Abstract: This paper defends an interpretation of the representational function of sensation in Kant’s theory of empirical cognition. Against those who argue that sensations are ‘subjective representations’ and hence can only represent the sensory state of the subject, I argue that Kant appeals to different notions of subjectivity, and that the subjectivity of sensations is consistent with sensations representing external, spatial objects. Against those who claim that sensations cannot be representational at all, because sensations are not cognitively sophisticated enough to possess intentionality, I argue that Kant does not use the term ‘Vorstellung’ to refer to intentional mental states exclusively. Sensations do not possess their own intentionality, but they nevertheless perform a representational function in virtue of their role as the matter of empirical intuition. In empirical intuition, the sensory qualities given in sensation are combined with the representation of space to constitute the intuited appearance. The representational function of sensation consists in sensation being the medium out of which intuited appearances are constituted: the qualities of sensations stand in for what the understanding will judge (conceptualize) as material substance.

Keywords: *Kant, Sensation, Empirical Intuition, Representation, Intentionality*

Sensations as Representations in Kant

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In all appearances, the real, which is an object of the sensation, has intensive magnitude. (B207)

Sensation is that which designates an actuality in space and time. […] This perception thus represents (staying for now with outer intuitions) something real in space. (A374)

*Matter*, as opposed to *form*, would be that in the outer intuition which is an object of sensation. (4:481)

Sensation […] strictly speaking expresses the material (the real) in [things outside us] (5:189)

If a determination of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure is called sensation, then this expression means something entirely different than if I call the representation of a thing (through sense, as a receptivity belonging to the faculty of cognition) sensation. For in the latter case the representation is related to the object. (5:206)

§1 Introduction[[1]](#footnote--1)

One of Kant’s central concerns in *Critique of Pure Reason[[2]](#footnote-0)* lies in explaining how it is possible for our mental states to come to possess the ‘dignity’ (A197/B242) of referring to objects in empirical cognition. This is the problem of the representationality, or intentionality, or simply object-directedness of our mental states.[[3]](#footnote-1) Kant asserts that any cognition’s relation to its object requires an intuition (A19/B33), but he also claims that reference to an *empirical* object requires that the intuition relate to the object ‘through sensation’ (A20/B34). While space and time are a priori, formal conditions on the representationality of cognition, sensations are a posteriori, material conditions. Without sensations, we could represent the possible forms that objects in general could take, but we could not represent concrete, *actual* objects, much less have knowledge of them. Sensations, accordingly, are necessary (though by no means sufficient) conditions on the intentional relation between the mind and the world.

All this naturally raises the question of *how* sensations contribute to securing this relation. Are sensations non-representational conditions on the possibility of the representationality of other mental states, or do they possess a representationality of their own? And if the latter, what sort of representationality can they be said to possess?[[4]](#footnote-2) There are two dominant answers to this question in the literature. According to one position, sensations cannot represent anything because they are not cognitively sophisticated enough to meet the conditions that Kant places on representationality. On this view, sensations are merely the sensory effects of the impingements of objects on the senses, and although they may be necessary for the representationality of other mental states (most importantly, empirical intuitions), they do not themselves represent. According to another view, sensations are representations, but they are representations only of the subject’s sensorily modified state. On this view, rather than simply being identified with the effects of objects on the senses, sensations also involve an *awareness* of these effects.

Neither of these interpretations can be reconciled with the full range of Kant’s claims about the cognitive function of sensation. If ‘representation’ is taken strictly to mean ‘mental state with intentional object-directedness,’ then the first interpretation is surely correct to deny such a function to sensation. But in denying *any* representational function to sensation, this interpretation cannot account for the many instances where Kant explicitly characterizes *Empfindung* as a type of *Vorstellung*. And although the second interpretation is sensitive to these passages, in restricting the representational function of sensation to the representation of only the internal state of the subject, it is unable to account for the many places where Kant indicates that sensations can represent the matter of external objects (the ‘real’ in them, as Kant often puts it).

Against these views, I defend the claim that sensations have a representational function, and that they can represent *external* objects, not just internal ones. I will argue that although sensations are surely not intentional mental states, they nevertheless perform a representational function in virtue of their role as the matter of intuition. I’ll argue that sensations constitute the ‘undetermined’ appearance presented in empirical intuition, and thereby stand in for the matter of (what the understanding will cognize as) an empirical, physical object in space. On this interpretation, sensations are the medium out of which empirical representations of external objects are constituted. In the same way that we can make sense of colored paint on a canvas representing things without presuming that the paint itself possesses intentionality or is referential in any way, collections of sensations given spatial organization can likewise represent the matter of empirical objects despite the fact that sensations are not intentionally directed at these objects.

Here’s how my argument will go. In §2 I will outline in greater detail the two above-mentioned dominant lines in the literature. Both of them find some support in the *Critique*, but neither is completely satisfactory because neither can be reconciled with the full range of the relevant text. In order to find a satisfying interpretation of *everything* Kant says about sensation, two important puzzles must be resolved. (1) It must be shown how sensations can be ‘merely subjective representations’ by which we can only be aware that the subject is affected (B207-8), yet still be ‘objective representations’ (5:206) that ‘designate’ (A374) actualities in space and have the ‘real’ in appearance as their objects (B207). And (2) it must be shown how sensations can be representational at all, given the conditions on representational object-directedness that Kant describes throughout the Transcendental Analytic. I’ll resolve the first problem (§§3-4) by distinguishing two very different senses in which sensations can be ‘subjective.’ I’ll resolve the second problem (§§5-6) by showing that sensations can have a representational function (in virtue of their role as ‘matter’ of intuition) without being intentional representations. The interpretation that results is both philosophically and textually satisfying because it is consistent with important systematic considerations regarding Kant’s account of the representation of empirical objects, and it can account for the full range of Kant’s remarks about sensation.

