

MISUNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF CONCEPTS IN KANT

A INCOMPREENSÃO DO PAPEL DOS CONCEITOS EM KANT

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“The atmosphere surrounding this problem is terrible. Dense clouds of language lie about the crucial point. It is almost impossible to get through to it”.

L. Wittgenstein

Abstract: The claim that “concepts serve as rules for the synthesis of representations” is understood by the mainstream of Kant’s scholarship as if categories and concepts in general are conditions for the constitution of objects out of the manifold of sensations devoid of reference. That is the claim that I wish to question here. The claim comes in different flavors and formulations. Still, none of them are relevant here. My aim is to provide an alternative account for the claim that “the representation makes the object possible.” I argue that the traditional view represents a solution to what I call *the pseudo problem of intentionality*, namely to account for how a representation of something emerges out of a manifold of sensations devoid of reference. Yet, the intentionality problem is a misunderstanding of what I call *the recognition thesis*: the role of concepts is to provide the rules for the (mind-dependent) *recognition (Erkenntnis)* of the mind-independent existence of transcendental objects (noumena). “The representation makes the object possible” in the relevant sense that only by means of concepts can we recognize that what is sense-dependently represented actually exists mind-independently as transcendental objects or noumena in the negative sense. My view is embedded in the framework of what today is called “Kantian Nonconceptualism”. Still, my view is neither a simply re-statement of Kantian Nonconceptualism nor depend on it. It is independently grounded on what Kant calls “Erkenntnis”.

Keywords: Nonconceptualism; Concepts; Recognition thesis; Intentionality thesis.

Resumo: A afirmação de que “conceitos servem como regras para a síntese de representações” é entendida pela grande maioria dos estudiosos de Kant como se categorias e conceitos em geral fossem condição para a constituição de objetos a partir de um múltiplo sensorial desprovido de referência. Essa é a afirmação que desejo questionar aqui. A tese vem em diferentes formulações. Entretanto, nenhuma delas em particular é relevante aqui. Meu objetivo é fornecer uma explicação alternativa para a célebre tese kantiana segundo a qual “a representação torna o objeto possível”. Sustento nesse trabalho que a concepção tradicional fornece uma solução para o que denomino o pseudo-problema de intencionalidade, a saber explicar como a representação de algo emerge de um múltiplo desprovido de referências. No entanto, o problema da intencionalidade nada mais é do que uma compreensão equivocada do que chamo de tese do reconhecimento: o papel dos conceitos é fornecer regras para o reconhecimento da existência de objetos transcendentais (noumena) independentes da mente.

Palavras-chave: Não-Conceitualismo; Conceitos; Tese da Reconhecimento; Tese da Intencionalidade.

1. Setting the Stage

In his famous letter to Herz, Kant admits that in his *Dissertation* he never addresses the key question: how can concepts that depend only on “the very nature of the pure understanding” agree with objects that are quite independent of our understanding? In his own words:

In my *Dissertation* I was content to explain the nature of intellectual representations in a merely negative way, namely, to state that they were not modifications of the mind brought about by the object. *However, I silently passed over the further question of how a representation that refers to an object without being in any way affected by it can be possible.* (Corresp. Letter to Herz. AA, X, 130; 72. Emphasis added)

This problem leads him to examine more generally the relation between representations and objects of representations, in particular between intellectual or conceptual representations and their objects. The general question is about the *ground* of the relation of that in us which we call representation to the object? At the beginning of his transcendental deduction (TD henceforth), we can read the following statement:

There are only two possible cases in which a synthetic representation and its objects can establish connection, relate to one another with necessity and, as it were, meet one another: either if the object alone makes the representation possible, or the representation the object. In the former case, this relation is only empirical, and the representation is never possible a priori. (A92/B124-125)

When the object makes the representation possible, the representation is empirical and “making possible” seems to mean nothing more than a causal relation: the representation is nothing but a modification of the mind induced by the object. However, it is far from clear what Kant means by “making possible” when the representation is what makes the object possible and the representation is a priori and intellectual or conceptual.

My aim is to account for the central Kantian claim in the *Critique* that “the synthetic representation makes the object possible.” The Kantian claim that “concepts serve as rules for the synthesis of representations” (A 103) is usually understood as if concepts contain norms with a package of information that teaches us how to

make/constitute objects by unifying sensible representations in the same way as we assemble the pieces of a puzzle into a picture. I pejoratively call the first claim *the constitutional view* and the second *the puzzle theory*. The crucial assumption here is the fastidious claim that I pejoratively call *the mind-made reality view*. That is what I wish to question in this paper.

