriften I, Arbeiten zur Theoretischen Philosophie Kants*, edited by M. Heinz, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 133-146: 136-137). I will translate ‘überhaupt’ as ‘as such’ rather than ‘in general’.

²⁰ *KrV*, A 253-254 B 308-309, translation modified, cf. A 93 B 125-126, A 96-97, A 106, A 247 B 304, A 290 B 346.

Kant demonstrates in the transcendental deduction, however, that employing categories for the purpose of generating cognitions proper – rather than mere thoughts – is warranted only insofar as they carry out their function in relation to a sensible manifold. Taken in this sense, categories possess «objective validity» only insofar as they allow the understanding to refer *appearances* to «objects as such (*Objekte überhaupt*)» (*KrV*, A 111), that is, insofar as they function as rules that determine how a sensible manifold can be turned into an object of cognition at all. Unlike Wolff, that is, Kant limits the domain within which pure concepts can refer to objects to that of appearances qua possible objects of experience.

As can be seen from the passages cited above, Kant uses both the terms ‘Gegenstand’ and ‘Objekt’ to denote objects as such. In other contexts as well, Kant tends to use the two terms interchangeably, often alternating the two terms merely for the sake of variation.²¹ The most one can infer, in my view, is that Kant uses the term ‘Objekt’ more frequently in relation to non-empirical types of cognition (regardless of whether he subscribes to them or not).²² In the following passage, Kant even uses the three terms discussed in this section in a single sentence. We attempt to extend our a priori cognition, he writes in the *Disciplin*,

either through the pure understanding, with regard to that which can at least be an object of experience (*Objekt der Erfahrung*), or even through pure reason, with regard to such properties of things (*Dinge*), or else with regard to the existence of such objects (*Gegenstände*), as can never occur in experience.²³

²¹ See *KrV*, A 85 B 117, A 48 B 66. While recent commentators tend to hold that the two concepts do not differ in meaning (see ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction*, 380n; STANG, *Kant and the Concept of an Object*), the issue has divided commentators. Caygill claims that «Kant's distinction between *Gegenstand* and *Objekt* is crucial to his transcendental philosophy» but offers little in the way of proof (H. CAYGILL, *A Kant Dictionary*. Malden, MA, Blackwell, 1995, p. 305). In a recent contribution, Palmquist, Lown, and Love accept Caygill's position, claiming, based on their «consistent observation», that Kant always uses ‘Gegenstand’ to denote objects «given in intuition», which «are then united to form the empirical *Objekt* through the process of determination effected by the schematized categories» (S. R., PALMQUIST, G. LOWN, and B. LOVE, *How Does Transcendental Idealism Overcome the Scandal of Philosophy? Perspectives on Kant's Objekt/Gegenstand Distinction*, in *Kant on Intuition: Western and Asian Perspectives on Transcendental Idealism*, edited by S. R. Palmquist, Abington, Routledge, 2018, pp. 3-22: 7; for a similar approach, see S. R. PALMQUIST, *Six Perspectives on the Object in Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, «Dialectica», 40/2, 1986, pp. 21-151). Their attempts to harmonize these terminological distinctions with the relevant passages is utterly unconvincing.

²² See *KrV*, A 38 B 55, A 106, B 406. Similarly, ‘Gegenstand’ is used more frequently in expressions such as ‘Gegenstände der Erfahrung’, although the term ‘Objekt’ is used in such cases as well (see A 93 B 125-26, A 380, A 517 B 545, A 765 B 739, A 783 B 811).

²³ *KrV*, A 765 B 793, translation modified, cf. B 306. Clearly, Kant here uses the term ‘Ding’ in relation to the Wolffian approach he opposes.

Yet a much more relevant distinction, in my view, is one that has drawn much less attention in the literature, namely, that between the term ‘object’ and the same term in combination with the preposition ‘of’, as in ‘object *of* intuition’ or ‘object *of* experience’. The next section aims to clarify this distinction.

3. *Affecting objects*

Kant’s account, at the outset of the Transcendental Aesthetic, of how objects produce sensations in us is Lockean in spirit.²⁴ In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke distinguishes between «external objects» that «convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them»²⁵ and, on the other hand, the «object of thinking» that is produced by the human mind itself and that he calls «idea» (II.i.1). The objects that affect the human mind from without are said to be «the objects themselves» (II.viii.10) and called «bodies» (II.viii.11). Whereas all ideas are produced by thought, Locke distinguishes between ideas the content of which stems from sensations and ideas the content of which stems from reflection (II.i.4), and, further, between ideas qua «immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding» (II.viii.8). Ideas of reflection are said to arise if «the understanding turns inward upon itself, reflects on its own operations, and makes them the objects of its own contemplation» (II.i.8).

The term ‘idea’ clearly corresponds to what Kant considers to be the mind-immanent object of a particular type of cognitive activity. Like Locke, he distinguishes objects in this intentional sense from objects that affect the human mind from without. Thus, Kant writes that intuition

takes place only insofar as the object (*Gegenstand*) is given to us; but this, in turn, is possible only if the latter affects the mind in a certain way. The capacity (receptivity) to acquire representations through the way in which we are affected by objects is called sensibility. . . .

²⁴ Locke’s analysis of the cognitive activities carried out by the human mind is rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, as Kant points out at A 854 B 882 (see M. SGARBI, *Kant and Aristotle: Epistemology, Logic, and Method*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2016, pp. 51-56). Locke’s *Essay* was translated into German in 1757 and well received among Kant’s contemporaries, including Tetens. Kant appears to have studied both Locke’s *Essay* (see *KrV*, A ix; *Prol*, AA IV 270) and Tetens’s *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung* (1777) in some detail (see ALLISON, *Kant’s Transcendental Deduction*, pp. 143-163, esp. 148-153). Yet while Kant’s investigation of the human mind is continuous with Locke and Tetens’s in several regards, only Kant carried out this investigation in order to shed light on the limits within *a priori* cognition of objects is possible (cf. R 4901, 18:23).

²⁵ J. LOCKE, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by P. Nidditch, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975, II.ii.3, cf. II.xiv.27.

The effect (*Wirkung*) of an object on the capacity for representation, insofar as we are affected by it, is sensation. That intuition which refers to (*sich bezieht auf*) the object through sensation is called empirical. The undetermined *object of* an empirical intuition (*unbestimmter Gegenstand einer empirischen Anschauung*) is called appearance.²⁶

I propose to call the mind-independent things that can have an effect on our senses ‘affecting objects’. As I see it, what Kant has in mind in this regard – following Locke – are plain things such as roses and swans.²⁷ In a corresponding passage from lectures dated 1782-1783, Kant indeed uses the term ‘thing’ and contrasts it with the object *of* intuition that requires the unification of impressions:

Our intuition . . . rests on the receptivity of being affected by things (*Dinge*). . . . To every manner in which we are affected there belong two parts: matter, i.e., the impression of sensation, and form, i.e., the manner in which the impressions are unified in my mind. Otherwise I would have millions of impressions but no intuition of a whole object (*Objekt*). . . . Experience is a cognition that we have of an object of intuition.²⁸

Thus, like Locke, Kant distinguishes affecting objects from objects *of* a particular cognitive activity. Accordingly, the most general concept of an object assumed by Kant arguably branches out into two more specific concepts, namely, (a) objects in relation to which the mind is completely *passive* and (b) objects in relation to which the mind is *active* to a certain degree.²⁹

²⁶ *KrV*, A 19, emphasis mine, cf. B 33, A 51 B 75.

²⁷ In most cases, Kant uses the term ‘Gegenstand’ to denote affecting objects (cf. *KrV*, B xxvi, A 26 B 42, A 28-29, A 89 B 121). I have argued elsewhere that Kant’s notion of a thing or object that affects us from without should not be confused with the notion of a thing-in-itself that is key to his critique of former metaphysics, i.e., the thing qua purported object of a non-sensible type of cognition. See DE BOER, *Kant’s Reform*, pp. 101-126.

²⁸ *V-MP/Mron*, XXIX 800, cf. 880 (1782-83). Kant also uses the term ‘thing’ in this plain sense in the 1787 Refutation of Idealism. As he puts it there, the perception of a «persistent thing is possible only through a thing outside me and not through the mere representation of a thing outside me» (*KrV*, B 275).

