

Research Article

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The Collective Unity of Reason in the First *Critique*

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Abstract: Unity is a central concept in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, since it is only through the unifying act of our spontaneous faculties that an experience can emerge, according to Kant. However, the faculty of reason brings forth a different unity than that of the understanding: Kant characterizes the former as a collective unity, while the latter as a distributive unity. This article aims to explain the meaning of these terms, with reference to the *Nachlass* on metaphysics and the writings on right where Kant employs them in a clearer manner. This explanation can provide a basis to understand the difference between the faculty of understanding and the faculty of reason within the first *Critique*, a difference rather neglected by scholars, who have focused mainly on Kant's distinction between sensibility and understanding.

Keywords: faculty of reason, understanding, system, unity, collective, distributive

A long critical tradition has misinterpreted the Transcendental Dialectic as the mere *pars destruens* of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, leading many scholars to disregard the peculiarity of the faculty of reason, on which the second part of the Transcendental Logic mainly focuses, and to underestimate the importance of its distinction from the faculty of the understanding analyzed in the Transcendental Analytic. According to Kant, both faculties fall, together with the capacity to judge, into the subdivision of the highest faculty of knowledge, which is characterized by the spontaneity of its activity, in opposition to the receptivity of sensibility. This spontaneity consists in the unity brought by rules to the sensible manifold, through the cooperation of the three faculties mentioned above.¹ The synthetic activity exercised by the concepts of the understanding and the principles of the capacity to judge has received great attention among Kantian scholars, who have thoroughly analyzed how experience gains unity through the guidance of categories and schemes. The Transcendental Deduction of pure concepts, in particular, seems to offer an exhaustive explanation of the unity of experience, which is provided by the synthetic unity of apperception. From this point of view, the question arises as to why Kant assigns to reason the role of a further unification of experience.

¹ Cf. *Antr* § 7, § 40ff. (AA VII: 140–3; 196ff.) and *Log* §§ 1–3 (AA IX: 91–3). The division between higher and lower cognitive faculties can be already found in Baumgarten's *Metaphysics*, as noticed by Pollok (*Kant's Theory of Normativity*, 76–7). Actually, the faculties of understanding and reason have different and ambiguous meanings in Kant's philosophy, since they are sometimes identified with two of the three higher faculties of knowledge, whereas sometimes they are used interchangeably to mean the higher faculty of knowledge in general. In this article, I refer exclusively to understanding and reason in the first meaning, as Kant analyzes the former in the Transcendental Analytic and the latter in the Transcendental Dialectic. For a disambiguation of the different meanings of the term "reason," see Willaschek, "Kant's Two Conceptions of (Pure) Reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*;" Willaschek, *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics*, 21–36.

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The recent resurgence of interest in the Transcendental Dialectic gave rise to many different standpoints on the matter. One of the main debates concerns the role of the unity of reason in justifying the empirical laws' necessity, which can be hardly granted by rules of understanding alone. But there is barely any agreement among scholars on this topic and, more in general, in what is the role of reason necessary for.²

With this article, I am not going to provide an answer to this question: rather, I am going to focus on a preliminary topic which has gone unnoticed until now but that I consider to be pivotal to the problem about the reason's function and unity. It deals with the different *kind of unity* provided by understanding and reason, respectively – an aspect which can prove to be a compelling argument to understand why Kant needs to distinguish a faculty of reason from a faculty of understanding. Kant employs indeed two different terms to determine this difference in kinds: the unity of understanding is characterized as a *distributive* unity and the unity of reason as a *collective* unity. However, since he does not provide a clear definition of these terms in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, a focus on their meaning can shed light on the ground of his differentiation between a rational faculty and an intellectual one. In fact, the pre-critical writings provide a merely logical distinction between understanding and reason and it is only during the silent decade that he realizes the importance of a stronger differentiation between the two faculties.³ Unlike the well-known distinction between sensibility and understanding, already present in *Inaugural Dissertation*, a more than merely logical difference between understanding and reason is thus an original entry of the first *Critique*.⁴

In providing the analysis of the distinction between the distributive unity of the understanding and the collective unity of reason, Section 1 summarizes the main differences between the unity of the two faculties, as they explicitly emerge in the Transcendental Dialectic. In Section 2, I specifically explore the meaning of the adjectives “distributive” and “collective” through the examination of the published and unpublished writings where Kant employs these terms. In Section 3, I draw the consequences of the previous analysis, by showing why the notion of a collective unity can give substantial support to the re-evaluation of the faculty of reason in the first *Critique*.

² Starting from Buchdahl, a necessary role both in the justification and knowledge of nature's particular laws has been accorded to the systematic unity of reason. This reading has been in turn criticized by Friedman who, on the contrary, has identified the ground of the necessity of empirical laws in the derivation from *a priori* laws of understanding. See in particular Buchdahl, *Kant and the Dynamics of Reason*; Friedman, *Kant and the Exact Sciences*. For an overview of the recent debate, see Breitenbach, “Laws and Ideal Unity;” Seide, *Die Notwendigkeit Empirischer Naturgesetze bei Kant*. Especially controversial is whether the alleged claim of the second Analogy of Experience consists in proving the necessity of empirical laws or the systematic unity of reason alone can provide this justification. For a comprehensive overview of the topic, see Thöle, “Die Einheit der Erfahrung,” where he provides a complete analysis of the different possible roles which can be attributed to reason, while excluding that it can play an essential function. Moreover, some interpreters have extended the role of reason beyond natural sciences by claiming its necessity for all empirical knowledge. See Geiger, “Is the Assumption of a Systematic Whole of Empirical Concepts a Necessary Condition of Knowledge?;” and Anderson, *The Poverty of Conceptual Truth*, 333–73. Anderson focuses in particular on the role of reason in the formation of empirical concepts.