I argue that the mind-made reality claim and the puzzle theory come, at least in the interpretations of some recent major scholars, as a solution to a pseudo problem in the *Critique: the intentionality problem*, namely, accounting for how a representation of something emerges on the basis of a manifold of sensations devoid of reference. I argue in this paper that the intentionality problem is a deep misunderstanding of what I call *the recognition thesis*: the role of concepts is to provide the rules for the (mind-dependent) *recognition (Erkenntnis)* of the mind-independent character of transcendental objects. “The representation makes the object possible” in the relevant sense that only by means of concepts can we recognize that what is sense-dependently represented actually exists mind-independently as transcendental objects.

How should I proceed? The first section is devoted to the intentionality problem. Here my aim is to show that the intentionality problem is a pseudo problem that emerges from two Hegelian readings of Kant: putative Kantian conceptualism, and putative Kantian radical subjectivism. The second section is devoted to explaining how this putative problem is supposed to be solved. The third and last section is devoted to explaining the recognition thesis as the real Kantian position regarding the normative role of concepts.

2. The Intentionality Problem

In the course of the TD, Kant restates the original problem: how the representation makes its object possible. His answers are quite similar:

Nonetheless the representation is a priori determinant of the object, if it be the case that only through the representation is it possible to *cognize (erkennen)* anything *as* an object. (A92/B125-26. Original emphasis)

What does one mean [...] if one speaks of an object corresponding to and therefore also distinct from the cognition [*Erkenntniß*]? (A104)

And his answer is again quite similar:

It is easy to see that this object must be thought of only as something in general = X, since outside of our *cognition* we have nothing that we could set over against this *cognition* as corresponding to it. (A104; emphasis added)

Before I proceed, I would like to ask: what is the simplest, most natural and compelling reading of those passages? By claiming that the concept makes the object possible, Kant is not saying that the representation is causing the object (as in the case of empirical representation). Still, if we take the use of “cognition” (*Erkenntnis*) as a technical notion seriously, the sentence “to *cognize* (*erkennen*) anything *as* an object” can only have the sense that concepts make the *mind-dependent cognition* of what our senses represent as an object possible, that is, as something that exists *mind-independently as a transcendental object (noumenon)*. That is the claim that I want to support in this paper.

Unfortunately, that is not the way that some scholars within the mainstream of Kantian scholarship reads that statement. According to Longuenesse, for example:

The relation considered here no longer has anything in common with the second term of the alternative stated in the Letter to Herz. The object is an object-of-representation which representation alone “makes possible,” not in its existence (which continues to be dependent on the presence of an in-itself outside representation), but in its character as a represented object. But this clause presupposes a new meaning of the term “representation” itself. Representation here is no longer a result (as the synthetic representations “made possible by the object” were in the previous case), but an act of representation, or at least a disposition to represent. If representation is considered in this way, one may say that the object (e.g., the appearance that in the previous case “made possible” representation) is possible only if there is a representation or “disposition to representation,” which *constitutes it* as an object of representation: *the preposition as signals the internalization of the object within the representation*. But perhaps, then, the disposition to representation has its own characteristics that determine the features of the object “as” internalized within representation. (1998: 23. Emphases added)

According to Longuenesse’s reading, the preposition “as” (italicized in “cognize anything *as*”) means the “internalization of the object within the representation.” That is the most unnatural reading of the preposition “as” in those contexts that I have ever

found. Let me call this *the internalization thesis*. The internalization thesis was recently reiterated by Schulting¹. However, he seems to recognize that such a reading is at least *prima facie* counterintuitive:

It is clear that Kant wants to argue that in order for us to be able to know the thing about which we make claims, we must somehow *internalize* the thing, *how odd or counterintuitive this may at first blush sound*. Already here, we are in the thicket of a specifically Kantian theory of knowledge, which shows the inextricability of epistemological and ontological issues. (2017: 41. Emphases added).

The internalization thesis relies on two complementary claims. The first is the Hegelian reading of transcendental idealism as a radical form of subjective idealism. Following Schulting, let me call this *Kantian radical subjectivism*.² The second key claim is also of Hegelian provenance, namely putative Kantian conceptualism, that is, the claim that without concepts our senses represent nothing.³ In other words, without concepts, we have only a chaotic manifold of sensations devoid of reference. Both putative radical subjective idealism and putative Kantian conceptualism give rise to what I wish to call *the intentionality problem*, namely how to account for the putative fact that out of a chaotic manifold of sensations (“mere representations”) devoid of reference we manage to represent something as an object. Longuenesse’s internalization thesis is the first step towards solving this pseudo intentionality problem.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that the mainstream of Kantian scholarship has identified the intentionality problem as the crucial problem of the Critical philosophy. Indeed, the intentional problem is so old in the history of Kantian philosophy that it is hard to locate its beginnings. But I believe that the oldest manifestation of it traces back to Beck’s letter to Kant:

The *Critique* calls “intuition” a representation that relates immediately to an object. But in fact, a representation does not become objective until it is subsumed under the categories. Since

¹ See Schulting 2017: 9.

