

Husserl and Classical German Philosophy
(*Phaenomenologica* 212)

Ed. Faustino Fabbianelli and Sebastian Luft
Dordrecht: Springer, 2014.

Kant, Husserl, and the Case
for Non-Conceptual Content

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In recent debates about the nature of non-conceptual content, the Kantian account of intuition in the first *Critique* has been seen as a sort of founding doctrine for both conceptualist and non-conceptualist positions. In this paper, I begin by examining recent representative versions of the Kantian conceptualist (John McDowell) and Kantian non-conceptualist (Robert Hanna) positions, and suggest that the way the debate is commonly construed by those *on both sides* misses a much broader and more important conception of non-conceptual content, one for which resources can be found in Husserl's later thought. Husserl's account of the object as "transcendental clue" [*Transzendentaler Leitfaden*] in the context of his later genetic phenomenology suggests a less reductive account of non-conceptual aspects of experience that respects central insights of Kant's transcendental idealism but does not reduce the role of the non-conceptual to a mere formally-determined, not-yet-conceptualized "fodder."

1. *The Contemporary Debate about Non-conceptual Content*

The contemporary debate about non-conceptual content is a debate about the possibility, role, and status of the unmediated presentation of experiential content to consciousness, a question typically traced (in this form, at least) to Gareth Evan's posthumously published *The Varieties of Reference*, and greatly reinvigorated by John McDowell's critical discussion of Evans' notion of non-conceptual content in *Mind and World*. On the conceptualist view, the contents of perceptual experience, insofar as they are epistemically relevant, are exclusively and exhaustively explainable in terms of our concepts. For the conceptualist, cognition is conceptual "all the way down," and—to use the Sellarsian language often employed by those taking this position—all representationally significant content must be content existing within the "space of reasons" and thus the space of concepts. On this view, our experiential capacities, insofar as they play a significant and meaningful role in thought, are exhaustively limited by our conceptual capacities. This is often expressed by conceptualists by pointing to Kant's remark that "intuitions without concepts are blind" (KrV,

A 51/B 75). In Kantian terms, the conceptualist will argue that the spontaneity of the synthetic unity of apperception is *exhaustively* characterized by the bringing of intuitions from sensation (*Sinnlichkeit*) under the concepts of the understanding (*Verstand*), and that there is no sense to be made of intuitions *outside* of their structural organization in the understanding through the mediation of concepts. The Kantian conception of spontaneity is taken to imply that there is no meaningful sense to be made of intuitions outside of or prior to their organization under concepts.

Against this, the non-conceptualist argues that there *is* a sense in which intuitions play a role in cognition outside of their synthesis into conceptual content via the understanding. Non-conceptualists generally take the Kantian claim that “intuitions without concepts are blind” to say *only* that sensory experience which remains unconceptualized is not fully rational because non-conceptual, but they do *not* take this to mean that the non-conceptual aspects of experience can play no role whatsoever in cognition. Most non-conceptualist accounts rely on some version of the claim that non-conceptual content is necessary as a “rational constraint” upon the exercise of conceptual capacities, since otherwise the exercise of our conceptual capacities begins to look like little more than “moves in a self-contained game,” (Fossheim et al., 2003, p. 2) or a version of what John McDowell has influentially criticized as “coherentism,” “a version of the [Kantian] conception of spontaneity as frictionless, the very thing that makes the idea of the given attractive” (McDowell, 1996, p. 14).¹ This rough sketch of the basic positions in the contemporary debate regarding non-conceptual content gives a clear indication of why many of those on both sides of the debate have come to see it in largely Kantian terms.

For an example of what is at issue in the debates, take my perceptual experience of two red objects, one of which I perceive to be slightly darker and richer in color than the other. Assume that my conceptual toolbox for shades of red contains only the conceptual capacity to recognize (i.e., is limited to the concepts) brick red, blood red, metallic red, and garnet, and no other shades. Assume further that, when shown each of these two red objects independently, I categorize each of them without reservation as “brick red.” And yet, when shown the two objects side-by-side, I am able to distinguish between their shades: they do not appear to me to be identical in shade, despite the fact that I have no further color concept in my toolbox according to which they can be differentiated. To put it in the parlance of the contemporary debates, this would seem to suggest, *prima facie*, that the fineness of grain of my perceptual capacities “outstrips” that of my conceptual capacities, since if my perceptual capacities placed a direct constraint upon my conceptual capacities, I should not be able to register a *perceptual* color difference for which I have no *conceptual* color difference at the ready.