²⁹ However, Kant does not always carefully distinguish between objects in their capacity as affecting objects and objects in their capacity as objects of intuition. He notes, for instance, that «the receptivity of the subject to be affected by objects (*Gegenstände*) necessarily precedes all intuitions *of these* objects (*Objekte*)» (*KrV*, A 26 B 42, emphasis mine, cf. A 19 B 33, *Prol*, AA IV 289). Yet even if we can take it for granted that my intuition of a swan targets the very swan that gave rise to a manifold of sensations in me, I hold that Kant conceptually distinguishes the two approaches in order to focus on the object established in the act of intuiting, i.e., to study the «object of the senses» insofar as it depends on «the constitution of our faculty of intuition» (B xvii). In his 1772 letter to Herz, Kant refers to sensible representations as «passive» and intellectual representations as «active» (*Br*, AA X 130). This distinction

Kant may well have chosen the term ‘object’ rather than ‘thing’ to denote affecting objects in order to identify the genus of the x that produces sensations in the mind and, on the other hand, the x that, as far as its form is concerned, is nothing but the *mind-immanent correlate of a particular type of representation*.

In the final sentence of the passage at A 19 quoted above, Kant already – and inconspicuously – uses the term ‘object’ in the latter sense. Kant’s account of how such objects are being produced consists of various aspects that are not always easy to discern. A brief discussion of the ways in which his German predecessors used the terms ‘Gegenstand’ and ‘Object’ might help to shed some light on the issue.

4. *The accepted use of the term ‘object of’*

At the time Kant published his first writings, both the terms ‘Gegenstand’ and ‘Object’ were used in German treatises to denote the content or subject matter of a type of cognition or theory. Yet this usage was derived from a more original meaning of the term ‘Gegenstand’, namely, that which withstands a certain pressure.

The new meaning of the term ‘Gegenstand’ came to the fore in the 1730s as a translation of ‘objectum’ and accordingly required some explanation.³⁰ Thus, in his treatise on metaphysics, first published in 1733, Gottsched explains that the term ‘object’ can denote either a material thing at which an action is directed or the subject matter of thought:

Any efficient cause must have something over against itself (*vor sich*) on which it has an effect (*darein sie wirkt*) and in which its effect comes to an end: this is what is called the object (*das Object oder den Gegenstand*). For example, the object (*Object*) of a carpenter is the piece of

can be traced to Aristotle’s distinction between the passive and the active intellect in *De Anima* (DA 430A 10–14). Textual challenges apart, I take Aristotle to mean that the passive intellect at each moment coincides with the content of successive impressions such as ‘white’, whereas the active intellect – said to «produce all things» – generates cognitions of objects, such as ‘swans are white’, that are no longer dependent on the succession of impressions. As Sgarbi explains, Aristotelianism dominated the university of Königsberg from its foundation in 1544 onward and remained a significant factor during Kant’s time as a student (SGARBI, *Kant and Aristotle*, pp. 6-16).

³⁰ See *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, according to which the term ‘Gegenstand’ was originally equivalent to ‘Widerstand’, i.e., ‘resistance’. Citing the passage quoted below, the authors point out that Gottsched was among the first to use ‘Gegenstand’ rather than ‘Gegenwurf’ as a translation of ‘objectum’. See <https://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?lemid=G04493>, last consulted 16.05.2022.

wood he works; my object (*Gegenstand*), at this point, is the ontology or foundational doctrine as well as the paper on which I write.³¹

A piece of wood is an object in the sense that it withstands the pressure of the chisel, such that the effect of the latter comes to an end in the piece of wood rather than the wall behind it. According to the more recent meaning of the term, conversely, an object is that which is intended by any action whatsoever.³² Seen in this way, the object with which the philosopher is concerned can be a piece of paper (resisting the pressure of the pen) or that which is being thought about, in this case, ontology.

The first and more original meaning of the term ‘object’ distinguished by Gottsched can be found in Kant’s early writings as well. In *Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces* (1749), for example, the term ‘Gegenstand’ denotes a thing insofar as it resists the force exerted on it (*GSK*, AA I 33-34). In many other texts, Kant uses the term to refer to the meaning that came to prevail, namely, the object of a particular type of thought.

Similarly, Meier’s *Excerpt from the Doctrine of Reason* (1752), a textbook Kant used in his logic lectures, explains that «what we represent and cognize is distinguished from the representation and cognition. The former is called the object (*Gegenstand*) of the cognition and representation».³³ In his lectures on logic from the early 1770s, Kant extended Meier’s account by mapping the distinction between the representation and its object onto that between form and matter, noting that a single object, conceived as matter, can be treated – or determined – in various ways.³⁴ In this sense, my sensible intuition of a swan and my subsequent judgment about it have the same object but a different form.

³¹ J. C. GOTTSCHED, *Erste Gründe der gesammten Weltweisheit darinn alle philosophische Wissenschaften, in ihrer natürlichen Verknüpfung, in zween Theilen abgehandelt werden*. Leipzig, Breitkopf, 1733/1743, § 313, cf. § 433.

³² See also C. A. CRUSIUS, *Entwurf der notwendigen Vernunft-Wahrheiten, wiefern sie den Zufälligen entgegengesetzt werden* [1745], in *Die philosophischen Hauptwerke*, Vol. 2, edited by G. Tonelli, Hildesheim, Olms, 1964, § 65, cf. §§ 96-97.

³³ MEIER, G. F., *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*, Halle, Gebauer, 1752, reprinted in Kant’s *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band XVI, translated as *Excerpts from the Doctrine of Reason*, edited and translated by L. Pasternack and P. Muchnik, London, Bloomsbury, 2016, § 12.

³⁴ Thus, Kant is reported to have said that «[m]atter is the object of the cognition (*obiectum*) and does not permit of change» (*V-Lo/Philippi*, XXIV 341, c. 1772). Scarbi notes that the Aristotelian form/matter distinction was marginal to Wolffianism and that Kant, following philosophers such as Crusius and Knutzen, introduced it in his comments on Meier’s logic (SGARBI, *Kant and Aristotle*, pp. 80-83). On Kant’s epistemological transformation of Aristotelian hylomorphism, see K. POLLOK, ‘The Understanding Prescribes Laws to Nature’: *Spontaneity, Legislation, and Kant’s Transcendental Hylomorphism*, «Kant-Studien», 105/4, 2014, pp. 509-530; SGARBI, *Kant and Aristotle*, pp. 79-94.

The Transcendental Aesthetic, for its part, breaks new ground by applying the distinction between matter and form to the components of an appearance, i.e., to the as yet undetermined object of an empirical intuition (*KrV*, A 19, cf. A 34 B 51). In this context, the matter of that which is being intuited is that which «corresponds to the sensation», for instance, the ‘white’ that I see. The form of that which is being intuited, conversely, is «what allows the manifold of the appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations» (*KrV*, A 20 B 34, cf. A 59 B 83), that is, to be cast in a spatio-temporal mold.³⁵ In other words, the *form* of an empirical intuition consists in the way in which the human mind orders a manifold of sensations, whereas its *content* consists in the content of these sensations themselves.

Prior to the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, however, the term ‘object of’ was used mainly to refer to the subject matter of a particular doctrine or discipline. This loose usage can also be found in the *Critique*. Thus, the Transcendental Dialectic refers to the soul, the world as such, and God as the objects of the various parts of special metaphysics (*KrV*, A 334 B 391). Clearly, Kant’s use of the term ‘object of’ in this broad sense disregards the question as to whether the intended object exists outside of the mind or whether it can be known: while God is the object of theology, the x denoted by the term ‘God’ is definitely not an object of cognition in the strict sense of the term.

In order to comprehend what it means to produce an object of cognition proper, the *Critique* moves beyond the accepted uses of the term ‘object of’ and the related distinction between the matter and form of a representation. What is required for his purposes is rather an account of how the mind *brings about the very distinction between a representation and its object so as to turn the latter into an object of intuition or cognition proper*. The next section discusses a number of key passages from the *Critique* that deal with the ways in which the human mind can carry out this objectifying activity, including the so-called *Stufenleiter*.