² That is the name of Schulting’s last book from 2017.

³ Kantian conceptualism comes in two forms. Usually, non-Kantian scholars like McDowell and Sellars claim that Kantian sensible intuitions are already demonstrative-like concepts. In contrast, Kantian scholars construe putative Kantian conceptualism as the claim that without concepts sensible intuitions are nothing but a manifold of sensations devoid of reference. It is only this second reading that gives rise to the intentionality problem.

intuition similarly acquires its objective character only by means of the application of categories to it, I am in favor of leaving out that definition of “intuition” that refers to it as a representation relating to objects. I find in intuition nothing more than a manifold accompanied by consciousness (or by the unique “I think”), a manifold determined by the latter, in which there is as such no relation to an object.” (*Corresp.*, AA, 11: 311; p. 396)

Cassirer, for example, clearly endorsed the intentionality problem. He interprets Kantian intuition as “mere occurrences of sense impressions in the mind” (1954: 56). Moreover, he claims that, without concepts, “no proper awareness of anything is possible” (1954: 118), and that “in the absence of original acts of understanding, there can be no consciousness of anything objective (...)” (1954: 138). In the same vein, Bennett states: “(Without such self-conscious use of concepts) we live in a chaotic world of manifold data in which everything is in continual flux” (1966: 33). Allison reiterates exactly the same reading in the following words: “(Without concepts) nothing would be recognizable and our experience would be nothing but what William James famously referred to as “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (Allison 2015: 54).

Longuenesse adds the following:

But it is also intended to distinguish, within the realm of representation, between the object “only as” appearance and the object “as” object. In other words, it is intended to distinguish the object that might be called “*preobjective*” (*the indeterminate object of empirical intuition, prior to any distinction between the representation and the object of representation*) from the “*objective*” object, or the object “corresponding to” intuition. For this distinction to be possible, and therefore “for the cognition of an object as object,” a second type of representation is required: concepts.” (1998: 24. Emphases added)

Longuenesse’s idea of preobjective objects echoes Allison’s idea of proleptic representations. Just take a look:

As W.H. Walsh aptly put it, a Kantian sensible intuition is “proleptically” the representation of a particular. To fulfill their representational function, intuitions must be brought under concepts...(2004: 82)

The other claim that underlies the internalization thesis is the Hegelian reading of transcendental idealism as a radical form of subjectivism. To be sure, Kant is not a

naïve Berkeleian idealist for whom *esse est percipi*. Still, we are told, he remains a sophisticated subjectivist idealist for whom *esse* is a rule-governed synthesis of *percipi* according to concepts. The widespread idea is always more of the same: since the transcendental object is cognitively inaccessible, the only thing to be known is its surrogate, namely a necessary unity of representations guided by concepts as rules of synthesis. Accordingly, if we cannot say that categories are ontological conditions of the existence of noumena in the negative sense, we call still call them *ontological conditions of objects*⁴.

The emerging picture is the mainstream view of reality as mind-made. Reality only emerges when the rule-governed mental activity synthetizes the internalized representations in us into representations of objects guided by concepts. To honor the mainstream of Kantian scholarship, let me call this *the constitutional view* of concepts⁵. One good illustration of the constitutional view is the following:

The Copernican solution that Kant presents is that, instead, we regard objects as conforming to *our* modes of cognition, specifically our a priori forms of intuition as well as a priori concepts (Bxvi–xvii). This means that, although as said our representation of the object does not at all generate the object, as a thing in itself, as far as its existence is concerned, it does determine something a priori about that which we represent, such that what is being represented can first be considered an object. There is thus *a constitutive element involved* in our a priori representation of the object... (2017: 5; emphasis added)

Thus, the forceful conclusion is that “the object is nothing but a synthesis of representations” (Schulting 2017: 177). According to Schulting:

⁴ Schulting provides the following warning:

