

Research Article

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Determining and Grounding: The Twofold Function of the Transcendental Dialectic

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Abstract: For a long time, the transcendental dialectic was not at the center of Kant scholarship but was often treated simply as Kant's reckoning with contemporary metaphysics. Accordingly, the main interest was in the transcendental analytic, especially the transcendental deduction. It is all the more gratifying that in recent times a rethinking seems to be taking place on this issue. In the following, I shall attempt to show why the transcendental dialectic is something more than an addendum to the core business of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Rather, it forms the culmination of the work, demanding our full attention. Indeed, it provides the key to the entire critical philosophy by exhibiting reason itself as the ultimate founding principle in the form of its Idea.

Keywords: philosophy, Kant, reason, critique, synthesis, ideas, categories, dialectic, system, autonomy

1 Synthesis and critique

The neglect of the transcendental dialectic is not solely due to a lack of attention on the part of Kant scholars; rather, it is at the same time the result of two questionable peculiarities of Kant's mode of exposition. First, his one-sided emphasis on the negative function of dialectic suggests that it only serves to generate a form of systematic self-deception on the part of reason, a "logic of illusion" ("Logik des Scheins"). Perhaps more damaging to the project of transcendental philosophy is his failure to disclose his methodological principle. Indeed, it is only in the third *Critique*, in the last footnote of its introduction, that Kant explicitly points to the principle behind the critique of reason:

That my divisions in pure philosophy almost always turn tripartite has aroused suspicion. Yet that is in the nature of the case. If a division is to be made a priori, then it will be either *analytic* or *synthetic*. If it is analytic, then it is governed by the principle of contradiction and hence is always bipartite (*quodlibet ens est aut A aut non A*). If it is synthetic, but is to be made on the basis of a priori *concepts* (rather than, as in mathematics, on the basis of the *intuition* corresponding a priori to the concept), then we must have what is required for a synthetic unity in general, namely, (1) a condition, (2) something conditioned, (3) the concept that arises from the union of the conditioned with its condition; hence the division must of necessity be a trichotomy.¹

¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 38 (Introduction IX, B LVII; AA V, 97). "Man hat es bedenklich gefunden, daß meine Einteilungen in der reinen Philosophie fast immer dreiteilig ausfallen. Das liegt aber in der Natur der Sache. Soll eine Einteilung *a priori* geschehen, so wird sie entweder analytisch sein, nach dem Satze des Widerspruchs; und da ist sie jederzeit zweiteilig (*quodlibet ens est aut A aut non A*). Oder sie ist synthetisch; und, wenn sie in diesem Falle aus Begriffen *a priori* (nicht, wie in der Mathematik, aus der *a priori* dem Begriffe korrespondierenden Anschauung) soll geföhlt werden, so muß, nach demjenigen, was zu der synthetischen Einheit überhaupt erforderlich ist, nämlich (1) Bedingung, (2) ein Bedingtes, (3) der Begriff, der aus

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It is synthesis, in the sense here described, that constitutes the unity and structure of Kant's work. In contrast to analysis, synthesis is more than a mere determination of logical form, since, in contrast to the latter, it engages the actual content of what it determines.² Only synthesis, according to its "principle of thoroughgoing determination"³ enables cognition of an object, whereas merely logical analysis can never yield a philosophically relevant finding about a concrete reality, other than to talk about its relation to logic. However, the (transcendental) dialectic, too, claims to deliver knowledge of objects and yet produces only fallacious insights. How does this go together with the fact that both the concepts of the analytic–logical order and those of the synthetic–dialectical order in each case establish satisfying units of meaning? The fundamental distinguishing factor is clearly not the synthetic nature of dialectic and of its objects in the form of ideas. If that were the case, transcendental philosophy, which itself presents only the "idea of a science,"⁴ would also be only a producer of transcendental appearances. What makes the dialectic problematic is rather that it makes the principles, and thus reason as the last principle, an object, a "thing" by means of the schematization of its concepts. This it does, again, not from the negligence typical of bad metaphysics, but from its inherent tendency, since it bears on the real, to reify the object of reason into an object of the understanding. Transcendental prudence consists in becoming aware, i.e., critical, of this tendency of reason to forget itself and to sink to the level of its object, i.e., to the level of the understanding ("Verstand"). However, one would fundamentally misjudge Kant's great achievement with respect to metaphysics if one sought to place it entirely under the rubric of critique; but it would be equally wrong to see him only as a reformer of metaphysics. Rather, his fundamental insight is that there cannot possibly be metaphysics without critique nor a critique of metaphysics without metaphysics; the former would be empty insofar as it contained only illusory objects, and the latter blind to its own presuppositions.⁵

