

Is it the Understanding or the Imagination that Synthesizes?

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Abstract: A common reading of Kant's notion of synthesis takes it to be carried out by the imagination in a manner guided by the concepts of the understanding. I point to a significant problem for this reading: it is the *reproductive* imagination that carries out the syntheses of apprehension and reproduction, and Kant claims repeatedly that the reproductive imagination is governed *solely* by its own laws of association. In light of this, I argue for a different division of the labor of synthesis between the imagination and the understanding. On my view, while the reproductive imagination puts representations together in accordance with laws of association, the understanding recognizes (some of) these combinations of representations as necessary in virtue of corresponding to a connection in the objects represented. I conclude by suggesting that a virtue of my account is that it can make sense of Kant's claim that the relational categories are merely regulative for intuitions.

Keywords: synthesis, guidance, reproductive imagination, concepts, relational categories

Despite its centrality to his account of experience, there is much that remains puzzling about Kant's notion of synthesis. My topic in this paper is a question that is surprisingly difficult to answer: is it the imagination or the understanding that is responsible for synthesis? Interpreters seeking to defend a position on this issue have to contend with strong evidence pointing in either direction. For Kant says in so many words both that synthesis is a function of the imagination and also that it can only be carried out by the understanding; he also describes the concepts of the understanding as providing the rules for synthesis.

One common strategy for reconciling these conflicting claims is to take the imagination to carry out synthesis in a manner that is guided by the concepts of the understanding: that is, to understand the imagination as effectively an arm of the understanding, in virtue of which the conceptual rules of the latter come to govern the synthesis of sensible intuitions. In §1, I raise what I take to be a significant problem for this strategy: Kant specifies that the *reproductive* imagination

plays a central role in synthesis, especially in the synthesis of empirical intuitions, and he makes clear that the reproductive imagination is determined *only* by its own laws, which he identifies as the laws of association. Given the clear differences between laws of association and the conceptual rules of the understanding, however, it is not clear how the latter can be said to govern the activity of the reproductive imagination in synthesis. In light of this, in §2, I argue for a different way of reconciling Kant's conflicting claims, according to which the labor of synthesis should be divided between the imagination and the understanding along different lines than it usually is. As I discuss, this demarcation of roles also points the way to an alternative understanding of what it means to say that concepts are rules for synthesis. Finally, in §3, I suggest that my account also helps to make sense of Kant's claim that the mathematical and relational categories are distinct insofar as the former are constitutive whereas the latter are merely regulative for intuitions.

1. Kant defines synthesis as follows:

By synthesis in the most general sense...I understand the action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition...synthesis alone is that which properly collects the elements for cognitions and unifies them into a certain content...(A77-8/B103).¹

Immediately following this definition, Kant explicitly identifies the imagination as the faculty that performs synthesis: "Synthesis in general is, as we shall subsequently see, *the mere effect of the imagination*, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious" (A78/B104, my emph.). Another clear statement to the same effect can be found in the A-deduction, where Kant says that different

¹ Translations of Kant's text are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (ed. Guyer and Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992-) and are given using the volume and page number in the *Akademie* edition. References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* use A/B pagination. Other works are referred to as: Anth.: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; CPJ: *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; L-Anth: *Lectures on Anthropology*, P.: *Prolegomena*.

perceptions that by themselves are “encountered dispersed and separate in the mind” must first be combined in order to amount to cognition; thus, he continues, “there is...an active faculty of the synthesis of this manifold in us, which we call imagination...” (A120).

Despite these seemingly decisive statements ascribing synthesis in general to the imagination, however, equally clear statements can be found that attribute it instead to the understanding. Thus, for example, in §15 of the B-Deduction, Kant asserts categorically that “all combination, whether we are conscious of it or not...is an action of the understanding, which we would designate with the general title synthesis...” (B130). In addition, he describes the categories—which are the highest concepts of the understanding and structure all its activity—as serving to “subject appearances to general rules of synthesis” (A146/B185). This strongly suggests, then, that the understanding carries out synthesis and that it does so in accordance with categorial rules.

How can these conflicting passages be reconciled? A first possibility is that they reflect a change in Kant’s position across the A- and B-editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Whereas the imagination is central to Kant’s discussion of the three-fold synthesis in the A-Deduction, this discussion is omitted from the B-Deduction, which focuses instead on the role played by the understanding in particular in bringing about the kind of unity required for objective cognition. Moreover, §§18 and 19 of the B-Deduction explicitly contrast the combination of representations by the imagination with combination by the understanding and make clear that only the latter amounts to cognition (B139-40; B141-2). This might be taken to indicate that by the time he writes the B-Deduction, Kant no longer thinks that synthesis could be a “blind” effect of the imagination and has reassigned it exclusively to the understanding.²

² See Kitcher 1990, 158; Allison 2004, 186-7; Kneller 2007, 100; Pollok 2017, 229n18. Tolley 2019 also rules out this reading.

