

Representation & Content

Kant Seminar

Oxford | May 24, 2017

1 The Contemporary (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?

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 content¹

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)

¹ 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. According to this proposal, experiences are the kinds of states that can be accurate, and their contents are conditions under which they have this status. (Siegel 2010, 30)

- 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)²

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

² 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)

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

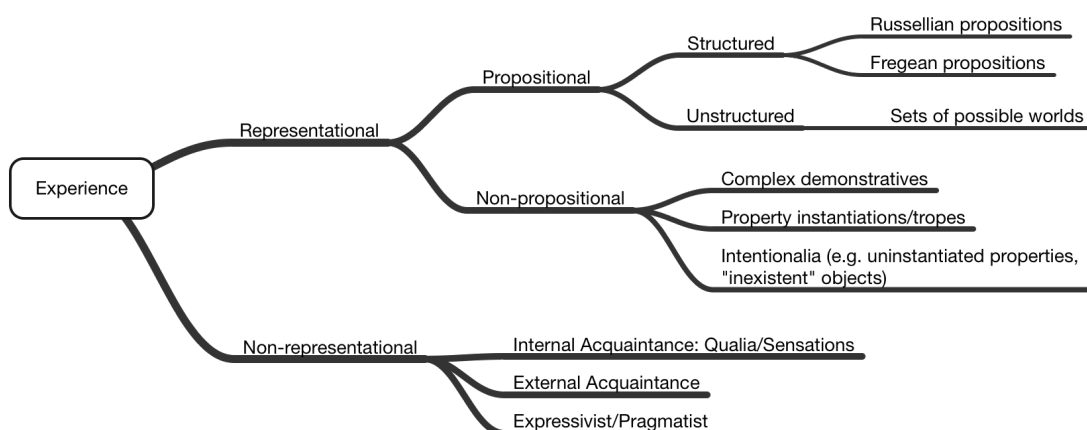


Figure 1: Varieties of Experiential Content

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?^{3,4}
5. Is content something that a perceptual experience (an intuition) can possess independently of the intellect?

3.1 Kant on Content – A Short Argument for Non-Conceptualism?

Content_K (Inhalt): the relation of a representation to its object⁵

1. The content of a cognition (whether intuition or concept) consists in—i.e. is nothing but—a relation to an object⁶
2. Concepts and intuitions relate to objects in different ways—viz. mediately and immediately⁷
3. ∴ The content of intuition is different from the content of concepts
4. Representations are individuated as to type—i.e. intuition or concept—in virtue of their content
5. ∴ Intuitions cannot have conceptual content

3.2 Kant on Content – A Kind of Conceptualism

Here is a version of a ‘conceptualist’ position that would seem to avoid the conclusion of Tolley’s short argument:

1. The content of an intuition is a kind of relation to an object
2. The relation to an object depends on the possession of a privileged set of cognitive capacities—specifically, the capacity to carry out a “synthesis” directed in accordance with concepts⁸
3. Synthesis in accordance with concepts sets correctness conditions for the intuition’s representation of a mind-independent object – such correctness conditions are necessary for the ‘objective’ status of experience
4. ∴ The same conceptual capacities that set correctness conditions for judgment also set correctness conditions for intuition

4 Against The Content View

- The Kantian (non-)conceptualism debate is typically framed by the presupposition that Kant endorses some version of the ‘Content View’ that

³ [Concepts are] predicates of possible judgment (A69/B94)

⁴ the understanding can make no other use of these concepts than that of judging by means of them. (A68/B93)

⁵ General logic abstracts from all content (Inhalt) of cognition, i.e., from any relation (Beziehung) of it to the object *y* (B79)

⁶ if we understand by ‘content’ ... a representation’s particular relation to an object ... then it is clear that we should conclude that Kant accepts non-conceptual content. This is because Kant accepts that intuitions put us in a representational relation to objects that is distinct in kind from the relation that pertains to concepts. I argued, furthermore, that this is the meaning that Kant himself assigns to the term ‘content’. (Tolley 2013, 128)

⁷ Since no representation pertains to the object immediately (*unmittelbar auf den Gegenstand geht*) except intuition alone, a concept is thus never immediately related to an object (*niemals auf einen Gegenstand unmittelbar bezogen*), but is instead related to another representation of it (whether this be an intuition or itself already a concept). (B93; see also B33, B41, A109, B376–7; Prolegomena, §8 (4: 281); What Real Progress, 20: 266)

⁸ Understanding is, generally speaking, the faculty of cognitions. These consist in the determinate relation of given representations to an object.” An object, however, is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united. Now, however, all unification of representations requires unity of consciousness in the synthesis of them. Consequently the unity of consciousness is that which alone constitutes the relation of representations to an object, thus their objective validity, and consequently is that which makes them into cognitions... (B137; cf. A104-5)

perceptual experiences present or convey information about the subject's environment to the subject in virtue of having content, but we should reject this interpretation