1 This is not to suggest that McDowell supports a non-conceptualist position in opposition to such coherentism. His explicit goal in *Mind and World* is to develop a middle position with regard to spontaneity which avoids *both* coherentism *and* the “myth of the given.”

Now, at first blush such an example of non-conceptual content is far too simple: the conceptualist need only point out that perception can be exhaustively conceptual without being exclusively oriented by concepts of a particular type. Indeed, it seems phenomenologically accurate to say that perceptual experience is *almost never* limited to a single register: when I perceive the two objects (let's assume they are apples), I am not exclusively perceiving colors. I am also perceiving depth, texture, brightness, and a great number of other contextual factors involved in what Husserl would call the *horizontal* aspects of the experience. Because of this great variety of types of simultaneous perceptual content, it is possible to have an adequate conceptual basis for distinguishing a difference in color between the two objects on the basis of a conceptual difference other than that of the *color* concepts involved. Since the difference is to be explained at the level of concepts and thus of rational understanding, we can claim, for example, that I recognize the difference in color because of a perceived difference in darkness, and thereby understand the difference to be one of color which is inferred (albeit in "spontaneity") on the basis of my concept of darkness of shade, in which is included a basic understanding of the relation of darkness of shade to color, but not necessarily any specific conceptual link to any specific shade of red. *Prima facie*, the example is easily handled by an adequately rich conceptualist account by means of inferences between different concepts or related elements in a conceptual scheme.

But there remains a deeper problem, one that seems more difficult to deal with within the framework of an exclusively conceptualist notion of experiential content. To speak again in Kantian terms, since the conceptualist argues that any perceptual difference must be exhaustively explainable by a conceptual difference at the level of the understanding (*Verstand*), it seems she must be able by some *different* criterion to account for the distinction between *perceiving* a difference in color and merely *thinking of one*. If all of our perceptions are necessarily already conceptual, upon what basis are we to differentiate those contents, which are perceived from those which are merely thought or imagined? Even if an inference from related concepts is capable of explaining how I can *understand* the difference between the two shades of brick-red apple despite the poverty of my toolbox of red color concepts, the conceptualist would seem to be in need a different criterion by which to explain my *perceiving* that difference in the first place; for the perception which first *causes* my judgment of the difference in shades cannot be mediated by concepts or inferences from concepts *already*.

It seems our inference by means of related concepts in order to explain the difference in shades of red for which we had no concept hitherto is not sufficient here: while that inference can indeed explain how a new and more nuanced concept of red can be formed by the *understanding* on the basis of these other concepts, it cannot explain what *in intuition* caused the need for this new concept in the first place. Without an independent criterion to distinguish perceptual difference from conceptual difference in thought, conceptualism would seem to treat of minds in

isolation from the world; to amount to a series of “moves in a self-contained game” which could never generate any concepts whose possibility is not already contained implicitly in the logical content of other concepts. On the conceptualist account my formation of concepts seems to occur exclusively by means of other concepts, and this amounts to a rather impoverished conception of the role of experience in knowledge formation. Avoiding this coherentist problem necessitates appeal to some criterion that is *not only* epistemically relevant (the condition the conceptualist is most concerned to meet), *but also* unique to intuition as distinguished from mere thought.²

But the objection also demands from the non-conceptualist an account of that aspect of experience that is non-conceptual, but that is still determinant of *content* in some epistemically meaningful way, such that it cannot be dismissed by the conceptualist by objecting that it is a reference to some otherwise unjustified “bare presence.” The non-conceptualist must give an account of non-conceptual content that avoids the problem of the “myth of the given.”³

In *Mind and World*, McDowell attempts to avoid both the pitfalls of coherentism and the error of the myth of the given while maintaining a conceptualist position in which the “space of reasons” is coextensive with the “conceptual sphere.” He does so by arguing that the fact that our experience is passive, a “matter of receptivity in operation,” is enough to guarantee the needed rational constraint on spontaneity which avoids the problem of coherentism without going so far in the other direction as to reassert the myth of the given, since “the constraint comes from outside *thinking*, but not from outside what is *thinkable*” (McDowell, 1996, pp. 29–30). McDowell claims to have established a rational constraint upon the spontaneity of the understanding that arises from outside our thinking, but which, insofar as it is still within the sphere of the “thinkable,” nonetheless remains within the sphere of the conceptual, and guarantees that our experience is conceptual all the way down.