³ Cf. the following quotation from FS: “*understanding* and *reason*, that is to say, the faculty of cognizing distinctly and the faculty of drawing rational inferences, are not different *fundamental faculties*. Both consist in the capacity to judge; but when one judges mediately, one draws an inference” (AA II: 59).

⁴ While the difference between sensibility and understanding has been widely discussed by Kant's scholarship, the distinction between understanding and reason has been surprisingly rather neglected, except for their logical difference. The only exceptions are the above-mentioned studies on the role of the unity of reason with regards to empirical laws and the analysis carried out by Neiman on the autonomy of reason, in contrast with the heteronomy of understanding, which depends on the contents provided by sensibility. This is however a matter of controversy, since Willaschek has shown that the dependence of the understanding on experience is not incompatible with the absoluteness of its spontaneity: cf. Neiman, *The Unity of Reason*, 49ff.; Willaschek, “Die ‘Spontaneität des Erkenntnisses’.” Nonetheless, neither the debate on the role of reason nor the controversy on its absolute spontaneity focuses on its different kind of unity compared to the understanding's one, except for Friedman, *Kant and the Exact Sciences*, 302–7. The recent studies focusing on the Transcendental Dialectic pinpoint the difference between distributive and collective unity without however exploring it: cf. Pissis, *Kants Transzedentale Dialektik*, 53; Meer, *Der Transzedentale Grundsatz der Vernunft*, 140. I have found a more extensive analysis of the two unities in Hohenegger, *Kant, Filosofo Dell'architettura*, 97–124.

1 *Verstandeseinheit* and *Vernunftseinheit*: A first sketch

Kant's use of the terms "collective unity" and "distributive unity" to characterize the unity achieved by reason and understanding, respectively, occurs only twice in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, both times in the context of the Transcendental Dialectic.⁵ In Chapter 3 of the Second Book on the Transcendental Ideal, Kant describes "the unity of the understanding in the experience" as "**distributive**," in opposition to "the **collective** unity of a whole of experience" (A582/B610) produced by reason for the first time, but it is only in the Appendix chapter that a thorough characterization of this distinction emerges. It is worth quoting the whole passage in question:

Reason never relates directly to an object, but solely to the understanding and by means of it to reason's own empirical use, hence it does not **create** any concepts (of objects) but only **orders** them and gives them that unity they can have in their greatest possible extension, i.e., in relation to the totality of series; the understanding does not look to this totality at all but only to the connection through which series of conditions always **come about** according to concepts. Thus reason really has as object only the understanding and its purposive application, and just as the understanding unites the manifold into an object through concepts, so reason on its side unites the manifold of concepts through ideas by positing a certain collective unity as the goal of the understanding's actions, which are otherwise concerned only with distributive unity. (A 644/B 672)

In this paragraph, Kant recapitulates under the expressions "collective unity" and "distributive unity" the main differences that distinguish the unity of reason (*Vernunftseinheit*) and the unity of the understanding (*Verstandeseinheit*). This distinction in fact appears in the very first pages of the Transcendental Dialectic, albeit without the attributes "collective" and "distributive." Since the meaning of these terms is not explicitly addressed in the first *Critique*, it is important for now to pave the way for this explanation by listing neatly the main features of these two types of unity, scattered throughout the Dialectic chapter and summarized in this paragraph of the Appendix.

First of all, it is important to recall that both understanding and reason are discursive faculties which unify their manifold through concepts that are universal representations "of what is common to several objects" (AA IX:91; 589). It is precisely this unifying action that grounds the spontaneity of the two faculties, in contrast with the receptivity of sensibility, whose representations, i.e., intuitions, are singular, that is, they are simply given through the senses without the need for a spontaneous act of unification that makes up a representation common to different others. As O'Neill notices, both understanding and reason are thus "faculties of unity."⁶

Despite the discursive common ground, three main differences can be identified between the unity of the understanding and the unity of reason: (1) the different manifolds that are unified, (2) the different logical form of the two unities and (3) the difference in the kinds of unity. The first difference clearly emerges in the previous quotation: what is unified by the concepts of the understanding is the manifold of appearances, whereas reason applies its unity to the manifold of the concepts of understanding itself. According to this view, "the understanding constitutes an object for reason, just as sensibility does for the understanding" (A 664/B 692).⁷

⁵ See also *Prolegomena* § 40 (AA V: 327–8). The term "collective" alone occurs significantly in a passage of the A Deduction with regard to the unity of apperception (A 117). Since the association between collective and apperception disappears in the second edition of the *Critique*, I am not going to deal with this topic, which has been investigated by Hohenegger, *Kant, Filosofo Dell'architettura*, 100–3.

⁶ O'Neill, "Vindicating Reason," 282. O'Neill mistakenly determines, however, the understanding as a lower faculty of knowledge, in contrast to reason as the higher faculty, whereas in *Anthropology*, Kant classifies both as the higher faculty of knowledge, as I recall above.

⁷ Cf. also A 302/B 359; A 306/B 363; A 326/B 383; A 643/B 672 ff. Pissis has highlighted an important consequence of this account: the understanding, being related to sensibility, "cannot see itself from backward," that is, it cannot be aware of its own concepts' origin. Reason, instead, reflects on the conditions of the understanding and thus produces the subject's self-knowledge, in which the critical turn properly consists (Pissis, *Kants Transzendente Dialektik*, 79, 88).