“It is perhaps confusing to speak of the categories as ontological conditions of objects, which are not conditions of the possibility of things in themselves, when ‘ontological’ is usually understood as having to do with precisely the things in themselves (die Sachen selbst, in Kant’s terms). *But ‘ontological’ should in the first instance be understood as having to do with what instantiates the objects as being objects, i.e. as being the intentional accusatives of objectively valid experience that are perceived as existing external to oneself.*” (2017: 147. Emphasis added)

⁵The widespread view is that the *constitutional view* is the very core of Kantian transcendental philosophy. According to the pre-Kantian philosophy the object “is given” independently of concepts. According to Kantian wisdom, on the contrary, objects would be “constituted” by the employment of concepts. According to Longuenesse, for example: “If representation is considered in this way, one may say that the object (e.g., the appearance that in the previous case “made possible” representation) is possible only if there is a representation or “disposition to representation,” which *constitutes it* as an object of representation: the preposition as signals the internalization of the object within the representation.” (1998: 23. Emphases added). [Why repeat yourself like this? In any case, see earlier comment on this.]

(t)he synthetic relation *among the representations themselves* defines the pure, or as Kant also says, “transcendental object” (2017: 7)

So, in effect, when Kant says that the object house, as appearance, “is nothing more than a sum of these representations”, this should be understood in the sense that the determinate appearance that is the house in front of me is to be identified with the *synthetic unity* in the manifold of representations. (2017: 177).

3. The Puzzle Theory

Now, the best way to figure out how the Kantian philosopher solves his *intentionality problem* in light of the *constitutional view of concepts* is to assume that “concepts serve as a rule for synthesis”, in the sense that they contain packages of information that teach us how to unify representations into the representation of an object, in the same way as we assemble the pieces of a puzzle into a picture. Let me call this *the puzzle theory*. Imagine that we are playing with a jigsaw puzzle. We face the manifold of pieces of a puzzle: windows, roofs, doors, walls etc. The problem is how to fit them together. Now, suppose in addition that such pieces are nothing but “mere representations” or “internalized entities within the realm of representations” (to put in Longuenesse’s terms). Through our vision we have only cognitive access to a chaotic manifold of *internalized* representations of windows, roofs, doors, walls etc. Now, when we *think of* such a manifold of sensible representations by means of the concept HOUSE, we find a rule that guides us in synthesizing them, that is, in assembling the pieces of a puzzle, namely as the house-representation.

But let me start from the beginning. The intentionality problem begins with the (empirically false) assumption that animals and infants live in James’s blooming, buzzing world of chaotic sensations devoid of objects. However chaotic and in flux those sense-impressions might be, they are all in time understood as forms of intuitions. Now, there is at least one key passage of TD where Kant *seems* to endorse this conceptualist and subjectivist view that without concepts we are immersed in this chaotic manifold of sensations:

Unity of synthesis in accordance with empirical concepts would be entirely contingent, and, were it not grounded on a transcendental ground of unity, it would be possible for a *swarm* of appearances (*ein Gewühle von Erscheinungen*) to fill up our soul without **experience**

(*Erfahrung*) ever being able to arise from it. But in that case, all relation of **cognition** (*Erkenntnis*) to objects also disappears, since the appearances would lack the connection that universal and necessary laws demand, and would thus be intuition with no thought or cognition (*Erkenntnis*), and would therefore be as good as nothing for us.” (A111. Emphasis in bold added)

Given this, according to the puzzle theory, the first “objectivizing” step to “constitute” our reference to objects is described as follows:

Now in order for unity of intuition to come from this manifold information (as, say, in the representation of space), it is necessary first to *run through* and then *take together* this manifold information, which action I call the **synthesis of apprehension**, since it is aimed directly at the intuition, which to be sure provides this information but can never interpret it, and indeed is contained **in one representation**, without the occurrence of such a synthesis. (A99, emphases in cursive are added)

As subjective, the manifold of internalized representations occurs during time, as part of the succession of everything that is occurring. Therefore, the first thing the self-conscious mind undertakes is to *run* through these *internalized* representations and then integrate them (*take them together*) as pieces of the same unified singular representation. At least in the first edition of the *Critique*, we are told that such “running through” the manifold in time and “taking them together” are understood by puzzle theory as real processes that the mind performs, below the threshold of self-conscious thought.⁶ Third, as this operation is performed under the threshold of self-conscious thought according to concepts, the resulting singular representation is not yet an object.⁷

Let us come back to Kant’s examples. By means of sight, a chaotic manifold of internalized representations is given as mere modifications of my mind. In that sense, they only exist inside me: partial representations of a roof, partial representations of a

⁶ In Strawson’s words:

“At times Kant seems to turn for an answer to a special kind of “transcendental self-consciousness” associated with the *activity* of the faculty of understanding. The key unity of consciousness, it seems, is to be sought in the fact that the connectedness of our perception is produced by the activity of the mind.” (1966: 94)

⁷ Paton, one of the most influential Kantian Scholars, put this as follows:

“The full description of the synthesis of apprehension is the synthesis of the apprehension of ideas, as modifications of the mind in intuition. This shows that apprehension qua apprehension is concerned with ideas as these are present to us in inner sense. These ideas may be called subjective in the sense that for mere apprehension (that is apprehension in abstraction from thoughts) they are not ideas of an object.” (1937/1970: part I: 360.)]

window, partial representations of a door, and so on. However, when I *run* through these successive partial representations and then *take them together* as pieces of a puzzle, a conscious singular picture emerges. However, since I am not employing the concept HOUSE, this first unity of representations is not enough to be considered as an object.

This first step in objectification is inseparable from the following second step, which Kant defines as follows:

It is, to be sure, a merely empirical law in accordance with which representations that have often followed or accompanied one another are finally associated with each other. They are thereby placed in a connection in accordance with which, even without the presence of the object, one of these representations brings about a transition of the mind to the other in accordance with a constant rule. (A100)

The unified singular representation would not be possible if there were not an empirical law that enables the mind to retrieve some past partial representation, when this is no longer present in the mind, by means of another partial representation empirically associated with the first. For example, if I have the partial representation of a boat navigating upstream at t_2 , it prompts in my mind the retrieval of the partial representation of a boat navigating upstream at t_1 , which was no longer present and so my empirical imagination can unify both partial representations as a single representation. Likewise, if I have the partial representation of a door at t_2 , it prompts my mind to retrieve the partial representation of a window at t_1 or the partial representation of a roof at t_0 , which are no longer present and so my empirical imagination can unify both partial representations as a single representation.

To complete the puzzle, a final objectification operation is still required. This is what Kant calls the synthesis of recognition:

Without the consciousness that what we think is the very same as we thought a moment before, all reproduction in the series of representations would be vain. For it is a new representation in our current state, which would not belong to the act through which it had been gradually generated, and its manifold would never constitute a whole, since it would lack the unity that only consciousness can obtain for it. If, in counting, I forget the units that I now have before my senses, I would not cognize the generation of the multitude through this successive addition of one to the other, and consequently

I would not cognize the number; for this concept consists solely in the consciousness of this unity of the synthesis.

The word “concept” itself could effectively describe this remark. For it is one consciousness that unifies the manifold information that has been successively processed, and also reproduced, into one representation. (A103)

The idea is that the empirical association of a present partial representation, say of a window, with the past partial representation, say of a door or of a roof, does not ensure *per se* that they all belong together to a single house-representation. Only the concept HOUSE could ensure the consciousness that all partial representations belong together in a single house-representation. Therefore, apprehension and reproduction would be in vain without concepts. According to puzzle theory, concepts provide the missing rules to assemble all the pieces (partial representations) of the puzzle together into a coherent singular picture/representation. I assemble the partial representation of a roof, the partial representation of a window, and the partial representation of a door into the singular representation of a house. However, I would not succeed in assembling all the manifold pieces of the puzzle together until I could *think* of them all as partial representations of a singular representation of a house.

Now the puzzle theory faces the key question: what should we understand as the object of our sensible representations:

And here it is necessary to explain what is meant by the expression “an object of representations.” We have said above that appearances themselves are nothing but sensible representations, which, like objects, must not be regarded in themselves, outside the power of representation. What does one mean, then, if one speaks of an object corresponding to and therefore also distinct from the cognition? It is easy to see that this object must be thought of only as something in general = X, since outside of our cognition we have nothing that we could compare to this cognition as corresponding to it.

However, we find that our thought of the relation of all *cognition* to its object carries something of necessity. Since the latter is regarded as that which is opposed to our cognitions being determined at pleasure or arbitrarily, rather than being determined *a priori*, insofar as they are to relate to an object, our cognitions must also necessarily agree with

each other in relation to it, i.e., have that unity that constitutes the concept of an object. (A104, emphasis added)⁸

It is here that the Hegelian reading of Kantian idealism as a radical form of subjectivism enters into the picture. The transcendental object is cognitively inaccessible. All we have is a chaotic manifold of partial representations. However, we can create a surrogate for the forever lost transcendental object, namely the very single representation compounded by partial representations unified in a necessary way by a rule provided by a concept. Following Schulting, let me call this *the ontological view of concepts*. In Schulting's own words:

To know an object means to “have effected synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition” (A105). **And this constitutes not just the knowledge of an object, but the very object itself**, because “[t]hat in the appearance [*dasjenige an der Erscheinung*] which contains the condition of this necessary rule of apprehension *is the object*” (B236/A191; emphasis added). (2017: 180, emphasis in bold added)

Henrich goes a step further and starts to conceive the Kantian object as ontologically complex, that is, as a compound of predicates:

It is easy to see that **our relations to objects** cannot take effect through such occurrences (the presentations of sensible qualities) **alone**. Regarding **both** what an object is and the attitude that makes possible its cognition, **conditions are included in the thought of the object that cannot be satisfied by the presentations of sensible qualities as such**. Whereas objects must satisfy certain requirements of **constancy**, a cognition that can be called “objective” can come about only through the successful application of criteria that allow a distinction to be drawn between objects that are merely putatively given and objects that are really given (1994: 130; emphases in bold

⁸ This passage echoes Kant's Second Analogy:

“We have representations in us, of which we can also become conscious. But let this consciousness reach as far and as exact and precise as one wants, there always remain only representations, i.e., inner determinations of our mind in this or that temporal relation. Now how do we come to posit an object for these representations, or ascribe to their subjective reality, as modifications, some sort of objective reality? Objective significance cannot consist in the relation to another representation (of that which one would call the object), for that would simply raise a new the question: How does this representation in turn go beyond itself and acquire objective significance in addition to the subjective significance that is proper to it as a determination of the state of mind? If we investigate what new characteristic is given to our representations by the **relation to an object**, and what is the dignity that they thereby receive, we find that it does nothing beyond making the combination of representations necessary in a certain way, and subjecting them to a rule; and conversely that objective significance is conferred on our representations only insofar as a certain order in their temporal relation is necessary.” (A197/B242-3)

are added). (...) For this reason, we can never think of objects as simple entities beyond appearances. A **multiplicity** of presentations must always be ascribed to them. In this sense objects are themselves **complexes** or, in any event, are complexly characterized particulars.” (1994: 132, emphasis in bold are added).

Let me take stock and leave Kant aside for a moment. For all we know, concepts are representations (mental particulars) that make us understand the things they apply to. So, for example, I see a body but I do not know what a body is. But then I learn the concept BODY and hence start to understand what bodies are. Now, the mainstream of Kant’s scholarship wants us to believe that besides understanding, concepts have the magic power of constituting objects out of sensations devoid of objects. Let us imagine the following thought experiment. Let us suppose we are all newborns imprisoned in a concealer where, however, we see nothing, we hear nothing, we smell nothing, we touch nothing. In short, we represent absolutely nothing. All we have are sensations devoid of reference: we have only a sensation of colic, a sensation of pain, a sensation of sleep, a sensation of hunger etc. So, for us there is no outside world made of material things. But one day we are released from our imprisonment in the concealer. But how? Pure magic: when we start to think of those sensations in a necessary order according to concepts, we magically start to represent something.

4. The Recognition Thesis

To begin with, Kant’s *swarm of appearances* is certainly not James’s blooming, buzzing world of appearances at all, that is, a chaotic manifold of sensory states devoid of reference or representational content. Kant is clearly assuming that a *swarm of appearances* can fill up our souls, that is, that objects can appear or are represented by our senses without experience (*Erfahrung*) and cognition (*Erkenntnis*). The error of the intentionality thesis traces back to the misunderstanding of experience and cognition as technical terms.⁹ Cognition is not a condition for the representation of objects. Instead, it is the *realization* that what we represent sense-dependently in fact exists mind-independently as a transcendental object. Therefore, what Kant is stating in the quoted

⁹ “Cognition” (*Erkenntnis*) is a technical term in Kant’s theoretical philosophy. Kant contrasts *erkennen* with *kennen*. To put it in Russell’s famous terms, *Erkennen* is understood by Kant as a form of propositional knowledge or understanding: “I erkennen dass (...)” In contrast, *kennen* is understood as an immediate form of knowledge by acquaintance: an objectual knowledge (see FSS., § 6, AA, 2: 60; BL., fifth section, § 139, AA. 24: 132–133; pp. 103–104; JL., VIII, AA., 9: 65; p. 569).

passage of A111 is that, without concepts, we could represent what appears to us as a swarm, that is, as something we could not understand. Empirical concepts are conditions for the cognition of objects (the cognition thesis) rather than conditions for representing objects (the intentionality thesis).

