

Developing Cognition From Its Original Seeds:
Kant's Conception of the Synthetic Method in the *Critique of Pure Reason*

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1. Introduction

(1) In the *Critique of Pure Reason* I proceeded synthetically in relation to this question, namely, by inquiring **within pure reason itself**, and seeking to determine within this source both the elements and the laws of its pure use, **according to principles**. This work is difficult and requires a resolute reader to think himself little by little into a system that takes no foundation as given except reason itself, and that therefore tries **to develop cognition out of its original seeds without relying on any fact whatsoever**. (Prol, 4: 274)

(2) I understand by an analytic of concepts not their analysis (*Analysis*), or the usual procedure of philosophical investigations, that of analyzing (*zergliedern*) the content of concepts that present themselves and bringing them to distinctness, but rather the much less frequently attempted analysis (*Zergliederung*) of the faculty of understanding itself, in order to investigate the possibility of a priori concepts by seeking them only in the understanding as their birthplace and analyzing (*analysieren*) its pure use as such; for this is the proper business of a transcendental philosophy. (A65-66/B90-91)

2. Two meanings of the term 'synthesis' in the Critique of Pure Reason

(3) By **synthesis in the most general sense**, however, I understand the act of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending (*begreifen*) their manifoldness in one cognition (*Erkenntnis*). . . . The synthesis of a manifold, however (whether it be given empirically or a priori) first brings forth a cognition. (A77/B103)

(4) The proof [of the B Deduction] makes use of **the synthetic method**, i.e., it proceeds on the basis of the fact that **the two doctrines of the Critique** are initially developed independently of one another – the doctrine of the categories as functions of unity in self-consciousness and the doctrine of space and time as given representations. . . . Within the structure which Kant had already given his book, the advantages of **a construction according to the synthetic method** were in any case obvious. This construction allowed him to ground the two fundamental positions of critical philosophy, the sensible a priori and the active role of the understanding in knowledge, separately and **unite them by means of a single argument**. (Henrich 1969: 649-50)

(5) [T]he second step of the ‘Transcendental Deduction’ presupposes the **identification of space and time** as a priori intuitive representations and **the recognition of the categories** as conditions of the combination of the manifold of intuitions into the concept of an object. . . . The analytic stages of Kant’s argument identify necessary conditions in our sensible and conceptual representations, while the **synthetic stage** is able to show **a necessary connection** between the latter and the former. (Gava 2015: 744)

3. *The immediate context of Kant’s conception of the synthetic method*

(6) If one seeks to elaborate a system according to the synthetic method, (1) one needs to ground it **on a single truth**, from which everything else is derived, in order that the system acquire a unity and thoroughgoing coherence and, thus, contain no more or less than is necessary; (2) one needs to ground the system *on a division* and distinguish its various parts, yet without thereby offending against the synthetic method; (3) the learned thoughts must be treated in the following order: (a) first the definitions, (b) then either the indemonstrable truths or intuitive judgments, (c) and then the demonstrable truths. (Meier, *Auszug*, § 431)

(7) The metaphysical aspects of science must be presented scientifically. The method is further divided into the analytic and synthetic one. The former starts from the *pricipiatis* and moves toward the *pricipiis*. The synthetic method moves from **the principii to the effects**, or from the simple to the composite. The analytic method might also be called regressive, and the synthetic one progressive. The analytic procedure fits the popular method better, but the synthetic method is the most perfect one and **a system is only possible by dint of it**. (LL Pöhlitz, 24:598-599, my translation).

4. *Kant’s use of the synthetic method in the Critique of Pure Reason*

(8) If we survey the cognitions of our understanding in their entire range, we find that what reason quite uniquely prescribes to it and seeks to bring about is **that which is systematic in cognition**, i.e., its interconnection based on **one principle** (*aus einem Prinzip*). This unity of reason always presupposes an *idea*, namely that of the form of a whole of cognition, which precedes the determinate cognition of the parts and contains the conditions for determining a priori the place of each part and its relation to the others.

(9) [What is at stake is a critique of] the **faculty of reason as such**, in respect of all the cognitions after which reason might strive independently of all experience, and hence the decision about the possibility or impossibility of a metaphysics as such, and the determination of its sources, as well as its extent and boundaries, all, however, **from principles**. (Axii)

(10) We will therefore pursue the pure concepts **into their first seeds and predispositions in the human understanding**, where they lie ready, until with the opportunity of experience they are finally developed and exhibited in their clarity by the very same understanding, liberated from the empirical conditions attaching to them. (A66/B91)

(11) In the *Critique* I always gave my greatest attention not only to how I could distinguish carefully the types of cognition, but also to how I [1] could **derive** all the concepts **belonging to each type** from their common source, so that I might not only, by learning their origin, be able [2] to **determine their use** with certainty, but also might have the inestimable advantage . . . of cognizing a priori, hence **according to principles**, the completeness of the enumeration, classification, and specification of the concepts. (Prol, 4:329, numbers added)

(12) Transcendental philosophy has the advantage but also the obligation to seek its concepts according to **a principle** (*nach einem Prinzip*), since they spring pure and unmixed from the understanding, as absolute unity, and must therefore be connected among themselves according to a concept or idea. Such a connection, however, provides a **rule** by means of which the place of each pure concept of the understanding and the completeness of all of them together can be determined a priori. (A67/B92)

(13) I need not seek far beyond myself, because it is in myself that I encounter this knowledge (*Kenntnis*), and common logic already provides an **example** of the latter [knowledge] by showing that the simple acts of reason can be fully and systematically enumerated. (Axiv, translation modified).

(14) 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 [unity], expressed generally, is called the pure concept of understanding. The **same understanding**, therefore, and indeed by means of the very same actions through which it brings the logical form of a judgment into concepts by means of the analytical unity, also brings a transcendental content into its representations by means of the synthetic unity of the manifold in intuition in general, on account of which they are called pure concepts of the understanding that pertain to objects a priori (A79/B104-105, cf. A68-70/B93-95).

(15) Here we must take the same path as the one we took above in the deduction of the categories, that is, we must consider the logical form of rational cognition, and see whether in this way reason perhaps also [1] becomes a source of concepts [through which] [2] objects in themselves can be regarded as determined synthetically a priori in respect of one or another function of reason.

5. Conclusion

(16) When knowledge moves forward little by little, it cannot be helped that certain expressions which already have become classical . . . should subsequently be found insufficient and badly suited, and that a **certain newer and more apt usage** should fall into danger of being confused with the old one. The analytic method, insofar as it is opposed to the synthetic, . . . signifies only that one proceeds from that which is sought as if it were given, and ascends to the conditions under which alone it is possible. (Prol 4:276n)

References

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Henrich, Dieter (1969). 'The Proof Structure of the Transcendental Deduction,' *Review of Metaphysics* 22, 640-659.