This correlation of metaphysics and critique, in turn, has entirely to do with the nature of synthesis and thus with the core concern of transcendental philosophy, namely, the search for ultimate grounding or justification, for the unconditioned basis in a given set of grounds. As soon as reason makes a claim to knowledge, it has at the same time set the limits of its claim, since synthesis as a condition of every *grounding* of reason is at the same time also *critique*, i.e., *determination*, of this ground. Now, the critique of reason has to do not with objects of experience, but "with our mode of cognition of objects, insofar as this [cognition] is to be possible *a priori*."⁶ The synthesis that reason achieves, as well as the critique that it performs, refers accordingly to reason and its moments themselves. This is already implicit when the idea of transcendental philosophy is given the title of a critique of reason, since reason must after all be both the subject and the object of its critique. But unlike what is imagined in our usual familiarity with this ambiguity, the genitive also has a third meaning. Reason "is" insofar as it criticizes itself, i.e., it is critique in its very nature. In addition to subjective and objective genitive, the genitive here thus has an absolute sense. In this respect, the unity of the three moments of synthesis as a principle is already announced in the title of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The reason that the critique seeks to bring into conceptual focus is such that it is presupposed that reason in itself is able to distinguish between condition and conditioned and to do so through itself. Accordingly, critique of reason means self-differentiation of reason in the conquest of its concept *qua* "disjunctive synthesis."⁷ Herein lies the idea of the whole of the critique of

der Vereinigung des Bedingten mit seiner Bedingung entspringt, die Einteilung notwendig Trichotomie sein." Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 43 (Einleitung IX, B LVII; AA V, 97).

2 Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 653 (A572/B600).

3 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 553 (A572/B600). "Principium der durchgängigen Bestimmung" Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 653 (A572/B600).

4 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 150 (B27). "die Idee einer Wissenschaft", Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 85 (B27).

5 In the present time, when the pendulum has swung to the side of critique, this insight of Kant is being reaffirmed in face of the metaphysical monsters to which scientism, blind to its presuppositions, gives birth. This blindness will lead to a restored but empty metaphysics. Their forthcoming can already be seen today in the form of "analytic metaphysics."

6 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 149 (B25). "Ich nenne alle Erkenntnis transzendental, die sich nicht so wohl mit Gegenständen, sondern mit unserer Erkenntnisart von Gegenständen, so fern diese a priori möglich sein soll, überhaupt beschäftigt." Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 83 (B25).

7 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 400 (A323/B379), "disjunktive[] synthesis", Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 429 (A323/379).

reason, which Kant already expresses at the beginning of the transcendental analytic as the basis of deduction.