Second, the widespread assumption that without concepts our cognitive life would be James's blooming, buzzing world of appearances lacks any textual support. Worst than that, the assumption completely contradicts Kant's achievement in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, according to which we represent objects in space and time without concepts and we can also represent the very space and time as *a priori* forms of all empirical intuitions, that is, as pure intuitions without the use of concepts.

The careful reader must remember that, in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant not only claims that space and time are the forms of sensible intuition. He also claims to have proven that space and time are *pure intuitions*: that is, they are not only the form of what appears to our outer and inner senses, but also immediate and singular representations of space (A25/B39) and of time (A32/B47)—immediate and singular representations of the spatiotemporal forms. In the particular case of space, Kant quite clearly claims that without any concepts whatsoever, including the concept of space, we are already able to represent an “infinite magnitude” (B40): the intentional object of our outer sense. Pure intuition of space is a paradigmatic case of nonconceptual content: without the category of quantity or any other spatial concept whatsoever, the subject is able to represent an infinite magnitude (as the intentional object of her outer sense), of course without *recognizing* or *understanding* what “an infinite magnitude” means. Kant goes beyond this and wonders how such pure intuitions are possible. It is at this moment that he introduces a further crucial concept: *forms of human sensibility*. We can only immediately represent *a priori* the forms of what appears to our outer sense and inner sense because those forms of appearances lie *a priori* in us as formal constitutions of our human sensibility (B41).

Longuenesse (1998) is the only conceptualist reader who is coherent in this respect. She clearly sees that if Kant is assuming that without concepts our cognitive life would be reduced to what Allison calls James's blooming, buzzing world of appearances, we face the challenge of rewriting the *Transcendental Aesthetic* (1998: 216). Considering that Kant rewrote his *Deduction* many times and his *Refutation*

dozens of times, the fact that he never changed his Transcendental Aesthetic is strong textual evidence that he never thought of intuitions without concepts, as in James's blooming, buzzing world.

Now let us return to apprehension and reproduction. To be sure, Kant's way of expressing himself suggests that he is postulating a necessary but still insufficient condition for representing objects from the putatively chaotic manifold of successive sense-impressions. On closer inspection, he is not considering the intentionality thesis (how a representation of an object arises out of the manifold of sense-impressions), but rather the cognition thesis:

The synthesis of apprehension is therefore inseparably combined with the synthesis of reproduction. And since the former constitutes the transcendental ground of the possibility of all *cognition* in general (*not only of empirical cognition, but also of pure a priori cognition*), the reproductive synthesis of imagination belongs among the transcendental actions of the mind, and we will also call this faculty the transcendental faculty of imagination. (A102, emphases added)

According to the intentionality thesis, apprehension is a necessary but insufficient condition for representing something as an object. Instead, according to the recognition thesis, apprehension is a necessary but insufficient condition for the recognition (*erkennen*) that what I am representing exists mind-independently. Let us rethink our example. First, sensible intuitions are not "internalized representations", or what Kant calls a "mere representation". Rather, they are modifications of the mind that clearly represent mind-independent objects. So, by means of my vision I represent a house, even though without the concept of HOUSE I cannot understand what I am representing and without the category of substance I cannot understand that what I am representing exist mind-independently (the nonconceptualist thesis).¹⁰ Now the first

¹⁰ This famous passage better supports this reading:

"If a savage sees a house from a distance, for example, with whose use he is not acquainted, he admittedly has before him in his representation the very same object as someone else who is acquainted with it determinately as a dwelling established for humans. But as to form, this cognition of one and the same object is different in the two. With one it is mere intuition, with the other it is intuition and concept at the same time." (LOG, introd., V, AA, 9: 33; p. 544–545)

Kant's point is that sensible intuition and concepts are two different and quite independent forms, or ways, of cognizing the same dwelling. Prior to and independently of the conceptual recognition (*erkennen*) of the seen object as a dwelling that is built for humans, the savage is already able to refer to the same subject-independent object and to represent it as a bodily particular that appears from a certain distance, with a given shape, etc. Therefore, the savage's sensible intuition is blind, but not in the sense

necessary but insufficient condition of the recognition (*Erkenntnis*) that the object that I am seeing is a house and exists mind-independently is the recognition that my sensible intuitions qua states representing something succeed one another in time. Second, I must *run through* those states and *take them together* as representations of something. In Kantian words, I *run through* my successive states in time (say, of a roof, of a door, of a window, etc.) and take them together as a representation of something.