The second distinction between the two unities concerns the different logical form that grounds the unifying acts of the understanding and those of reason. Understanding combines the sensible manifold through the form of judgment, while reason attains unity through the form of syllogism. With regard to the understanding, a manifold of intuitions can only be cognized as an object, e.g., a body, because it is referred to a concept, e.g., the concept of “divisible,” which is recognized as the characteristic mark of the thing and thus it can produce a cognition through the judgment “All bodies are divisible.” The predicate “divisible” is common to all different bodies and to many other concepts that stand under it. A concept of the understanding thus “serves as the rule for our cognition of ... appearances by means of the unity of the manifold that is thought through it” (A 106), and in this regard, the understanding is defined by Kant as “the faculty of rules [*Vermögen der Regeln*]” (A 299/B 356). Whereas the combination of different representations, called synthesis, is a spontaneous act of the understanding, made first possible through the synthetic unity of apperception, only sensibility can provide the material to which the understanding gives such a unitary form. Thus, not only do the concepts of understanding unify a sensible manifold, but they also cannot do otherwise, if they are not to be empty. Only through the unification of the spontaneity of understanding and the receptivity of sensibility can cognition arise, but at the same time, they are “two entirely different sources of representation” (A 271/B 327).⁸ This grounds a qualitative distinction between sensibility and understanding, a difference “in kind” as Pollok specifies, which is recognized by Kant himself as one of the main discoveries of his thought, misunderstood by his predecessors, who have instead explained the difference between sensibility and understanding as a mere difference in degree.⁹

While the understanding, as “the faculty of determination of the universal,” defines the rules which guide the synthesis of the sensible manifold, reason orders the rules of understanding in order to determine particular concepts through general ones. This cognition of the particular in the universal through concepts is called “cognition from principles” and arises through the logical form of syllogism. A syllogism derives a new judgment (the conclusion, e.g., “Caius is mortal”) not from experience provided by sensibility, as in the case of the understanding, but rather from the connection of two different judgments, which provides the condition under which the predicate “mortal” can be given (“Caius is a man,” the minor premise) and subsumes the predicate under this condition in its whole extension (“Every man is mortal,” the major premise or principle).¹⁰ In this respect, reason is defined by Kant as “the faculty of principles [*Vermögen der Prinzipien*]” (A 299/B 356). Moreover, since the major premise could be regarded as the conditioned of another condition, reason ascends the series of conditions up to the unconditioned, with which the unity of a cognition is completed: “[...] the concern of reason is to ascend from the conditioned synthesis, to which the understanding always remains bound, toward the unconditioned, which the understanding can never reach” (A 333/B 390).¹¹ A concept of the totality of conditions to a given conditioned thing, thus a concept of the unconditioned, is what Kant calls an idea of reason, the proper means by which reason achieves its unity.¹²

⁸ “There are two conditions under which alone the cognition of an object is possible: first, **intuition**, through which it is given, but only as appearance; second, **concept**, through which an object is thought that corresponds to this intuition” (A 92/B 125). Cf. also A 51/B 75–6. For an analysis of Kant’s account of cognition as the combination of sensibility and understanding, in contrast with the definition of knowledge, see Watkins and Willaschek, “Kant on Cognition and Knowledge.”

⁹ Pollok, *Kant’s Theory of Normativity*, 50. He gives an hylomorphic interpretation of the difference between sensibility and understanding, by considering the first as the source of matter and the second the source of form.

¹⁰ Cf. A 322/B 378.

¹¹ “For pure reason leaves to the understanding everything that relates directly to objects of intuition or rather to their synthesis in imagination. It reserves for itself only the absolute totality in the use of concepts, and seeks to carry the synthetic unity, which is thought in the categories, all the way to the absolutely unconditioned. We can therefore call this the **unity of reason** in appearances, just as that which the category expresses can be called the **unity of understanding**” (A 326/B 383). According to Pissis, this entails that “[d]ie Dialektik entspringt demnach aus der Analytik selbst, aus der Fortführung ihres Programms, das auf die Einheit der Erkenntnis ging” (Pissis, *Kants Transzendente Dialektik*, 79).

¹² “So the transcendental concept of reason is none other than that of the totality of conditions to a given conditioned thing. Now since the unconditioned alone makes possible the totality of conditions, and conversely the totality of conditions is always itself unconditioned, a pure concept of reason in general can be explained through the concept of the unconditioned, insofar as

In contrast to the concepts of the understanding, whose “objective reality is founded solely on the fact that because they constitute the intellectual form of all experience, it must always be possible to show their application in experience,” the ideas of reason, since they contain the unconditioned, “deal with something under which all experience belongs, but that is never itself an object of experience” (A 311/B 368). Accordingly, this definition of the ideas of reason has two consequences when considering the unity proper to this faculty: firstly, the unity of reason, as unconditioned, emerges as the supreme unity that can be achieved; Kant refers to it as “the highest unity of the manifold of cognition” (A 305/B 361), which is “absolute” (A 324/B 381ff.) and “complete” (A 645/B 673).¹³ Secondly, this absolute unity cannot lead to a cognition of an object, since such an unconditioned object cannot be given through experience and, as I have recalled above, it is only through experience that an objective cognition can arise. The quotation with which we opened this section rules out, indeed, the possibility for reason to create any concept of an object of experience, through what Kant calls its constitutive use, and admits instead only its application to the concepts of understanding, following the so-called regulative use.¹⁴

With regard to the third point, namely the different kinds of unity of the two faculties, the matter is more complex. It could be argued, indeed, that the difference in unity achieved by reason compared to that of the understanding which has here emerged amounts to a quantitative distinction, according to which the unity of reason would be a large-scale reproduction of the unity of the understanding and not a different qualitative kind of unity. According to this view, the unity of reason seems to differ from the unity of the understanding only insofar as the latter applies to intuitions, while the former to the concepts of the understanding itself. Consequently, the absolute character of the unity of reason is considered a difference in degree, since understanding’s unity is finite by virtue of its direct relation to our finite experience, whereas reason’s unity is infinite precisely because it lacks a direct connection with intuitions. This is suggested by the hylomorphic interpretation of Kant’s theory of normativity offered by Pollok, which reads the relation between understanding and reason as a mere re-proposition of the hylomorphic interaction between the material of sensibility and the form of understanding. As a consequence, syllogisms of reason, as connections of judgments, seem thus to provide the same unity, in a higher degree, as judgments of understanding, which are connections of intuitions: in this respect, Pollok’s interpretation can be classified as a quantitative interpretation.¹⁵