5. Objects of cognition in the broad sense of the term

At the outset of the Second Analogy, Kant presents the problem the present section addresses as follows:

Now one can, to be sure, call everything, and even every representation, insofar as one is *conscious* of it, an object (*Objekt*); yet what this word is to mean in the case of appearances, not insofar as they (qua representations) are objects, but rather only insofar as they *designate* an object (*ein Objekt bezeichnen*) requires a deeper investigation.³⁶

³⁵ *KrV*, A 22 B 36, cf. A 225 B 273, A 266-267 B 322-323. Moreover, Kant considers all formal aspects to originate in the human mind, i.e. to be a priori (A 20 B 34).

³⁶ *KrV*, A 189-90 B 234-35, emphasis mine, cf. A 108-109.

If I direct my attention to the content of a sensation, intuition, or thought, this content constitutes an object of thought in the broad sense discussed above. Seen from Kant's perspective, however, being conscious of the content of a representation is a necessary yet not a sufficient condition for the empirical intuition or cognition *of an object*. Reiterating the problem in somewhat more specific terms, he writes:

We have representations in us, of which we can also become conscious. But this consciousness may reach as far and be as exact and precise as one wants, these representations always remain only . . . inner determinations of our mind in this or that temporal relation. Now how do we come to provide these representations *with an object*?³⁷

In my view, passages such as these defy 'deflationary' readings such as Allison's. In order to clarify their radical thrust, it is useful to read them in view of Kant's critical engagement with the way his Wolffian predecessors, especially Meier, framed the problem of cognition.

According to Meier's *Excerpt*, any representation is a cognition (*cognitio*) (§ 11). In order for a cognition to amount to a thought (*cogitatio*), one has to be conscious of it (§ 122-123), which means, for Meier, that one distinguishes the marks contained in the cognition to a certain degree (§§ 119, 124).

In his 1771 lectures on logic, Kant agrees with Meier that cognition can be obtained by analysis and results in a certain degree of consciousness.³⁸ Yet he departs from Meier by stating that «[i]t is false, as the author maintain, that our cognition becomes distinct *only* through analysis» (*V-Lo/Blomberg* XXIV 130, emphasis mine). By producing the «concepts of triangle, square, circle, etc.», for instance, we add their various elements so as to conceive of them as a unity. This synthetic procedure is very different from the analysis of a given concept, but even so results in a distinct concept, i.e., a concept of which all the marks are distinguished such that they constitute a definition (*V-Lo/Blomberg* XXIV 130-131, 133; cf. *KrV*, A77-78 B 103).

Accordingly, Kant distinguishes the various types of cognition no longer in terms of the degrees of distinctness that can be obtained by means of analysis. More specifically, he moves beyond Meier by conceiving of the capacity to obtain cognitions proper as «the capacity to bring that which I represent under a universal concept, and thus of being able to know *what my representation actually refers to (worauf sich meine Vorstellung eigentlich bezieht)*» (*V-Lo/Blomberg* XXIV 133, emphasis mine). Thus, Kant already in 1771 – i.e., between the

³⁷ *KrV*, A 197 B 242, emphasis mine, translation modified.

³⁸ See Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken*, §§ 206-214, 277-280; Meier, *Auszug*, §§ 123-154. See Crusius, *Entwurf*, § 444 (pp. 910-911) for an earlier critique of the Wolffian account of consciousness. Commenting on § 139 of Meier's *Auszug*, Kant writes that «[b]y means of analytical distinctness we . . . only cognize better, i.e., more distinctly, more clearly, and with more consciousness, what we already actually knew.» (*V-Lo/Blomberg* XXIV 131).

publication of the *Inaugural Dissertation* and the Herz question – turned his attention to the question as to what it means for the human mind to refer its representations *to an object*. He suggests, moreover, that in the case of both mathematics and experience cognitions of objects are achieved by means of synthesis rather than analysis.³⁹

The example of the triangle entails that the *x* to which a concept refers is not necessarily something that exists independently of the mind: the triangle is distinguished from its concept only qua object of the representation itself. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to which we can now return, Kant addresses the way the human mind establishes the difference between a representation and its object in all cases and in a more sophisticated way.

At some point in the A-Deduction, and after having used the term ‘object of’ in this sense multiple times, Kant pauses to offer the following description of it:

And here then it is necessary to explain what is meant by the expression ‘an object of the representations’ (*ein Gegenstand der Vorstellungen*). We have said above that appearances themselves are nothing but sensible representations, which must not be regarded . . . as objects (*Gegenstände*) (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 as such = X, since outside of our cognition we have nothing that we could set over against this cognition as corresponding to it.*⁴⁰

Kant here and elsewhere refers to appearances as «mere representations» to distinguish them from mind-independent things.⁴¹ In fact, however, this characterization is not exhaustive: it abstracts from a crucial feature of appearances, namely, *that they are objects of a particular cognitive act*, namely, the act of intuiting. Kant uses the term ‘object of’ to signal that the object in this sense is not something «outside the power of representation», but is produced, as far as its form is concerned, by the human mind. As seen, the Transcendental Aesthetic stresses this aspect by defining an appearance as «the undetermined object of an empirical intuition» (*KrV*, A 19) rather than a representation *per se*.

In the passage just quoted, Kant completely abstracts from the question as to where the matter of empirical cognitions might stem from, which is to say that he focuses exclusively on the relation between representations and their mind-immanent objects. This shift, which undergirds the *Critique* as a whole, makes it possible to answer the question put forward in the

³⁹ *V-Lo/Blomberg* XXIV 132; cf. *V-Lo/Philippi*, XXIV 417-418, where Kant points out that clarifying an empirical concept such as ‘mercury’ requires that we search for new marks by means of experiments.

⁴⁰ A 104. Arguably anticipating later versions of idealism, Locke similarly conceived of the idea of substance, produced by the mind, as an idea that «is nothing but the supposed, but unknown, support of those qualities, we find existing» (*Essay*, II.xxiii.2, cf. IV.iv.5). See also note 61 of the present article.

⁴¹ *KrV*, B 164, cf. A 191 B 236, A 369.

1772 letter to Herz, namely, under which conditions the human mind can refer *a priori* cognitions to objects. Kant answers this question, I contend in what follows, by arguing that it can do so only insofar as it produces these objects as regards their form.

In order to clarify what it takes to produce an object of cognition proper, the *Critique* investigates the full range of cognitive activities carried out by the human mind. A revealing passage in this respect is the so-called *Stufenleiter* in the introductory part of the Transcendental Dialectic. Kant here derives the concept of idea by classifying the possible types of representation according to a number of contrary options.⁴² The passage is clearly indebted to the sections of Meier's *Excerpt* that distinguish the various types of representations – all of which he calls 'concepts' – along similar lines.⁴³ However, whereas Meier's taxonomy distinguishes these types in view of the extent to which they clarify the marks contained in a concept, Kant does so by inquiring into the relation between the representation at hand and its object. More specifically, he distinguishes types of representations by asking (a) whether the mind is conscious of them, (b) whether they refer to an object, and (c) how they refer to an object.⁴⁴ Evidently, this shift of focus reflects Kant's conception of the difference between general and transcendental logic (cf. *KrV*, A55-56 B 79-80).

The *Stufenleiter* starts by positing that any representation of which the mind is conscious is a perception, which means that Kant here distinguishes between perceptions *per se* and empirical perceptions, i.e., representations the content of which consists in sensations (*KrV*, A 166 B 207).⁴⁵ In the part of the passage that is most relevant to the present discussion, Kant

⁴² This logical procedure, which goes back to at least Aristotle, was quite common among Kant's predecessors and contemporaries. In his *Versuche*, Tetens uses the term *Stufenleiter* in relation to his hierarchisation of human capabilities, which he regarded as analogous to that of natural kinds presented in Bonnet's *Contemplation de la nature*. See J. N. TETENS, *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung*, Leipzig, Weidmann und Reich, 1777, 615-616, cf. 353. Bonnet's work was translated into German in 1766. In the *Critique*, Kant praises Bonnet's «Stufenleiter» of natural kinds (*KrV*, A 668 B 696).

⁴³ See Meier, *Auszug*, §§ 249-60. Two unpublished notes, undated, contain early sketches of the *Stufenleiter* (*Refl*, AA XVI 537-539, 2835-2836) that relate to these sections. See also *V-Lo/Blomberg*, XXIV 251, *V-Lo/Philippi*, XXIV 451, *V-Lo/Pölitz* XXIV 565-566, *Log*, IX, 64-65.