But that is obviously not enough. For one thing, while I am contemplating the window of the house, I might forget seeing the roof or the door and so on. Even though the transcendental object I represent through my vision exists mind-independently, as it appears to me mind-dependently as appearances or mere representations, if I forget the first appearances of it as it appears to me another time, so reproduction is needed. While I am contemplating the window of the house, I must be able to retrieve the representations of the roof and of the door that are empirically associated with the representation of the window. Reproduction is the further necessary but insufficient condition of cognition of a transcendental object as a mind-independent house.

Finally, recognition of the object that I nonconceptually represent requires empirical concepts of objects, and recognition that such an object exists mind-independently requires the category of substance. Again, from the outset, according to Kantian nonconceptualism, I am able to represent particulars without possessing empirical concepts. Moreover, contrary to Kantian metaphysical subjectivism, without the category of substance (or pure concepts of objects in general) I am able to represent mind-independently existing particulars, namely noumena or transcendental objects. From the fact that we can cognize them only mind-independently as phenomena it does not follow that they (the same things) exist mind-independently as noumena. However, without the empirical concept HOUSE I have no means of recognizing that what my vision is representing successively is a house. Likewise, without some concept of an object (category of substance), I have no means of recognizing that what I am now

that it either lacks reference or that it refers only to “mere representation.” Rather, it is blind to the fact that what the savage sees is a dwelling built for humans. In other words, without the concept of a dwelling built for humans, the savage simply cannot understand and hence know the subject-independent object that his intuition represents.

Simple-minded animals and nonlinguistic infants probably lack the Kantian categories of substance, causality, etc. They certainly cannot *know or understand* what their perceptual experience is representing. However, this dictum takes no position on whether perceptual experience without concepts lacks the power of reference.

seeing successively is the same object that I have seen before. In Kantian terms, without the consciousness that what we think is the very same as what we thought a moment before, all reproduction in the series of representations would be in vain *for cognition* that what my senses represent exists mind-independently. The synthesis of recognition is the last condition of cognition that ensures that what we see is the same mind-independent object we have seen before.

Now we must face the Kantian question: what is meant by the expression “an object of representations?” (A104). Let us take a further look at A 104:

And here it is necessary to explain what is meant the expression “an object of representations.” We have said above that appearances themselves are nothing but sensible representations, which, like objects, must not be regarded in themselves, outside the power of representation. What does one mean, then, if one speaks of an object corresponding to and therefore also distinct from the cognition? It is easy to see that this object must be thought of only as something in general = *X*, since outside of our cognition we have nothing that we could compare to this cognition as corresponding to it. However, we find that our thought of the relation of all *cognition* to its object carries something of necessity. Since the latter is regarded as that which is opposed to our cognitions being determined at pleasure or arbitrarily, rather than being determined *a priori*, insofar as they are to relate to an object, our cognitions must also necessarily agree with each other in relation to it, i.e., have that unity that constitutes the concept of an object. (A104, emphasis added)

On closer inspection, Kant never says that the object of our representation is some necessary unity of sensible representations. Rather, what he states and reiterates in the second edition is that such ‘unity constitutes *the concept of an object*, that is, our *way of recognizing* that what we do represent by our senses is an object, namely a mind-independent particular. That is enough to rule out the nonsensical claim that categories are *ontological conditions* for the existence of objects (as phenomena rather than as noumena).¹¹

Second, when he identifies appearances with sensible representations he also rules out the traditional reading that a synthetic unity of appearances are the accusative objects of our sensible representations. That is enough to rule out the nonsensical claim that some necessary synthetic unity of appearances is the surrogate of the forever lost

¹¹ See Schulting below 2017: 180.

transcendental object, and the additional nonsensical claim that objects are metaphysically complex, namely some compound of predicates of properties.¹² The accusative object of our sensible representation is what in the first edition Kant calls *transcendental object = x* and in the second *noumenon in the negative sense*. However, insofar as we can only cognize it as an appearance or as a mere representation, the only way we have to recognize its mind-independent existence is by recognizing the successive sensible representation of something objective. Thus, I can only recognize that a transcendental object that my senses represent is a substance that exists mind-independently, when I recognize by means of the category of substance that all my successive representations are representations of a same particular that continues to exist even when unperceived.

Again, what our senses represent exist mind-independently as noumena. However, without empirical concepts we cannot understand what those particulars are. And without categories we cannot recognize that they exist mind-independently. So, ‘concepts serve as rules’ in the key sense that they enable us to recognize the object type-identity and in the key sense that they enable us to recognize that those objects exist mind-independently.

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¹² See Henrich below 1994: 132.

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