- 2 As Walter Hopp has put this point, “there must be something that the experience possesses that the mere thought lacks, and this feature, far from being a mere sensation that attaches to a propositional content the experience shares with the belief [...] is what distinguishes experience *epistemically*” (Hopp, 2010, pp. 13–14). As Hopp goes on to argue, the appeal to demonstratives—a very common response to such objections in the literature—does not actually answer the objection, since I may perceive two phenomenologically or epistemically distinguishable states of affairs which have identical demonstrative content.
- 3 As McDowell characterizes it, “the idea of the given is the idea that the space of reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere. The extra extent of the space of reasons is supposed to allow it to incorporate non-conceptual impacts from outside the realm of thought. But we cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a judgment is warranted except as relations within the space of concepts: relations such as implication or probabilification, which hold between potential exercises of conceptual capacities. The attempt to extend the scope of justificatory relations outside the conceptual sphere cannot do what it is supposed to do” (McDowell, 1996, p. 7).

Interestingly, McDowell's avowedly Kantian conceptualist position relies upon the same distinction appealed to by non-conceptualists: that between a thought conceptual difference in the understanding and the prior difference in intuition that is not-yet-thought. In support of his own Kantian non-conceptualist position, Robert Hanna claims unequivocally that

non-conceptual cognitive content in the contemporary sense is, for all philosophical intents and purposes, identical to intuitional cognitive content in Kant's sense. Indeed, in my opinion the contemporary distinction between non-conceptual cognitions and their content, and conceptual cognitions and their content, is essentially the same as Kant's distinction between intuitions and 'concepts' (Begriffe). Correspondingly, if I am correct, then the contemporary distinction between non-conceptual capacities and conceptual capacities is also essentially the same as Kant's cognitively seminal distinction between the 'sensibility' (Sinnlichkeit) and the 'understanding' (Verstand).
(Hanna, 2005, p. 248)

On Hanna's reading, the Kantian conception of non-conceptual content can be inferred from the description of the a priori character of time and space in the Transcendental Aesthetic, and specifically from a note in the B edition of the transcendental deduction of the categories, where Kant notes that "Space, represented as an object (as is really required in geometry) contains *more than the mere form of intuition*, namely the putting-together (*Zusammenfassung*) of the manifold given in accordance with the form of sensibility in an intuitive representation, so that the form of intuition (*Form der Anschauung*) merely gives the manifold, but the formal intuition (*formale Anschauung*) gives unity of the representation" (KrV, B 160, note/Kant, 1998, p. 261, note). The important distinction here is that between the "form of intuition" and "formal intuition." Since the forms of intuition require only a subjective unity of consciousness, and not the full *synthetic* unity of apperception, they seem to function coherently at a level of experience that does not necessitate the use of concepts in synthesis (a function of the understanding and thus of conceptual thought), and thus they offer a potential way of explaining non-conceptual content within the Kantian framework. Formal intuitions, by contrast, give us the *objective* unity of consciousness, and in order to do so such intuitions function at the level of rational cognition, and thereby in necessary relation to the concepts of the understanding (actual, conceptual thought) (Hanna, 2005, p. 277).

On Hanna's reading, Kant's "forms of intuition" have a certain epistemic primacy over "formal intuition," since it is only on the basis of the former that the latter can be established via rational self-consciousness. But at the same time, it is formal intuition, which is responsible for the unification of the manifold of intuition and thus necessary for the putting-together (*Zusammenfassung*) of the manifold in the unity of apperception. The *formal intuition* of time and space, which occurs with the help of rational conceptual capacities and is thus in some sense dependent on concepts of the understanding, is made possible by space and time as the *forms of*

intuition, even as these forms of intuition depend upon formal intuition for the unification of their otherwise disparate manifold. This reflects the distinction that we noted above is demanded of both non-conceptualist and conceptualist positions: that between the explanatory conceptual difference in the understanding and the prior difference in intuition on the basis of which we form new concepts.