§2 Sensation in the First *Critique*

Kant initially characterizes sensations as *effects*: they are the result of the impingement of objects on the senses (A20/B34).[[5]](#footnote-3) More specifically, they are *mental* effects, and they are describable in terms of the phenomenal qualities they display. For instance, Kant refers to sensations of ‘impenetrability, hardness, color’ (A21/B35), ‘taste’ (A28), and ‘sounds and warmth’ (B44) as examples of the kinds of qualities he has in mind. Sensations are phenomenal *lightings up* of sensibility. Kant goes on to indicate that each sensation can be described exhaustively by specifying the quality it displays and the intensive degree to which it displays it (see A143/B182 and A166/B207). This much I take to be uncontroversial. Having specified what sensations *are*, a more difficult question asks what sensations *do*, i.e., what cognitive function they perform. Specifically: do sensations represent?

One might think that sensations could not possibly be representations because of the conditions Kant places on what is necessary for representationality. Minimally, for a mental state to represent, in the sense of referring to or intending some object, it must involve an intuition (A19/B33). Sensations, being cognitively more basic than intuitions, do not meet this requirement. Although Kant indicates that sensations are the *matter* of intuitions (more on this later), on their own sensations lack the intuitive *form* necessary for object-directedness.

These considerations have led many commentators to treat sensation as simply the raw, unprocessed, *non-representational* data of experience. Sensation provides the mind with a sensory matter to work with, but all of the representational heavy-lifting is carried out by higher mental states (intuitions and concepts). I’ll refer to this reading as the *Non-Representation model*. So for instance, according to Pippin, Kantian sensations are ‘not a mode of representation at all’ (*Theory of Form*, 31) and he claims that sensations ‘comprise only the undifferentiated material of experience’ (ibid., 36). According to Allais, ‘Although Kant is not entirely consistent in what he says about sensations, in the first *Critique* his dominant view seems to be that sensations are nonintentional or nonreferential’ (`Non-Conceptual Content’, 398). Sellars (*Science and Metaphysics*) and McDowell (‘Woodbridge Lectures’; *Mind and World*) also argue for versions of the Non-Representation interpretation. What these views all have in common is the claim that sensations are a part only of the causal order of things, not the intentional, representational order in which mental states refer to and hence are beholden to objects. That work is the exclusive responsibility of other items in Kant’s catalogue of the mind.

Although these philosophical considerations about the conditions on the possibility of representationality really are good reasons to think that sensations cannot be representations (qua intentionally-directed mental states), Kant nevertheless frequently describes sensations as ‘*Vorstellungen*.’ Most often, when Kant describes sensations as representations, he describes them as *subjective* representations. In the Transcendental Aesthetic, sensations are called ‘subjective representations’ (A28/B44) which ‘belong only to the subjective constitution of the kind of sense [which] do not in themselves allow any object to be cognized’ (B44). In the Anticipations of Perception, he refers to ‘the real of sensation, as merely subjective representation, by which one can only be conscious that the subject is affected, and which one relates to an object in general’ (B207). And in the ‘*Stufenleiter*’ of representations, Kant defines sensation as ‘a perception that refers [*bezieht*] to the subject as a modification of its state’ (A320/B376; see also *Metaphysik Vigilantius*, 29:829 and *Metaphysik L2*, 28:547).

These passages have led a second group of commentators to assert that sensations are representations, but that they are restricted to representing only the subject’s own sensorily modified state. I’ll refer to this interpretation as the *Internal Representation model*. For instance, Aquila reads Kant as claiming that a mental state ‘is called “sensation” precisely in virtue of its ability to call our attention to the altered state of the sense organs’ (*Representational Mind*, 59). Similarly, Watkins argues that, ‘Kant thinks that sensations have a very specific kind of representational content insofar as they represent *the way in which the subject is affected by the object*. So the representational content of sensation is *of the subject’s state* insofar as it is acted upon by something distinct from it’ (‘Myth of the Given’, 321). Thompson (`Singular Terms’, 323) defends a similar position as well.

These are the two dominant interpretations. There is a third possibility, however, which has not received much support in the literature. On this reading, sensations do have a representational function, and they represent external, physical objects, not just the subject’s internal mental state. I’ll call this the *External Representation model.* It is surprising that this interpretation does not boast many partisans, given that one finds Kant assigning sensation an *objective* representational function in several places (in both the *Critique* and in other critical period writings). For instance, consider the relation between sensation and the ‘matter’ (which Kant also calls the ‘real’) of external objects. Although this relation is initially described vaguely as a ‘correspondence’ (A20/B34), he later specifies that an empirical object’s matter is ‘an object of sensation’ (B207).[[6]](#footnote-4) Later, he asserts that ‘sensation is that which designates [*bezeichnet*] an actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] in space and time [….] This perception thus represents something real in space’ (A374). In *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, he claims that ‘*matter*, as opposed to *form*, would be that in the outer intuition which is an object of sensation’ (4:481). In *Critique of Judgement* (CJ) he refers to ‘external’ sensations, and says that ‘strictly speaking’ they ‘express [*drückt… aus*] the material (the real) in [things outside us]’ (5:189). And in the *Anthropology*, sensations are described as representations that can ‘contribute to the cognition of external objects’ (7:154).

These passages are too numerous to disregard, and they indicate that Kant assigned an *objective* representational function to sensation. But these passages also leave us with interpretive puzzles to solve. If we want to take seriously *everything* Kant says about sensation *and* come away with a consistent interpretation of Kant’s theory of sensory consciousness, then two distinct issues will need to be resolved. *First*, it must be explained how Kant can assert both that there are ‘objective’ sensations which ‘designate’ external objects, yet that sensations are all ‘subjective representations.’ *Second*, it must be explained how Kant can describe sensations as representational *at all*, given that he places conditions on representational object-directedness that sensations do not satisfy. I turn now to the first problem (§§3-4). Once this is resolved, we can address the second (§§5-6).