Now this completeness of a science cannot reliably be assumed from a rough calculation of an aggregate put together by mere estimates; hence it is possible only by means of an *idea of the whole* of the *a priori* cognition of the understanding, and through the division of concepts that such an idea determines and that constitutes it, thus only through their *connection in a system*.⁸

The order of the critique of reason follows the order of synthesis by exhibiting reason as condition, conditioned, and concept of the first principle. Analysis and synthesis are now *formaliter* equally determinations of *unity*. Reason sets this up as a rule – more precisely as a “logical maxim”⁹: “to find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed.”¹⁰

The unconditional unity of reason thus forms the *content* of a postulate, whose *form*, i.e., the postulating instance in the shape of an “ought” (“Sollen”), however, does *not* emerge from it. The “ought” is not content, but, rather, the form of the unconditioned. The “ought,” as the claim to *truth*, is necessarily expressed with that unconditional unity by means of which reason seeks to determine its unity as *perfection*, i.e., as completely realized synthesis. By distinguishing matter and form, unity and truth, of the unconditioned in itself, reason differentiates in itself two usages of the unconditioned. On one hand, the “ought” of the maxim presupposes the unconditioned condition as *ratio essendi*, consequently as *constitutive* of the possibility of the “ought.” On the other hand, since reason holds no currency for speculative purposes, the claim to validity put forward by unity, even though it possesses the ground of knowledge as the *ratio cognoscendi* of that unity, which is the unconditional “ought,” must postpone eternally its demonstration, as one of its achievements of positing, that this claim can be fulfilled. Hence, the unconditional unity can only be a *task*, i.e., *regulative*, for speculative reason. This becomes immediately clear if we simply look at the relation of Kant’s famous questions to each other: First we note that from the answer to the question “What can I know?,” which is the object of the critique of purely speculative reason, it does not emerge that it *should* be known at all. Accordingly, for reason on its theoretical standpoint, it remains only to assume the form of that unconditionality in the shape of an “ought,” without understanding the rational basis for this “ought.” From its position, theoretical reason thus already points beyond itself, namely, on one hand, to the *practical*, in which it itself gives the law; on the other, to the ground of the unity of reason itself as the transrelational ground of all references in the form of the *substratum* of this unity. The title of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is accordingly too narrow or too broad, depending on the perspective, but it encompasses the whole of the three Critiques, the order of which is based on the principled sense of their governing ideas as corresponding to the classical transcendentials *unum*, *verum*, and *bonum*.¹¹ Kant wants to have these ‘transcendentally interpreted.’¹² Their ensemble is the complete exposition of reason as an idea, thus as an ultimate principle, which each *Critique* runs through from its respective point of view. Thus, the first *Critique* of pure speculative reason inquires after the unity of experience and finds it by referring to the subject as the principle of unity and to

⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 201 (A64f./B89). “Nun kann diese Vollständigkeit einer Wissenschaft nicht auf den Überschlag, eines bloß durch Versuche zu Stande gebrachten Aggregats, mit Zuverlässigkeit angenommen werden; daher ist sie nur vermittelt einer *Idee des Ganzen* der Verstandeserkenntnis *a priori* und durch die daraus bestimmte Abteilung der Begriffe, welche sie ausmachen, mithin nur durch ihren *Zusammenhang in einem System* möglich.” Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 142 (A64f./B89).

⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 392 (A307/B364). “logische Maxime” Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 416 (A307/B364).

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 392 (A307/B364). “[Z]u dem bedingten Erkenntnis des Verstandes das Unbedingte zu finden, womit die Einheit desselben vollendet wird.” Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 416 (A307/B364).

¹¹ The transcendentials as heuristic concepts of systematic knowledge formation are functionally identical with the three ideas in regulative intention as conclusive logical functions of concept formation (homogeneity, specification, and continuity), cf. Bunte, “Transzendenz,” 159. With the exception of Peter Baumanns, the special significance of the transcendentials as constituents of the logical and of the systematic connection of logical functions and capacities has been largely overlooked. Cf. Baumanns, *Erkenntnis*, 257.