it contains a ground of synthesis for what is conditioned” (A 322/B 379). The derivation of the ideas of reason from syllogisms’ tripartition is however a matter of controversy: for two different interpretations, see Klimmek, *Kants System der Transzendentalen Ideen*; and Meer, *Der Transzendentale Grundsatz der Vernunft*. Since “we are brought to such ideas by a necessary syllogism” (A 339/B 397), Kant defines the ideas of reason as “inferred concepts [geschlossene Begriffe]” (A 310/B 367), in contrast with concepts of understanding that are “merely reflected concepts.” This additional difference, which Klimmek and Pissis identify as that between given [gegeben] and fabricated [gemacht] concepts, is important to differentiate between the means through which the unity of understanding and the unity of reason are achieved (Klimmek, *Kants System der Transzendentalen Ideen*, 7ff.; Pissis, *Kants Transzendentale Dialektik*, 63). According to Meer, this distinction grounds the different metaphysical deductions of concepts of understanding and ideas of reason (Meer, *Der Transzendentale Grundsatz der Vernunft*, 82).

¹³ See also A 701/B 730, A 670/B 699A 676–77/B 704–5.

¹⁴ According to Kant’s definition of regulative principle, “it is a principle of reason which, as a **rule**, postulates what should be effected by us in the regress, but **does not anticipate** what is given in it self in **the object** prior to any regress” (A 509/B 537). However, there is no agreement among Kant’s scholars on what a regulative principle of reason could consist in. In particular, the deepest point of disagreement concerns its identification either with the logical maxim or with the supreme principle of reason. For a recent and thorough interpretation and a comprehensive overview of the debate, see Willaschek, *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics*, 110–26.

¹⁵ Pollok, *Kant’s Theory of Normativity*, 143. Pollok distinguishes the two unities only through their different logical form, as in Kant’s pre-critical writings: “Similar to Kant’s hylomorphism about the forms of judgments determining the objectively valid connections of concepts, what we learn from Kant’s hylomorphic treatment of inferences with respect to his theory of normativity is that inferences, and inferences of reason in particular, determine the form of all possible connections of judgments, if these connections are to count as objective cognition” (Pollok, *Kant’s Theory of Normativity*, 177). The subordination of syllogism to the form of judgement is named “*Primat des Urteils*” by Meer. In his view, this primacy remains unaltered from the *False Subtlety* to the first *Critique*. Nevertheless, if it is true that the two faculties through their logical differences amount to one and the same higher faculty of knowledge, it must not be overlooked that in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant develops a stronger

Such a quantitative interpretation of the distinction between the unity of the understanding and reason is however not compatible with Kant's claim that there is rather a *distinction in kind* between the two unities, as the following passage from the Introduction of the Transcendental Dialectic shows:

If the understanding is the faculty of the unity of appearances by means of rules, then reason is the faculty of the unity of the rules of understanding under principles. Thus it never applies directly to experience or to any object, but instead applies to the understanding, in order to give unity *a priori* through concepts to the understanding's manifold cognitions, which may be called "the unity of reason," and is of an altogether *different kind* than any unity that can be achieved by the understanding. (A 302/B 358, my emphasis)

This quotation reiterates the characters of the two unities described above and adds the important specification that there is a qualitative distinction between the two, which is also confirmed in a separate passage, defining them as "essentially different" (A 307/B 363).¹⁶ In the next section, I aim to show that the analysis of the meanings of the terms "collective" and "distributive" provides a valuable clue to understanding what the difference in kind between unity of understanding and unity of reason consists in. Following the account of the different manifolds that are unified by reason and the understanding and their different logical form, I analyze how the concepts of the understanding on the one hand, and the ideas of reason on the other, perform their unity when applied to their respective manifold.

2 Distributive versus collective

Although in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant takes for granted the meaning of the terms "distributive unity" and "collective unity," it is possible to shed light on this dichotomy by addressing the works where he employs and defines these terms together. The terms are attested in juridical, metaphysical, religious and physical fields without relevant changes of meaning.¹⁷ In what follows, I am going to focus on the metaphysical and juridical sphere.

In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant offers a clear characterization of the distinction between these two kinds of unity:

Certainly the will of *all individual* human beings [*aller einzelnen Menschen*] to live under a legal constitution in accordance with principles of freedom (the *distributive* unity of the will of *all*) is not sufficient to attain this end [of perpetual peace]. For civil society to become a whole, it is also necessary that *all individual* human beings *together* [*Alle zusammen*] want this condition (the *collective* unity of the general will), that they all want this solution of a difficult task.¹⁸

Beyond the significance of this passage for Kant's political theory, for our present purposes, it is important to consider the explanation of a distributive unity as a commonality among *every single* particular taken individually, whereas collective unity is a unity which at once collects *all* the individuals *together*. Thus, in the first case, the unity is distributed among its objects, and in the second, the unity gathers together all the objects in a whole. In the *Reflexionen* on metaphysics, where the majority of the occurrences of the terms "distributive" and "collective" is found, we find the same notion, which Kant also clarifies by referring to

and not merely logical distinction between understanding and reason, as I hope it will emerge from this analysis: see Meer, *Der Transzendentale Grundsatz der Vernunft*, 87–8.

¹⁶ Cf. also *Prol* §41 (AA IV: 329): "The distinction of *ideas*, i.e., of pure concepts of reason, from categories, or pure concepts of the understanding, as cognitions of completely different type, origin, and use, is so important [...]."

¹⁷ Beyond *Perpetual Peace* and the *Reflexionen* on metaphysics, which I analyze below, the adjectives "distributive" and "collective" are employed significantly by Kant in *Religion within the Limits of Reason* and in the *Opus Postumum*. As far as I know, the only two studies dealing with distributive and collective universality take into account these very two works and are provided by Hansmichael Hohenegger and Friedman (Hohenegger, *Kant, Filosofo Dell'architettura*, 97–119; Friedman, *Kant and the Exact Science*, 302–7).