§3 Two Kinds of Subjectivity

We’ve seen that Kant repeatedly claims that sensations are ‘subjective representations.’ Later I’ll argue that there are different ways to understand what ‘representation’ means here. For now, in order to reconcile Kant’s claims that all sensations are ‘merely subjective’ and yet are (in some cases, at least) also ‘objective,’ we’ll only need to disambiguate the different senses of ‘subjective’ as Kant uses the term. Although I do not claim that there are *only* two senses in which Kant uses the term ‘subjective,’ there are *at least* two importantly different senses that are relevant to Kant’s discussion of the cognitive function of sensation.[[7]](#footnote-5)

On the one hand, a representation can be called ‘subjective’ when the content of the representation reflects the way the subject is affected by objects (as opposed to features of the sensed object itself). For while some contents represent their object as it is independently of the way the subject is affected by it, other representational contents are determined by the way the subject is disposed to be affected by the object.[[8]](#footnote-6) Sometimes, Kant uses the term ‘subjective’ to refer to representational contents of this latter sort.

On the other hand, a representation can be called ‘subjective’ when what it represents, its object, is the sensing subject’s own internal state. This notion of subjectivity pertains to the representational function of a mental state because it describes the mental state in terms of what it is a representation *of*. By contrast, ‘objective’ can be used to characterize a representation of an external object. Although I will show momentarily that this distinction is at work in the first *Critique*, let’s first look at CJ, where we get a clearer expression of these two senses of the subjective/objective distinction and their use in describing sensations.

In the Introduction to CJ, Kant distinguishes two aspects of empirical representations:

What is merely subjective in the representation of an object, i.e., what constitutes its relation to the subject, not to the object, is its aesthetic property; but that in it which serves for the determination of the object (for cognition) or can be so used is its logical validity. (5:188-9)

Here, the distinction between subjective and objective is cashed out in terms of the distinction between ‘aesthetic property’ (*ästhetische Beschaffenheit*) and ‘logical validity’ (*logische Gültigkeit*). A representation’s aesthetic properties reflect the way in which the representation’s content depends on the constitution of the sensing subject and the way in which the subject is affected by the object in its passive reception of impressions. I’ll refer to this type of subjectivity as ‘aesthetic subjectivity,’ or simply ‘A-subjectivity.’ The distinction between aesthetic property and logical validity parallels the distinction between sensibility and understanding. Where sensibility allows empirical objects to be *given* through a passive affection relation, understanding allows objects to be actively *determined* in thought. Representations of the former reflect the way the subject is affected while representations of the latter reflect how the object is determined independently of its relation to the subject.[[9]](#footnote-7) On this description, sensations (and intuitions as well[[10]](#footnote-8)) are necessarily A-subjective, for the particular sensory qualities displayed by sensations are determined by the way human sensibility is affected by objects.[[11]](#footnote-9) Just as the crack in my windshield is not similar (in any important respect) to the pebble that caused it, but rather reflects the way in which my windshield is affected by flying pebbles, so too sensory contents are not similar to their causes, but reflect the way in which the human sensory apparatus is affected by these causes.

A-subjectivity (like its contrast, logical validity) is ultimately an epistemic notion, for whether a representational content can count as cognition and knowledge of an object depends on whether that content has logical validity instead of mere aesthetic subjectivity.[[12]](#footnote-10) But the cognitive function of a representation is not exhausted by its epistemic contribution, for representations also possess semantic, referential functions, which I’ve been calling their representationality.[[13]](#footnote-11) Thus even though the sensory contents given in sensation are A-subjective and hence do not amount to cognition of what the object is really like, this is not inconsistent with sensations also having an object-representing, semantic function. And in fact Kant makes clear that some sensations—those he calls ‘external’ sensations—have such a function:

*Sensation* (in this case external) likewise expresses the merely subjective aspect of our representations of things outside us, but strictly speaking [it expresses] the material (the real) in them (through which something existing is given). (5:189)

The claim here is that there is *a sense* in which sensation ‘expresses’ (*drückt… aus*) the subjective aspect of our representations of objects, but ‘strictly speaking’ (*eigentlich*) it expresses some feature of the objects themselves, namely, the matter in them. The first clause is an assertion of the A-subjectivity of sensation, while the second clause describes sensation’s object-directed representational function. The fact that a sensation displays the quality it does reflects the way the human sensory apparatus is affected by objects, and not the feature of the object itself that caused the sensation; hence that quality cannot be predicated of the object with objective validity. But this epistemic claim about the A-subjectivity of sensation is consistent with the semantic claim that ‘external’ sensations function to establish reference to the material or the ‘real’ in external (i.e., spatial) objects.

Kant elaborates this account of the cognitive function of sensation in the opening sections of CJ. There he distinguishes ‘objective’ sensations, to which he attributes a form of object-directedness, from those sensations which contribute nothing to the cognition of the object (5:203-4). The latter are sensations insofar as they are pleasurable or displeasurable, ‘by means of which nothing at all in the object is designated [*bezogen werden*], but in which the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation’ (5:204). As Kant describes it, the primary contrast is between sensations which contribute to the cognition of the (external) object, and those which do not.[[14]](#footnote-12) A few pages later this contrast is made explicit:

If a determination of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure is called sensation, then this expression means something entirely different than if I called the representation of a thing (through sense, as a receptivity belonging to the faculty of cognition) sensation. For in the latter case, the representation is related to the object, but in the first case it is related solely to the subject, and does not serve for any cognition at all, not even that by which the subject cognizes itself. (5:206)

Kant goes on to claim that the feeling of pleasure and displeasure should simply be called *Gefühl*, in contrast to *Empfindung* proper, which is ‘an objective representation of the senses’ (5:206). Note that in making this contrast, Kant has not backed off from his claim that the sensory contents of sensations fall under the aesthetic properties of our representations and hence are A-subjective. They are the result of the way we are affected by objects, and do not correspond to what the objects are like in themselves. Nevertheless, sensations can be called ‘objective’ in those circumstances in which the sensation contributes to the cognition of objects by directing cognition towards them.[[15]](#footnote-13)

Kant gives an illuminating example of how we should distinguish sensations that contribute to the cognition of objects from those that do not. He says, ‘the green color of the meadow belongs to *objective* sensation, as perception of an object of sense; but its agreeableness belongs to *subjective* sensation, through which no object is represented’ (5:206). In referring to ‘objective sensation,’ Kant must be using the subjective/objective distinction in a completely different way than when he characterized it in terms of the distinction between aesthetic property and logical validity. The objectivity of some sensations in this new sense is compatible with the A-subjectivity of all sensations. For the sense in which an ‘objective sensation’ can be ‘of the meadow’ pertains to the semantic function of sensation. A sensation is objective (in this new sense) when it represents an external object, and subjective when it represents the subject’s own internal affected state (in this case, the agreeableness of the perception). I’ll refer to this second sense of the objective/subjective distinction in terms of ‘representational objectivity’ and ‘representational subjectivity’ (or simply, ‘R-objectivity’ and ‘R-subjectivity’).