¹² Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 216 (B113); Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 162 (B113).

the object as its principiated. It is the unity of the subject that conditions the unity of the world of experience and as such has a transcendental function with respect to the possibility of an object of experience. The transcendental deduction, in showing that and how the “subjective conditions of thinking [] have objective validity”¹³ brings the ultimate resolution of the problem of knowledge. But this comes at a high price, for the sought unity of the principle is doubled, once to the unity of the ground, then to the unity of the grounded. Thus, reason becomes the ground of the defined opposition of the transcendental subject and object, which step apart as unconditioned and conditioned unity. However, the subject, which falls on the side of the unconditioned condition, is again opposed by the object as unconditioned, insofar as the unconditioned is conditioned precisely by being the condition of the conditioned. Accordingly, the unipolar setup of the subject-centered subject–object distinction must entail, correspondingly, a renewed bipolarity of the subject with the object as the ground affecting it. Kant’s principled solution, in turn, leads to a tetralemmatic extension of the subject–object difference, in which the subject is on one side active, on the other passive; while the object, mirror image of the subject, is correlative to it as well as affecting it. This is expressed in the categorial order determining them respectively.¹⁴ Thus, the principle-based logical elucidation of the subject–object difference takes us to the well-known distinction between *appearance* and the *in-itself*. Reason accordingly differentiates within itself two mutually contradictory standpoints, that of phenomenality and that of noumenality. At the same time, however, reason, which finds in itself the presupposition of this distinction, must bring the unity of this opposition to its concept, since otherwise it remains in the adversarial contradiction between the unconditionality of the ground it determines and the unknowability of the truth of that ground. Transcendental philosophy would thus have failed already from the start, since its idea would turn out to suffer from an inherent contradiction. Reason, as a principle, must therefore be a unity that releases its truth from itself and, by doing so, forms through itself, i.e., through its concept, a complete wholeness in the form of a single and final truth. Now, as the transcendental dialectic shows in its negative bearing, this cannot be brought about by having reason taking the place of the understanding, since reason stands in a definite opposition to the sensory. For reason, the world is, according to its form, understanding, according to its matter, appearance. The in-itself, hence the truth, of its principle (and thus of reason itself), can accordingly only refer to the form of the understanding, thus to pure reason itself. Reason as such is accordingly a reflexive principle bearing on the condition of the possibility of reflection, or respectively of reflexivity, and thus determines itself to be the transcendental principle of rationality. The in-itself of form consequently refers to appearance in the mode of the appearing of appearance. Accordingly, the concept of reason can only be exhibited as an apperceptive principle, consequently as Kant envisioned under transcendental apperception.¹⁵ As transcendental apperception, reason must be ground of itself, *causa sui*, and consequently *spontaneity*. It is not necessitated by anything external and, as unconditioned, is again under no condition. This, however, leads to an opposition in which the in-itself as ground and the appearance as grounded again modally diverge, namely as law-governed appearance and lawless ground. This can already be anticipated from the concept of the unconditioned,

¹³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 222 (A 89/B122). “wie nämlich subjektive Bedingungen des Denkens [sollten] objektive Gültigkeit haben” Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 169 (A 89/B122).

¹⁴ In this sense, the order of ideas is also the key to the solution of the completeness problem of logical functions. Cf. Bunte, *Erkenntnis*. The approach to the logic of principles in terms of a logic of apperception, as set forth in “Erkenntnis,” is discussed extensively by Zeidler in the supplement to his “Grundriss der Transzendentalen Logik.” Cf. Zeidler, *Grundriss*, 301. For the answer that discusses the translatability of the two approaches in terms of strict monism of principles, cf. Bunte, “Vernunftseinheit.” Michael Lewin suggests changing the order of the categories of modality (I + II + III) to (II + III + I) in relation to the ideas, as this would correspond more to the Kantian exposition of the ideas. Cf. Lewin, *Ideen*, 108. In fact, the modal categories provide transitions between the three categorial orders. The first row is about the possibility of understanding an idea (“Vorstellung”) as one’s own. Therefore, it is completely unproblematic that the *empirical* sentence of “I think” includes the idea of “I exist” (cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 453 [B422]). On the contrary, this forms the prerequisite for being able to reflect on the ego as an affectible subject (“[i]n relation to possible objects in space” Ibid., 413 [A344/B402]), which is the sense of the second row.