There are a number of considerations that tell against this reading, however. For one, multiple passages ascribing synthesis to the imagination are left unaltered in the B-edition,³ including in sections that Kant otherwise extensively revised.⁴ Second, and more importantly, Kant *added* a number of passages to the B-edition that continue to describe the imagination as performing synthesis. For example, in a passage added to the beginning of the Second Analogy, he says: “...I really connect two perceptions in time. Now connection is not the work of mere sense and intuition, but is here rather the product of *a synthetic faculty* [*synthetischen Vermögens*] *of the imagination...*” (B233, my emph.).⁵ This suggests that the passages mentioned above are not simply traces of an earlier view that Kant neglected to omit from the B-edition. Even further evidence of this can be found in the *Critique of Judgment*, in which Kant continues to ascribe synthesis to the imagination: specifying, for example, that when an object affects sensibility, this “brings the imagination into activity for the synthesis of the manifold...” (5:238).

This evidence calls for a different way of reconciling the conflicting passages above. According to a widely adopted strategy for doing so—which I will call the *guidance model*—while it is indeed the imagination that synthesizes the manifold of sensible intuition, it does so in a manner that is *guided* by the concepts of the understanding.⁶ On this reading, then, the imagination functions as an arm of the understanding, serving to combine the sensible manifold in a manner that is determined by the conceptual and categorial rules of the latter. Longuenesse, for example, argues that “empirical concept[s] guid[e] our apprehension/reproduction of the phenomenal manifold...in order to constitute complete representations of objects from our present impressions”

³ E.g., in §10 of the “Clue” section, which includes the passage quoted above.

⁴ E.g., A237/B296 in the section on the distinction between phenomena and noumena.

⁵ See also B164; B151-2.

⁶ Ginsborg 2015 also describes and criticizes what she calls the “‘guiding’ model” of synthesis, although on different grounds than I do here (53-93).

(1998, 49).⁷ As I will discuss further below, Kant ascribes what he calls the syntheses of apprehension and reproduction to the imagination (A99-102); thus, on Longuenesse's reading, these synthetic activities of the imagination are guided by concepts which then enables objective representations to result from this synthesis.⁸

Since the guidance model takes the imagination to function as an extension of the understanding in sensible synthesis, it can explain why Kant ascribes synthesis to both faculties without seeming to recognize any tension between these claims. However, I now want to raise what I take to be a significant problem for this model. The problem arises as a result of two claims that there is ample textual evidence for. First, as I will discuss below, the *reproductive* imagination plays an essential role in the syntheses of apprehension and reproduction, which are in turn required for the synthesis of empirical intuitions. Second, Kant says that the synthesis of the reproductive imagination “is subject *solely* to empirical laws, namely those of association...” (B152, my emph.). But if the reproductive imagination is governed *solely* by the laws of association, then it is not clear how its syntheses can also be said to be *guided* by the concepts of the understanding.

Let me spell out the problem in greater detail. On Kant's view, the reproductive imagination serves in general to call back to mind past representations that previously accompanied a representation or type of representation a subject is currently having. In his discussion of the three-fold synthesis in the A-Deduction, he makes clear that in virtue of performing this function, it plays an essential role in both the syntheses of apprehension and reproduction. First, it is necessary for apprehending—or taking up into consciousness—a series of representations had by a subject and holding that series in mind *as* a series. As Kant puts it, it is

⁷ See also Longuenesse 1998, 50, 64, 118.

⁸ See also Paton 1936, vol. 1, 272; Grüne 2009, 172-173, 183-185; Hoppe 1983, 188; Kitcher 1990, 158; Land 2015, 480; Kraus 2020, 47, 73. On Ginsborg's reading, while the activity of the imagination is not explicitly *guided* by concepts, it can nonetheless be said to be *governed* by them (Ginsborg 2015). I discuss my disagreement with Ginsborg's view in n29 below.

required for “calling back a perception, from which the mind has passed on to another, to the succeeding ones, and thus for exhibiting entire series of perceptions...” (A121). Thus, for example, it enables a subject to keep her successive perceptions of the parts of a house in mind as she scans its façade. It is because apprehension of a series of representations requires this kind of reproduction that Kant claims that “the synthesis of apprehension is...inseparably combined with the synthesis of reproduction” (A102).⁹ Second, the reproductive imagination also recalls representations that have frequently accompanied the type of representation a subject is currently having (A121-2; A100-2). In this way, it enables her to represent more than she immediately perceives. A subject’s past experiences with houses, for example, may lead her to represent the house she is currently perceiving as having side and back walls although she only currently sees its façade.¹⁰

In short, on Kant’s view, the syntheses of apprehension and reproduction both require the reproductive imagination and are necessary for intuitions to be held together and combined for recognition by the understanding (A103). This progression is laid out in Kant’s claim that “actual experience...consists in the apprehension, the association (the reproduction), and finally the recognition of the appearances” (A124).¹¹ It also figures in his explanation of the manner in which concepts serve as rules. As he puts it, a concept “can be a rule of intuitions only if it represents the *necessary reproduction* of the manifold of given intuitions” (A106, my emph.).

Now, according to the guidance model, concepts make reproduction necessary by *guiding* it.¹² On this type of reading, for example, the concept of a body constitutes a rule that directs the

⁹ The role played by reproduction in apprehension is often overlooked. Land 2015, e.g., appears to take apprehension to only require the productive imagination (470-2).