§4 A-subjectivity and R-objectivity in the first *Critique*

We can now see how Kant can consistently assert that sensations are both subjective yet objective: All sensations are A-subjective, but at least some sensations—specifically, those directly involved in the perception of the external world—are R-objective. Only sensations which happen to represent the state of the subject are both A-subjective and R-subjective (e.g., pains and pleasures). These would be sensations of ‘inner sense.’ Having seen the two different senses of ‘subjective’ at work in the third *Critique*, we can use this distinction to make sense of some of what Kant is up to in the first *Critique*.

First off, note that we now have the resources to reconcile Kant’s claim that sensations are ‘merely subjective representations’ (B207; cf. A28/B44) with his claims that ‘the real’ in outer appearances ‘is an object of sensation’ (B207), that sensation ‘designates an actuality in space and time’ (A374), and that an intuition can only relate to an empirical object ‘through sensation’ (A20/B34). These latter claims are meant to indicate an R-objective function for sensation, and this is consistent with the claim that all sensations are A-subjective representations.

With this interpretive strategy in place, I turn now to a few slightly more complicated and difficult passages. Consider this important passage from the Transcendental Aesthetic regarding the distinction between sensation and the a priori intuition of space (both of which are A-subjective representations).

Besides space, however, there is no other subjective representation related to something *external* that could be called a priori objective. For one cannot derive synthetic a priori propositions from any such representation, as one can from intuition in space. Strictly speaking, therefore, ideality does not pertain to them [i.e., sensations], although they coincide with the representation of space in belonging only to the subjective constitution of the kind of sense, e.g., of sight, hearing, and feeling, through the sensations of colors, sounds, warmth, which, however, since they are merely sensations and not intuitions, do not in themselves allow any object to be cognized, least of all a priori. (A28/B44)[[16]](#footnote-14)

This is a loaded passage, and it is worth spending a moment to unpack it. What is most striking about this passage (for present purposes, at least) is that in the very first sentence, space is referred to as both a ‘subjective representation’ and as ‘a priori objective.’ This in itself is sufficient to indicate that Kant had multiple senses of the subjective/objective distinction in mind. In describing the representation of space as ‘related to something external,’ he is describing its R-objectivity. (This is hardly surprising. If any representation is R-objective, that of space surely is.) Despite being an R-objective representation, space is nevertheless ‘subjective’ because, like sensation, it ‘belongs only to the subjective constitution of the kind of sense,’ i.e., it is A-subjective.

Now Kant is clearly drawing an important distinction between space and sensation in this passage, but the distinction between them is not that space does while sensation does not represent external objects. Rather, both represent external objects, but only space does so with ‘a priori objectivity,’ and only space will ‘allow any object to be cognized.’ This last claim might seem inconsistent with the claim from the third *Critique* discussed earlier (5:206), according to which an external sensation is a ‘representation of a thing’ that belongs to ‘the faculty of cognition.’ But note that here it is sensation ‘in itself’ that does not ‘allow any object to be cognized.’ I take sensation ‘in itself’ to refer to sensations considered independently of their combination into any higher cognitive forms. As I’ll argue in §5, sensations can contribute to cognition and carry out their R-objective function only in virtue of their synthesis into empirical intuitions.

Another difference between the cognitive functions of sensation and intuition pertains to the different ways in which both are A-subjective. For while both ‘belong only to the subjective constitution of the kind of sense’ (A28/B44), intuitions can lead to cognition of how the (empirical) object really is, while sensations cannot. This might seem to conflict with my earlier characterization of A-subjectivity as an epistemic notion: A-subjective representations do not ‘serve for the determination of the object (for cognition)’ (5:189), yet here the intuition of space seems to do precisely that, despite its A-subjectivity. This apparent inconsistency can be resolved by treating space as *transcendentally* A-subjective and sensation as *empirically* A-subjective. Space and time are the forms of sensibility, and only reflect how we are affected by transcendent, unknowable things in themselves, but not how these things are in themselves. Hence they are not cognitions that determine features of things in themselves. But since they are a priori forms (which carry necessity with them), they can be used to cognize empirical objects. Sensations, by contrast, are *a posteriori*, and thus do not bring along any necessity and do not reflect the way empirical objects are in themselves, and thus they amount to cognition of neither empirical nor transcendent objects.

The Anticipations of Perception contains another important discussion of the relation between sensations and objects. In the official formulation of the principle of the Anticipations itself, Kant indicates that the ‘real’ in an appearance is represented by sensation: ‘In all appearances, the real, which is an object of sensation, has an intensive magnitude’ (B207). This statement of the principle seems to straightforwardly entail that sensations are R-objective. Things, however, are quickly complicated in his summary of the argument for the principle. After defining perception as a consciousness that ‘contains sensations,’ and claiming that the objects of these perceptions are appearances, Kant goes on to characterize ‘the real of the sensation’ as a ‘merely subjective representation, by which one can only be conscious that the subject is affected, and which one relates to an object in general’ (B207). This passage could be taken to support the Internal Representation interpretation (and to conflict with the claim from a few lines earlier that the object of sensation is the real in appearance). Closer inspection reveals that this reading is not necessitated by the text. Kant is not saying that sensations are representations of the subject being affected. Rather, the claim is that *the real* of sensation can make one conscious that the subject is affected. This is a claim about the epistemic significance of sensations, not their semantic function. The phrase ‘the real of sensation’ refers to the sensory quality presented in the sensation. Kant’s claim is that the real of sensation can be taken as evidence that the subject has been affected by *something* (an ‘object in general’), but not by what kind of object specifically. This epistemic shortcoming follows from the A-subjectivity of sensations: since a sensation’s peculiar quality (the ‘real’ in it) depends on the constitution of the sensory apparatus and not on how the object is in itself, we may not infer that the object which caused the sensation possesses the same quality as that presented in the sensation.[[17]](#footnote-15) This epistemic claim about sensation is independent of its semantic function and so the epistemic claim is consistent with the R-objectivity assigned to sensation earlier on that page.[[18]](#footnote-16) In short, the sensation can secure reference to the object, but not knowledge of it.