¹⁵ The identification of the synthetic unity of apperception with the faculty of understanding (Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 179 [B134]) already specifies apperception with respect to experience. Thereby, however, as Baumanns has already correctly stated, it stands in a principle–principiated relation to understanding. See Baumanns, *Erkenntnis*, 494.

since its concept includes the idea of a groundless ground, i.e., the absolute contingency of the last ground. This last un-ground is now nothing other than reason as freedom, and from freedom everything else must follow.¹⁶

2 Conclusions and ideas

Reason as the last founding principle is formally composed synthetically–dialectically. As the ultimate principle, it is at the same time self-grounding. This means for the consistent interpretation of Kant that the various differentiations – constitutive vs regulative, theoretical vs practical, idea vs category, etc. – are to be derived from reason itself as a synthetic principle and are not merely *de facto* externalities.¹⁷ The schema of deduction is always the same: reason posits the principle of an unconditioned unity and differentiates this in the same movement according to content and form. The rule of positing the unconditioned is thereby dependent in its content on the reason's positing of the unconditioned, but in its “ought”-form, it is formally independent of the posited unity of reason. Modal reflection on matter and form of the unconditioned thus leads to a standpoint distinction within reason, the ground of which, in the third moment of the unity of the concept, is resolved to the presupposition of unity and law. The reflection is carried out three times in the critique of reason until its completeness, whereby the concept of the presupposition gained in each case determines at the same time the exponent of the consequential reflection. In the case of the transition from theoretical to practical philosophy, this is the concept of reason as freedom, or of autonomy in the transition to the third *Critique*.

Now, how does this general logic of principle relate to the concepts of reason? Looking at the state of research, it is first of all astonishing that there is disagreement even about the number of ideas. These doubts about their number result from failure to grasp what the ideas ultimately are. Ideas, grasped in their generality, are concepts of an unconditioned. If one grasps this thought energetically, it becomes clear that “in principle” there can be only one idea, namely reason itself. The ground for the plurification of the one idea must now be sought in the idea itself, more precisely in the determination of it. Now, the unconditioned can or must be presented in three different ways: (1) As an unconditioned condition at the beginning of a series of conditions, (2) as the end of the series, and (3) as the entirety of the series enclosing beginning and end. It is not difficult to recognize here again the logic of the principle. Reason and ideas are accordingly related as unity and moment, whereby the difference of the moments to each other makes up the determinateness of the single moment. The formality of the principle thereby points to its fundamental logical character, namely that of the *conclusion*. The general form of inference is again threefold according to the relations presented in it:

There will be as many concepts of reason as there are species of relation represented by the understanding by means of the categories; and so we must seek an *unconditioned*, *first*, for the *categorical* synthesis in a *subject*, *second* for the *hypothetical* synthesis of the members of a *series*, and *third* for the *disjunctive* synthesis of the parts in a *system*.¹⁸

¹⁶ “Natur also und transzendente Freiheit unterscheiden sich wie Gesetzmäßigkeit und Gesetzlosigkeit [...]” Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 551 (A448/B476).

¹⁷ Zeidler aptly distinguishes between the “reconstructive–analytical” and the “principled–speculative” interpretation of Kant. Cf. Zeidler, “Vernunft,” 251. In fact, the attempt to understand Kant through Kant is shaped by the idea of applying the synthetic principle within interpretation, a kind of self-application of the principle in the service of its illumination. The radial–radical interpretation I propose assumes that Kantian thought can be understood only through the unity of the two argumentative movements: On the one hand, the centripetal, i.e., the movement directed toward the systematic-closed center of argumentation in the form of the apperceptive principle of reason; on the other hand, the centrifugal direction of argumentation, which aims at a systematic openness of the manifold of experience.