¹⁸ PP AA VIII:371.

the dichotomy “each one/all together” [*ein jedes/Alle zusammen*], establishing a clear difference between the two types of unity.¹⁹

As in the following work on religion, in the metaphysical context as well, the terms “collective” and “distributive” are indeed employed to characterize two distinct meanings of the concept of “everything” [*Alles; omnitudo*], “universality” [*Allgemeinheit*] or unity [*Einheit*]. Since these adjectives are not used in Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics*, of which most of the *Reflexionen* on metaphysics are a commentary, they appear as an integration made by Kant with respect to Baumgarten’s conception of the whole: the notes which contain the terms “collective” and “distributive” concern thus, in particular, the sections of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics* devoted to “the whole and the parts” and “the simple and composite” as ontological predicates, in order to bring out two different types of relationships between the parts and the whole – a relationship that in Baumgarten was treated in a univocal way.

The *Nachlass* on metaphysics is particularly interesting in this regard since it relates distributive and collective unity with the unity and universality of a concept, as *Refl* 3936 clearly states: “Everything is considered either *distributively* or *collectively*. The former indicates a universal concept, insofar as it is a common mark of what is inferior; the second indicates the collecting together [*Zusammenhang*] of many.”²⁰ What emerges are the different ways in which a set of objects can be unified: on one side, a universal concept can be applied to *each* inferior concept individually taken and they thus realize a unity only insofar as they share one common feature; the universality of the superior concept is thus *distributed* among the inferior concepts. On the other side, a unity of objects collectively taken *simultaneously gathers* all the objects *together*: here, the universality of the totality is not given by any scattered predicate, but only through the completeness of the set in which the objects are all collected. “Gathered in one” is namely the etymological meaning of “universal,” where “one” may refer to the common predicate in the case of distributive universality or to the totality of the objects in collective universality. Borrowing an example from Kant himself: “all experience [*Alle Erfahrung*] is not the same as the all of experience [*das All der Erfahrung*].”²¹ I can say, for example, “All experience is real” when referring to the universal concept of “real” which distributively applies as a common mark to the inferior concept of “experience,” but if I say “the all of experience,” I’m not using the same concept of “all” as in the previous sentence because it now implies the idea of a complete totality that was previously missing.

In fact, the *omnitudo collectiva* differs from the *omnitudo distributiva* in the completeness which pertains only to the former. In other passages, it is only the term “collective” that is used in association with the concept of “whole” or “totality” [*Ganz; Allheit; totalitas*] in opposition to “distributive,” to which this meaning of completeness does not belong; likewise, the adjective “absolute” appears only in connection to the collective kind of totality.²²

If the attribution of an absolute character to collective unity could be regarded as a first hint of origin of the first *Critique*’s association between distributive unity and the faculty of understanding on one side, and collective unity and the faculty of reason on the other, there are many other *Reflexionen* that further develop this topic. First of all, in various passages dated around 1769–70 distributive universality is related to Ontology, the first section of the *Philosophia transcendentalis* that Kant was planning in the 1770, following the structure of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*.²³ On the other side, collective universality is related to Cosmology, when it is built through coordination of the parts, and to Theology, when it is made through subordination. I quote a particular telling passage:

¹⁹ *Refl.* 4149, AA XVII: 434, 1769–70, my translation. Cf. also *Refl.* 5638, AA XVIII:276, 1780–3.

²⁰ *Refl.* 3936, AA XVII: 354.

²¹ *Refl.* 5597, AA XVIII: 246, my translation (dated around the time of the publication of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*).

²² Cf. *Refl.* 4490, 4694, 4756, AA XVII: 570, 678, 703 (pre-critical period); *Refl.* 5638, 5639, 5840, 5842, XVIII: 276, 278, 366, 377 (critical period).

²³ Cf. *Refl.* 4149, XVII: 434, 1769–70.

The *omnitude distributiva* is either *universaliter* or *disiunctive distributiva*. Ontology deals with the predicates of things, which apply universally [*universaliter*] or disiunctively [*disiunctive*] to all. *Cosmologia* [deals with] all together, which belong as parts to the same whole. *Theologia naturalis* [deals with] all things together, which as consequences belong to one cause.²⁴

In other words, following Baumgarten, Ontology “is the science of the most general predicates of a being, ... that are in each and every single thing”:²⁵ ontological predicates are thus distributed among each thing. On the contrary, the concept of world belonging to Cosmology, or the concept of God grounded in natural Theology, is not distributed among things, but rather gathers simultaneously together all the things that pertain to them.

A few years later, around 1775–77, the couple collective/distributive seems to be employed in a different transcendental context, not necessarily in contradiction with the previous one. In these later *Reflexionen*, Kant seems to be preparing what in the first *Critique* will become the antinomies of pure reason: he distinguishes between “immanent principles of the empirical use of understanding” [*immanente Grundsätze des empirischen Verstandesgebrauchs*] on one side, in which time and space are conditions of appearances, which accordingly have no first beginning, no first indivisible substances and so on, and “transcendent principles of the pure use of understanding” [*transscendente Grundsätze des reinen Verstandesgebrauchs*] or “of the pure use of reason” [*des reinen Vernunftgebrauchs*], which assume a first beginning, a first indivisible substance and so on.²⁶ To the former, Kant ascribes distributive unity and a distributive universality of synthesis, to the latter a collective universality of the synthesis. Both are principles of the possibility of experience, but the immanent principles are such with regard to intuition, while the transcendent ones concern “the relation with the apperception, i.e. with the existence [*Daseyn*].”²⁷