¹⁰ See Strawson 1970 and Matherne 2015. Kant also describes the imagination as bringing the manifold of intuition “into an image” (A120). For further discussion of the role of images, see Matherne 2015 and Tolley 2019.

¹¹ For discussion of Kant’s progression through intuition, perception, cognition and beyond, see Tolley 2020.

¹² More precisely, this type of view appeals to such guidance to explain why certain representations are reproduced rather than others. Longuenesse also posits a second sense of necessitation that is closer to my understanding of it: namely, that a concept provides “a reason to predicate of this object the marks that define the concept” (50).

imagination to represent extension, impenetrability and shape when synthesizing the representation of a body, and this is what explains why these representations are reproduced by the imagination as it synthesizes the manifold of intuition.¹³

As mentioned, however, I take this reading to be subject to a significant objection, which arises due to Kant's claim that the reproductive imagination is "subject solely to empirical laws...of association" (B152), a claim that is repeated in various discussions of the reproductive imagination across his texts.¹⁴ If the reproductive imagination is governed *solely* by laws of association, it is not clear how its synthesis can *also* be said to be guided by the conceptual rules of the understanding. Kant describes the "law of association" in general as follows: "empirical ideas that have frequently followed one another produce a habit (*Angewohnheit*) in the mind such that when one idea is produced, the other also comes into being" (*Anth.*, 7:176; see also A100). Thus, the association of representations occurs in response to their being found to frequently accompany in each other in a subject's experience; this produces a "habit" by which having the first representation in mind naturally "brings about a transition" (A100) to the others.¹⁵ I do not have space for a full discussion of Kant's account of laws of association here; what I wish to call attention to are the in-principle differences between associations and the conceptual laws of the understanding. For one, as just mentioned, associative laws relate representations as a result of their frequently *accompanying* each other, where this accompaniment might be explained, for example, by the fact that the objects they

¹³ This is how the guidance model reads Kant's discussion of this example at A106.

¹⁴ See, for example, A121; A124, *CPJ*, 5:240; *Anth*, 7:220, *L-Anth*, 25:512.

¹⁵ As should be apparent, Kant's understanding of association is strikingly similar to Hume's. Thus, I see no evidence for Young's claim that Kant rejects the empiricist understanding of association held by his predecessors (1988, 154-5). While Young notes that the reproductive imagination is governed by laws of association on Kant's view, he takes this to be compatible with describing it as actively "construing" or "interpreting" what is "sensibly present as an *F*" (149). On my view, this disregards the features of association I am calling attention to here as well as Kant's claim that the reproductive imagination is receptive rather than spontaneous (B151-2). It also conflicts with his descriptions of what consciousness of merely associated representations amounts to, namely, the mere consciousness that certain representations are "found together in perception" (B142). See Sethi 2020 for further discussion.

represent are temporally or spatially contiguous in a particular subject's experience (*L-Anth.*, 25:512-3). In contrast, representations are related under a concept in virtue of containing the "marks (*Merkmale*)" that constitute that concept, which specify the features that all objects falling under that concept have in common (B133*, B377). Second, the manner in which representations come to be related in the two cases is also different. As we have seen, Kant says that an associative relation comes about due to a subject's *habit* of thinking certain representations together, which results in a natural movement of the mind from one representation to another. In association, in his words, "if [one] representation occurs, another is immediately summoned" (*L-Anth.*, 25:512). Moreover, the mechanism by which such a habit is formed or activated is not transparent to the subject (*Anth.*, 7:176). In contrast, Kant says that the only use that can be made of concepts is in *judgment* (A68/B93), and, on his view, a judgment is not a blind habit of thinking representations together but rather an essentially self-conscious act that claims objective validity (B141-2).¹⁶ In claiming objective validity, a judgment claims, in effect, that the representations that are related in it are "not merely found together in perception"—as would be the case if they were combined merely "in accordance with laws of association"—but rather that this relation of representations corresponds to how things are "combined in the object" (B142). Finally, and of a piece with this last point, whereas Kant characterizes the understanding as a *spontaneous* faculty insofar as it is governed by its own *a priori* laws (B150) and is the source of *a priori* representations that it "bring[s] forth...itself" (A51/B75),¹⁷ he describes the reproductive imagination as a *receptive* (B151-2) and *sensible* (*Anth.*, 7:153) faculty, insofar as it is determined merely by empirical laws (B152) and can

¹⁶ It should be noted that although Kant's discussion in the B-Deduction appears to rule them out, in other contexts, Kant also allows for judgments that are *merely subjectively valid* and do not claim objective validity. This is the case, e.g., for judgments of perception in the *Prolegomena* as well as judgments of agreeableness in the *Critique of Judgment*. But judgments of perception are still distinct from associations: as I have argued elsewhere, although such judgments can *express* temporal relations between a subject's representations that obtain as a result of association, they are not themselves associations. See Sethi 2020.