¹⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 400 (A323/B379). “So viel Arten des Verhältnisses es nun gibt, die der Verstand vermittelt der Kategorien sich vorstellt, so vielerlei reine Vernunftbegriffe wird es auch geben, und es wird also *erstlich* ein *Unbedingtes* der

Kant distinguishes here the forms of inference,¹⁹ in terms of a logic of judgment,²⁰ according to their exponents.²¹ First, the unconditioned of categorical synthesis in a subject as subsumptive, second, in hypothetical synthesis as inductive, and last, in disjunctive as reductive. Instead of from the functions of judgment, this division could also have been made on the basis of the functions of inference. In this case, the inferential-logical form of the triad of ideas and thus of reason would be immediately recognizable as the unity of the three “ducts”: *deduction*, *induction*, and *abduction*.²² As pure concepts of reason, the ideas are based on the logical functions of reason, i.e., in themselves a differentiated triad of forms of inference, but they still lack determinate content. This determination is again a function of the modal reflection on the matter and form of reason. Hence, as Kant himself states,²³ the metaphysical deduction of ideas proceeds in a manner entirely parallel to that of the categories: First, as predication of form on matter; second, as denotation of matter on form; and third, as unity of matter and form in the presupposition of their disjunctivity. In the first case, correspondingly, the unconditioned unity of the subject, in the second case, the absolute unity of the plurality of form-affected phenomena, and thirdly, the absolute unity of the conditions of all objects in thinking in general is brought to the concept. Accordingly, the ideas, as concepts, are moments of reason and, as such, are based on its pure functions. More precisely, the pure ideas, i.e., ideas not schematized into objects, are categorial determinative complexes which, as constitutive of reflection, make possible the transcendental-logical possibility of the relation of subject and object on the basis of their disjunctivity and thus simultaneously determine the whole of experience. This applies to both the indeterminate (theoretical) and the determinate (practical) forms of the concepts of reason.

Up to now, we knowingly left out the problem of intuition as the heterothetic counterpart of the concept. In fact, one may be justified in doubting whether a resolution of their opposition could manage to determine its principle without thereby revising the critical or realistic impulse of Kantian “idealism.”²⁴ The question of the relation of receptivity and spontaneity can also be transposed as a question of the unity of reason, i.e., of theoretical and practical reason. Without establishing the precondition in form of that unity, which is the *one* reason, transcendental philosophy will remain eternally incomplete.

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kategorischen Synthesis in einem Subjekt, zweitens der hypothetischen Synthesis der Glieder einer Reihe, drittens der disjunktiven Synthesis der Teile in einem System zu suchen sein.” Kant, Kritik der Reinen Vernunft, 428 (A323/B379).

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 437 (A334/B391).

²⁰ Reason as apperceptive principle is at the same time self-grounding (finally grounding) as well as self-determining. As such, reason is also the origin of the functional-categorial system of the understanding and the final condition of its completeness. See on this Bunte, *Erkenntnis*, 205.

²¹ There is an ongoing debate concerning the foundation of reason. On the one hand, there is the notion that reason is based on the “logic of judgement” – cf., e.g., Flach, *Erkenntnislehre*, 264 – or, on the other hand, on the “logic of inference,” which is prominently represented by Kurt Walter Zeidler (Fn. 22).

²² On the unity of the three forms of syllogism as a sign of ultimate justification, see Zeidler, “Vernunft.” The problem of the correspondence between the synthetic function within judgments and the three ducts arose from the relation between the categorial and disjunctive synthesis to the form of the deductive and the abductive inference. A key to this problem seems to be the synthetic relation between (1.) condition, (2.) rule and (3.) precondition in form of the concept. The third moment, which marks the unity of the first and second moment, is not on the same logical level as the first and second but precedes them. The transcendental order translates to the ordinary order of justification by changing the relation of the three functions, where through the application of the rule the condition emerges from the preconditions as position *and* opposition, which relates to the disjunctive synthesis.

²³ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 403 (A329/B386); Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 433 f. (A329/B386).

²⁴ On what motivates the difference between intuition and concept, see Bunte, “Mannigfaltigkeit.”

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