The only passage that presents difficulties for the External Representation interpretation is the famous *Stufenleiter* passage. There Kant defines a sensation as ‘a perception that refers to the subject as a modification of its state’ (A320/B376). At face value, the most natural reading of the passage takes it as claiming that sensations are only R-subjective, never R-objective, which is inconsistent with the claims that sensations can represent external objects.

One possible response would be to say that by ‘refers to the subject as a modification of its state,’ Kant simply means ‘*is* a modification of the subject’s state’. This however might be a bit of a stretch. A better explanation of the inconsistency of the *Stufenleiter* passage with Kant’s other remarks about sensation is best explained in terms of an occasional inconsistency in the use of the term *Empfindung*. Although most of the time Kant uses the term as I’ve described it in this paper, occasionally he classifies sensations and intuitions as distinct species of perceptions (*Wahrnehmungen*): intuitions are perceptions that refer to external objects, and sensations are perceptions that refer to internal objects, i.e., the subject and its states.[[19]](#footnote-17) The contrast is typically described instead in terms of a distinction between outer and inner intuition.[[20]](#footnote-18)

§5 Sensations and Intuitions

At the end of §2, we were faced with two problems: (1) It wasn’t clear how to reconcile Kant’s claims that sensations are all ‘subjective representations’ with his claims that sensations can also be ‘objective representations.’ (2) And it wasn’t clear how to make sense of Kant’s claims that sensations are representations at all, given the strict requirements a mental state must meet in order to count as an object-directed representation. We’ve resolved the first problem, but this resolution will be for naught without a resolution to the second. I propose the following two-part solution. *First*, it must be conceded that sensations cannot count as representations in Kant’s full or ‘official’ sense of the term, i.e., as mental states possessing intentionality and referring to some object distinct from themselves. The most basic intentional state in Kant’s ontology of the mind is the empirical intuition, and sensations, considered on their own and as merely the results of causal impingements on sensibility, do not have intuitive representational content. Hence they cannot be representations in the full sense: they do not refer to anything, they have no intentional objects.[[21]](#footnote-19) If sensations are to be considered *Vorstellungen* at all, it must be in some broader sense of the term. Thus *second*, I argue that sensations do perform a representational function (in a broader sense of ‘representational’) in virtue of their role in empirical intuitions. Explaining this function will require elucidating Kant’s claim that sensation is the ‘matter’ of intuition (and of empirical cognition generally).[[22]](#footnote-20) I’ll argue that empirical intuitions are produced when the phenomenal qualities of sensations are combined with the a priori representation of space.[[23]](#footnote-21) Sensations ‘represent’ the real in objects because they stand in for that reality when the represented object is constituted in intuition.[[24]](#footnote-22) They are the medium out of which our empirical representations of the world are made.

The matter/form distinction appears in different guises across all of Kant’s systematic philosophy. The precise meaning of this distinction varies by context, but when Kant refers to matter and form in his discussions of *representations*, he typically takes ‘matter’ to refer to the constituent elements of the representation, while ‘form’ refers to the way these elements are combined together. For instance, in the Amphiboly, he writes, ‘In every judgement, one can call the given concept the logical matter (for judgement), their relation (by means of the copula) the form of judgement’ (A266/B322).[[25]](#footnote-23) When I judge that ‘the ball is blue,’ the concepts ‘the ball’ and ‘blueness’ are the matter of the judgement and the predicative combination of these together is the form. The matter/form distinction is at bottom a mereological notion: it describes the way the parts of a thing are organized into wholes.[[26]](#footnote-24) Since sensations are the matter of intuitions (A22/B36, A267/B323), they literally constitute or ‘make up’ the intuition in the same sense that bricks and mortar are the matter of a wall, or innings are the matter of a baseball game. A wall is no more than bricks and mortar organized a certain way for a specific function, and a baseball game is no more than a series of innings organized in succession and taken as a whole game. Likewise, an intuition is no more than an intentional directedness attached to a collection of sensations organized in a certain way. That ‘certain way’ is the form of outer intuition: space. Hence, an outer intuition is a collection of sensations organized into spatial form and brought to intentional awareness.[[27]](#footnote-25)

Verification of this account of empirical intuition is found in two revealing passages from early in the Aesthetic about the relation between sensations and space.

Since that within which the sensations can alone be ordered and placed in a certain form cannot itself be in turn sensation, the matter of all appearance is only given to us a posteriori, but its form must all lie ready for it in the mind a priori. (A20/B34)

For in order for certain sensations to be related to something outside me (i.e., to something in another place in space from that in which I find myself), thus in order for me to represent them as outside and next to one another, thus not merely as different but as in different places, the representation of space must already be their ground. (A23/B38)

Kant’s main point here has to do with the priority of the pure representation of space: we couldn’t sense things in space if we didn’t have an a priori representation of space to begin with. But his argument hinges on the claim that a posteriori sensations need something to be ‘ordered and placed’ in, namely the representation of space. Sensations are ‘related to something outside me’ (they are R-objective), but they are also themselves represented outside me, ‘outside and next to one another… in different places.’