Despite the significant differences from the previous quotations, due to the progress of the critical project, the terms collective and distributive retain a meaning coherent with the previous one: now the immanent principles of the understanding have taken the place of Ontology, while the transcendent principles of pure reason are identified as being responsible for the *metaphysica specialis*. In this regard, the association maintained in the *Critique of Pure Reason* between the faculty of understanding and the distributive unity on one side and the faculty of reason and collective unity on the other already arises here as the result of a precise evolution of Kant’s thought.²⁸ The rightness of the ascription to the faculty of understanding of a unity that is applied only distributively to each particular in contrast with the collective unity of reason is confirmed by a passage of the *Prolegomena*, where Kant focuses on the distinction between the two faculties, this time naturally under a full critical perspective:

The empirical employment to which reason limits the understanding does not fulfill its own whole determination. Each single experience is only a part of the whole sphere of its domain, but the *absolute whole of all possible experience* [das *absolute Ganze aller möglichen Erfahrung*] is itself no experience and therefore a necessary problem for reason – which requires wholly other concepts for its mere representation than the concepts of the understanding, whose employment is only immanent, i.e., extends to experience, so far as it can be given, whereas the concepts of reason extend to the completeness, i.e., the collective unity, of the whole of possible experience and thereby extend beyond any given experience and become *transcendent*.²⁹

²⁴ Refl 4169, XVII: 442, 1769–70, my translation. Cf. also Refl 4149, AA XVII: 434, 1769–70.

²⁵ Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, 100.

²⁶ Refl 4757, 4758, AA XVII: 703–6, 1775–6. Starting from the study of Benno Erdmann, Kant’s account of antinomies has been identified as the origin of the critical turn: see Kant et al., *Reflexionen Kants zur Kritischen Philosophie*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*. In a similar way, a later *Reflexion* (1780–3) refers to the series of the conditions in a twofold way: in an endless series, the law through which each conditioned can be found is given, but this does not imply that the totality of the series, i.e., “das collective All,” is given as well (Refl. 5638, AA XVIII: 276).

²⁸ The association between collective unity and the faculty reason is found also in Refl 5555, 5892 (AA XVIII: 231, 377). For a recent and thorough reconstruction of the critical path which has led Kant to reform Wolffian general and special metaphysics, see De Boer, *Kant’s Reform of Metaphysics*, 44–72.

²⁹ *Prolegomena* § 40 (AA IV: 32–28).

The results of the analysis of this section can be concluded with the words of Friedman who, commenting on this paragraph, defines understanding's distributive unity as "the conditions that make possible each and every given experience," whereas collective unity is "the unity of all experience as a single totality" which "is comprehended by no such constitutive conditions [the concepts of the understanding], but only by the merely regulative principles of reason."³⁰

3 A unity "of an altogether different kind than any unity that can be achieved by the understanding"

While the meaning of the distributive and collective unity as two distinct kinds of unity has now been clarified in the previous section, the ground of the association between the two kinds of unity and the faculties of understanding and reason on the basis of the account of the *Verstandeseinheit* and *Vernunftseinheit*, sketched out in the first section of this article, remains unclear. The previous reference to the distributive unity of Ontology and the collective unity of the disciplines of special metaphysics is a first hint of an explanation that now needs to be integrated within the transcendental framework of the first *Critique*. Indeed, it remains to be seen how the rules of understanding apply a distributive unity to the sensible manifold and, correspondently, how the principles of reason collectively unify the intellectual manifold. In order to answer this question, it is useful to compare the unity achieved by a rule of the understanding, such as the category of substance, with the unity performed by the corresponding ideas of reason, that is the transcendental idea of the soul.³¹

With regard to the category of substance, a categorical judgment grounded on it could be of the type: "Bodies are movable." In this judgment, the predicate "movable" is unified through the synthesis of the category of substance with the subject "bodies," starting from a sensible manifold given by experience: all bodies share the same common predicate, which unites them under it. This is an example of a distributive unification of the subjects, since each of them is concerned with the same predicate, but not all the subjects are simultaneously gathered together. A passage once again from the *Reflexionen* on metaphysics confirms this point: "Each body is movable; not: all together. Each change has an end. Not: all together."³² It emerges thus how a rule of the understanding distributively unifies a sensible manifold through experience, giving rise to the concept of movable bodies – since Kant specifies how the predicate "movable" can be related to a subject only with reference to experience.³³

The case of the ideas of reason is completely different. An elucidation of the way the concepts of reason in their regulative use bring the highest unity to experience is provided by the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic.³⁴ I am particularly concerned with the transcendental idea of the soul, which is dealt with in the following quotation:

³⁰ Friedman, *Kant and the Exact Sciences*, 303. Cf. also *Kant-Lexikon*, which describes *Verstandeseinheit* as "a unity of experience" and *Vernunftseinheit* as "the unity of experience" (my emphasis): Willaschek et al., *Kant-Lexikon*, 2487.

³¹ "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 [...]" (A 323/B 379). In contrast to Klimmek, Meer identifies the association between the table of judgments and the tripartition of syllogisms as one of the steps of the metaphysical deduction of the ideas of reason (Meer, *Der Transzendente Grundsatz der Vernunft*, 84–91).

³² *Refl* 4149, AA XVII: 434, 1769–70.

³³ A 41/B 58; B 155.