¹⁷ For a helpful discussion of Kant's understanding of spontaneity, see Callanan 2017.

only recall to mind representations originally received through sensible affection (A51/B75; *Anth.*, 7:167; 7:140-1).¹⁸

These differences between concepts and associations make it difficult to see how concepts could be said to guide reproduction by the imagination. For as I have noted, reproduction occurs in accordance with laws of association, and Kant's discussion of association suggests that it is not the sort of thing that can be guided at all, much less in accordance with the *a priori* laws of the understanding. Consider the example of a body again. Kant's law of association predicts that a subject's repeated exposure to bodies and their package of properties—impenetrability, extension and shape—will result in these representations becoming associated for her, such that she ends up with a habit of representing extension and shape when she represents impenetrability. The formation of this associative habit, however, is a result of these representations frequently accompanying each other, and does not depend on her possession or application of the concept 'body'; conversely, if she fails to acquire this associative habit or acquires a different one, it is not clear how her possession of the concept 'body' could rectify this. For she cannot rationally control which associative habits she has, nor when and how they are activated.¹⁹

At this point, a defender of the guidance model may wish to appeal to the role played by what Kant calls the *productive* imagination. The productive imagination, unlike the reproductive, is

¹⁸ Grüne 2009 argues that it is what she calls "obscure concepts [*dunkle Begriffe*]" that serve as rules for sensible synthesis, where such concepts are simply primitive capacities to combine certain sensible representations and grasp them together as unities (202ff). Although she concedes that such "obscure concepts" do not fit well with Kant's account of concepts in general (209), she argues they are necessary to explain the role she takes concepts to play in bringing intuitions to consciousness. On my view, concepts do not play this role and so it is unnecessary to posit any such obscure concepts.

¹⁹ At least not directly: she may be able to exercise some indirect control over her associations, e.g., by repeatedly exposing herself to bodies. For a discussion of how to understand cognitive control on Kant's account, see McLear 2020. McLear also distinguishes between conceptual representation and association on the grounds that in the former, the subject is "able to base one [mental] state (or act) on another" as opposed to these states simply "flow[ing] one to the next" (64-5).

characterized as spontaneous (B152), and one of its functions is to produce “schemata” for concepts. A schema is “a rule for the determination of our intuition in accordance with a certain general concept”: to use Kant’s example, the schema for the concept of a dog provides “a rule in accordance with which my imagination can specify (*verzeichnen*) the shape of a four-footed animal in general” (A141/B180). Thus, schemata appear to mediate between concepts and sensible intuitions and are said to be rules for determining the latter in accordance with the former. Moreover, since they are produced by the productive imagination, they may be thought of as rules that are internal to the imagination, and as such, good candidates for guiding its activity.

Despite its promise however, I do not believe this proposal provides a solution to the problem I am discussing here. To see why, let us begin by noting that it can be spelled out in at least two ways. According to the first, the productive imagination itself carries out the apprehension and reproduction of empirical intuitions in accordance with schemata;²⁰ according to the second, schemata guide the synthesis carried out by the reproductive imagination. There are problems with either of these ways of proceeding. The first must overlook the fact that Kant explicitly distinguishes between the productive and the reproductive imagination, and ascribes reproduction to the latter. It also conflicts with his apparent restriction of the role of the productive imagination to the synthesis of pure intuitions of space and time. The following passage contains both these points:

The power of imagination...is either *productive*, that is, a faculty of the original presentation of the object...*which thus precedes experience*; or *reproductive*, a faculty of the derivative presentation of the object...which brings back to the mind an empirical intuition that it had previously. – Pure intuitions of space and time belong to the productive faculty; all others presuppose empirical intuition... (*Anth.*, 7:167).²¹

²⁰ Land 2015 appears to endorse this claim for the apprehension of empirical intuitions (470-2).

²¹ Kant often describes the synthesis of the productive imagination as producing *shapes* (A124; A157/B196; A163/B204; 23:18). This is true even in his examples of schemata: the schema of a triangle (A141/B180) is a rule for synthesizing “pure shapes in space,” and the schema of a dog is a rule for producing the *shape* of a four-footed figure. Williams 2020 discusses the significance of this point for the role played by concepts in scientific classification.

Given these worries, the second way of spelling out the proposal—according to which the schemata of the productive imagination guide reproduction—may seem more promising and, indeed, is adopted by a number of interpreters. Thus, for example, Matherne says that the “primary function” of the schema of a concept “is to serve as *a rule for the imaginative synthesis (apprehension and reproduction)* of a manifold of intuition in accordance with that concept” (2015, 767, my emph.).²² However, the worries I raised for the previous version of the guidance model—according to which concepts directly guide reproduction—reappear on this way of understanding it. For it is not clear in what sense the general rules that comprise schemata can be said to *guide* the natural movement of the mind that occurs in association, since again, neither the possession of the habit that comprises the association nor its activation on any particular occasion seems to be the type of thing that can be rule-guided. Moreover, Kant’s description of schemata tells against a reading on which they guide the reproductive synthesis of actual intuitions in experience. As we have discussed, he describes the schema of a dog as a rule that specifies the *general* shape of a dog, clarifying that this shape is not “restricted to any single particular shape that experience offers me or *any possible image that I can exhibit in concreto*” (A141/B180, my emph.). But if the schema of a dog specifies a general shape that does not correspond to any concrete image I can exhibit, this suggests that it does not guide the actual synthesis of intuitions of particular dogs given in experience.²³ On my view, schemata instead play a *recognitional* role: the schema of a dog allows the subject to recognize concrete instances of dogs in virtue of the *resemblance* between their shape and the general shape specified by the schema.²⁴ Thus, Kant distinguishes between an image that is “spontaneously

²² See also Allison 2004, 210.

