Jenny Marsh – “Kant on the Justification of Empirical vs. A Priori Concepts”

Kant makes two apparently conflicting statements in the first Critique: (1) we are justified in applying empirical concepts to objects as we experience them even ‘without deduction’ (that is, without argument as to the proof of their legitimate applicability to objects); and (2) an account of how we acquired some concept through experience is what we call an ‘empirical deduction’ of that concept. Henry Allison recently suggested that, despite Kant’s claims to the contrary, Kant isn’t really, or shouldn’t really, be committed to (1): for Kant’s so-called ‘empirical deduction’ is properly a deduction of at least empirical concepts. We disagree with Allison’s reading however, and instead argue that Kant has reason for being committed to both (1) and (2). We argue that Kant is reasonably committed to both, for a legitimate ‘quid juris’ can never be raised against empirical concepts, and suggest some reasons as to why that might be. We further argue that Kant was only using the title of ‘empirical deduction’ to refer to the past, and in his eyes, defective, historical project of ‘empirical deductions’ of the legitimacy of our concepts – including a priori concepts, whose deduction should never have been looked for in experience.