⁴⁴ *KrV*, A 320 B 376-77. Since Kant's aim is to define the concept of idea, he further distinguishes, somewhat obliquely, between (d) pure concepts and empirical concepts, (e) between purely intellectual concepts and schematized pure concepts, and finally (f) conceives of ideas as a particular type of the former.

⁴⁵ In accordance with the meaning of the Latin term 'percipio', Kant here uses the Latinate term 'Perception' to denote any conscious representation. By contrast, the term 'Wahrnehmung' is used throughout the *Critique* to denote empirical perceptions alone. The latter are said to make the mind conscious of that which is being intuited (*KrV*, B 160). Kant further claims that whereas empirical intuitions are instantaneous, empirical perceptions are produced over time (A 99) in that they distinguish

distinguishes between perceptions qua sensations such as ‘white’ and ‘cold’ and perceptions that attribute the content of these sensations *to an object*:

A perception (*Perception*) that refers to the subject as a modification of its state is a sensation (*sensatio*); an objective perception (*Perzeption*) is a cognition (*cognitio*). The latter is either an intuition or a concept (*intuitus vel conceptus*). The former refers immediately to the object and is singular; the latter does so mediately, by means of a mark, which can be common to several things.⁴⁶

Thus, on Kant’s account, not all representations have an object: a sensation lacks an object since it pertains to the subject alone (cf. *KrV*, A253).

Further, it is clear that Kant here uses the term ‘cognition’ in a broad sense: the term basically denotes two complementary ways in which the human mind can consciously refer a set of sensations to an object, namely, either through intuitions or through concepts (cf. *KrV*, A 19 B 33, A 99). Thus, I turn a set of sensations into an *intuition*, i.e., a cognition, insofar as I attribute their content to a single ‘x’ that I take to differ from both myself and other things. As is well known, the Transcendental Aesthetic considers this act to rest on space qua form of outer intuition (*KrV*, A 22-23 B 37-38).⁴⁷ If, by contrast, the content of the representation I attribute to the ‘x’ is considered to be common to a number of things, which is the case when I make a judgment such as ‘this swan is white’, the representation is called a *concept* (*KrV*, A 320 B 377), i.e., something that «holds of many» (*KrV*, A 68 B 93). In this case, the mind explicitly represents the relevant manifold of representations *as a unity* (cf. *KrV*, B 130-131).⁴⁸

Seen in this way, even a sensible intuition emerges from an act in which the mind distinguishes a manifold of representations from an ‘x’ so as to refer them to the latter, i.e.,

and gather the elements contained in the intuited manifold, i.e., emerge from the synthetic act called ‘apprehension’ (A 99, cf. B 202, B 162). Accordingly, Kant specifies that «the imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself», since producing images of objects «requires . . . more than the receptivity of impressions, namely, a function of the synthesis of these impressions» (A 120n, cf. A 163 B 204, B 203, B 271).

⁴⁶ *KrV*, A 320 B 376-77, translation modified.

⁴⁷ In the case of outer appearances, Baum writes, »a subject of empirical intuition . . . refers its representations of outer objects to these objects«, which requires »an intervening space that first enables us to speak of intuitions of objects other than ourselves« (BAUM, *Kant on Pure Intuition*, p. 137).

⁴⁸ Tacitly referring to the broad conception of cognition presented in the *Stufenleiter*, Kant at one point refers to the concepts of space and time as »a priori cognitions« that »necessarily refer to objects« (*KrV*, A 89 B 121). Space and time are cognitions insofar as they are intuitions (cf. A 25 B 39, A 32 B 47) and allow the mind to refer its representations to as yet undetermined empirical objects at all. Kant occasionally conceives of categories as a priori cognitions as well (A 110, B 159).

brings about the *object qua object of intuition*. In the case of an empirical intuition, the act is largely determined by the affecting object: I cannot *but* have the intuition of a white swan the moment a white swan produces sensations in me. For this reason, the intuition refers to the object in an immediate way (*KrV*, A 19 B 33) and is singular (*KrV*, A 32 B 47). Even so, the act of referring the sensation of white *to an object at all* is an act that testifies to a minimal degree of activity: although an intuition does not yet properly *determine* its object (cf. *KrV*, A 374), it represents a manifold of features as belonging to a single x. This act requires that one focus one’s attention on a particular cluster of features and let others fade out.⁴⁹

This broad conception of cognition goes hand in hand with an equally broad conception of the mind-immanent object to which the cognition refers: throughout the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant mentions objects of intuition, objects of apprehension, objects of perception, objects of consciousness, objects of the understanding, objects of reason, etc.⁵⁰ In each case, the human mind can be said to be engaged in the *objectification* of its representations, i.e., in the act of assigning the content of a representation to an x that differs from the representation itself yet remains immanent to the mind.

⁴⁹ An intuition is a singular representation in the sense that it refers to a single object, but it contains a manifold since it results from assembling a set of features provided by sensations. As Kant puts it, »every appearance as intuition . . . can only be cognized, in apprehension, through successive synthesis (from part to part). All appearances are accordingly *already intuited* as aggregates« (*KrV*, A 163 B 203-204, emphasis mine, cf. A 99, B 136n). Similarly, he distinguishes the “mere synthesis of different representations *in an intuition*” from the unity conferred upon the latter by concepts (A 79 B 105, emphasis mine). At A94 Kant uses the term ‘synopsis’ to denote this non-discursive type of act. While he clearly considered the very production of intuitions, qua object-directed representations, to require the imagination (A 163 B 204, cf. A 77-78 B 103), I take him to hold that the object of intuition thus produced may well appear *to the human mind itself*, qua consciousness, as something given to it rather than produced by it. See J. J. WILLIAMS, *How Conceptually Guided Are Kantian Intuitions?*, «History of Philosophy Quarterly», 29/1, 2012, pp. 57-78, for an insightful account of the former point and corresponding critique of both conceptualist and non-conceptualist readings of Kant. On the role of the imagination in the intuitions of space and time, see M. HEIDEGGER, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Fünfte, vermehrte Auflage, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 1929/1991, pp. 220-223. Unlike WATKINS and WILLASCHEK, *Kant’s Account of Cognition*, p. 91, cf. p. 106, I hold that Kant’s conception of sensible intuition allows for, but *does not depend* on, the relation of a subset of sensible representations to existing objects that act as their causes. Significantly, Kant does not *define* a sensible intuition in terms of its extramental cause.

⁵⁰ Kant mentions, e.g., objects of representations (*KrV*, A 191 B 236), objects of intuition (A 79, A 89 B 122, A 772 B 800), objects of apprehension (A 211 B 258), objects of perception (A 343 B 401), objects of experience (A 56 B 81, A 93 B 126, A 158 B 197), objects of cognition (A 94 B 127, A 260 B 315), objects of consciousness (A 190 B 235), objects of thought (A 334 B 392), objects of the (pure) understanding (A 249, A 258 B 314, A 264 B 320), and objects of reason (A 829 B 857).

Now when Kant uses the term ‘object of’ in this sense, he disregards the question as to whether the type of cognition at hand amounts to a cognition in the strict sense of the term, i.e., whether it *determines* the object to which it refers. Similarly, he in these contexts disregards the question as to whether the type of cognition at hand is *warranted*. These two interrelated questions take center stage in Kant’s investigation into the type of cognition that is achieved in judgments, particularly in a priori judgments, which is a topic that falls outside the scope of the *Stufenleiter* and will be discussed in the next section.

6. *The object of cognition in the strict sense of the term*

In line with the aim of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a whole, the Transcendental Analytic investigates the conditions under which the human mind can obtain a priori cognitions of objects, i.e., under which the employment of categories is warranted.⁵¹ In particular, Kant investigates synthetic a priori cognitions such as ‘everything that happens has its cause’ (*KrV*, A 9 B 13) or ‘the soul is substance’ (*KrV*, A 344 B 402), that is, cognitions that take the form of judgments and determine a subject by means of a predicate not contained in the subject.

Evidently, only the former type of judgment is warranted on Kant’s account. Why this is so cannot be decided from the perspective of general logic, which treats any judgments as a combination of a subject and predicate (*KrV*, B 140). As I will argue in this section, Kant rather considers a judgment to objectify a manifold of representations in a preeminent way, namely, by positing the unity of the manifold as rule-bound rather than arbitrary. While this conception is key to his critical account of the synthetic a priori judgments put forward in former metaphysics, Kant in various contexts abstracts from the difference between a priori and a posteriori judgments in order to clarify what he means by a judgment as such.