²³ In contrast, Matherne 2015 argues that a schema functions like a “stencil” that guides the imaginative synthesis of intuitions (763, 765). But the role of a stencil is precisely to allow the production of concrete images.

²⁴ Kant distinguishes between the “empirical” and “pure” productive imagination: the former produces images that exhibit empirical concepts like the concept ‘dog’, whereas the latter produces schemata “in accordance with which these images first become possible” (A141-2/B181).

produced” by the productive imagination to exhibit a concept in general (*Anth.*, 7:173) and the associative synthesis of actually given empirical intuitions by the reproductive imagination. As he says, “if we perceive *real sense representations (not imaginary ones)*...and we perceive our representations by themselves as being connected to each other, then this happens in time *and is associative.*” (*Anth.*, 7:177n, my emph.)

2. In the previous section, I criticized various ways of spelling out the guidance model of synthesis, according to which the concepts of the understanding guide the imaginative synthesis of intuition. I began by noting that synthesis of empirical intuitions essentially involves the *reproductive imagination*, and that the latter is said to be subject only to laws of *association*. Next, I argued that this gives rise to two problems for the guidance model. First, associations are sensitive to different relations between representations than concepts are, and so it is not clear how the latter could be said to guide the former. Second, given that Kant understands associations as psychological habits, neither the acquisition nor the activation of which are under a subject’s rational control, the idea that they can be guided by rules is out of place. Moreover, I argued that these problems arise regardless of whether concepts are thought to *directly* guide the synthesis of the imagination or to do so *via* the schemata of the productive imagination.

In light of these worries for the guidance model, I now wish to defend an alternative account of synthesis. On my account, as on the guidance model, both the imagination and the understanding play a role in synthesis. However, I will argue that the labor of synthesis should be divided between them along different lines than it usually is.²⁵ To begin with, and in line with my

²⁵ A notable exception is Tolley 2019, who argues for a similar division of labor via a consideration of the role played by the imagination and its images in perception. Tolley does not, however, discuss the essentially associative nature of the reproductive imagination that is the focus of my arguments here; rather, he appears willing to characterize the latter as spontaneous (33n9, 35), which I take to be ruled out at B151-2. He also does not focus on Kant’s discussion

discussion so far, I propose that it is the reproductive imagination that carries out the syntheses of apprehension and reproduction of the empirical manifold, and that it does so in accordance with its own laws of association without any guidance by the understanding. This fits well with Kant's description of synthesis as a "blind though indispensable function...of which we are seldom even conscious" (A78/B103). Second, I will argue that this reproductive synthesis results in the type of combination of representations that Kant describes as an "empirical" or "subjective" unity of consciousness. Third, I will argue that the role played by the understanding is to represent or recognize (some) empirical unities of representation as *necessary* in the sense of being *required* by what is the case for the objects represented. This last point will also entail a different understanding of Kant's claim that concepts are rules of synthesis. Rather than taking concepts to guide the initial synthesis of the imagination, I will argue that they should be understood as rules for the type of recognition I have just described: that is, rules in virtue of which objective unities of consciousness are recognized and distinguished from merely subjective ones.

I have already provided evidence for my reading of the first stage of synthesis. Let me now provide some textual evidence for the second and third claims above. Kant routinely draws a distinction between what he describes as merely empirical or subjective unities of representation due to association by the imagination, on the one hand, and unities of representation that are judged by the understanding to be necessary or objective, on the other. For example, in §18 of the Transcendental Deduction, he describes the "empirical" or "subjective" "unity of consciousness" which he says occurs "through *association*" in intuitions, and contrasts it with the "objective" "unity of consciousness" through which the manifold of intuition "is united in a concept of the object" (B139-40). §19 of the Deduction takes up the same contrast: there, Kant describes "the relation of

of the contrast between subjective and objective unities of representation in the B-deduction, which I will argue provide further important evidence of this division of labor.

given cognitions in every *judgment*... as something belonging to the *understanding*” and distinguishes this “from the relation in accordance with *laws of the reproductive imagination*” (B141, my emph.). The aim of judgment in general, he explains, is “to distinguish the objective unity of given representations from the subjective” (B142).

Similarly, in the Second Analogy, Kant describes the connection of perceptions as “the product of a synthetic faculty of the imagination.” In being conscious of this synthesis, he says, “I am...only conscious that my imagination places one state before and the other after, not that the one state precedes the other in the object...” The latter consciousness requires that I make a judgment through the understanding about the “objective sequence” of events, which requires that I think the relation between my perceptions “in such a way that it is thereby *necessarily determined* which of them must be placed before and which after rather than vice versa” (B233-4, my emph.). Finally, the following passage from Kant’s general discussion of the Analogies brings out many of the same points:

[P]erceptions come together only contingently...since apprehension is only a *juxtaposition* (*Zusammenstellung*) of the manifold of empirical intuition...But since experience is a cognition of objects through perception, consequently the relation in the existence of the manifold is to be represented in it...as it is objectively... [E]xperience is thus possible only through a representation of the *necessary connection* of the perceptions (B218-9, my emph.).

