

Attention and Synthesis in Kant's Conception of Experience

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1. Introduction

In an intriguing footnote in the Transcendental Deduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant registers the following complaint:

I do not see how one can find so many difficulties in the fact that inner sense is affected by ourselves. Every act of *attention* can give us an example of this. In such acts the understanding always determines the inner sense, in accordance with the combination that it thinks [...] (KrV §24, B156-7n)

The context of this passage is Kant's account of *figurative synthesis*, which he presents as "an effect of the understanding on sensibility and its first application (and at the same the ground of all others) to objects of intuition" (B 152). Our passage, then, implies that working out Kant's views on attention could provide clues to the difficult question of what figurative synthesis is, and more generally shed light on the role of understanding in perceptual experience. Moreover, our passage is not an aberration: in the *Anthropology* Kant goes so far as to identify the "faculty of apprehending given representations to produce intuition" with attention (using the Latin gloss, "*attentio*"), as a function of the understanding (Anth 7:138). Our aim in this paper is to explore the interpretive path such remarks open. We argue that it leads to a promising and novel way of reading Kant's views on perceptual experience.

In the first *Critique's* Refutation of Idealism, Kant contrasts his own transcendental idealism with the "material idealism" that he attributes, in distinct versions, to both Berkeley and Descartes (B274). He calls Cartesian idealism "problematic", and portrays it as a skeptical position professing "our incapacity for proving an existence outside us [...] by means of immediate experience" (B275). According to problematic idealism, we are only ever immediately aware of the contents of our own minds in inner experience; our grasp of a world outside our

minds is *indirect* or *mediated*, and hence less secure. While the details of Kant’s own views on perceptual experience remain contested, his rejection of problematic idealism is clear: and it suggests, in turn, a rejection of the idea that we are aware of external objects through mental intermediaries (see especially B277n). Kant therefore seems to think that, in perceptual experience, we come into direct cognitive contact with external objects.¹

There are good reasons, therefore, to think of Kant as a direct realist about perception. And indeed, direct realist readings of Kant have been developed by several recent commentators such as Lucy Allais (2015) and Colin McLear (2015; 2016). We are in broad agreement with direct realist approaches to Kant. However, any attempt to read Kant as a direct realist faces a *prima facie* problem in Kant’s claims about synthesis. The problem is this. Much of what Kant has to say about experience in the *Critique* turns on the role of *synthesis* — an activity of the understanding, or the higher faculty of cognition — in experience (conceived broadly as “empirical cognition”). Experience, for Kant, is not simply a deliverance of the *receptivity* of the mind, but also involves what Kant refers to as its “spontaneity” (B131-132). This much is uncontested as a bald statement of Kant’s view. It suggests, though, that relation to external objects in sensible experience requires some activity of the understanding: i.e., *synthesis*. And this, one might think, could threaten the idea that our cognitive contact with external objects in experience is *direct*. Our contribution in this paper is to develop Kant’s clues about attention and synthesis, and show how they provide a better response to this problem than anything currently available in the literature.

¹ Allais (2015, 102) draws on the friendliness of Kant’s Refutation of Idealism to direct realist accounts of perception as a starting point for her own project. As Allais points out, any direct realist reading of Kant will have to come to grips with Kant’s own idealism, and his repeated assertions that the objects we come into direct contact with in experience are, in some sense, “mere representations”. For the purposes of this paper we bracket questions about the ontological implications of direct realism, and how they fit with Transcendental Idealism. Allais (2015) examines this issue in depth.

In response to the problem sketched above, direct realist readers have pointed out that, for Kant, sensible representation as “intuition” is not the same thing as experience. Moreover, they have argued that intuitions represent external *objects*, entirely through the resources of sensibility. In intuition, we relate directly to external objects, prior to any involvement of the understanding.

Thus direct realist readers of Kant have taken strong stances against the prevailing Kantian orthodoxy: the “conceptualism” (Allais 2015) or “intellectualism” (McLear 2015), according to which the objective cognitive significance of intuitions depends not just on sensibility, but also upon the operations of the understanding.² According to many such interpreters, the conclusion of the Transcendental Deduction requires “reinterpreting, in light of the demonstration he has just provided, *the manner in which things are given to us*” (Longuenesse 1998, 213). By contrast, contemporary direct realists argue that mere receptivity can furnish us with representations *of* objects in intuition; the contribution that the understanding makes simply allows us to cognize them *as* objects, by bringing these more basic (but still objective) representations under the categories (McLear 2015, 99; Allais 2015, 168).

However, it is a mistake to think that we have to choose between direct realism and conceptualism.³ Taking Kant’s hint in the passage quoted at the outset of this paper, we will argue that the synthetic activity the understanding contributes to experience should be conceived of on the model of *directed attention*. As we will argue, the role of the understanding in experience

² We will use the label “conceptualist” to refer to this general approach to Kant on intuition; McClear calls it “intellectualist” to acknowledge that some of these commentators (including Longuenesse and Allison) pointedly distinguish conceptual from pre-conceptual acts of synthesis. This distinction is orthogonal to our concerns here, so we use the label “conceptualist” in a broad sense that covers both positions. In this broad sense, it covers P. F. Strawson (1966), Henry Allison (1983; 2004), John McDowell (1994; 1998) and Béatrice Longuenesse (1998), and many others.

³ See also Gomes (2014), who argues against non-conceptualism while pointing out that this doesn’t settle anything one way or the other about the aptness of direct realist accounts of perception to the interpretation of Kant.

is to guide us in exploring our environment through our senses. If this is right, there should be no conflict between direct realism and the idea that experience is thoroughly shaped by the understanding: your grasp of principles that guide you in exploring your environment is no more liable to get in the way of your contact with that environment than your grasp of ways of dancing is liable to get in the way of dancing (to paraphrase Evans's [1985, 302-3] famous remark).

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we set out the interpretive question we aim to address, and explain the apparent conflict between direct realism and Kant's views of the role of the understanding in experience. Then in Section 3 we present our positive proposal on this topic, which is based on reading Kant's views on synthesis on the model of directed attention. Finally, in Section 4 we explain how our view bears on the broader debate over Kant's views on perception, and specifically on the question of direct realism.

2. The Interpretive Question

Our aim in this section is to set out more clearly the problem we aim to address, and showing why contemporary attempts to address it do not seem up to the task. This will require sorting through some crucial Kantian terminology first.

