

# The Autonomy of Sense

Kant Seminar

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## 1 The (Non-)Conceptualism Debate

- Debate about (non-)conceptual content is driven by interest in at least the following three issues:
  1. **Acquisition** : How do we acquire the content of that which we think, believe, etc.?
  2. **Fixation** : On what basis do we come to hold specific (perceptual) beliefs about the world?
  3. **Warrant** : On what basis are our basic (perceptual) beliefs about the world warranted?
- Part of the interest in Kant's views on these matters is that he seems to provide an answer to (1)-(3) in terms of experience, and to construe experience as nevertheless *fundamentally different in kind* than conceptual judgment<sup>1,2</sup>
  - a) To what extent does the contemporary debate map issues with which Kant is concerned?
  - b) To what extent does the contemporary debate presuppose positions that Kant rejects?

## 2 Content

Debate about conceptual vs. non-conceptual content depends on an antecedent grasp of what content *is*. So what is content?

1. 'Content' as local containment—e.g. the content of a bucket
  - Mental 'content' as that which is *in* the mind/brain (e.g. 'qualia' or 'sense-data')
2. 'Content' as information—e.g. the content of a newspaper article
  - Mental 'content' as the information possessed by a subject in virtue of being in a particular kind of mental state (or undergoing a particular kind of mental event)
  - 'Content' in this second sense typically possesses two characteristics:
    - a) Content is abstract
    - b) Content is or determines a correctness condition

*Content*: The condition(s) under which a mental event, state, or process is veridical (i.e. accurate/inaccurate, true/false)

*The Content View*: A Perceptual experience presents or conveys information, about the subject's environment, to the subject (and so counts as a form of *perception*), in virtue of that state's possession of content<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Our nature is so constituted that our intuition can never be other than sensible; that is, it contains only the mode in which we are affected by objects. The faculty, on the other hand, which enables us to think the object of sensible intuition is the understanding. To neither of these powers may a preference be given over the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought ... What's more, these two faculties or capacities cannot exchange their functions. The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything, and the senses are not capable of thinking anything. (A51/B75)

<sup>2</sup> In contrast [to the pure forms of intuition], the categories of the understanding do not at all put forward conditions under which objects in intuition can be given to us. Consequently, objects could indeed appear to us without their being necessarily related to functions of the understanding, and therefore without the understanding containing their conditions a priori. (A89/B122; see also A90/B122–3, B132, B145)

<sup>3</sup> the Content View can be refined into a proposal that finds the following similarity between visual experiences and beliefs: like beliefs, maps, and newspapers, visual experiences have contents, and just as the contents of beliefs are conditions under which the belief state is true, so the contents of experiences are conditions under which the experience is accurate.

## 2.1 Concepts

- To have a concept is typically tied to one's having one or more of the following:
  - a) Discriminatory capacities of a particular kind (e.g. the capacity to discriminate red from green)
  - b) Recognitional capacities of a particular kind (e.g. both the discriminatory capacity and the capacity to designate red things as *red*)
  - c) Inferential capacities (e.g. capacity to infer *x is colored* from *x is red*)
  - d) Mental particulars with specific causal-functional roles

## 2.2 Conceptual vs. Non-conceptual Content

- States with “conceptual content” are states whose content *consists of concepts*
  - Typically, though not always, such states are doxastic states (e.g. belief)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Non-conceptual content is not conceptual content, where the latter is characterized either as belief content, or as content with concepts in the Fregean sense as constituents. (Byrne 2005, 233)

*Conceptualism:* A perceptual experience whose content is constituted of/by concepts

## 2.3 Propositional vs. Non-propositional Content

- Concepts are typically construed as the components of propositions (i.e. entities that are true or false, and (typically) the objects of doxastic attitudes both within and across persons)
- Propositions as typically construed as either ‘structured’ or ‘unstructured’
  1. Structured propositions
    - ‘Russellian’ propositions: ordered pairs of objects and properties/universals
    - ‘Fregean’ propositions: structured combinations of concepts (‘modes of presentation’)
  2. ‘Unstructured’ sets of possible worlds (or functions from worlds to truth values)
- Neither “Russellian” propositions nor unstructured propositions have conceptual content