And, indeed, that epistemic priority should be given to the latter as a non-conceptual aspect of intuition is admitted by Kant himself. The footnote in the B deduction cited above continues:

in the Aesthetic I ascribed this unity [of representation] merely to sensibility, only in order to note that *it precedes all concepts*, though to be sure it presupposes a synthesis, which does not belong to the senses but through which all concepts of space and time first become possible. For since through it (as the understanding determines the sensibility) space or time are first given as intuitions, the unity of this *a priori* intuition belongs to space and time, and not to the concept of the understanding.

(KrV, B 160–161, note/Kant, 1998, p. 261, note, emphasis mine)

The synthesis Kant refers to seems to be a synthesis of intuition *epistemically prior to* the fully conceptual synthetic unity of apperception, a “unity which precedes all concepts” despite the fact that the givenness of space and time as the *forms* of intuition can be recognized only at the cognitively higher level of *formal intuition*.

It is at this point, in the contemporary debate that McDowell’s conceptualism and Hanna’s non-conceptualism part ways: on McDowell’s account, the “unity which precedes all concepts” is glossed as the *thinkable*, and its “preceding all concepts” understood as “preceding all actual thinking.” McDowell will insist that the empirical manifold of space and time amounts to “a constraint from outside *thinking* and *judging*,” not “from outside *thinkable contents*” (McDowell, 1996, p. 28). For Hanna, however, Kant’s notion of the “unity which precedes all concepts” is taken as evidence that sensibility, considered theoretically in independence from the understanding, is the locus of non-conceptual content. Space and time as such (as distinguished from the *concepts* of space and time), as the *a priori* forms of intuition, will uniquely determine non-conceptual content: “what I am asserting on Kant’s behalf is that our capacities for spatial and temporal representation constitutively explain non-conceptual content: that is, non-conceptual content is *nothing but* cognitive content that is essentially structured by our *a priori* representations of phenomenal space and time” (Hanna, 2005, p. 278, my emphasis).

From McDowell’s perspective, Hanna’s position seems to amount to the claim that space and time constitute a part of the space of reasons that extends beyond the sphere of the concept and is thus a form of the Myth of the Given. From Hanna’s perspective, McDowell’s conceptualism remains a problematic coherentism: since the space of reasons has been limited to the conceptual, space and time will be considered only as elements in a closed conceptual system, and space and time will have lost

their role, *qua a priori forms* of intuition, of providing the “friction” by which intuition places rational constraints upon the spontaneity of the understanding. If we take both positions seriously, we seem to be at an impasse.

2. *Constitutional Problems*

Following upon a remark from Steven Crowell,⁴ I want to suggest that this impasse as the result of a refusal *on both sides* to take seriously the conception of *constitution*. McDowell’s well-founded opposition to what he calls “bald naturalism,” combined with his insistence on the thoroughgoing conceptuality of perceptual experience (albeit “in passivity”), demands from him an alternative conception of nature, one which is not equivalent to the law-bound conception of nature as conceived by modern science.⁵ He answers this demand through his discussion of “second nature,” which he sees as recovering a conception of nature based upon the Aristotelian conception of the formation of ethical character “that would not stand in the way of a satisfactory conception of experience” (McDowell, 1996, p. 91), since it consists not of the exclusively causal laws of modern science, but of

initiation into conceptual capacities, which include responsiveness to other rational demands besides those of ethics [...]. If we generalize the way Aristotle conceives the moulding of ethical character, we arrive at the notion of having one’s eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature. I cannot think of a good English expression for this, but it is what figures in German philosophy as *Bildung*.

(McDowell, 1996, p. 84)

Intriguing as this notion of “second nature” is, McDowell does little more than gesture at it by way of vague references to “*Bildung*,” “culture,” and the like.⁶ He goes no further in the direction of *explaining* the way this second nature functions in relating mind and world except to say that it replaces the “bald naturalist” conception, and tellingly, after speaking throughout almost the entire book in terms of “mind” and “thought,” to suggest in the final pages that the notion of *Bildung* is best understood in terms of the learning of *language*.⁷ As Crowell notes, what

4 See the introduction to Crowell, 2001, especially pp. 13–19.

5 Cf. McDowell, 1996, pp. 70–72.

6 Although McDowell attributes his conception of *Bildung* to Gadamer, he does not to my knowledge offer an account of *Bildung* in terms of constitution anywhere in his own work.