Our question has to do with the role of the understanding in experience. But what is experience for Kant? His customary gloss for this term is "empirical cognition" (*empirische Erkenntnis*).⁴ This may seem less than helpful, as Kant seems to use "cognition" quite broadly, to cover everything from intuitions⁵ to full-blown judgments, and the modifier "empirical" seems

⁴ In the first *Critique*, see B147, B165-6, A176/B218, A189/B234, B277; cf. Bxvii, A124 and A509/B537. In the *Anthropology*, see 7:141 and 7:167, and (in the handwritten text) H 7:398. See also Fortschritte 20:276.

⁵ E.g., in the so-called "Stufenleiter" passage (KrV A320/B376), which suggests that "*Erkenntnis (cognitio)*" is a genus under which "intuition" and "concept" fall as species. Tolley (forthcoming) argues against the widespread assumption that the passage lays out a taxonomy; if so, then it would not follow that intuition is itself *cognition*.

tautological in an attempt to define “experience”. Fortunately, Kant sometimes expands on this idea, as in the following passage:

Experience is an empirical cognition, i.e., a cognition that determines an object through perceptions. It is therefore a synthesis of perceptions, which is not itself contained in perceptions but contains the synthetic unity of the manifold of perception in one consciousness [...]. (B218)

Experience is here said to consist in a *synthesis of perceptions* in one consciousness. This may sound somewhat odd to contemporary ears, inasmuch as recent work in perception does not often distinguish “perception” and “perceptual experience”. But Kant clearly takes “perception” to be something more basic than perceptual *experience*: perception is (mere) “sensation [...] bound up with consciousness” (Fortschritte 20:276; see also B 207, A225/B272; A320/B376). Perceptions as such do not suffice for empirical cognition of the objective world: for this, it seems, we require a *synthesis* of perceptions.⁶

So how should we understand the idea of a synthesis of perceptions? On the one hand, Kant sometimes appears to suggest that experience consists in judgment — e.g., consider the remark in the handwritten Nachlass that “the judgment that expresses an empirical cognition is *experience*” (RMet-5661 [1788-90] 18:318)⁷ — and of course understood in this way experience would involve the synthesis of *concepts* in which judgment consists. For present purposes, however, this is not the sort of synthesis we are primarily interested in. Rather, one of the main

⁶ This point is intended to be consistent with the view that unsynthesized sensory states may still have *objective reference* (such states, according to both Allais and McLear, are what Kant calls “intuitions”). As McLear (2015, 99) points out, one can consistently claim that intuitions have objective cognitive significance, although they do not, on their own, count as instances of empirical *cognition* (see also Tolley [forthcoming]). Although we disagree with the view that unsynthesized sensory states have objective reference, our disagreement does not turn on a point of terminology.

⁷ Cf. the more attenuated claim in the *Anthropology* to the effect that experience, as empirical *cognition*, must — evidently like any cognition — “rest on judgments” and therefore must also involve “reflection [Überlegung] (*reflexio*)” (7:141).

moves that Kant makes in the Transcendental Deduction is to argue that our awareness of an objective world *in sensory consciousness* (rather than judgment) requires that the manifold of intuition be synthesized in a way that accords with the categories.⁸ This is where Kant’s notion of “figurative synthesis” or “transcendental synthesis of the imagination” comes in. The imagination is explained here as “a faculty for determining the sensibility a priori [...] in accordance with the categories”, and (as already mentioned above) its activity is characterized as the “first application” of the understanding to the objects of intuition, and “the ground of all others” (B 152) — the “others” including, presumably, our *judgments* about those objects.⁹

It is uncontroversial that Kant takes there to be a synthesis involved in the representation of an objective world in sensory consciousness. But a number of questions remain. The question that has dominated the literature more than any other is how far down the understanding’s synthetic activity goes: is synthesis by the understanding required for *any* episode with objective cognitive significance at all, or are there perceptual states with objective purport prior to synthesis by the understanding? Conceptualists claim that synthesis reaches “all the way down”, so that no states with objective cognitive significance — including intuitions — are possible independently of synthesis (Allison 1983, 67; McDowell 1998, 452; Longuenesse 1998, 213); their opponents argue otherwise. Contemporary direct realists such as Allais (2015) and McLear

⁸ In order not to beg any contested questions, we adopt here Kant’s ambiguous talk of a synthesis *of* intuitions. This talk is ambiguous, because it may denote either a synthesis whose *components* are intuitions, or one whose *outputs* are intuitions (see, e.g., Allais 2105, 150). Conceptualists read Kant in the latter way, while their opponents read him in the former.

⁹ There is some disagreement regarding how precisely the imagination relates to the faculty of understanding. While Kant is explicit that the synthesis of the imagination involves the understanding affecting sensibility, commentators dispute whether it does so *qua* faculty of *concepts*, or in some other capacity (see, e.g., Longuenesse 1998, 61-65; Allison 2004, 186-187). This debate is connected to the distinction we remarked upon earlier between intellectualism and conceptualism (see note 2). For present purposes, we can afford to set this debate aside: what matters is that, according to Kant, the understanding is involved not only in judgments, but also in (some level of) sensory representations as well.

(2015; 2016) tend to fall in the latter camp, as they worry that allowing synthesis to reach all the way down to intuition would threaten the directness of our cognitive relations to the world.

Although we will return to this debate in Section 4 of this paper, the question we primarily aim to address is somewhat different. It is the prior question of what the synthetic activity of the understanding, as applied to the “manifold of intuition”, *consists in*. Unfortunately, while Kant rests much on this notion of synthesis, the *Critique* itself does not contain a straightforward answer to this question. Kant tells us that:

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. (A77/B103)

There is a difference between being in a complex state that involves representing *A* and representing *B*, and being in a single state that represents *both A and B*, combined together in some way; in the one case we have multiple representations, while in the other we have a single (albeit complex) representation of something complex. The latter, Kant indicates here, requires synthesis. What exactly is this cognitive activity — synthesis — whereby we represent complex things?