In claiming that sensations are represented in space, Kant cannot mean that sensations are represented *as sensations* in space. If I represent something as a sensation, then I represent it as something in my mind (or perhaps as something somewhere on my body); this is not consistent with it being represented ‘in another place in space from that in which I find myself’ (A23/B38). Rather, what Kant must mean is that sensations are projected into organized spatial arrays and thereby constitute the appearance as the object of intuition, presenting the subject with a nonconceptual awareness of the *qualities* of sensations, their intrinsic phenomenal characters. In intuiting an appearance, one is aware of spatially organized sensations (specifically, their qualities), but one is not aware of them (conceptually) *as* sensations. This is why Kant could say in CJ (in a passage discussed earlier) that ‘the green’ is both ‘of the meadow’ and yet ‘belongs to sensation’ (5:206). One and the same sensory quality is possessed initially by received visual impressions, but is then used in the representation of the surface of the external object (the grass). To intuit an outer empirical object, then, is simply for the mind to be presented with sensory qualities in spatial arrays.[[28]](#footnote-26) When sensations are combined into intuitions[[29]](#footnote-27) and projected into spatial arrays, their qualities stand in for the matter of the intuited object (the ‘real’ in the appearance). Sensations thereby make up the appearance in sensory consciousness, and in that way can be said to represent the real in it.[[30]](#footnote-28) (As I will explain in greater detail in the next section, this interpretation is not meant to entail that the physical objects experienced in cognition are to be identified with the sensations by means of which we represent them.)[[31]](#footnote-29)

Thus sensations are not representations proper, in that they do not possess their own intentionality. And they are also not representational at all when considered ‘in themselves’ (A28/B44, B208), i.e., considered in abstraction from their role as the matter of intuition. But they come to have a representational function when a manifold of many sensations is synthesized with the representation of space into an intuition of an outer appearance.

The following analogy will help clarify all this. Consider an otherwise blank canvas with a single, tiny dot of red paint in the center. Surely the red dot would not be said to represent anything (assuming we’re not dealing with any sort of high-concept, abstract art here). But if we consider that exact same red dot in a painting of, say, a still life with an apple, now we’d say that the red dot functions to represent a part of the skin of the apple. The red dot comes to acquire this function in the context of the rest of the daubs of paint arranged and organized in a coherent way. There’s nothing contradictory in saying that the red dot on its own and independent of its combination with other colored shapes does not represent, yet that it does represent once it is in that context. Furthermore, when we say that the red paint represents part of the apple, we obviously do not mean that the paint itself possesses any kind of intentionality. It’s not *that* sense of ‘represents.’ But just as the red can nevertheless represent the apple *for the viewer*, sensations represent features of the intuited object *for the sensing subject*. It is this latter sense of ‘represents’ that Kant must have in mind when he describes *Empfindungen* as *Vorstellungen*. Sensations represent objects in the sense that they are the medium out of which our sensory representations of objects are constituted.

§6 Concluding Remarks

I conclude with three clarifications and elaborations of the External Representation interpretation I’ve been defending.

(1) The interpretation I’ve defended shows that the relation between sensation, intuition, and appearance is quite complex. Unlike sensations, intuitions are representations in the ‘official’ sense: they possess intentionality and refer to objects. Philosophers often take intentionality to be a *relational* property of a representation. There are two things—the representing mental state and the object—and intentionality is a special relation between the two. If the interpretation of empirical intuition I’ve offered is correct, then this model of intentionality is not quite right, at least not with respect to the intentionality of intuitions. The intentionality of an empirical intuition is not to be construed as one thing—the intuition—’pointing at’ another—the appearance. Since the matter of the intuition (a collection of sensations) is numerically identical to what the subject is presented with in the intuition (those same sensations, given spatial form), the intentionality of the empirical intuition must be construed differently. According to the interpretation I’ve presented here, an intuition is not one of the relata in the intentional relation to the appearance; rather, the intuition (or better, the *intuiting*) is itself the relation. An intuition is not a mental *entity*, but rather a certain *mode of awareness*. Insofar as there is a relation at all, it is between the subject and the spatially organized sensory content (i.e., the ‘undetermined’ appearance itself); the intuiting is the intentional directedness of the one at the other.

(2) One might object to the External Representation interpretation along the following lines. We talk of ‘blue’ sensations and we talk of ‘blue’ objects. But this fact about our language obscures an important difference between the ways we use the term ‘blue’ in the two cases. When I refer to a physical surface as ‘blue,’ I am using a concept that can only be applied meaningfully to spatially extended objects. When I refer to my sensation as ‘blue,’ I take myself to be conceptualizing something (a mental state) that cannot possibly be spatial. Hence the concepts used in the two cases cannot be the same. But the model of empirical intuition I’ve offered seems blind to this distinction. In identifying sensations (or at least the qualities thereof) with the qualities represented in space by the intuition, the difference between the two has been erased. This, it will be objected, cannot be correct.

The response to this objection is relatively straightforward. It can be granted that there is a *conceptual* difference between my characterization of the ‘blue’ of the sensation (in here) and the ‘blue’ of the surface (out there). But this difference is *just* a conceptual one, and doesn’t come into play until judgements are made about the object. At the level of mere intuitive content, there is no difference between the qualities displayed by the sensations constituting the intuition and the appearance’s qualities as represented by the intuition. It is not until I add a conceptual content to the cognition of something given in outer intuition that I will conceptualize the sensed quality in terms of color concepts describing external physical objects (not internal mental states).[[32]](#footnote-30)

In short, even though the External Representation interpretation identifies the qualities of sensations with the qualities represented by the intuited objects, it does not entail that these qualities must be represented *as sensations* when they are determined in judgement.[[33]](#footnote-31) To return to the analogy of the painting, just as I point to the red paint on the canvas and say ‘that is an apple’ and not ‘that is a dot of red paint,’ so too when I attend to the qualities sensed in perceptual episodes I say of them ‘that is a red surface’ and not ‘that is a phenomenal mental event with a certain “red” qualitative component.’[[34]](#footnote-32) To think otherwise would be to confuse the sensory medium with the empirically real message.

(3) Finally, the External Representation interpretation has the virtue of being able to make sense of some of Kant’s otherwise frustrating remarks about the relation between sensations and objects. One of the premises of the argument of the Anticipations of Perception is that ‘the objects of perception […] contain […] the real of the sensation’ (B207). And in the A-edition Fourth Paralogism, he remarks, ‘every outer perception’ (i.e., every sensation-containing conscious representation) ‘immediately proves something real in space, or rather is itself the real’ (A374). In these passages, Kant seems to be identifying sensory, mental states with realities in space, and hence he could be taken to be claiming that the ordinary objects of experience—tables, chairs, etc.—are literally made up of these sensory states. Passages like this make it easy to see why Kant’s early critics (later ones too) would be ready to accuse him of a Berkeleyan phenomenalism and idealism.