³⁴ The analysis of the idea of the soul can also apply by way of example to the idea of the world and the idea of God, whose regulative use is examined by Kant in a similar manner in the second section of the Appendix "On the final aim of the natural dialectic of human reason." Conversely, the principles of reason analyzed in the first section of the Appendix (principles of homogeneity, specification and continuity) would deserve a separate analysis, which I cannot develop here for reasons of space. Despite the differences between ideas and principles, analyzed by Meer, in *Der Transzendente Grundsatz der Vernunft*,

Following the ideas named above as principles, we will **first** (in psychology) connect all appearances, actions, and receptivity of our mind to the guiding thread of inner experience **as if** the mind were a simple substance that (at least in this life) persists in existence with personal identity, while its states – to which the states of the body belong only as external conditions – are continuously changing. ... With this, however, reason has nothing before its eyes except principles of the systematic unity in explaining the appearances of the soul, namely by considering all determinations as in one subject, all powers, as far as possible, as derived from one unique fundamental power, all change as belonging to the states of one and the same persisting being, and by representing all appearances in space as entirely distinct from the actions of thinking. (A 672/B 700; A 683/B 711)

It follows that the idea of the soul is not a predicate which is distributed among its objects, but rather that these objects, i.e., “all the appearances, actions and receptivity of our mind” – already synthesized by the understanding – are now collected together in a set following a systematic principle which “serves to obtain for these concepts the greatest unity” (A 644/B 672). The concept of “system” emerges indeed, particularly in the Appendix, as the special character of the collective unity of reason, insofar as Kant understands by system “the unity of the manifold cognitions under one idea,” “the rational concept of the form of a whole insofar as through this the domain of the manifold as well as the position of the parts with respect to each other is determined *a priori*” (A 832/B 860).³⁵ This characterization can be read as an immanent consequence of the concept of collective unity, since its meaning, i.e., a complete whole which gathers different parts, implies that each part occupies a place in the whole, in relation with the others, because in the absence of one of them, the whole would not be thought as complete. Although the rational idea of systematic, complete unity “in itself can never be presented adequately in experience” (A 677/B 705), it gives to the empirical use of the understanding a systematic connection of a completely different kind than the unity of experience achieved by the understanding.

The difference between *Verstandeseinheit* and *Vernunftseinheit* is not grounded merely on a quantitative difference, due to the fact that the understanding lacks the concept of totality which pertains only to reason. Rather a qualitative difference pertains since the systematic character of reason’s unity cannot be achieved by the understanding precisely because of its distributive way of unifying. Indeed, in a distributive unity, the objects only share a common predicate but they are not connected to each other beyond this predicate: “bodies” in the categorical judgment mentioned above are all movable, but they do not have any other connection among each other. On the contrary, within the set developed through the collective unity of reason, the objects are internally related to each other, in order to pursue a unity that is not already given in experience. In this respect, the collective unity of reason helps to explain the meaning of the regulative use of ideas and principles of reason, insofar as it is defined as “an excellent and indispensably necessary” use that directs

the understanding to a certain goal respecting which the lines of direction of all its rules converge at one point, which, although it is only an idea (*focus imaginarius*) – i.e., a point from which the concepts of the understanding do not really proceed, since it lies entirely outside the bounds of possible experience – nonetheless still serves to obtain for these concepts the greatest unity alongside the greatest extension (A 644/B 672).³⁶

69–126, both accomplish the same systematic function (cf. A 662/690). For an explanation of how the regulative use of the principles of reason works, I refer to McNulty, “Rehabilitating the Regulative Use of Reason.”

35 Contrary to the notion of collective unity, the concept of system has been widely discussed by Kant’s scholarship in light of its importance for Kant’s entire philosophy. Despite various different occurrences, a consistent meaning is preserved through the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, where it refers in particular to the system of cognition. While in the first section of the Appendix it concerns specifically the classificatory system of cognition, in the second section its meaning is explored in regard to the concept of end. For an overview of the different meanings of system and its use in the Appendix, see Meer, *Der Transzendentale Grundsatz der Vernunft*, 128–73. Furthermore, the notion of system plays an important role within the debate on the necessity of empirical laws: the so-called “Best System Interpretation,” suggested among the others by Kitcher along the reading of Buchdahl, maintains that only within the system of cognition achieved by reason an empirical law can be justified in its necessity: cf. Kitcher, “Projecting the Order of Nature;” Breitenbach, “Laws and Ideal Unity.”

36 The association between collective unity and regulative use of reason is drawn by Meer as well (Meer, *Der Transzendentale Grundsatz der Vernunft*, 140). On the contrary, Pollok relates the collective unity only with the constitutive use of reason: Pollok, *Kant’s Theory of Normativity*, 35.

The collective unity thus explains *how* the manifold of understanding is unified by the regulative use of reason and why the faculty of understanding cannot suffice to achieve this kind of unity of its own rules. The different kind of unity of understanding on one side, and of reason on the other, can ground a difference between the two faculties, even in case reason should not be accorded a necessary role in the justification of empirical laws, as within the ongoing debate on these issues mentioned in the introduction. Ultimately, reason cannot conflate into understanding because of its peculiar kind of unity, unattainable by understanding.

As for the above-mentioned debate, it is useful now to add a further comment. Even interpreters like Friedman and Ansgar Seide, who do not accord to reason a justificatory role with regard to particular laws of nature, recognize that the systematic unity of nature offers a guide, even if merely preliminary, to empirical laws.³⁷ Kant himself in the Appendix specifies, indeed, that the empirical and particular use of understanding is the end of the collective and systematic unity of reason, for instance when speaking about “[...] regulative principles for the systematic unity of the manifold of empirical cognition in general, through which this cognition, within its proper boundaries, is cultivated and corrected [*berichtigt*] more than could happen without such ideas, through the mere use of the principles of understanding” (A 671/B 699). Beyond the different possible interpretations of passages like this one, what I want to emphasize is that it is the collective character of rational unity that can explain its relation to empirical knowledge.³⁸ Whereas the distributive unity of understanding involves a universal predicate, such as “movable,” which overlooks the differences among the concepts subsumed under it, the collective unity of reason offers a guide to investigate the connection between the parts of the whole. A few lines later in the Appendix, Kant clarifies this point: “it is not from a simple thinking substance that we derive the inner appearances of our soul, but [such appearances are to be derived, my addition] from one another in accordance with the idea of a simple being” (A 673/B 701). The leading thread of the idea of the soul guides the search for further connection among objects, which thus exhibit intrinsic relationships with one another, otherwise unknown through the distributive unity of understanding. Such a system provides a guide or an essential touchstone, depending on interpretations, to prove the necessity of particular laws of nature that best fit their place in the system. Conversely, the understanding cannot achieve a system but only an aggregate of particular cognitions because of its distributive unity.