Now, Kant’s gloss on “synthesis” in the remark above is deliberately broad: it accommodates the synthesis of representations in a judgment, as well as the synthesis of representations in sensory consciousness. And in a much quoted passage, Kant says the following:

The same function that gives unity to the different representations **in a judgment** also gives unity to the mere synthesis of different representations **in an intuition**, which, expressed generally, is called the pure concept of understanding. (A79/B104)

For Kant, the *unity* of different representations (concepts) in a judgment is combination in accordance with some set logical forms: for example, the concepts ‘body’ and ‘heavy’ may be

combined in subject-predicate form in the judgment “bodies are heavy”. But what is the *function* that produces such representational unities?

It is relatively clear what it is to combine *words in a public language* (strings of symbols on a computer screen, or vocalized sounds) in such a way as to produce a sentence that *expresses* a judgment. Moreover, if one thinks of concepts as in some ways analogous to mental words, and judgments as analogous to mental assertions, this linguistic model could arguably be extended to judgment. But the linguistic model cannot plausibly apply to the sort of synthesis we are interested in: even if concepts are in some sense like words we can manipulate at will, the stuff of sensory consciousness (whatever it turns out to be) is *not* like that. We simply do not have the sort of access to our low-level perceptual states that would enable us to manipulate them like words.¹⁰

An alternative, and very common, model of thinking about the role of synthesis in sensory consciousness is in terms of higher-level perception, or *seeing-as* (Sellars 1978; Young 1984; Longuenesse 1998; Allison 2004; Allais 2015; McLear 2015, 2016). Consider an ambiguous pictorial representation, such as the duck-rabbit drawing made famous by Wittgenstein (1958, Part II, xi). Familiarly, you can see the drawing as depicting either a duck or a rabbit, but not both at the same time. There are a number of reasons why this might seem like a tempting model for understanding Kant’s notion of synthesis. For one thing, as Wittgenstein himself points out, seeing-as is not the same thing as judgment, and not even the same thing as propositional seeing (“seeing-that”). Moreover, we can intuitively describe your seeing an ambiguous scene in one

¹⁰ There is a tradition of commentators for whom lack of such access would not be a problem. According to them, Kant’s talk of synthesis is an early expression of ideas that are currently mainstream in sub-personal perceptual psychology (Sellars 1971; Kitcher 1993; Brook 1997). A proper assessment of this approach falls outside the scope of this paper. But the central problem with this approach is that it renders mysterious Kant’s emphasis on *self-consciousness*: on this, cf. Kitcher (2011). Our approach of understanding synthesis on the model of attention avoids this problem, since attention — even if often automatic and non-intentional — is still a personal-level process, potentially open to self-conscious control.

way rather another as some sort of *activity* on your part: after all, you can *choose* to take Wittgenstein's picture as representing a duck or a rabbit, more or less at will. And it does not seem much of a stretch to think of this interpretive activity as, somewhat metaphorically, a matter of "combining" various features of the drawing in one way rather than another.

But we need to be clear about what this interpretivist model of synthesis requires. When confronted with an ambiguous scene, the *elements* of that scene are perceived by you, and available to be attended to, independently of your perceptually interpreting the scene in one way rather than another. For example, you can attend to the duck-rabbit drawing as simply a set of dark marks on a white background without interpreting it one way rather than another. Indeed, a subject suffering from some forms of visual agnosia (so-called "associative" agnosia) may altogether *lack* the capacity for such interpretive perception, while perceiving the drawing as such just fine.

The lesson of all this is that in order to apply the interpretivist model to Kantian synthesis, we need a story about what it is that *gets interpreted*: for the model to work, there has to be something in ordinary experience that is merely "given", and plays the role of the ambiguous duck-rabbit drawing in Wittgenstein's example. While this point may seem obvious, it has strong implications. In particular, it suggests that the interpretivist model of synthesis is problematic for conceptualists: if no perceptual states with objective cognitive significance are possible independently of synthesis, it is not at all obvious *what*, on their view, could play the required role.¹¹ The obvious answer would be that what gets interpreted by the understanding is a mere *play of sensations*, which in itself has no objective cognitive significance. But it is hard to see how such a view of perception could cohere with Kant's view (evidence for which was noted in Section 1) that in perception we come into direct cognitive contact with external objects, not mental intermediaries.

¹¹ Longuenesse seems especially exposed to this line of criticism, as she combines her conceptualism with a heavy use of the "seeing-as" model of synthesis (see, especially, Longuenesse 1998, 117-118, 335).

Contemporary direct realist readers of Kant also employ the “seeing-as” language when speaking of synthesis: both Allais and McLear, in particular, draw a distinction between representations *of* objects and representations of objects *as* objects. Since Allais and McLear eschew conceptualism, they do not face the problem raised above. They have a ready answer to the question as to what is the “given” that gets interpreted by the understanding: it is *intuitions*. Through the synthetic activity of the understanding, in turn, we interpret those intuitions *as* representing persisting substances causally interacting with one another (see, e.g., Allais 2015, 279).

However, while eschewing conceptualism means that Allais and McLear can coherently embrace the interpretivist reading of synthesis, a tension remains. Recall that direct realists aspire to show that in perception we can come into direct cognitive contact with external objects, i.e., that we can cognitively relate to external objects without mental intermediaries. Now, clearly, direct cognitive contact with external objects cannot be the outcome of *interpreting* our own intuitions, since in that case intuitions would surely count as mental intermediaries. Thus, whatever the outcome of synthesis might be (judgment or “seeing-as”), it does not constitute direct cognitive contact with external objects. Direct cognitive contact with external objects is limited to *intuitions*, conceived of as possessing only spatiotemporal, and not categorial, unity. Nevertheless, despite their evident poverty, such intuitions are supposed to provide us with representations *of* particular objects — where such a particular is a “distinct, bounded thing to which the subject can pay individual attention” or which “the subject can pick out as a unit” (Allais 2015, 147n2, 154).