In this regard, Kant states that «judgments are . . . functions of unity among our representations» that differ from other cognitions by employing concepts, i.e., representations that, «as predicates of possible judgments, refer to a representation of an as yet undetermined object» (*KrV*, A 69 B 94). Thus, the judgment ‘this swan is white’ refers the concept ‘white’ to the representation of a swan, which as a result acquires greater determination. While, according to Kant, the human mind can unify a manifold also independently of the understanding, it is only through judgments that it achieves cognition in the strict sense of the term:

Synthesis as such is . . . the mere effect of the imagination. . . . Yet to articulate this synthesis by means of concepts (*auf Begriffe zu bringen*) is a function that belongs to the understanding,

⁵¹ Concepts that are »destined for pure use a priori . . . always require a deduction of their entitlement, since . . . one must know how these concepts can be related to objects that they do not derive from any experience. I therefore call the explanation of the way in which concepts can relate to objects a priori their transcendental deduction.« (*KrV*, A 85 B 117).

and by means of which it first provides us with cognition in the proper sense (*in eigentlicher Bedeutung*).⁵²

Similarly, Kant conceives of the understanding both as the faculty of judging (*KrV*, B 94) and as the faculty of cognitions in the strict sense, adding that the latter «consist in the *determinate* reference of given representations to an object» (*KrV*, B 137, emphasis mine).

Seen in this light, Kant's well-known account of cognition at the outset of the *Transcendental Logic* can be harmonized with the *Stufenleiter*. In my view, this account is concerned not so much with cognition at large as with cognition proper, i.e., the type of cognition obtained in judgments rather than in intuitions or concepts alone. Without spelling this out, Kant asserts that «neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition.⁵³ In a related passage, he moreover suggests that only judgments produce objects of cognition in the strict sense of the term:

But there are two conditions under which alone the cognition of an object (*Gegenstand*) is possible: first, intuition, through which the object is given, but only as appearance; second, concept, through which an object is thought that corresponds to this intuition. (*KrV*, A 92-93 B 125)

Thus, the act of intuiting provides the mind with objects of intuition such as the singular representation of a swan. Yet only the judgment 'some swans are white' is an instance of cognition proper because it employs a concept to determine an object of intuition in a particular way and, thus, turns the latter into an object of cognition.⁵⁴

As I see it, however, Kant's initial presentation of cognition proper in terms of the distinction between receptivity and spontaneity merely anticipates his actual analysis of cognition proper. The latter turns on Kant's account, in the *Transcendental Deduction*, of the specific way in which judgments objectify a manifold of representations. This account is continuous with his conception of cognition outlined in section 5 in that it seeks to clarify how a particular type of

⁵² *KrV*, A 78 B 103, translation modified.

⁵³ *KrV*, A 50 B 74, cf. A97, A 271 B 327; see WATKINS and WILLASCHEK, *Kant's Account of Cognition*, pp. 85-89.

⁵⁴ I agree with Vanzo that Kant would regard a judgment such as 'all swans are white' as an instance of cognition proper in the sense that it is truth-apt (A. VANZO, *A Correspondence Theory of Objects? On Kant's Notions of Truth, Object, and Actuality*, «History of Philosophy Quarterly», 25/3, 2008, pp. 259-275; cf. *KrV*, A 191 B 236). For a defense of the contrary, see P. ROHS, *Bezieht sich nach Kant die Anschauung unmittelbar auf Gegenstände?*, in *Kant und die Berliner Aufklärung*, Vol. II, edited by V. Gerhardt, R.-P. Horstmann, and R. Schumacher, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2001, pp. 214-28: 219.

cognitive activity attributes the content of given representations to an *x* that is distinguished from these representations but remains within the sphere of the mind's cognitive activity.

As was mentioned above, Kant distinguishes judgments from other types of cognition by arguing that they establish unity among a manifold of representations in a way *that is not arbitrary*, i.e., that abstracts from the way in which a particular subject is affected by objects. Considering cognitions to refer to an object, he writes in the A-Deduction, means taking them »to be determined not at random or arbitrarily«, in other words, to defy, or resist, attempts to determine it on merely subjective grounds (*KrV*, A 104, translation modified). On my account, it is crucial that Kant *does not identify the *x* that offers resistance to our arbitrary determinations with a mind-independent thing*: contrary to a piece of wood that resists the force of the chisel, an object of cognition proper is itself nothing but a mind-immanent product of cognitive activity to which concepts can be referred.⁵⁵ Arguably, Kant meant to say that the human mind generates such objects with the sole aim of purging its sensible cognitions of arbitrary or merely subjective elements.

In the B-Deduction, Kant explains the same point by referring to the function of the copula:

I find that a judgment is nothing other than the way to bring given cognitions to the objective unity of apperception. That is the aim of the copula 'is' in the judgment (*in demselben*): to distinguish the objective unity of given representations from the subjective unity of the same. For this term designates the reference (*Beziehung*) of the representations to the original apperception and its *necessary* unity, even if the judgment itself is empirical, hence contingent.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ What I describe above in terms of 'resistance' is based on Kant's description at *KrV*, A 104 of the object as something »was dawider ist«, i.e., as that which 'is against something' or 'opposed' to something. While Kant's use of the term seems unusual and is hard to translate, he most likely alludes to the original use of the term 'Gegenstand' discussed in section 4. Misinterpreting the syntax, Guyer and Wood wrongly assume that Kant opposes the object to cognitions considered in a certain sense. My reading also deviates from Thöle, among others, who identifies that which is 'dawider' with the mind-independent object qua cause of sensations (THÖLE, *Kant und das Problem der Gesetzmäßigkeit der Natur*, 193). By contrast, Allison rightly notes that the necessity at stake stems from a priori rules (ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction*, 222). Similarly, Strawson aptly notes that »to know something about an object is to know something that holds irrespective of the occurrence of any particular state of consciousness« (STRAWSON, *The Bounds of Sense*, p. 73, cf. p. 91). My reading is in line with Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's use of the term 'dawider' (HEIDEGGER, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, pp. 72-74, 122-123).

⁵⁶ *KrV*, B 141-142, translation modified, emphasis mine. On this issue, see Kant's well-known distinction between judgments of perception and judgments of experience in the *Prolegomena* (IV 297-298). For a helpful discussion of this section and relevant parts of the Transcendental Deduction, see M. J. YOUNG, *Kant's Notion of Objectivity*, «Kant-Studien», 70/1-4, 1979, pp. 131-148.

Thus, by positing that the swan is white, I explicitly conceive of a manifold of cognitions as a unity. Unlike an intuition, a judgment presents this unity in a form that disregards the particular way in which I am affected by something, i.e., it establishes what Kant here calls ‘objective unity of apperception’. On his account, that is, the unity produced in the judgment is nothing but a unity that I consciously conceive *as* a unity.

By considering a judgment in these terms, Kant is only one step away from arguing that what is called an object of cognition – in the strict sense of the term – is *nothing but the unity that I consciously conceive as a unity in the act of judging*, i.e., something that results from a particular type of cognitive activity and accordingly is completely mind-immanent. This point is brought out clearly by the following passage from the A-Deduction:

It is clear, however, that, since we have to do only with the manifold of our representations, and since the 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 makes the object *necessary (die Einheit, welche der Gegenstand notwendig macht)* can be *nothing other than the formal unity of consciousness* in the synthesis of the manifold of the representations. Hence we say that we know the object if we have effected synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition.⁵⁷

Similarly, Kant writes in the B-Deduction that »[a]n object is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united« and, thus, that »the unity of consciousness is that which alone constitutes the reference of representations to an object«. ⁵⁸ Importantly, this definition of the object, like other descriptions, abstracts completely from mind-independent things considered as the ultimate referents of empirical judgments.

Kant’s conception of the object as the mind-immanent correlate of the synthetic unity achieved in the act of judging radically deviates from preceding theories and, accordingly, has provoked both resistance and attempts to dilute its radicality. As was mentioned in the introduction, I hold that both responses are unnecessary on the assumption that Kant’s account rests on the purely methodological decision to analyze the cognitive activities carried out by the human mind from within. Seen from this perspective, the human mind necessarily emerges

⁵⁷ *KrV*, A 105, emphasis mine, translation modified. In terms of grammar, the clause ‘die Einheit, welche der Gegenstand notwendig macht’ means that the object makes the unity necessary. Guyer and Wood translate the clause in this sense (see also ALLISON, *Kant’s Transcendental Deduction*, p. 222). In terms of content, however, and given the surrounding passages, we cannot expect Kant at this point to claim that it is the object that achieves something rather than the type of unity produced by the judgment. For this reason, I propose to read ‘den Gegenstand’ instead of ‘der Gegenstand’, i.e., to take ‘object’ as the direct object of the clause.