Now, these passages are familiar ones; it is usually thought, however, that Kant brings up the empirical unity of consciousness or the “juxtaposition” of perceptions through the imagination only as a point of *contrast*, so as to deny that such unities can play any role in cognition.²⁶ However, this overlooks the fact that synthesis by the reproductive imagination is an essential stage of Kant’s own account of cognition. Thus, while I do not mean to deny the importance for Kant’s purposes of the contrast between what can be accomplished by the imagination alone and what requires the

²⁶ See, e.g., Hoppe 1983, 107-11; Allison 2004, 88, 183; Kitcher 2011, 158-9.

understanding,²⁷ I believe the aim of these passages is also to isolate the role of the understanding so as to describe the way in which its activity *builds on* the reproductive synthesis of the imagination in order to achieve cognition.²⁸

Returning to the general definition of synthesis with which I began this paper, we can see that it includes two components. “By synthesis in the most general sense,” Kant says, “I understand the action of [1] putting different representations together with each other and [2] comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition” (A77/B103, my numbering). On my reading, these two components pick out the contributions the reproductive imagination and the understanding respectively make to synthesis. The reproductive imagination [1] “put[s] different representations together” in accordance with its own laws of association, whereas the understanding [2] “comprehend[s] their manifoldness in one cognition”—in other words, recognizes the connection between a set of associated representations to be necessary or required in virtue of corresponding to a connection in the object(s) distinct from the representations that the representations are of. As Kant indicates in the passages above, it is in virtue of representing such a necessary connection between perceptions that the understanding first achieves cognition of the objects perceived.

This way of construing the role played by the understanding in synthesis also implies a different—and more restricted—understanding of Kant’s claim that concepts are rules for synthesis. On my view, this claim should not be taken to mean that concepts govern the synthesis of the imagination, but rather that they provide rules for the judgments by which the understanding

²⁷ This contrast plays an important role in Kant’s response to Hume: not, however, as is usually thought, because Kant denies *any* role to association in experience, but rather because it highlights how consciousness of associated representations falls short of experience that so much as represents objects as being a certain way. See Sethi 2020, §4.

²⁸ I do not mean to suggest that the latter always requires explicitly reflecting on reproduced representations to determine whether they correspond to an objective connection. Nevertheless, such consciousness of merely associated representations is genuinely possible, and explicit reflection may sometimes be required to ward off error and prejudice. In support of the former claim, note that Kant consistently draws the contrast I highlight above in terms of two types of unities of *consciousness*, or between *consciousness* of the subjective sequence of apprehension vs. the objective sequence of events. For discussion of the latter claim, see Sethi ms.

recognizes (some) imaginative combinations of representations as objective rather than merely subjective.²⁹ I take this restricted understanding of the role played by concepts to be supported by Kant's insistence that "the understanding can make no other use of...concepts than that of judging by means of them" (A68/B93),³⁰ as well as his claim that the aim of judgment in general is to distinguish objective unities of representation from merely subjective ones.

An example may be helpful here. Say that I hear barking from behind a gate as I walk by it and, as a result of my past experiences, my reproductive imagination connects my representation of barking with representations of dogs. And let's assume also that I possess the concept of a dog and that it contains 'barking' as a mark. In this case, although the initial synthesis of my representation of barking with the representation of a dog is due to my reproductive imagination and its associations, my concept 'dog' provides a rule in accordance with which I can judge that this combination of representations corresponds to a connection in the object my representations are of: I can judge, in other words, that there is a dog barking behind the gate.³¹

²⁹ This is an important difference between Ginsborg's view and mine. Although we argue for this on different grounds, we both conclude that the synthesis of the imagination is a "natural psychological process" that is not guided by rules (2015, 82). Ginsborg, however, argues that we are nevertheless "primitively" entitled to think of this synthesis as governed by rules, and in particular, by concepts. Thus, on her view, we are primitively entitled to regard the way the imagination actually synthesizes representations to exemplify how it ought to synthesize them (82-3). One problem with this, however, is that in many cases, the imagination will *not* be regarded as synthesizing as it ought to: since our associations often connect representations on merely subjective grounds, the synthesis of the imagination will often combine representations in ways that do not correspond to objective connections. Thus, the synthesis of the imagination will often not be regarded as exemplifying a conceptual rule; rather, as I see it, concepts are rules for distinguishing through judgment those syntheses that correspond to what is objectively the case from those that do not. Here, Ginsborg might object that this leaves it difficult to see how these conceptual rules are acquired in the first place. I present my account of this and distinguish it from hers in Sethi 2022.

³⁰ Land 2015 argues that this claim need only mean that the *capacity* for employing concepts depends on the *capacity* for using these concepts in judgment. His primary motivation for this weaker reading, however, is to allow for concepts to also play a different role: namely, that of guiding the sensible synthesis of the imagination. In this paper, I have argued that the synthesis of empirical intuitions could not be guided by concepts. And although I do not have space to fully defend this here, I also raise a worry in n34 below concerning whether it makes sense to think of the productive synthesis of pure intuitions as involving guidance by the understanding. If this is right, it would seem to undercut the motivation for Land's weaker reading.