But how much sense can we make of objective representations — representations *of* objects — that possess merely spatiotemporal unity? If we are to ascribe objective reference to a mental state, such as an intuition, then it must *make a difference* to the subject’s mental life that this state picks out a particular environmental object (as opposed to the play of her own sensations, for example). What sort of difference? Allais provides some suggestions:

It requires that the subject is able to discriminate the thing ... from other things and its surroundings. Typically, the subject will be in a position *to attend to the thing, to track it, and perhaps to do things to it* (such as reaching out and grabbing it), and move around it. (Allais 2015, 154; emphasis ours)

This list of abilities is surely plausible as constitutive of objective reference. The question for Allais, however, is whether this list of abilities can be ascribed to *sensibility alone*, independently of any categorially-grounded activity by the understanding. Our main argument in the rest of this paper is that, at least on Kant's view, it cannot. But the underlying problem is also, we believe, intuitively clear. The whole point of speaking about attending to environmental *objects* — rather than, say, our own sensations — is that we are able to keep track of such objects even through radical changes in the shapes and colors they project onto our retinas, and even despite short-term occlusions. But doing so, it would seem, just *is* to treat the things one is attending to as persisting substances, subject to causal laws. Indeed, we believe that Kant's conception of synthesis is best understood in terms of the sorts of capacities for individuation and tracking that Allais highlights — or, as we will collectively characterize them, capacities for *directed attention*.¹²

We develop the argument for this claim in the rest of this paper. In Section 3, we argue that Kant thought that experience, as empirical cognition, requires directed attention; and we link that form of attention to synthesis, as discussed in the *Transcendental Analytic*. In Section 4, we return to the question of direct realism. If, in agreement with Allais, we take objective reference in perception to require the capacity to selectively attend to the particulars in question, then the

¹² Something very much like this debate remains live in contemporary cognitive science and philosophy of mind. According to Zenon Pylyshyn (2011), objective reference is achieved by mechanisms in early vision, which are modular and encapsulated from higher, conceptual capacities for individuation and causal attribution. We cannot, of course, discuss Pylyshyn's views in any detail here, but it is worth noting that his non-conceptualist view seems to involve a very narrow understanding of how concepts might be involved in cognition: in particular, he seems to assume that concepts only serve to *label* or *categorize* things. If our reading of Kant is correct, however, he held that concepts (specifically, the categories) can also serve to *guide sensory exploration* of our environment.

conclusion from Section 3 suggests that objective reference for Kant does, after all, require synthesis. The result is a version of conceptualism — but one that, as we shall see, poses no threat to direct realism.

3. Attention and Synthesis

Our guiding idea is that Kant’s talk of synthesis is best understood in terms of the employment of basic capacities for *exploration* of one’s physical environment — paradigmatically, the capacity for directed attention. While Kant says little about attention in the first *Critique*,¹³ he discusses it at length in the *Anthropology*. So we will first look at the *Anthropology*, in order to figure out how Kant thought of attention *in concreto*, as it were. Having thus equipped ourselves with a ground-level view of Kant’s conception of attention, we will turn to the discussion of synthesis in the *Critique*. We will argue that Kant’s discussion of synthesis fundamentally concerns the same sort of activity that goes by the name of attention in the *Anthropology*, only considered at a higher level of abstraction.

¹³ In addition to the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper (to which we will return), there is one other explicit mention of attention in the *Critique*. It comes at the point where Kant distinguishes pure from applied general logic as he introduces his own project of “transcendental logic” (A52-5/B77-9). Pure general logic deals with constitutive requirements on thought, abstracting both from the content of thought (it is general), and also from the *in concreto* employment of our cognitive capacities (it is pure). Among the concerns of applied general logic that Kant mentions we find: “attention, its impediments and consequences” (A54/B79). The core project of Kant’s *transcendental* logic is to identify principles constitutive of thought *about objects in the domain of nature* (i.e., it does not entirely abstract from the content of thought, as pure general logic does). This surely has implications for the ground-level use of our cognitive capacities, though it is not Kant’s project in the *Critique* to elaborate on this. We will argue, however, that experience requires attention by Kant’s lights, and that this commitment is implicit in the Transcendental Analytic. For a discussion of the idea that experience requires attention, as part of a critique of McDowell’s Kantianism, see Roessler (2011).

3.1 Attention in the Anthropology

In *Anthropology* §3, Kant considers the “voluntary consciousness” of one’s representations, which he says is possible either by “paying attention [das *Aufmerken*] (*attentio*) or [...] turning away [das *Absehen*] from a representation of which I am conscious (*abstractio*)” (7:131). This “turning away”, he elaborates, is a “real act of the cognitive faculty of holding off a representation of which I am conscious from combination with other representations in one consciousness” — and on these grounds should be distinguished from *distraction* (7:131). This presents abstraction as a matter of stopping a “combination” of representations that might otherwise obtain. Attention and abstraction are presented here as flip sides of the same coin: one attends *as* one disregards this or that. And this simply means that I *could* direct my attention in some other way, and I would accordingly *combine* representations differently.

Kant also observes that attention may or may not be voluntary. One’s attention can be seized — say by a strange bird’s call, or a sudden stabbing pain in one’s tooth; and likewise, as far as involuntariness goes, one might give one’s attention indifferently — say, to whatever happens to fall within one’s line of sight as one walks down the street. By contrast, Kant takes it that the capacity to abstract “demonstrates a freedom of the faculty of thought and the authority of the mind *to have the state of one’s representations under one’s control (animus sui compos)*” (7:131). At this point, Kant distinguishes abstraction from *distraction* — which, when intentional, can also be conceived as stopping a combination that might otherwise obtain: to get that annoying children’s television theme song out of my head, I might try humming another tune.¹⁴ Although both abstraction and deliberate distraction involve making it such that one does not *have* present to mind what one

¹⁴ Distraction is the “mere failure and omission” of attention (7:131); later Kant says that it is “the state of a diversion of attention [der Zustand einer Abkehrung der Aufmerksamkeit] (*abstractio*) from certain ruling representations through its dispersal onto other, dissimilar ones” (Anth §47, 7:206). There is an art to purposefully distracting oneself, Kant claims, that belongs to “mental dietetics” (Anth §47, 7:208), and memorably points to “suitor who could make a good marriage if only he could overlook a wart on his beloved’s face, or a gap between her teeth” (Anth §3, 7:131-2).

might have present to mind, with distraction it is a matter of some indifference where one's attention may then settle: whatever does the trick, as long as the dreaded song no longer chimes away within.

