Kant held that what distinguishes an object in our experience from the mere subjective play of representations is rule-governed unity. His famous definition of an object is just “that in the concept of which a manifold is united.” (B137). This means that consciousness itself must be understood as a discriminating, unifying activity, paradigmatically as judging, and not as the passive recorder of sensory impressions. Such a claim opens up a vast territory of possibilities and questions, since Kant does not mean that our awake attentiveness is to be understood as something we intentionally do, in the standard sense, even if it is not also a mere event that happens to us, as if we happen to be triggered into a determinate mental state, or as if sensory stimuli just activate an active mental machinery.

Kant also clearly does not mean to suggest by his claim that “the form of consciousness is a judgmental form” that consciousness consists of thousands of very rapid
judgmental claims being deliberately made, thousands of ‘S is P’
s or ‘If A then B’
taking place. The world is taken to be such and such without such takings
being isolatable, intentional actions. What Kant does mean by understanding
consciousness as “synthetic” is quite a formidable, independent topic in
itself.\footnote{1}

Now Kant’s main interest in the argument of the deduction was to show first
that the rules governing such activities (whatever the right way to describe
such activities) cannot be wholly empirical rules, all derived from experience,
that there must be rules for the derivation of such rules that cannot them-
selves be derived, or that there must be pure concepts of the understanding;
and secondly that these non-derived rules have genuine “objective validity,”
are not subjective impositions on an independently received manifold, that,
as he puts it, the a priori prescribed “synthetic unity of consciousness” “…is
not merely a condition that I myself require in knowing an object, but is a
condition under which any intuition must stand in order to become an object
for me.” (B138) Kant seems to realize that he gives the impression that for him
consciousness is a two-step process; the mere reception of sensory data, and
then the conceptualization of such data, but he works hard in the pursuit of
the second desideratum to disabuse his readers of that impression.

Aside from some Kant scholars, there are not many philosophers who still
believe that Kant proved in this argument that we possess synthetic a priori
knowledge, although there is wide admiration for the power of Kant’s argu-
ments about, at least, causality and substance. But there remains a great deal
of interest in his basic picture of the nature of conscious mindedness. For the
central component of his account, judgment, is, as already noted, not a men-
tal event that merely happens, as if causally triggered into its synthetic activ-
ity by sensory stimuli. Judging, while not a practical action initiated by a
decision, is an activity sustained and resolved, sometimes in conditions of
uncertainty, by a subject and that means that it is normatively structured. The
rules of judgment governing such activity are rules about what ought to be
judged, how our experience ought to be organized (we distinguish, judge, for
example, successive perceptions of a stable object as really simultaneous in
time, and not actually representing something successive). Such rules are not
rules describing how we do judge, are not psychological laws of thought.
And, to come to the point of contact with Hegel that is the subject of the