Reason’s Search for the Unconditioned and the Standpoint of the Subject in Kant

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In this paper I’d like to propose a reading of Kant’s philosophy from the standpoint of reason in its most general or generic sense, as synthetic activity per se. That is, to come right out and say it, I will be stressing the idea that reason imposes form or unity on the manifold of content not just in the epistemic sense but also in the practical sense. In order to do this, reason must itself be conceived as fundamentally unified.

This project, I believe, can shed light on a number of problems which contemporary Kant scholarship in both the theoretical and practical realms continues to encounter. Understanding Kant from the perspective of reason per se allows us to understand Kant’s project as dynamic and immanent rather than as static and transcendental. Examining Kant from this vantage point allows us to see that the two uses of reason, the speculative and the practical, are merely versions of reason’s original form giving capacity or synthesis. If this is correct, the understanding and practical reason are themselves to be understood as dynamic and as synthetic, constituting their respective domains through their activity of subsuming intuitions under concepts in thought or by producing states of affairs by ordering particular elements in the world through action.

The main obstacle to such a dynamic conception of reason is Kant’s alleged formalism most prominently expressed in the theory of the categories. Kant’s table of the categories seems to suggest that there is a stable, transcendental and hence non-dynamic core to our relation to material nature. This idea has suggested to many that Kant has a limited conception of reason’s role and that this role is antagonistic to the role the understanding plays as it determines what is legitimately to be called knowledge and what is not.1 The emphasis is hence placed on the understanding rather than on reason. Moreover, if one begins one’s reading of Kant’s philosophy, as Kant himself suggested, with a discussion of the understanding and hence the categories, it appears that

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1 This criticism is, of course, Hegel’s main critique of Kant. Hegel argues that Kant’s insight into the organizing capacity of reason is decisively undercut by the rigidity of the categories of the understanding which, as stable, are prejudge our experience of nature. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977).
the theory of the understanding undermines the authority of reason in its
generic sense. Such readings are dominant in the current secondary literature
and hence it is of little surprise that there have been relatively few investiga-
tions which have sought to understand Kant from the perspective of reason.²

I intend, nonetheless, to propose a reading of Kant from the perspective
of reason since I believe the payoff could well be significant. I will seek to
address the issue of the categories indirectly, by concerning myself foremost
with the problem of the divided authority of reason which lies at the bottom of
the objection to the categories. I will show that the divided authority of reason
is not as problematic as is often thought by showing that the understanding is
subordinated to reason in a genus-species relation (as, analogously, is practical
reason to reason). I will further suggest that the division within reason into the
understanding and practical reason, criticized by Hegel and McDowell alike,
relates not to Kant’s supposed empiricism, but rather to the relation between
practical reason and the understanding as two stems of the same activity, one
active, the other passive, which nonetheless form parts of a unity. This division
will ultimately be shown to characterize the basic condition of reason itself.

In part 1 of this paper, I situate the ambitions of this paper to reorient our
understanding of Kant’s division of reason with regard to the criticism that
he does not have a unified conception of reason because his view of reason is
static. This section is meant to motivate the necessity of seeing Kant’s theory
of reason from the larger perspective suggested by both Hegel and McDowell.
Part 2 examines Kant’s view of reason as the search for the unconditioned of
its conditions through an examination of reason’s basic activity, synthesis.
I conclude that Kant’s conception of reason and hence also of the subject itself
is dynamic or productive. In Part 3, I come back to respond, albeit obliquely,
to the criticism that Kant was wrong to separate practical and speculative rea-
son. I argue that the division within reason between the understanding and
practical reason is meant to account for the fact of human subjectivity which
finds itself both affected by the world and as an agent within it. It is this fact
which accounts for the tension between the two branches as knowledge and
action. The Copernican turn, then, is conceived as the rational human’s per-
spective on her own double relation to materiality as an embodied subject who
is within nature yet not quite of it.

² But see, the important work by Axel Hutter, Das Interesse Der Vernunft: Kants UrsprüNgliche
Einsicht Und Ihre Entfaltung in Den Transzendentalphilosophischen Hauptwerken (Hamburg:
Meiner, 2003). A dynamic conception of reason can more often be found in the work of
thinkers who do not pursue a directly Kantian line, for example Stanley Cavell or Richard
Rorty, and on the other side the philosophical idiom, by Heidegger or Adorno.