In Kant's account, then, attention is dynamically linked with abstraction — one attends *as* one disregards this or that — which accordingly presupposes a background of representations that are not attended, but could be. Kant develops this point as he considers, next, Locke's famous complaint against the very idea of having representations without being conscious of them. Kant responds by suggesting that we can be "*indirectly* conscious" of certain representations without being "directly conscious" of them (Anth §5 7:135). The representations that we are directly conscious of are "*clear*"; but there is an "immense field" of representations that we are only "indirectly" conscious of, which Kant deems "*obscure*" (7:135).¹⁵

What does Kant's talk of being "indirectly conscious" of our representations amount to? There seem to be two ways to read Kant here. On one reading, Kant concedes nothing to Locke. His claim is just that, through some sort of theoretical argument, we can conclude that we have such unconscious representations. But although such reasoning might make us *conscious that we have* such representations, it would do nothing to make the representations themselves into conscious states. This reading is supported by the following statement: "The field of sensuous intuitions and sensations of which we are not conscious, even though we can undoubtedly conclude that we have them ... is immense" (Anth §5 7:135). But Kant's more phenomenologically inclined examples in this context suggest a slightly different reading. On this

¹⁵ Alexander Baumgarten refers to the "sum" of obscure representations as the "FOUNDATION OF THE SOUL" (*Metaphysica* §511), and suggests that what figures as obscure, versus clear (and possibly also distinct) in one's sensible perception of things depends upon the position of one's body (*Metaphysica* §513); he also points to attention and abstraction as powers that "reveal themselves" not only in thought but also in sensible representation of the world (*Metaphysica* §625) — see Watkins ed. (2009, 116-118). Although much of this is suggestive of Kant's discussion of these topics in the *Anthropology*, it is not our project to work out how Kant both draws upon and distinguishes himself from his German rationalist predecessors on these topics.

alternative reading, obscure representations are conscious — but *dimly* (or obscurely) so. They form the background against which clear representations stand out.¹⁶

For present purposes it is not essential to determine exactly how Kant thought of obscure representations. What matters is that this discussion suggests a picture of attention, wherein attending is a matter of actively selecting some representations out of an “immense field”. Kant illustrates this type of attention in his example of a “freely improvising” musician, who

plays a fantasy on the organ with ten fingers and both feet and also speaks with someone standing next to him. In a few moments a mass of representations is awakened in his soul, each of which for its selection requires still a special judgment as to its appropriateness, since a single stroke of the finger not in accordance with the harmony would be heard as a discordant sound. (7:136)¹⁷

The sounds he perceives clearly are the notes he strikes — the ones he actually plays. These notes are selected *from* the mass (which Kant suggests bubbles up in him, once he starts to play) on grounds of their appropriateness, presumably in light of principles of harmony. So although the musician is “freely improvising”, his selection is guided by his assessment of the appropriateness of each note that he plays to the harmony he aims to produce. Moreover, as the reference to *judgment* of appropriateness strongly implies, Kant thinks of such guidance as a job for the understanding.

¹⁶ On our consciousness of obscure representations, see also *Critique* (B414-5n). A further aspect of Kant’s account of the phenomenology of empirical consciousness in the *Anthropology* concerns the *distinctness* of one’s representations: this is clarity that extends to the composition (*Zusammensetzung*) of representations (Anth §6, 7:138). Cognition (*Erkenntnis*) requires that “order” is thought in the manifold, and thus requires also distinctness in this sense (7:138). For present purposes, though, we are mostly concerned with the contrast of clear versus obscure representation. We also set to one side what clarity and distinctness mean when it comes to concepts.

¹⁷ For present purposes, nothing hangs on the further complication that the musician’s attention is divided between his improvisation and his conversation — so we ignore it.

This sort of attention also seems to be part of what Kant requires for full-blown experience, at least as he presents it in the handwritten manuscript of the *Anthropology*. Consider the following passage, where Kant elaborates on the idea that experience is empirical cognition:

Therefore experience is the activity (of the power of representation) whereby appearances are brought under the concept of an object of experience[;] and experiences are made by employing observations (intentional perceptions [absichtliche Wahrnehmungen]) and being reflective about their unification under a single concept. (H 7:398)

The idea that experience requires *intentional perceptions* is perhaps overstated: after all, as we have noted, Kant acknowledges that a person's attention can be involuntarily grabbed by (e.g.) the call of an unfamiliar bird. However, we can read Kant as making the more modest claim that experiences are made through perception that is *active*, in the sense that involves the sort of attention we have been discussing. We put ourselves in a position to know about an objective external world by *actively selecting* which out of the immense field of representations potentially on offer to attend to and which to disregard. Moreover, these selections are not made at random, but rather follow certain principles or rules, and are thus unified "under a single concept".¹⁸

We think these remarks from the *Anthropology* contain valuable clues about how Kant understands attention and its role in experience. Armed with these hints, we turn next to the *Critique's* Transcendental Analytic.

¹⁸ In this last phrase (i.e.: über die Vereinigung derselben unter Einem Begriffe nachgedacht (reflectirt) wird), Kant suggests that the subject must also stand *to be reflective about* the unification of the perceptions under a concept. We take it that this is also what Kant has in mind when he presents the "faculty of cognition as such" as involving capacities of *apprehension* (there glossed *attentio*), *abstraction*, and *reflection* at Anth 7:138. Parsing that particular account of our cognitive faculty would require more of a discussion on Kant's conception of reflection than can be offered in the present context.

3.2 Attention and synthesis in the *Transcendental Analytic*

Let us return to the passage from the Deduction (§24) mentioned at the outset of this paper, quoted now at further length:

I do not see how one can find so many difficulties in the fact that inner sense is affected by ourselves. Every act of attention can give us an example of this. In such acts the understanding always determines the inner sense, in accordance with the combination that it thinks, to the inner intuition that corresponds to the manifold in the synthesis of the understanding. (B156-7n)

This note is appended at the end of a discussion of the “paradox” that inner sense “presents even ourselves to consciousness only as we appear to ourselves, not as we are in ourselves” (B152-153), which is itself a coda to Kant’s discussion of the figurative synthesis. In particular, Kant’s resolution of the supposed paradox consists in arguing that through inner sense we are conscious of ourselves only insofar as our inner sense is *affected by* ourselves, and that this self-affection is an act of the understanding “under the designation of a transcendental synthesis of the imagination” (B153). The passage just quoted is meant to dispel the sense of mystery that might surround the notion of self-affection, by linking it to the phenomenon of attention. Unfortunately, of course, the *Critique* itself does not contain an explicit account of attention, and thus it does not by itself give us the resources to exploit Kant’s suggestion. This is precisely where the account we just recovered from the *Anthropology* comes in handy.

