When indirect questions are disguised as relative clauses: the case of French *ce que*

French exhibits a curious ambiguity that is often neglected in the literature and requires a syntactic explanation. A clause like (1), with a weak demonstrative ‘*ce*’ followed by ‘*qui/que*’, looks like a ‘light-headed relative clause’ (Citko, 2004), but can be interpreted in two ways, either as a relative clause (RC) like (2), as expected, or as an indirect question (IQ) like (3), somehow unexpectedly given its RC makeup.

(1) \[DP \text{ ce } [CP \text{ que ton frère a acheté}]\] [ambiguous structure]  
\text{this that your brother has bought}  
‘what your brother bought’

(2) Je mangerai \[DP \text{ ce } [CP \text{ que ton frère a acheté}]\] [relative clause]  
I eat-FUT-1SG this that your brother has bought  
‘I will eat [DP what your brother bought]’

(3) Je me demande \[DP \text{ ce } [CP \text{ que ton frère a acheté}]\] [indirect question]  
I me ask this that your brother has bought  
‘I wonder [CP what your brother bought]’

The same ambiguity also holds in English (see the translations), but is less surprising: ‘what’ is both a D element and a wh- element, and this double nature might explain why it can head a relative or an interrogative. ‘*Ce*’, on the other hand, is not a wh- element. Moreover, there is some evidence that ‘*qui/que*’ in ‘*ce qui / ce que*’ is the complementizer and not the wh- word. We know indeed that an interrogative is a weak element, and this double nature might explain why it can head a relative or an interrogative. ‘*Ce*’, on the other hand, is not a wh- element. Moreover, there is some evidence that ‘*qui/que*’ in ‘*ce qui / ce que*’ is the complementizer and not the wh- word. We know indeed that an interrogative is a weak element, and this double nature might explain why it can head a relative or an interrogative. ‘*Ce*’, on the other hand, is not a wh- element. Moreover, there is some evidence that ‘*qui/que*’ in ‘*ce qui / ce que*’ is the complementizer and not the wh- word. 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(8) *[Comment] tu te demandes ce que la machine pourrait réparer e;? [adjunct] how you ask this that the machine could repair  
(9) *[Quel objet] tu te demandes ce qui pourrait réparer e;? [argument] which object you ask this that could repair

So we will argue that these structures, which should be indirect questions, are in fact disguised relative clauses.