4.1 *The Argument From Deception*⁹

- Kant denies that illusion/hallucination is to be explained by appeal to veridicality conditions of intuitive representation
1. Truth and error are found only in judgment
 2. The senses do not judge, only the understanding does
 3. ∴ The senses do not deceive, for the deliverances of sense lack truth-apt content

4.2 *The Argument From Combination*¹⁰

- Kant holds that a state's possession of veridicality conditions requires combination, which can only occur via acts of the understanding
1. Only judgements may be true or false
 2. The truth or falsity of a judgement depends on the existence of a logical relation between its representational elements
 3. Logical relations between representations depend on an intellectual act — namely, combination
 4. Sensibility is incapable of performing intellectual acts, so the intuitions it provides cannot be true or false
 5. Intuition gives us objects (from Kant's Dictum)
 6. ∴ No intuition gives an object in virtue of a content that is true or false

4.3 *The Modal Argument Against The Content View*¹¹

- Kant's "modal condition" on cognition requires that sense experience contribute something over and above a correctness condition to the "proof" of the real possibility of a represented object
1. For cognition to occur one must be able to "prove" the real possibility of the object of representation
 2. One cannot prove the real possibility of an object of representation from the occurrence of a state with logically consistent representational content
 3. The real possibility of an object may be "proved" from its actuality as encountered in experience
 4. ∴ There must be some non-conceptual relation to an object that explains how its real possibility may be proven in experience¹²

⁹ truth and illusion are not in the object in so far as it is intuited [Denn Wahrheit oder Schein sind nicht im Gegestande, so fern er angeschaut wird], but are in the judgement made about the object in so far as it is thought. Hence although it is correct to say that the senses do not err, this is so not because they always judge correctly but because they do not judge at all. Thus both truth and error, and hence also illusion as the process of mistakenly leading to error, are to be found only in the judgement, i.e., only in the relation of the object to our understanding. (A293–4/B350)

¹⁰ all combination is an act of understanding ... we cannot represent anything as combined in the object without ourselves having combined it beforehand; and that, among all representations, combination is the only one that cannot be given through objects (B129–30)

¹¹ To cognize an object, it is required that I be able to prove its possibility (whether by the testimony of experience from its actuality or a priori through reason). But I can think whatever I like, as long as I do not contradict myself...(Bxxvi, note)

¹² Intellectualism cannot construe intuition as satisfying the Modal Condition on anything other than the most general "formal" level. Intuition, according to Intellectualism, makes no further contribution to determining whether something is really possible according to the specific natural laws governing our world. This leaves it a complete mystery as to how cases of the actuality of the object, as presented in an occurrent intuition, might play any special sort of role in providing the proof necessary for cognition. (McLear 2016, 194)

References

- Bengson, John, Enrico Grube, and Daniel Z Korman. 2011. "A New Framework for Conceptualism." *Noûs* 45 (1): 167–89.
- Broad, Charlie Dunbar. 1923. *Scientific Thought*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Byrne, Alex. 2005. "Perception and Conceptual Content." In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, edited by Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa, 231–50. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Evans, Gareth. 1982. *The Varieties of Reference*. Edited by John McDowell. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grüne, Stefanie. 2009. *Blinde Anschauung*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Heck, Richard G. 2000. "Nonconceptual Content and the 'Space of Reasons.'" *The Philosophical Review* 109 (4): 483–523.
- . 2007. "Are There Different Kinds of Content?" In *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Brian P McLaughlin and Jonathan Cohen, 117–38. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Lewis, Clarence Irving. 1929. *Mind and the World-Order: Outline of a Theory of Knowledge*. New York: Dover Publications.
- McLear, Colin. 2016. "Getting Acquainted with Kant." In *Kantian Non-conceptualism*, edited by Dennis Schulting, 171–97. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peacocke, Christopher. 1992. *A Study of Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sellars, Wilfrid. 1956. "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 1: 253–329.
- . 1968. *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul.
- Siegel, Susanna. 2011. *The Contents of Visual Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Speaks, Jeff. 2005. "Is There a Problem About Nonconceptual Content?" *The Philosophical Review* 114 (3): 359–98.
- Tolley, Clinton. 2013. "The Non-Conceptuality of the Content of Intuitions: A New Approach." *Kantian Review* 18 (01): 107–36.
- Van Cleve, James. 2012. "Defining and Defending Nonconceptual Contents and States." *Philosophical Perspectives* 26 (1): 411–30.