Recall our freely improvising musician. As he begins to play, “a mass of representations is awakened in his soul”. His task, then, is to select those among them which accord with his grasp of the harmony he aims to produce — or, as we might put it, those which accord with “the combination that [he] thinks”. Moreover, as we saw, in selecting these representations he lifts them up from the immense field of obscure representations, and into (full, direct) consciousness: in selecting them, therefore, he determines his own inner sense.

Thus from the *Anthropology* we learn that attention is the faculty that provides us with (fully or directly) conscious sensory representations; and we can link this to the remark in the *Critique* that every act of attention provides an example of the self-affection of inner sense. Moreover, attention does not determine inner sense at random, but rather in accordance with the “combination that [the understanding] thinks”. We can interpret this claim just as we did in our discussion of the *Anthropology*: out of the immense field of representations that we could potentially attend to in each given perceptual setting, we *select* in accordance with certain principles — fundamentally, the Principles of the Pure Understanding that Kant derives from the categories.

Now, Kant’s claim in the note from §24 is only that acts of attention are *examples* of self-affection or synthesis. So we should expect there to be other instances of synthesis which cannot, strictly speaking, be classified as acts of attention. But it is not hard to see why Kant suggests this: as we already saw, attention is used in the *Anthropology* as a gloss on “the faculty of apprehending given representations” (Anth §6 7:138), and so it is restricted to empirical employments of our sensibility. Since, however, Kant believes our sensibility can also be exercised in non-empirical contexts, there is scope for a priori syntheses too. Consider this example, invoked multiple times in the *Critique*:

We cannot think of a line without *drawing* it in thought, we cannot think a circle without *describing* it [...] and we cannot even represent time without, in *drawing* a straight line, [...] attending merely to the action of the synthesis of the manifold through which we successively determine inner sense, and thereby attending to the succession of this determination in inner sense. (B154; see also B137-137 and especially A162-163/B 203-204)¹⁹

How are we supposed to understand this “action of the synthesis of the manifold through which we successively determine inner sense”? In this case it cannot be a matter of selecting from

¹⁹ The “attending” in this translation renders *Acht ... haben*.

among an immense field of *given* representations, since the context is the determination of sensibility a priori. But we still think that something like our earlier model applies.

Consider what you do when you visually attend to a moving object. Sometimes you might need to move your eyes or head in order to keep the object in view; but let us set this aside, by assuming that the object is either small enough or far enough away. Even if you do not engage in such overt actions as moving your eyes and head, tracking a moving object still involves a clear sense of *motion* on your part: the focus of your attention shifts successively to take in different parts of your visual field. Accordingly, as you track the object the focus of your attention traces a figure in your visual field. Presumably, however, you can perform the same activity even *abstracting from* any given representations: if you have a capacity to direct your sensibility to trace shapes in space at all, there may be no reason why that capacity cannot be exercised a priori as well.²⁰

That something like this pure motion is what Kant has in mind seems to be confirmed by the following note, which occurs in the same context:

Motion of an *object* in space does not belong in a pure science, thus also not in geometry [...]. But motion, as *description* of a space, is a pure act of the successive synthesis of the manifold in outer intuition in general through the productive imagination, and belongs not only to geometry but even to transcendental philosophy. (B155n)

In tracking an empirical object we trace figures in space by successively attending to different parts of the manifold of an empirical intuition. When doing geometry in our heads we employ the same capacities, only directed to the manifold of “outer intuition in general”. Indeed, Kant suggests that we can abstract not just from sensation, but even from space (and hence outer

²⁰ However, there is some empirical evidence that, in the absence of visual objects, attention does *not* trace continuous shapes through empty space (Pylyshyn 2011, 63). This evidence obviously has no bearing on what Kant may have thought on the matter.

sense) altogether, and in that way “[m]otion, as action of the subject [...] first produces the concept of succession at all” (B155).

Thinking of synthesis on the model of directed attention proves fruitful when we turn to Kant’s account of the Principles of the Pure Understanding, and specifically the Analogies of Experience. Synthesis in the Analogies has often been read in explicitly interpretational terms. Longuenesse, for example, reads the Analogies as concerning how we *interpret* the succession of our own sensations, so as to arrive at representations of an outer temporal order:

We believe that we perceive the succession or simultaneity of the states of things.

Actually all we perceive (apprehend) is the succession of our representations, whereas the simultaneity and succession in states of things are not directly perceived. Rather, the representation we have of objective simultaneity and succession is the result of the way we interpret the succession of perceptions in our apprehension. (Longuenesse 1998, 335)

The suggestion seems to be that we are *first* aware of our perceptions, as a sequence of mental events in us, and then from this awareness we somehow arrive at conclusions about the objective temporal order. But, although the details of Kant’s positive account of temporal consciousness may be hard to decipher, this particular suggestion is plainly at odds with the text of the Analogies, which contains numerous passages that reject the idea that our awareness of objective temporality is derived from some prior awareness of an inner temporal order (e.g., A193/B238; see also A182/B225-226 and A201/B246).

Thus thinking of synthesis in the Analogies in terms of interpretation does not seem like a promising approach. Let us then see if we can do better with our alternative approach to synthesis.

The general principle of the Analogies, Kant announces, is that “experience is possible only through the representation of a necessary connection of perceptions” (B218). Representing such a necessary connection, however, would not be possible through the merely haphazard uptake of sensory representations: “apprehension is only a juxtaposition of the manifold of

empirical intuition [with] no representation of the necessity of the combined existence of the appearances that it juxtaposes” (B219). Experience is possible, therefore, only in the “synthetic unity of the manifold of perception in one consciousness” (B218), which is accomplished through “a priori connecting concepts” (B219).