⁵⁸ *KrV*, B 317, cf. A 109, A 247 B 304, A 197 B 242 (cited below).

as the origin of the object qua object of cognition. In an unpublished note dated 1773-1775, Kant writes accordingly:

[T]he determinable (object) . . . can only be represented according to (*nach*) its relations and is nothing other than the subjective representation (of the subject) itself, but made general, for I am the original of all objects.⁵⁹

Despite the distortive impact of the 1783 Garve/Feder review, the true significance of Kant's account was not lost on some of his students. In his response to a now lost letter from Jacob Sigismund Beck from 1792, Kant confirms the latter's reading and clarifies his position as follows:

You put the matter quite rightly when you say: The sum total (*Inbegriff*) of representations is itself the object, and the act of the mind through which the sum total of representations is represented is what we mean by 'referring them to the object'. But one may still ask: How can a sum total . . . of representations be represented? Not through the awareness that it is given to us; for a sum total requires a uniting (synthesis) of the manifold. The sum total must therefore . . . be produced (*gemacht werden*), and this by an inner act that pertains to a given manifold as such and that precedes a priori the manner in which the manifold is given.⁶⁰

Although the final part of this passage is concerned with a priori cognition, to which I will turn shortly, Kant's comments apply to empirical and a priori judgments alike. By positing that *x* is a swan, or that swans are white, I explicitly represent a number of representations, including «white colour, long neck, red beak, black legs, and whole feet, and all these of a certain size, with a power of swimming in the water, and making a certain kind of noise», *as a unity*.⁶¹ According to Kant, doing so requires a special act, namely, the «inner act» of distinguishing an *x* from the relevant set of representations and explicitly conceiving of it as the sum total of these representations. It is through this act alone – carried out in a judgment – that the human mind generates an object of cognition in the strict sense of the term.

⁵⁹ *Refl*, XVII, 645-646 (4674).

⁶⁰ Kant to Beck, January 20, 1792 (Br XI 314). Beck may well have drawn on a passage from the Second Analogy where Kant writes that the mind apprehends a series of representations, but that it considers »the appearance that is given to [it], in spite of the fact that it is nothing other than a sum total of these representations (*Inbegriff dieser Vorstellungen*), as the *object* of these representations« (*KrV*, A 191 B 236, emphasis mine).

⁶¹ The example I use here is Locke's (*Essay*, III. xxiii.14). Locke further notes that »our specific ideas of substances are nothing else but a collection of a certain number of simple ideas, considered as united in one thing.« See II.xxiii.1 for an account of empirical concept formation along the same lines.

The act of consciously conceiving a set of representations as a unity that is necessary rather than arbitrary rests on the awareness of a particular *rule*. Thus, positing that x is a swan comes down to affirming the rule according to which the features x, y, and z, which are united in the concept ‘swan’, always go together. Seen in this way, the concept ‘swan’ is nothing but the articulation of a rule according to which a manifold of representations must be unified.⁶²

Drawing on various examples, Kant writes that «all cognition requires a concept» and that, «as far as its form is concerned, the latter is always something . . . that serves as a rule.»⁶³ I assume that Kant’s original understanding of concepts as rules draws on a consideration of geometrical concepts. Indeed, it is relatively easy to regard the concept of a triangle as an a priori rule that tells us to unify three straight lines in a particular way. On Kant’s account, consciousness of the unifying activity that this rule prescribes suffices to think of the triangle «as an object» (*KrV*, A 105), whereas actually producing the object as an object of mathematical cognition requires the execution of the rule in pure intuition.⁶⁴

This example illustrates that Kant need not resort to the role of mind-independent things to account for the possibility of judgments that lay claim to objectivity.⁶⁵ As he sees it, this merely

⁶² I take Kant to hold that we establish the empirical rules on the basis of which we treat a number of intuitions as belonging together by relying on repeated perceptions of the same constellation. In the case of empirical concepts, Kant states, the synthesis of representations they contain is »borrowed« from experience (*KrV*, A 220 B 267, cf. A 126). On this, see HOPPE, *Synthesis bei Kant*, pp. 116-117, 238-240. Clearly, the assumption on the part of the human mind that the particular features thus unified *necessarily* belong together will always remain provisional. Kant’s scattered remarks on empirical concept formation do not impact on the core of his analysis, according to which the rules that allow the mind to produce objects of cognition in the strict sense *at all* must stem from the mind itself.

⁶³ *KrV*, A 106. Kant uses the examples of the concept of body and the concept of triangle here. He refers to the concept of a dog as a rule at A 141 B 180; see also A 55 B 80, B 145. Unlike Watkins and Willascheck, I do not qualify Kant’s conception of concepts as rules as »psychological« (WATKINS and WILLASCHEK, *Kant’s Account of Cognition*, pp. 98, cf. 97-100). My reading also deviates from theirs in that I do not consider this conception to be on a par with the Wolffian account of concepts in terms of the marks they contain: whereas Kant in some contexts relies on this model, the aim of the *Critique* requires instead an account of the rules by means of which the mind unifies and objectifies its representations.

⁶⁴ *KrV*, A 713 B 741, cf. A 141 B 180, A 223 B 271.

⁶⁵ In a chapter quoted by Kant (*Prol*, AA IV 270), Locke also appeals to the case of mathematical judgments to claim that cognition proper is foremost a matter of determining mind-immanent ideas: »For the attaining of knowledge and certainty, it is requisite that we have determined ideas. . . . I place the certainty of our knowledge in the consideration of our ideas, with so little care and regard (as it may seem) to the real existence of things«. Since most discourses involve »general propositions, and notions in which existence is not at all concerned«, mathematics provide a useful model of how certainty can be

requires that a manifold of representations is established according to a rule. This also holds true of non-mathematical types of cognition:

If we investigate what new characteristic is given to our representations by the reference to an object (*Beziehung auf einen Gegenstand*), and what dignity they thereby receive, we find that this reference does nothing beyond *making necessary* the combination of representations in a certain way and subjecting them to a rule.⁶⁶

Accordingly, Kant conceives of the understanding as a «faculty of rules», i.e., as a faculty that seeks to subject all appearances to rules, in particular such rules as «necessarily adhere to the cognition of objects» and are therefore called «laws» (*KrV*, A 126, cf. A 127).

Clearly, most empirical rules for the unification of appearances lack this type of necessity: we might have grouped swans, geese, and ducks differently or not at all (cf. *KrV*, A 667-668 B 695-696). By unifying our representations merely «according to empirical concepts», Kant asserts, we would be unable to turn the «swarm of appearances» filling our soul into objects of cognition at all. In this case,

all reference (*Beziehung*) of the cognition to objects would . . . cease, since this reference would lack connection according to (*nach*) universal and necessary laws, and would thus be intuition deprived of thought, but never cognition, and would therefore be as good as nothing for us.⁶⁷

Thus, Kant holds that the human mind must be able to subject all appearances to rules that stem «from the understanding itself a priori» (*KrV*, A 126) to even generate empirical cognitions proper. These a priori rules – the categories – determine what counts as an object of cognition in the first place and, as such, allow the human mind to conceive of all possible empirical representations as interconnected elements of an ordered totality.

These rules themselves can be articulated – in philosophy – in the form of the synthetic a priori judgments Kant calls principles of the pure understanding (*KrV*, A 148 B 187), including the principle according to which «[a]ll alterations occur according to the law of the connection of cause and effect» (*KrV*, B 232). These judgments determine any possible object of experience according to one of the categories and, thus, amount to synthetic a priori cognitions proper (*KrV*, A 180-81 B 223, cf. A761 B 789).

obtained (*Essay*, IV.iv.8). Clearly, Kant moves beyond classical appeals to the model of mathematics by shifting the focus from demonstrative certainty to objectivity.

⁶⁶ *KrV*, A 197 B 242, translation modified, emphasis mine, cf. A 191 B 236, A 196 B 241-42.