Furthermore, the different relations between universal and particular established by the understanding on the one hand and by reason on the other might explain another characterization of the distributive and collective unity that Kant gives in the *Nachlass* on metaphysics, where the first is equated with analytic universality, whereas the latter with synthetic universality: “logical universality (one in all)” and “collective (many that make up one), synthetic unity” (AA XVIII:528).³⁹ As many interpreters have highlighted, in this respect, the difference between distributive and collective unity recalls the later distinction in §77 of the *Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment*, where Kant distinguishes among our understanding, which “must go from the **analytical universal** (of concepts) to the particular (of the given empirical intuition), in which it determines nothing with regard to the manifoldness of the latter” and an *intellectus archetypus* “which, since it is not discursive like ours but is intuitive, goes from the **synthetically universal** (of the intuition of a whole as such) to the particular, i.e., from the whole to the parts, in which, therefore, and in whose representation of the whole, there is no **contingency** in the combination of the parts.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Seide, *Die Notwendigkeit Empirischer Naturgesetze Bei Kant*, 292–325. Actually, Friedman appreciates the regulative use of reason with regard to sciences, even if he claims that we can have genuine knowledge of particular laws only when they are derived from *a priori* laws of understanding. See in particular Friedman, “Regulative and Constitutive,” where he argues against the strong dichotomy between the constitutive use of understanding and the regulative use of reason.

³⁸ Interestingly, in place of “*berichtigt*” (“corrects”), in the first edition, Kant uses the verb “*berechtigt*” (“justifies”), which suggests a stronger interpretation of reason’s role in the justification of empirical laws of nature, closer to the reading proposed by Buchdahl.

³⁹ Cf. also *Log* AA XVI: 623.

⁴⁰ KU §77 (AA V: 407). See Friedman, *Kant and the Exact Sciences*, 307–8; Hohenegger, *Kant, Filosofo Dell’architettura*, 108–24; Pissis, *Kants Transzendentale Dialektik*, 53.

This passage from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* refers in fact precisely to the problem of the necessity of the particular laws of nature, whose ground cannot be found unless we think of nature as if it were a product of an intuitive understanding. Scholars have recognized how this topic is anticipated in the Appendix to the Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, despite the substantially different contexts, to the extent that the regulative use of reason's idea of God can provide a systematic and teleological framework of nature, which the third *Critique* develops further, albeit not through reason's ideas but rather through the power of judgment.⁴¹ Without dwelling on this topic, for our present purposes, it is enough to notice that the parallel between distributive and collective unity on one hand and analytic and synthetic universality on the other confirms the strict distinction between the two kinds of unity.

The parallelism with the third *Critique*, however, should not be taken to the extreme. While the clear dichotomy between our discursive understanding and the *intellectus archetypus* established in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* doesn't leave any room for a connection between the analytic universality and the synthetic one, the first *Critique* and its account of the regulative use of reason does allow us to conceive of a relation between understanding's distributive unity and reason's collective unity, despite the clear differences between them.⁴² Indeed, as we have seen above, reason applies its unity to the rule of the understanding and poses it "as the goal of understanding's actions" (A 644/B 672).

From the last remarks, a general conclusion can be drawn, with which I would like to end this article: the analysis of the collective unity of reason has shown that this faculty plays a peculiar unifying role within the framework of the first *Critique*, a role that cannot be assimilated to that of the understanding. As we have seen, the *Vernunftseinheit* displays a difference in kind with regard to the *Verstandeseinheit* because the collective unifying activity of the first accomplishes a systematic and empirical function which cannot be achieved by the distributive unity of understanding. This should vindicate the attribution of a qualitative and not merely quantitative difference between the two unities. This result not only provides a grounded support to a positive reading of the Transcendental Dialectic but also suggests that the normative framework of the *Critique of Pure Reason* cannot be reduced to the account of the rules of the understanding, in contrast to the widespread interpretation of Kant's normativity from the analytic readings of Strawson and Sellars up to Pollok.⁴³ As Breitenbach recognizes, the distributive unity performed by the understanding is thus a reductive concept of unity, which alone cannot provide a complete framework for Kant's theory of experience.⁴⁴

Primary Texts/Abbreviations

I use the translations of Kant's works in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, citing AA vol:page except with the standard A/B references to the first *Critique*. Abbreviations are as follows:

- A/B *Critique of Pure Reason* (Guyer-Wood translation 1998)
 AA *Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften edition of Kants gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902ff)
 Antr "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View" (from *Anthropology, History and Education*)
 FS "The False Subtlety of the Four Syllogistic Figures" (from *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*)
 Log "The Jäsche Logic" (from *Lectures on Logic*)
 KU *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Guyer-Mathews translation 2000)
 PP "Toward Perpetual Peace" (from *Practical Philosophy*)

⁴¹ Cf. A 686/B 714ff. Among the many studies concerning the similarities and differences between the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic and the first *Critique*, I found particularly relevant Brandt, "The Deductions in the *Critique of Judgment*," 186; and Onof, "The Role of Regulative Principles and Their Relations to Reflective Judgment."

⁴² A similar point is made by Friedman, "Regulative and Constitutive" with regard to the *Opus Postumum*.

⁴³ A recent exception is provided by Watkins, *Kant on Laws*.

⁴⁴ Breitenbach, "Laws and Ideal Unity," 117–21.

- Prol “Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Present Itself as a Science” (from *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*)
- Refl *Kants handschriftlicher Nachlass*, cited with AA vol:page (following Bowman-Guyer-Rauscher translations, *Notes and Fragments*, where available)

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