This is very abstract, but we can get a sense of what Kant has in mind by looking at some of his examples. In the Second Analogy (as stated jointly in both editions), Kant begins with the familiar idea that “apprehension of the manifold of appearance is always successive” (A189/B234). But a *random* succession of perceptions is not yet sufficient for experience. Rather:

I must [...] derive the *subjective sequence* of apprehension from the *objective sequence* of appearances, for otherwise the former would be entirely undetermined and no appearance would be distinguished from any other. The former alone proves nothing about the connection of the manifold in the object, because it is entirely arbitrary [beliebig]. (A193/B238)

This point is illustrated by Kant’s notorious example of a ship being driven downstream (A192/B237-238). What is crucial in this illustration, we suggest, is that it provides an example of *visually tracking a moving object*. Clearly, if I am to keep track of the ship, my apprehension (the direction of my *attention*) must *follow* the movement of the ship:

My perception of its position downstream follows the perception of its position upstream, and it is impossible that in the apprehension of this appearance the ship should first be perceived downstream and afterwards upstream. The order in the sequence of the perceptions in apprehension is therefore here determined, and the apprehension is bound to it. (A192/B237)

The sequence in which I apprehend successive glimpses of the ship cannot be haphazard, but must be “bound” to the motion of the actual ship, as Kant puts it. To put the point in the terms used in our earlier discussion: from the immense field of representations on offer to me, I must successively select those that *follow the motion of the ship*. (This, in terms of the A193/B238 passage,

is the “subjective sequence of apprehension”). How am I to do this? Well, by “determining my inner sense in accordance with the combination that I think” — that is, through my grasp of the ship as a solid object following a determinate trajectory. I must grasp that the ship’s position at one moment is *causally determined by* its position at earlier moments, and direct my attention accordingly. If I were *not* able to direct my apprehension in this way — “in accordance with a priori connecting concepts” (B219), or the “objective sequence of appearances” (A193/B238) passage — I would simply not be able to track the ship as it moves downstream.

Similar remarks may be made about the concept of substance, which is the topic of the First Analogy. In the First Analogy, Kant indicates that to *represent* something as undergoing change there must be something that “*always exists*, i.e., something *lasting* and *persisting*” (A182/B225-6). It is only with the representation of something persisting (“*das Beharrliche*”) that it is possible to represent *it* as changing — and to keep track of it as it does — whether one is keeping track as it changes position in space, or else as it undergoes some alteration in quality. But there is no perception of this persisting substratum as such. Instead, we do things like track a ship as it changes its position. To track in this way, we represent successive representations as necessarily connected to one another, as movements of something *that is persisting*.

For a different example, Kant contrasts the perception of a moving ship with looking at a house. While in this case too “the apprehension of the manifold that stands before me is successive” (B235), as Kant points out we do not experience *the manifold of the house itself* (its different spatial parts) as successive: rather, we experience them as all existing simultaneously, despite being unable to take them all in at one time. Moreover, unlike the case in which I track a moving object, there is no fixed order in which I must take in its various parts:

[M]y perceptions could have begun at its rooftop and ended at the ground, but could also have begun below and ended above; likewise I could have apprehended the manifold of empirical intuition from the right or from the left. In the series of these perceptions there

was therefore no determinate order that made it necessary when I had to begin in the apprehension in order to combine the manifold empirically. (A192-3/B237-8)

The representation of a house is not given to me all at once — as it might be represented in a cubist painting, for example. Rather, I *explore* the house: whether merely visually, and at some fixed distance, or else by moving around and through it. And, indeed, my experience of the manifold of the house as simultaneous rather than successive is linked to my awareness that the house is *all there for me to explore* however I please: I can choose to scan it from top to bottom, or from left to right.²¹

We have been arguing that we should understand Kant's claims about the role of the understanding in perceptual experience in terms of the idea that experience requires *directed attention*. Our proposal accords with a further claim that Kant defends in the *Anthropology*: namely, that the capacity to enjoy experience is a *cognitive achievement*. In order to further illustrate our view, we will turn to this idea next.

3.3 The “progress of perceptions”

The first book of the *Anthropology* is devoted to “the cognitive capacity”, and the first section to self-consciousness. Kant asserts here in rapid succession that it is because a human being “can have the ‘I’ in his representations” that “he is a *person*” rather than a thing; that thought as such is essentially first-personal; and that the faculty of thought “is *understanding*” (Anth §1, 7:127). He then notes that the capacity for thought, so conceived, is a developmental achievement; and he speculates that a child may be capable of genuine thought before he actually speaks in the first person (7:127). But how does the “I” enter into a child’s representations, so that he is capable of genuine thought? Here Kant gestures towards a “progress of *perceptions*” that has some “crude beginning” in activities like tracking shiny objects, and expands ultimately to “*cognition* of objects of the senses, that is, *experience*” (7:127-8). He concludes with the striking remark that childhood

²¹ See also Kant’s similar remarks about the moon and the earth, in the Third Analogy (A211/B257).

“was not the time of experiences, but merely of scattered [zerstreute] perceptions not yet united under the concept of an object” (7:128). It is this latter claim — that a capacity for experience is a developmental achievement — rather than Kant’s views on self-consciousness, that will concern us here.

Notice, first, that Kant must be talking of *early* childhood — infancy, really: the time of working up from shiny object-tracking and the like. It might seem that Kant takes infants to be fundamentally *distracted* (*zerstreut*) — for he goes on to discuss attention (*Aufmerken*, glossed *attentio*) and distraction (*Zerstreuung*, glossed *distractio*) in the ensuing pages (Anth §3, chiefly). Let’s query this. An infant — call her Zoë — who is not more than a few days old can track with her eyes the movements of a white string against a black background. And we would intuitively describe her as doing so attentively, in *some* sense: it is fully occupying her, at least for a few seconds at a time. Now, the progress of perceptions to which Kant gestures begins with the “apprehension of sensation [*Apprehension der Empfindungsvorstellung*]” (7:127), which surely encompasses episodes like this. But the sort of attention exhibited in such episodes is evidently different from the attention that Kant takes to be required for full-blown experience.

Zoë enjoys *perceptions*, in Kant’s sense of the term: she takes up, or apprehends, representations of sensation. Moreover, Zoë can even keep track of these sensations to some extent. Thus, considered from the outside, her perceptions are not merely haphazard or random: they are the result of the tracking motions she makes with her eyes; and these, we may assume, reliably respond to the movements of the string. And yet they remain “scattered” in Kant’s terms, because they are not “united under the concept of an object” (7:128). But why exactly do they lack this unity?

Zoë’s tracking is a mechanical impulse set into gear with the appropriate stimuli (of suitable size, and contrast against its background); it presupposes that certain raw resources have come online (e.g., suitably developed muscular reflexes) and that other enabling conditions are in place (the infant is awake, not hungry, not tired). This impulse is engaged as a reflex: Zoë is not

setting about tracking the string; she just does it. Her visual tracking is a mechanical skill that is developed on roughly the same terms that she acquires a capacity to grasp objects of different sizes and shapes. So what exactly would it take for Zoë's perceptions to stop being scattered, and instead to be unified (or synthesized) "under the concept of an object"? To do that, it seems, she would have had to track the string with *some* sort of understanding that she is following a publicly available object moving through space in an independent world. But surely such an understanding is beyond the capacities of a neonate.