⁶⁷ *KrV*, A 111, translation modified, cf. A 108, B 137, A 253, *Prol*, AA IV 298-299.

Kant's account of what it means to generate this type of cognition rests on an implicit analogy with the way in which the mind generates empirical cognitions.⁶⁸ As was discussed above, Kant claims with regard to empirical judgments that the mind produces «objective unity of apperception» (*KrV*, B 141-142) by (1) consciously distinguishing a set of representations from a mind-immanent *x* that, by representing this very set as a unity, functions as the object of the cognition, and (2) by considering the unity of the representations that is thought in the concept of the object to be necessary, i.e., rule-bound. Analogously, Kant maintains that synthetic a priori cognition proper consists in achieving «transcendental unity of apperception» (*KrV*, A 108, B 139) and requires non-empirical versions of (1) and (2).

As regards (1), Kant claims that all empirical cognitions presuppose an *x*, called transcendental object, which is nothing but the correlate of the mind's a priori conception of the synthetic unity of all possible representations, i.e., of the transcendental unity of apperception. As he puts it in the A-Deduction:

The pure concept of this transcendental object (which in all of our cognitions is really always one and the same = *X*) is that which can provide all of our empirical concepts with reference to an object, i.e., objective reality, in the first place. Now this concept . . . concerns nothing but *that unity* that must be encountered in a manifold of cognition insofar as it refers to an object. This reference, however, *is nothing other than the necessary unity of consciousness*, thus also of the synthesis of the manifold through a common function of the mind, a function that consists in combining this manifold in one representation.⁶⁹

Thus, just as the concept 'swan' refers to an *x* that represents a set of empirical representations as a unity, the concept of the transcendental object represents the unity that *any* object of cognition proper must possess. As was argued in section 5, whereas the features that make up the swan are already grasped as belonging together in the very act of intuiting, their unity is represented in conceptual terms only in the act of judging, which thus completes the objectification of the content provided by the senses (cf. *KrV*, A78 B 103). Analogously, Kant writes that all representations given in intuition are from the outset subject to a necessary synthesis, called «the original synthetic unity of apperception», but «must also be subsumed under this synthesis» (*KrV*, B 135-136, translation modified), which is to say that the mind

⁶⁸ In what follows, I disregard the role of Kant's analysis of the way in which the mind produces a priori cognitions of objects in mathematics. Evidently, I cannot do justice to the daunting complexity of Kant's transcendental deduction in the context of this article. I elaborate on this issue in DE BOER, *Kant's Reform*, pp. 127-162.

⁶⁹ *KrV*, A 109, translation modified, emphasis mine, cf. A 106-107, A 253. Elsewhere, Kant notes that the transcendental object qua «correlate of the unity of apperception» merely serves to establish »the unity of the manifold in sensible intuition« (A 250).

must be able to represent the a priori unity constitutive of any object of cognition also in purely conceptual terms. Evidently, this is where the role of pure concepts comes in.

As regards (2), we have seen above that Kant conceives of categories as «concepts that refer to objects as such» (*KrV*, A 290 B 346). According to the transcendental deduction, however, categories actually refer to objects – in the strict sense – not in all cases, but only insofar as they are used as *a priori* rules for the unification of sensible intuitions, i.e., in relation to possible objects of experience.⁷⁰ In this regard as well, I take Kant's analysis to be based on an analogy with empirical cognition: just as the concept 'swan' represents a rule for the unification of a particular manifold of intuitions, categories represent rules for *any* unification of a manifold of intuitions that is to result in an object of cognition proper, i.e., in a unity that is consciously posited *as a unity*.

As Kant puts it succinctly in the B-Deduction, categories are nothing but «rules for an understanding whose entire capacity consists in . . . the act of raising the synthesis of the manifold that is given to it in intuition . . . to the unity of apperception». Accordingly, the understanding is said «to bring about the unity of apperception a priori only by means of the categories», i.e., by subjecting all intuitions to the rules these categories represent.⁷¹ Thus, the understanding produces transcendental unity of apperception by attributing the rules contained in the categories to any possible object of experience whatsoever, something which requires that it distinguishes the categories from a mind-immanent *x* – the transcendental object – so as to attribute the former to the latter.

Arrived at this point, we can consider Kant to have answered the question at the heart of his 1772 letter to Herz as follows: categories can refer to objects only insofar as they produce the latter as regards their form, i.e., insofar as they function as rules by dint of which the human mind can refer its representations to an object at all and, hence, produce objects of empirical cognition proper. One of the many passages that summarizes this result is the one that presents the so-called «supreme principle of all synthetic judgments». According to this principle,

every object stands under the necessary conditions of the synthetic unity of the manifold of intuition in a possible experience. In this way synthetic a priori judgments are possible, [namely] by relating the formal conditions of a priori intuition, the synthesis of the imagination, and its necessary unity in a transcendental apperception to a possible empirical cognition as such.⁷²

⁷⁰ For a cognition to refer to an object, Kant writes, it must »refer its representation to experience (whether actual or else possible experience)« (*KrV*, A 156 B 195). Evidently, the object of *possible* experience can only be constituted by the mind itself. I take Kant to hold that the same applies to any actual object of experience, except insofar as the latter also requires sensible input.

⁷¹ *KrV*, B 145-46, translation modified, cf. A 108.

⁷² *KrV*, A 158 B 197.

Put very briefly, this principle entails that the principles of the pure understanding are warranted instances of a priori cognition proper because they refer categories, qua rules for the unification of a sensible manifold, to possible objects of experience. If, by contrast, a category such as substance is predicated of the soul, then the pure understanding bypasses the synthetic activity carried out by the pure imagination in relation to time.⁷³ Since, according to Kant, the act of predication in this case does not establish the correlate of a rule-bound unity of apperception, metaphysicians err by assuming that their conceptual determinations of the soul amount to cognitions proper.⁷⁴

Yet this result does not entail, finally, that Kant deprives metaphysics of the capacity to generate objects of cognition at all. If the term ‘cognition’ is used in the broad sense of the *Stufenleiter* outlined in section 5, then ideas of reason, which Kant views as a particular type of concept, do qualify as cognitions (*KrV*, A 320 B 377).⁷⁵ As we have seen, cognitions in this sense can also have an object, i.e., they can refer a manifold of representations to an *x* that is distinguished from it without therefore existing independently of the mind. Doing so makes it possible to specify the content of the idea, in one respect or the other, by means of concepts, for instance, by conceiving of the soul as a substance or of God as creator.⁷⁶

According to Kant, moreover, this type of cognitive activity can be purposive depending on the context. If we were to conceive of ideas of reason as nothing but representations, as is done by the transcendental philosopher, then the latter would not be able to function as effective incentives. The human mind must therefore objectify the content of the ideas to some extent, i.e., treat them as analogous to objects that can be determined by means of either pure or sensible predicates.⁷⁷ Seen in this light, it makes sense that Kant refers to the objectified content of an idea of reason as «an imagined object of this idea» (*KrV*, A 670 B 698) or, more

⁷³ «Categories do not afford us cognition of things . . . except through their possible application to empirical intuition. . . . [They] consequently have no other use for the cognition of things except insofar as the latter are taken as objects of possible experience.» (*KrV*, B 147-48, cf. A 124, A 146-147).

⁷⁴ *KrV*, A 401; cf. *Prol*, AA IV 315-16.

⁷⁵ According to the *Stufenleiter*, «a concept made up of notions, which goes beyond the possibility of experience, is an idea or a concept of reason» (*KrV*, A 320 B 377, cf. A 321 B 378). Evidently, this description abstracts from the different roles played by categories and ideas of the understanding in the progressive unification of representations.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., *KrV*, A 478-479 B 506-507, A 494-95 B 522-23, A 698 B 726, A 848 B 876.

⁷⁷ In this context, categories can be employed in their capacity as functions that allow us to think «objects as such without attending to the particular manner (of sensibility) in which they might be given» (*KrV*, A 253-254 B 308-309, translation modified).

frequently, as «an object in the idea».⁷⁸ Thus, Kant states that it is warranted to conceive of God as an object in this sense insofar as we regard it as «a substratum, unknown to us, of the systematic unity, order, and purposiveness of the world's arrangement, which reason has to make into a regulative principle of its investigation of nature» (*KrV*, A 696-697 B 724-725).