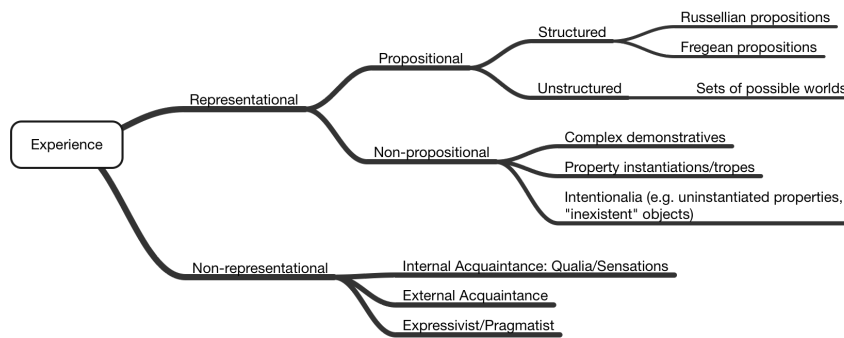


Figure 1: Varieties of Experiential Content

### 3 The Kantian Debate

1. What is the relevant kantian analogue of a perceptual experience?
2. Is it correct to think of the relevant kantian analogue of a perceptual experience as one with ‘content’ in the informational sense?
3. What is it for a representation to be ‘conceptual’ on Kant’s account?
  - Not a mere discriminatory capacity (non-rational animals have those)
  - Not a mere discriminatory capacity plus an attitude of appropriateness (lacks systematicity)
  - Not a capacity to act in accordance with a rule (what are rules if not conceptually structured propositional items?)
  - Not a capacity to be conscious of a ‘unity’

4. Are all conceptual forms of representation for Kant also propositional?<sup>5,6</sup>  
# Dependence & the Debate

<sup>5</sup> [Concepts are] predicates of possible judgment (A69/B94)

<sup>6</sup> the understanding can make no other use of these concepts than that of judging by means of them. (A68/B93)

#### 3.1 Terms

*Objective representation:* A conscious representation of a (naïvely) mind-independent feature of (empirical) reality

*Intellectualism:* All objective representation depends, at least in part, on the operations of the intellect

*Sensibilism:* At least some forms of objective representation do not depend on the intellect

#### 3.2 The Attractions of Intellectualism

- Kant makes remarks in central texts that are at least suggestive of a picture on which *any* cognitive ‘relation to an object’ depends on acts of the understanding
  - ‘Relation to an object’ is commonly taken by Intellectualism to mean representation of a mind-independent feature of reality<sup>7,8,9</sup>
    - \* Intellectualism here confuses conditions for objective representation with conditions under which something is represented *as* (i.e. conceptualized as) “objective” or mind-independent

<sup>7</sup> Kant’s proposal is that an object is “that in the concept of which a manifold of a given intuition is united” (B137). Here ‘object’ should be read in the broad sense of objective feature of reality — a feature whose existence and nature is independent of how it is perceived (Pereboom (2006), 160)

<sup>8</sup> Kant intends still to argue [in the Transcendental Deduction] that there is some connection between our language, its concepts, and the idea of an objective experience. Concepts both exhibit and are responsible

- Intellectualism proposes a strategy to validate the categories—viz. they are objectively valid because they are necessary for objective representation

### 3.3 General Problems for Intellectualism

1. Difficulty making sense of the repeated insistence on the independent roles of the two faculties of cognition
2. Difficulty making sense of Kant's conception of the structure of our representation of space and time
3. Difficulty accounting for the possibility of non-rational animal representation
4. Difficulty accounting for the role non-conceptual representation plays in the "construction" of mathematical objects necessary for mathematical knowledge
5. Difficulty accounting for why sense experience provides proof of the "real possibility" of the objects of cognition

### 3.4 The Mereological Argument Against Intellectualism<sup>10</sup>

1. The structure of pure intuition is one according to which the parts of the representation are determined by the whole
2. The structure of a representation that depends for its generation on an intellectual act is one according to which the whole is determined by its parts
3. ∴ The pure representations of space and time cannot be dependent on intellectual acts for their generation

## 4 Positions in the Kantian Debate

### 4.1 Hanna

- Sensibility has its own form of spontaneity, which is responsible for generating spatial and temporal representations, both pure and empirical (intuitions)<sup>11</sup>

### 4.2 Allais/McLear/Tolley

- Sensibility provides representation with a primitive (i.e. non-derivative) form of "unity" necessary for generating spatial and temporal representations, both pure and empirical, which is independent of any synthesis

### 4.3 Gomes

- Intuition occurs independently of the intellect, but the occurrence of an intuition necessitates (in discursive creatures) a categorial synthesis<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> premise (2) of the intellectualist's argument...says that both intuition and judgment have a common source of unity—namely, discursive activity. If this premise were correct then our cognitive grasp of space and time as pure forms of intuition would depend on a discursive form of unification, and thus on the combination of their many parts into a unity. ...This view entails that our conception of space as an infinite whole would be logically constructed from our grasp of the discrete spaces composing it... However, this seems to be precisely what Kant denies discursive intellectual activity is able to accomplish. Kant suggests instead, in the...Metaphysical Exposition, that our cognitive grasp of space is holistic. We grasp the whole of space first, and it is in virtue of this that its parts, as limitations of the infinite whole, are conceptually grasped and cognized discursively. (McLear 2015, 88)

<sup>11</sup> I am construing the sensibility as only relatively passive, but not entirely passive (as, e.g. in Locke's account of sensibility), by virtue of its expressing a mental power for spontaneous synthesis, or mental processing. This mental power is the 'power of imagination' (*Einbildungskraft*), and it is delivered in two distinct basic stages or moments: (i) a 'synopsis of the manifold a priori through sense' or 'synthesis of apprehension', and (ii) a 'synthesis of this manifold through the imagination' or 'synthesis of reproduction in imagination' (CPR A94, A98–102). (Hanna 2005, 249)

<sup>12</sup> Kantian intuitions are non-conceptual apprehensions of empirical particulars...These relations alone determine the phenomenal character of visual experience: hence naïve realism. But when one stands in such a relation to empirical particulars, the manifold of intuition is synthesised in accordance with the categories in a process governed by the understanding. (???)