Suppose now it is a few months later and her father starts to play a game with her using this string — say it is the white string of the black hoodie that he wears most days. He dangles it in front of her; she tracks it assiduously. Quickly, he flicks it over his shoulder. Where did it go? She is no longer tracking the string. Suppose then that they "find" it together. Maybe the father makes it clear that he is bringing it back: the same string. Zoë is conceivably in a position to recognize that the string *could* have been followed to the other side. Suppose then that they "find" it together. Maybe the father makes it clear that he is bringing it back: the same string. Zoë is conceivably in a position to recognize that the string *could* have been followed to the other side.²² She is now beginning to be able to react to *the string*, as opposed to just sudden or striking visual sensations. And what this example suggests is that, as part and parcel of this, she must be disposed to treat (e.g.) two temporally and spatially distinct impressions as belonging to the same *persisting thing*, and to anticipate where this thing might be located next, in light of its present location and state of motion. This capacity is significantly different from the capacities involved in neonate string-tracking. In particular, as we have been arguing, it requires a capacity for categorially-grounded syntheses.

The point of this section has been to sketch and defend a particular way of thinking about Kant's talk of synthesis: namely, on the model of directed attention. Armed now with a

²² Infants have been shown to be capable of this kind of expectation at six months of age or even younger (Pylyshyn 2011, 50).

better understanding of Kantian synthesis, we will close by returning briefly to the debate over direct realism.

4. Attention, Synthesis, and Direct Realism

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, contemporary work on Kant's views on perception appears to face a dilemma. On the one hand, Kant seems to think that in perception we have direct cognitive contact with external objects. On the other, however, Kant clearly thinks that perceptual experience requires the synthetic activity of the understanding. This has led direct realist readers of Kant to reject the position we called "conceptualism" — i.e., the view that the activity of the understanding is necessary for basic cognitive contact with external objects. But we are now in a position to see that the appearance of a dilemma is misleading: Kant may well, and coherently, have been *both* a direct realist and a conceptualist.

Allais (2015) and McLear (2015, 2016) grant that full-blown *experience*, for Kant, requires us to unify sensory representations under concepts. However, on their view, the sensory representations (intuitions) that get unified under concepts carry their own objective cognitive significance *anyway* — independently of any top-down influence or guidance by the understanding. But our reading suggests that this is not actually Kant's view. On the contrary, Kant suggests, the states that get unified under a concept are *observations*, or — as we suggested above — exercises of our faculty of *attention*. And, as we have already seen, attention is directed by the understanding — in accordance with "the combination that it [the understanding] thinks" (B156-7n), or by the need for unity "under a single concept" (H 7:398). This, fundamentally, is because in attending to and tracking particulars in the world, we need to treat them *as* relatively persisting unitary objects that follow causally continuous trajectories through space.²³ This

²³ Allais (2015, 147) points out that we can also attend to and track particulars — like shadows, or spots of light on a wall — that are not full-blown material bodies. But this is no response to the present concern: for it is plausible that our capacity to attend to such insubstantial particulars is parasitic upon our

suggests that the objective cognitive significance of intuitions is *not* there anyway, independently of their being unified (or, perhaps, independently of their *potential for* being unified) under concepts. On our reading, it is because we possess the capacity for directed attention — a capacity governed by the understanding — that we are capable of sensory states with objective cognitive significance at all.²⁴

One response to the present worries might be to impoverish our conception of the *objects* which intuitions represent: perhaps the things that intuitions pick out consist entirely of momentary instantiations of manifest qualities, like fleeting colour patches and perspectival shape. (This seems to be the view of McLear 2015, 2016.) But this would deliver much less by way of direct realism than one might have hoped. If *all* we are directly related to in perception is such fleeting instantiations of manifest qualities, ordinary objects are, once again, hidden behind a veil. We do not think that this is an attractive option for the direct realist.

capacity to attend to and track ordinary objects. In tracking a moving spot of light on the wall we are treating it *as if* it were an ordinary object, by expecting it to conform to rules of persistence and causal continuity that properly apply to such objects. If so, tracking insubstantial particulars should be no less cognitively demanding than tracking ordinary objects.

²⁴ What about the textual evidence Allais and McLear appeal to in rejecting the claim that the objective purport of intuitions depends on the understanding? This evidence prominently includes Kant's discussion in §13 (A89-90/B121-3), motivating the project of the Transcendental Deduction. Kant there seems explicitly to allow that "appearances can offer objects to our intuition" independently of the "functions of thinking" (A91/B123). A full discussion of this text would require a proper discussion of what Kant's project in the Deduction really is, something which falls outside the scope of this paper. But we should note the following. In contrast to accounts such as Longuenesse's that make the *very nature* of sensibility (the forms of space and time) depend on the synthesis of the understanding, our account does not threaten the independence of sensibility as a faculty. So it is, indeed, possible for "appearances to offer objects to our intuition", independently of the functions of thinking. It is just that such intuitions would *not*, on our account, put us in any cognitive relation to objects (appearances would still "offer us objects", but we would be unable to take up the offer, as it were).

Moreover, if our understanding of synthesis is correct, such defensive moves on the part of the direct realist are not required. If the role of the understanding is simply to direct our sensory exploration of our environment, in the manner sketched above, then it does not threaten the idea that, in perception, we are in direct cognitive contact with environmental objects. We do not have to choose between direct realism and conceptualism.

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Anth	<i>Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht = Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View</i> (1798) — Ak. 7
Fortschritte	<i>Welches sind die wirklichen Fortschritte, die die Metaphysik seit Leibnizens und Wolffs Zeiten in Deutschland gemacht hat? = What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?</i> (Nachlass from 1790s) — Ak. 20.
H	Handschrift (handwritten manuscript) of the <i>Anthropology</i> — Ak. 7
KrV	<i>Kritik der reinen Vernunft = Critique of Pure Reason</i> (1781/1787) — Ak. 3/ Ak.4
KU	<i>Kritik der Urteilskraft = Critique of Judgment</i> (1790) — Ak. 5
RMet	<i>Reflexionen zur Metaphysik = Kant’s handwritten notes on metaphysics</i> , various dates — Ak. 17-18

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