In sum, Kant's account of cognition in the broad sense allows him to analyse how the human mind, in types of cognition ranging from empirical intuition to the idea of God, distinguishes a mind-immanent *x* from a particular manifold of representations so as to provide the cognition with an object, i.e., to produce the object 'of' the cognition at hand. While innovative, this account itself is not critical *per se*, but merely constitutes the larger context of the properly critical strand of the *Critique*. The latter strand, we have seen, consists in Kant's completely new conception of what is required to produce an object of cognition proper. According to this conception, judgments about things as such, the soul, the world, and God do not count as cognitions in the strict sense and therefore should be expelled from the theoretical part of metaphysics.

7. A taxonomy

Kant's sustained attempt to determine the conditions under which a priori cognitions of objects are possible led him to explore the full range of ways in which the human mind engages in the objectification of its representations. Clearly, he regarded this exploration as a means rather than an end in itself, which explains why his analysis in this regard is scattered across the *Critique* and might appear to lack coherence. Given my interpretation so far, however, it should not be too difficult to present a taxonomy of the meanings Kant attributes to the term 'object' in this work (see Figure 1). As I see it, the binary divisions of Kant's implicit taxonomy rest on three main questions:

- (1) Is the human mind active or passive in relation to the object?
- (2) Is the cognition capable of producing objective unity of apperception?
- (3) Is the cognition empirical or pure?⁷⁹

In all types of cognition, objectification occurs by representing a manifold of representations as a unity, which requires that the manifold is distinguished from an *x* that serves as the mind-

⁷⁸ *KrV*, A 671 B 699, cf. A 674-675 B 702-703, A 687 B 715. The reality of ideas of reason, Kant writes, consists in nothing but «a schema of the regulative principle of the systematic unity of all cognitions of nature». For this reason, such ideas «should be adopted as grounds (*zum Grunde gelegt werden*) only as analogues of real things» (A 674 B 702, translation modified, emphasis mine, cf. A 672 B 700).

⁷⁹ Further divisions rest on Kant's understanding of the difference between intuition, the understanding, and reason, as well as their interplay. For the sake of simplicity the chart abstracts from the distinction between pure and empirical instances in the case of cognitions in the broad sense.

immanent object of the cognition at hand. In this sense, any cognition is objective. The cognitive activities differ with respect to the extent to which they unify a manifold of representations, i.e., with respect to the form they impose on the latter.

As regards (1), Kant distinguishes between affecting objects, in relation to which the mind is completely passive, and objects *of* cognition, in relation to which the human mind is active, or spontaneous, to some extent. In the case of intuitions, the human mind is largely but not completely passive in relation to the object. Insofar as the human mind produces a priori cognitions of objects, it does so spontaneously.

As regards (2), Kant distinguishes between objects of cognition in the broad sense and objects of cognition in the strict sense. The criterion in this regard is whether a type of cognition results in objective unity of apperception, i.e., whether it produces and determines a mind-immanent object by unifying a manifold of representations according to *rules*. Empirical judgments and mathematical judgments qualify as cognitions proper, i.e., they produce objects of cognition in the strict sense. The same can be said of a priori judgments that attribute categories, conceived as rules, to the object of any possible empirical cognition, i.e., the principles of the pure understanding.

As regards (3), all cognitions, in both the broad and narrow sense of the term, can be either pure or empirical, depending on whether their content is provided by sensations or generated spontaneously.

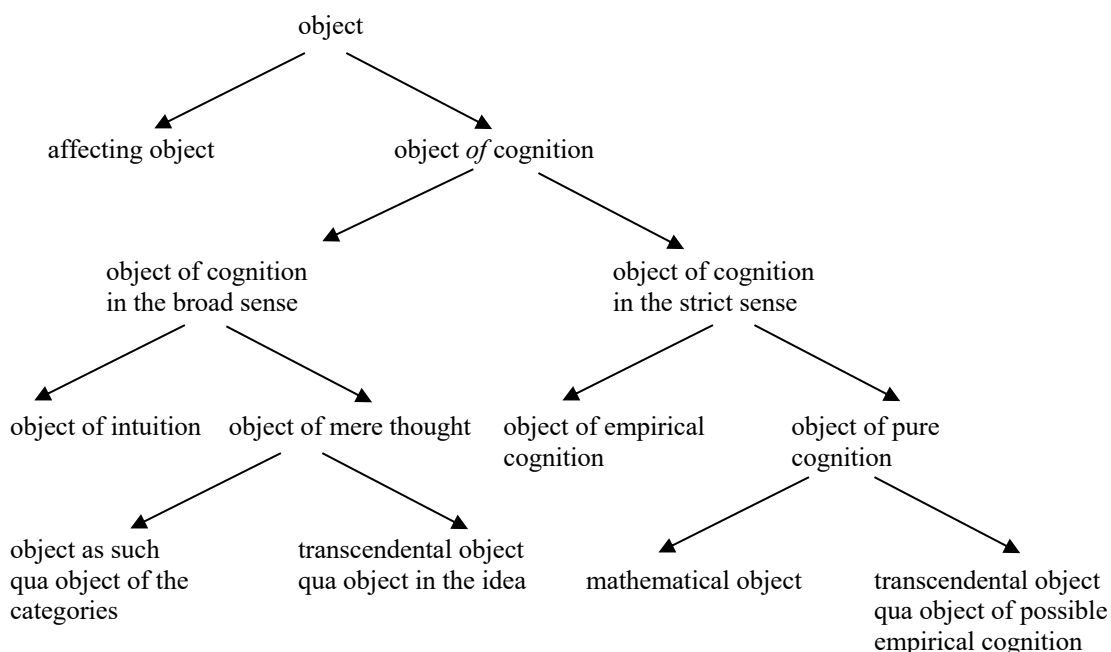


Figure 1

8. Conclusion

Toward the end of the *Transcendental Analytic*, Kant notes that transcendental philosophy, here considered as the first and foundational part of any metaphysical system, ought to begin with

«the concept of an object as such» rather than the common distinction between possibility and impossibility.⁸⁰ Kant definitely does not do so in the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself, which, in its capacity as a propaedeutic, adopts a method that is very different from that of a metaphysical treatise. Among the peculiarities of Kant's method is the fact that he often uses key terms in different senses and provides explanations or partial definitions of them only in the course of his discussions.

Rather than regarding this as a defect, however, I hope to have shown that Kant drew on accepted meanings of the terms 'object' and 'object of' where he took this to suffice, but gradually elaborated a coherent and highly innovative account of how the mind produces objects of cognition.

Insofar as Kant discusses instances of cognition in the *broad* sense of the term, I have argued, he shows how the human mind engages in a wide range of objectifying acts: it unifies its sensible representations, subjects them to empirical and a priori rules of its own making, and produces objects of a priori cognition, or transcendental objects, including the object contained in the idea of God. While this strand of Kant's account deviates from the Wolffian tradition by turning to the problem of the object, it is in line with the continuist conception of cognition typical of that tradition.

Kant's account of cognition in the *strict* sense of the term, by contrast, turns against Wolff and his followers and, in fact, against the philosophical tradition at large. Appealing to intuition and thought as two separate stems, he seeks to demonstrate that pure concepts can refer to objects only if they produce the latter as far as their form is concerned, that is, if they function as a priori rules for the unification of sensible representations. On this view, even an object of cognition in the strict sense of the term is nothing but an intentional object of sorts, regardless of whether its content stems from sensations.

Given Kant's methodological idealism, his highly innovative conception of cognition proper *cannot* take recourse to mind-independent things. Given the aim of the *Critique*, on the other hand, Kant *need not* take recourse to the same, for he develops his intricate analysis first and foremost to demonstrate that Wolffian metaphysics lacks the means to objectify its representations in such a way that a priori cognition proper results.

Seen from our perspective, however, Kant's most incisive contribution to philosophy is probably not so much his critique of Wolffianism as the means he elaborated to support it, that is, his unprecedented exploration of the capacity of the human mind to produce objects of intuition, objects of thought, and objects of cognition by drawing from its own depths.⁸¹

⁸⁰ *KrV*, A 290 B 346. The Architectonic uses the term 'transcendental philosophy' in this sense in as well (A 845 B 873).

⁸¹ I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments and questions I received from members of the Leuven Research Group in Classical German Philosophy as well as from audiences of the online workshop on *Actualités de la recherches kantienne* organized by Inga Römer (Grenoble 2021) and

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