³¹ I do not mean to claim that concepts alone will always suffice for distinguishing objective unities of representation from merely subjective ones: that would make all judgments that claim objective validity analytic. My suggestion is simply that it is in virtue of playing this role that concepts serve as rules for synthesis.

The division of labor between the imagination and the understanding that I am proposing is reflected in a number of passages. For example, after describing synthesis as a “blind though indispensable” effect of the imagination, Kant continues that “to bring this synthesis to concepts is a function that pertains to the understanding, and by means of which it first provides cognition in the proper sense” (A78/B103; see also *CPJ*, 5:238). A few lines later, he expands on the same point:

“The first thing that must be given to us a priori for the cognition of all objects is the manifold of pure intuition; the synthesis of this manifold by means of the imagination is the second thing, but it still does not yield cognition. The concepts that...consist solely in the representation of this necessary synthetic unity, are the third thing necessary for cognition of an object that comes before us, and they depend on the understanding.” (A78-9/B104)

Finally, the following passage adds that the understanding achieves cognition in virtue of recognizing that a set of reproduced representations corresponds to a connection in the objects the representations are of: “Sense represents the appearances empirically in perception, the imagination in association (and reproduction), and apperception in the empirical consciousness of the *identity of these reproductive representations with the appearances through which they were given*, hence in recognition” (A115, my emph.).

I take these passages to also support my understanding of Kant’s claim, mentioned above, that a concept “can be a rule for intuitions only if it represents the necessary reproduction of the manifold of given intuitions...” (A106). As we have seen, the guidance model reads this sentence as claiming that a concept *makes* a particular way of reproducing representations necessary by *guiding* it; on my view, in contrast, it says only that a concept is required for *representing* or recognizing that some particular way in which representations are reproduced is necessary: that is, is required in virtue of corresponding to what is objectively the case.

Let me pause here to consider an objection. In describing the reproductive imagination as synthesizing in accordance with its own laws, it may be argued that I have overlooked various ways

in which the synthesis of reproduction depends essentially on the understanding. For one, Kant makes clear in §18 that the empirical unity of consciousness—which he says is the result of association by the reproductive imagination—is “derived...from” the objective unity of consciousness, and that the latter itself results from a “pure synthesis of the understanding” (B140). Similarly, he suggests that the synthesis of the reproductive imagination depends essentially on a pure synthesis by the productive imagination (A101-2; A118; B152), describing the latter as a “transcendental synthesis” that is “an effect of the understanding on sensibility” (B152).

Now, a full discussion of the transcendental synthesis of the productive imagination is beyond the scope of this paper. To begin to respond to the objection, however, let me note that I do not take the claim that the reproductive synthesis of the imagination depends on the productive synthesis to entail either that the reproductive synthesis is itself a type of a productive synthesis, or that it is, after all, fully determined by the laws of the understanding. Rather, I take the dependence Kant has in mind to be a more restricted one, having to do with the fact that the reproduction of representations occurs in *time*, and consciousness of the unity of time as such itself depends on an *a priori* synthesis by the productive imagination. He explicitly gives this explanation for his derivation claim in §18, arguing that “the pure form of intuition *in time*...stands under the [objective] unity of consciousness...thus through the pure synthesis of the understanding, which grounds a priori the empirical synthesis” (B140, my emph.).³² And he similarly describes the transcendental synthesis of the imagination as that *a priori* synthesis in virtue of which the productive imagination “determine[s] the form of sense a priori in accordance with the unity of apperception” (B152). These are, of course, difficult claims; I bring them up here to call attention to the fact that Kant only attributes to the understanding (via the productive imagination) a *transcendental* synthesis that

³² I discuss the relation between the empirical and the transcendental unity of apperception in Sethi 2021.

determines time itself as the *a priori form* of any consciousness of representations through inner sense.³³ It is this transcendental synthesis (or transcendental element of synthesis) that is responsible for the fact that a series of reproduced representations is represented as a *temporal* series: that is, as related to each other *in time*. This latter feature is evident in Kant’s examples of empirical unities of representation—which he says are expressed through a claim of the form that *when* some representation is given, another one follows (e.g. at B142; see also *P.*, 4:301*)—as well as in his description of the consciousness of the subjective sequence of apprehension in the Second Analogy as the consciousness that my imagination “places one state *before* and the other *after*” (B233, my emph.). Thus, the transcendental synthesis of the productive imagination makes it the case that empirical unities due to reproduction are represented as *temporal* unities; it does not, however, determine *which* empirical representations are temporally unified through reproduction. I have been arguing that the latter is determined merely in accordance with the laws of association independently of the laws of the understanding, and I take this to be compatible with the type of formal dependence noted by the objection.³⁴

3. In this final section, I wish to briefly discuss an implication of my view for the role played in particular by the relational categories in synthesis. As is well known, Kant distinguishes the

³³ See Tolley 2019, §7 for further discussion. Tolley suggests that the transcendental synthesis of the imagination should not be thought to generate the *a priori* intuitions that constitute the form of sensibility, but rather to be that in virtue of which these intuitions are represented *as* intuitions which can then be cognized as objects.