#### 4.4 Messina

- The pure representations of space and time are not due to any synthesis, but the capacity to generate such representations (brutely) depends on the capacity for apperception. Finite pure and empirical intuition depends on synthetic activity.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4.5 Friedman

- The pure representation of space and time as unitary objects is due to a “pre-discursive” intellectual synthesis performed on an “aggregate” of possible spatial and temporal perspectives<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.6 Longuenesse

- The pure representations of space and time (both as pure forms and as “formal” intuitions) are generated by a pre-discursive synthesis made possible by the capacity to judge<sup>15</sup>

#### 4.7 Grüne

- The pure intuitions of space and time are independent of synthesis, but all representations of objects that are phenomenally present to the subject, including pure intuitions of finite spatial regions as well as all empirical intuitions, depend on sensible synthesis carried out by “obscure” (*dunkel*) concepts<sup>16</sup>

#### 4.8 Ginsborg

- The occurrence of an intuition with objective representational content constitutively depends on a (potential?) consciousness of the appropriateness of one’s representing as one does<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.9 Sellars

- Intuitions are forms of conceptual representation, characterized in terms of “this-such”, that are contrasted with the purely causal deliverances of “sheer receptivity”<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.10 McDowell

- The very intelligibility of a faculty of sensibility depends on that faculty’s engagement of those conceptual capacities distinctive of the intellect<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> the (metaphysical) unity of space is not a brute given. Instead, it is necessitated by the OSUA, as is the unity of any sort of formal intuition (including the non-spatio-temporal intuitions that might be possessed by non-human discursive creatures). (Messina 2014, 23)

<sup>14</sup> I understand the pure form of intuition of space as a mere (not yet synthesized) manifold of possible spatial perspectives on possible objects of outer sense... The unity of apperception then transforms such a not yet unified manifold into a single unitary space by the requirement that any such local perspective must be accessible to the same perceiving subject via (continuous) motion—via a (continuous) sequence of translations and rotations. (Friedman 2015, 290)

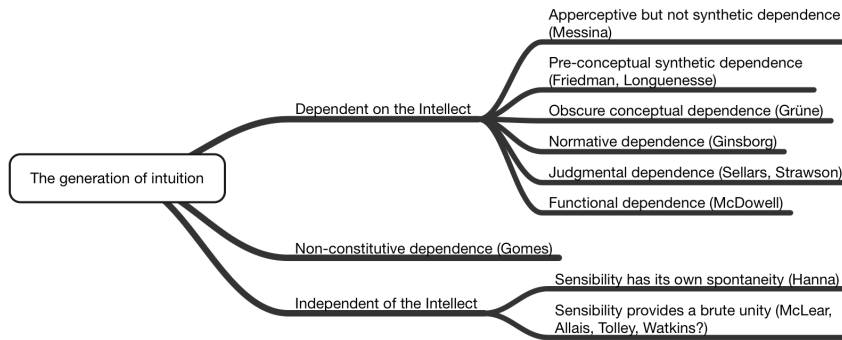
<sup>15</sup> the space and time described in the Transcendental Aesthetic are products of the figurative synthesis of imagination, and as such are what Kant calls, in section 26, formal intuitions. (Longuenesse 1998, 216)

<sup>16</sup> Sensible synthesis is required for relating the qualitative and the spatiotemporal content of complex sensible representations to an object and making it phenomenally present to the subject. In other words, sensible synthesis is required for transforming the qualitative and the spatiotemporal content of complex sensible representations into intentional content and making this content phenomenally present to the subject. (Grüne 2016, 88, note 4)

<sup>17</sup> that our perceptual experience has representational content in the first place is not due to the particular ways that we associate our representations, but rather to the consciousness of normativity in those associations. (Ginsborg 2008, 76)

<sup>18</sup> Kant’s use of the term ‘intuition’, in connection with human knowledge, blurs the distinction between a special sub-class of conceptual representations of individuals which, though in some sense a function of receptivity, belong to a framework which is in no sense prior to but essentially includes general concepts, and a radically different kind of representation of an individual which belongs to sheer receptivity and is in no sense conceptual. (Sellars 1968, 7)

<sup>19</sup> We must not suppose that receptivity makes an even notionally separable contribution to knowledge. Dependence on spontaneity. (McDowell 1996, 41)



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