The External Representation interpretation shows how to acquit Kant of this charge. It is true that sensations are projected in space and thereby constitute the appearances about which we make judgements in cognition. But just because the undetermined *appearance* is constructed out of sensory contents, this does not require that the judgements I make about the *object* (when I determine the appearance with concepts) assert that the object is made up of sensory states. When the object is judged in cognition, the sensory states constituting the intuited appearance are not conceptualized *as* sensory states.

To appeal to our analogy one last time, if I use red paint to depict an apple on a canvas, I do not thereby commit myself to the apple being made out of red paint. I take the depicted apple to be made out of *fruit*. Similarly, if sensations are the medium out of which I construct appearances in intuition, I do not thereby commit myself to judging these objects to be made out of sensations. I judge that the object I intuit is made out of physical, mind-independent stuff (the stuff described by physics). For again, the medium is not the message.

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2. All quotations of Kant are from the Cambridge Editions of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Paul Guyer and Allen Wood general editors. Citations of *Critique of Pure Reason* use standard A/B pagination. Citations from other works refer to Akademie volume number and page number. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. I’ll stick with ‘representationality’ for the most part. It is an admittedly unattractive term, but ‘intentionality’ and ‘object-directedness’ carry connotations that would muddy the waters I hope to clarify in the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. It will be important to keep this *semantic* question regarding sensation’s role in securing intentional relations distinct from any *epistemic* role that sensation might perform. For the question of whether and to what extent (if at all) sensations might determine or justify our objectively valid judgements of objects is a different one than the question of how sensations make a pre-epistemic object-directedness possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. I will not address the complex question regarding whether empirical objects (appearances) or things in themselves are the causes of sensation. As best I can tell, the dominant reading (with which I agree) seems to be that things in themselves are the true cause of sensation. Kant himself is not always perfectly clear on the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. In the A-edition formulation of this principle, the relation is merely one of ‘correspondence’ (A166). The fact that Kant revised the formulation of the principle to specify that this correspondence is an ‘object of’ sort of relation indicates that he was self-consciously emphasizing that there is some sense in which sensations have objects and hence represent. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. For instance, when Kant distinguishes judgements with objective validity from those with subjective validity, ‘subjective’ is being used in a sense distinct from the two senses to be articulated presently. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Here and in what follows, all references to the way the object is “independently of the way the subject is affected by it” are meant to refer to the *empirical* sense of a thing in itself (see A29/B45) as opposed to the usual transcendental sense. It is of course possible for us to have knowledge of *empirical* objects as they are in themselves (e.g., when we know their spatiotemporal determinations, or cognize them by appeal to the pure principles of the understanding), even if we cannot have knowledge of transcendent things in themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. Kant defends a similar position in *Jäsche Logic* (see 9:37). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Below (§4) I discuss at greater length the different senses in which sensations and intuitions are both A-subjective. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. See also *Inaugural Dissertation* (2:393). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. To be more specific, if an object *x* is represented by the content φ, if φ is a logically valid determination of *x* then (other things being equal) the judgement ‘*x* is φ’ may be licensed. But if φ is an A-subjective content, then at most one would be justified in saying ‘*x* seems/appears φ to me.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. I take semantic functions to be more basic than epistemic functions for the simple reason that I cannot have knowledge of an object unless I am first able to make determinate reference to that object. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. NB: A sensation can *contribute* to cognition without itself *being* a cognition. For since sensations are A-subjective, these contents cannot count as knowledge of the object. The contribution to cognition is rather a semantic one: sensation secures the intentional relation to the object. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. Similar remarks can be found in the *Anthropology*, where Kant distinguishes vision, touch, and hearing as objective senses from taste and smell as subjective senses. The former contribute to the cognition of the external object, the latter do not (see 7:154). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. Only the first sentence of this passage is common to both editions, while the remainder is a revision of a deleted passage. A similar point is made in the A-edition though: ‘Colors are not objective qualities of the bodies to the intuition of which they are attached, but are also only modifications of the sense of sight, which is affected by light in a certain way’ (A28). I take this to be another assertion of the A-subjectivity of sensations. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. For instance, one and the same color sensation could be caused by two very different objects under different illumination conditions. Hence, on the evidentiary basis of *only* the sensation, one could know that one was seeing *something*, but not what exactly. This is not to say, however, that the sensation tells us *nothing* about the nature of the affecting object. Presumably there will be some correspondence between the intensity of the sensation and the intensity of the object that caused the sensation. For a more detailed discussion of the epistemological significance of sensation in the Anticipations of Perception, see Jankowiak (‘Intensive Magnitudes’). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. A further consideration against the Internal Representation interpretation of the passage is that it would not be possible for a sensation to represent the content: ‘that the subject is affected’ (which is how that interpretation would have to read the passage). This is a propositional content, hence a judgement, and hence not a representational content that a creature of mere sensibility could possess. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. Manley Thompson, relying primarily on the *Stufenleiter* passage, takes this to be Kant’s official account (‘Singular Terms‘, 323). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. See A33/B49-50, A37/B53-54, B72, B156, B291, A374, A379, and B407. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. Most of the recent discussion about representationality in Kant has been structured around the question whether Kant thought that the intentional is necessarily conceptual. According to some, a mental state can refer to an object if the object is represented *as an object*, which requires the deployment of conceptual (categorial) capacities. According to others, we can distinguish two degrees of reference to an object: the ability to represent the object through a nonconceptual intuition is one achievement, and the ability to represent (conceptually) the object *as an object* is another. Proponents of the conceptualist line include Sellars (*Science and Metaphysics,* ch. 1), Ginsborg (‘Was Kant a Non-Conceptualist?’, 70), McDowell (*Mind and World*, 9), Brandom (*Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 23), Sedgwick (‘McDowell’s Hegelianism’), and Abela (*Empirical Realism*, ch. 2.). Proponents of the nonconceptualist line include Allais (‘Non-Conceptual Content’), Hanna (‘Beyond the Myth’, 334), Falkenstein (‘Kant’s Account of Intuition’, 185), and Longuenesse (*Capacity to Judge*, 201). This debate about whether intuitive representational content is nonconceptual is a deeply important one, and one that must be resolved in order to have a complete account of Kant’s theory of intentionality. But no matter where one sides on this debate about the intentionality of *intuitions*, it is clear that *sensations* will never meet the conditions on intentionality according to either camp. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. For Kant’s many descriptions of sensations as ‘matter’ in the *Critique* see A22/B36, A42/B59-60, A90, B207, A166/B208, A223/B270, A267/B323. See also the *Fortschritte* (20:266) and *Metaphysik Mrongovius* (29:795 and 29:800) for similar remarks. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. In the discussion to follow I focus only on the representation of external objects. A similar story would be told for the representation of inner objects, but in that case sensations are synthesized with the form of time only. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. We’ve already seen hints that the representational function of sensation could only be realized in the context of empirical intuition. At A374, Kant clarified the claim that sensations designate ‘actualities’ in space with the parenthetical remark, ‘staying for now with outer intuitions.’ And in the *Metaphysical Foundations*, he wrote, ‘*matter,* as opposed to *form*, would be that in the outer intuition which is an object of sensation’ (4:481). See also *Anthropology* (7:154). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. See also *Jäsche Logic*, 9:101: ‘the *matter* of judgement consists in the given representations that are combined in the unity of consciousness in the judgement, the *form* is the determination of the way that the various representations belong, as such, to one consciousness.’ In the *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, he says, ‘experience has matter, i.e., data, and form, i.e., the connection of the data’ (29:795). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. This mereological sense of the matter/form distinction also appears in some of Kant’s discussions of general ontology. For instance: ‘in every being its components (*essentialia*) are the matter; the way in which they are connected in a thing, the essential form’ (A266/B322). See also *Prolegomena* (4:295-6), Inaugural Dissertation (2:389-90), and the L1 Metaphysics Lectures (28:195). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
27. If sensations are the matter of *empirical* intuition, then one naturally wants to know whether *pure* intuitions can be said to have any matter. In places, Kant suggests that they do. Kant claims that the synthesis of a manifold in intuition can be ‘given empirically or a priori’ (A77/B103), by which he presumably means that the matter of pure intuition is a manifold of empty locations or moments in the a priori representation of space and time (cf. A94/B127). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
28. Unless one is a conceptualist with respect to intuition, in which case an intuition also involves the conceptual representation of those sensory qualities as an object. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
29. One might worry that appeal to the combination of sensations into an intuition is illegitimate because combination (or “synthesis”) is the work of understanding, not sensibility. In response, I’d claim that the understanding (in the guise of the imagination) does play in a role in the creation of intuition. Although I think this view highly defensible, I will not be able to defend it here. See Longuenesse (*Capacity to Judge*, ch. 9) and Sellars (*Science and Metaphysics*, chs. 1-2) for defenses of this sort of interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
30. Thus on this interpretation, sensations are the matter both of the intuition and the appearance. Of the former, because the intuiting of an object just is the organizing of sensations into spatial arrays and bringing these arrays to intentional consciousness, And of the latter, because what the subject is aware of in the intuition, what Kant labels appearance, just is the sensations so arrayed. (Kant refers to sensation as the matter of appearance at A42/B59, B207, and *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 29:829.) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
31. The view I defend here bears some similarity to Falkenstein’s (see especially *Kant’s Intuitionism*, ch. 3), so it’s worth making the differences between the views explicit. We agree that sensations are the matter of intuition and that there is *some* sense in which sensations are spatially located (ibid., 111ff.). We also agree that sensation has an important function with respect to the representation of the real in appearance (ibid., 117). However, where Falkenstein argues for the controversial thesis that sensations are physiological effects on the body (ibid., 119ff.), I take them as they are traditionally understood, viz., as effects in the mind. Accordingly, where Falkenstein says that sensations (and intuitions as well) *are* in space, I argue that sensations are merely *represented* in (or ‘projected into’, as I’ve put it) the representation of space. Just as importantly, where Falkenstein denies that sensations *have* sensible qualities, and claims instead that sensible qualities are the *intentional objects* of sensations (ibid., 128), I have argued that sensations are indeed the bearers of sensible qualities, and I have argued that sensations cannot possess an intentional object-directedness. Lastly, where Falkenstein argues that sensations are the matter of intuition but not appearance (ibid., 106ff.), I argue that sensation is the matter of both (see note 30 above). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
32. This response will work even for conceptualist interpreters (see note 21 above). For even if intuitions have an ineliminable conceptual component, it does not follow that *all* intuitive representational content is conceptual. Rather, the part of the intuition that represents the object as an object—i.e., the part of the intuition’s content that is structured by categorial form—would be irreducibly conceptual. But this does not preclude a distinct part of the intuition’s content—the sensory component, at least—from being non-conceptual. And Kant surely would not have claimed that *all* intuitive content is conceptual, for this would be to reduce intuitions to a special class of concepts and the entire distinction between sensibility and understanding would be erased (see A15/B29, A50/B74). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
33. Johannes Haag arrives at a similar position on this issue: ‘Properties of sensation are not represented by us in sensible perception as *properties of sensation*, (i.e., as mere subjective modifications of subjects), but rather *as properties of the represented* objects’ (*Erfahrung und Gegenstand*,135, my translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
34. To be sure, I *could* say ‘that is a dot of red paint’ if I were attending to the painting not as a representation of something, but simply as smears of paint on canvas. Likewise, I *could* take my visual sensations to be mere visual sensations. But in that case, I’d be having an inner intuition of my sensory state. This possibility is not ruled out by the External Representation model. Rather, all this model is committed to is the claim that *in instances of external perception* (where I take myself to be attending to something outside my mind), sensations are not represented as sensations. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)