³⁴ Does this mean that the guidance model does after all correctly describe the relationship between the understanding and the *a priori* transcendental synthesis of the imagination? A full answer to this question would require working out more details of the latter than I have space for here. One question is whether the notion of *guidance* would still be out of place in this case, perhaps because there is not enough *separation* between the understanding and the transcendental synthesis of the imagination. Kant in effect identifies the spontaneity of the productive imagination with the spontaneity of the understanding (B162*), and describes the transcendental synthesis of the former as the immediate effect of the understanding on inner sense (i.e., in self-affection, see B153-4). This is also reflected in claims such as that “[w]e cannot think of a line without drawing it in thought, we cannot think of a circle without describing it...” (B154), which do not seem to leave any place for guidance.

mathematical categories of quantity and quality from the dynamical categories of relation and modality on the grounds that whereas the former are “constitutive” of intuitions, the latter are only “regulative” (A178-9/B221-2; A664/B692). The mathematical categories are constitutive of intuition, he explains, because they “pertain to appearances with regard to their mere possibility” and specify “how both their intuition and the real in their perception could be generated in accordance with rules of a mathematical synthesis” (A178/B221). As I understand this, it entails that even being conscious of perceptions as such depends on an *a priori* synthesis in accordance with the mathematical categories, which necessitates thinking of these perceptions as representing extensive and intensive magnitudes. Kant again attributes this “mathematical synthesis” to the productive imagination (A162-3/B203-4; A170/B212) since it determines that *a priori* element of perceptions in virtue of which they represent appearances as spatiotemporal magnitudes and as having qualities that admit of degree; it is this *a priori* synthesis, he explains, that makes appearances mathematically describable (A178/B220). Again, the details of this do not matter for our purposes here; what I want to call attention to is the fact that since this productive synthesis necessarily accords with the mathematical categories, the latter are said to be constitutive of perceptions, and this entails that perceptions cannot *fail* to accord with the mathematical categories and their corresponding principles (i.e., the Axioms of Intuition and the Anticipations of Perception).

Now, if it were the case that the imagination must also “put together” different representations in synthesis—that is, *relate* them—in accordance with categories, then it would similarly follow that the mere consciousness of perceptions as related must involve thinking them under *relational* categories, and so, that perceptions could not fail to accord with the relational categories and their corresponding principles (i.e., the Analogies of Experience). But then why does Kant claim that the latter are merely regulative rather than constitutive of perception? An important part of the answer to this question, on my view, lies in the fact that, as I have been arguing, the

imagination does *not* put representations together in synthesis in accordance with the relational categories; rather, it does so in accordance with its own laws of association.³⁵ This means that determination by the relational categories is not a necessary condition on the mere consciousness of perceptions as related.³⁶ Rather, the principles of the Analogies specify how perceptions must be related *if* they are to represent *objective* rather than *merely subjective* connections.

As we have seen, Kant states the general principle of the Analogies as follows: “Experience is possible only through the representation of a *necessary connection* of perceptions” (B218, my emph.). On my view, we can understand this principle as specifying a regulative norm rather than a constitutive condition on the relation of perceptions,³⁷ a norm that an empirical unity of representations due to the reproductive imagination can be judged to either instantiate or fail to instantiate. Such an empirical unity accords with this regulative norm if and only if the associated representations that comprise it are also *necessarily connected*: that is, if their connection is required in virtue of corresponding to a connection in the objects represented. But since associations often have merely subjective grounds, empirical unities will often consist in relations between representations that are *not* necessarily connected—that is, do not correspond to a connection in the objects represented—and as such, will fail to accord with the regulative norm. In sum, then,

³⁵ Kant himself puts the point in terms of the fact that the existence of appearances that are necessarily connected cannot be “constructed” (A179/B122-3). I take this to be of a piece with my claim here that such a necessary connection is not simply generated *a priori* by a synthesis of the productive imagination in accordance with relational categories.

³⁶ Note that Kant consistently distinguishes *consciousness* of the subjective sequence of apprehension from a judgment about the objective sequence of events, and describes the empirical unity due to association as an empirical unity of *consciousness*. Thus, I disagree with interpreters who conclude that it is impossible to so much as be conscious of a non-objective unity of representations that is not already thought under the relational categories. See, e.g., Hoppe 1983 133ff., Allison 2004, 184-5, and for further discussion, see Sethi 2021.

³⁷ I do not take a stand here on whether constitutive conditions can also be thought of as normative. For discussion, see Tolley 2006, Lu-Adler 2017, Pollok 2017. An important issue in this debate concerns whether it makes sense to describe some *X* as subject to some norm *T* if it is the case that *X* cannot fail to accord with *T* (see Tolley 2006, 375). My discussion above seeks to show that perceptions can be related in a manner that does not accord with the principles of the Analogies: this allows the latter to be genuinely normative for the former in a manner that is not subject to this concern.

empirical unities due to the reproductive imagination can be judged as succeeding or failing to instantiate the regulative norm specified by the Analogies; it is only when they are judged to instantiate this norm that they amount to cognition or experience. This, then, explains Kant's claim that while the principles of the relational categories are merely regulative for *intuitions*, they are constitutive of *experience* (A664/B692).

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