7 McDowell claims, for instance, “human beings mature into being at home in the space of reasons, or, what comes to the same thing, living their lives in the world; we can make sense of that by noting that the language into which a human being is first initiated stands over against her as a prior embodiment of mindedness, of the possibility of an orientation to the world” (McDowell, 1996, p. 125).

McDowell is avoiding is any account of the *constitution* of content. He cannot go any further in the explanation of the way conceptual content comes about than the rough analogy of initiation into linguistic norms because his commitment to a Sellarsian, linguistically-oriented conceptualism leaves him nowhere else to go.⁸ If content is taken to be equivalent to conceptual content, and conceptual content is to be explained exclusively by reference to features of our language (perhaps also including our linguistic practices), then an account of the role of experience (of world in relation to mind) can amount to nothing more than a gesturing at linguistic norms.

But we need not share all of McDowell's commitments in order to recognize the important role intended to be played by what he calls "second nature." And if we do not share those additional commitments about language and conceptualism, a way remains open for filling out an account of non-conceptual content that recognizes McDowell's insights without reducing the perceptual experience to its capacity to be taken up in systems of concepts or by the use of words. As Crowell points out, the role McDowell wishes to assign to "second nature" is that which will be played in a transcendental phenomenological account by the theory of *constitution* (Crowell, 2001, p. 17). While McDowell is right to insist on a conception of the experiential world as much more than the scientific world of causal laws, his conceptualist and linguistic commitments, paired with a "quietism" he derives from Wittgenstein, which refuses to make any positive or constructive philosophical claims, leads him to reject the possibility of offering an account of meaning constitution for fear of falling into bad idealism. But the *role* McDowell's notion of second nature is intended to play vis-a-vis the natural-scientific conception of nature is nonetheless of the utmost importance. The challenge for the non-conceptualist is to further explicate how this "middle" space can function in an epistemologically relevant way that puts it neither in the space of concepts (i.e., McDowell's position), nor in that of natural-scientific or causal laws (i.e., "bald naturalism").

But Hanna's non-conceptualist account also fails to do so, and in fact fails to give any account of the constitutional function of non-conceptual content. As we saw above, Hanna insists that non-conceptual content is "*nothing but* cognitive content that is essentially structured by our a priori representations of phenomenal space and time." In his paper this claim is immediately followed by a qualification carefully limiting its scope:

by this thesis I do not mean that the sensory qualitative content of non-conceptual cognition is to be explained in this way, but rather only that the representational content of non-conceptual cognition is to be so explained. In particular then, Kant is saying that what determines

8 For more on this point, see Gail Soffer's critique of Sellars' position against non-linguistic intentionality in Soffer, 2003.

our cognitive reference to the uniquely individual material objects of empirical non-conceptual or intuitional representations, are the spatiotemporal features of those representations alone. To cognize this or that individual material object non-conceptually or intuitionally [...] is simply to locate it uniquely here-and-now or there-and-then. As the real estate agents say: it's all about location.

(Hanna, 2005, p. 278, my emphasis)

What Hanna's Kantian account of non-conceptual content is meant to accomplish is *not* the explanation of the character of sensations outside of their relation to consciousness by means of intuition (presumably an impossible task on the Kantian account), but only of the *representational* character—the *content*—of the non-conceptual cognition in intuition. I take Hanna to be relying on a distinction between the *object* of an empirical intuition and the *content* of that intuition, which allows us to distinguish between the (potentially) truth-bearing function of the *Vorstellung* (“representation,” or better, “presentation”⁹) for cognition, and the truth-making function of the *perception* (what McDowell called “friction”) against the spontaneity of the understanding.¹⁰ Such an account seems to fit with our everyday experience of the world, according to which it is quite odd to say that we *experience* concepts: when I fall down the stairs it is surely not the *concept* stairs that causes me pain. The *content* of our experience can be expressed conceptually, but the concept is not the same as the experience; the state-of-affairs our concepts allow us to represent is distinguishable in reflection from its representation via concepts. On Hanna's reading of Kant, the non-conceptual cognitive content of perceptions and the conceptual content of proposition and utterance are necessarily distinct.

But given Hanna's distinction between the qualitative character of experience (which he admits his conception of non-conceptual content does *not explain*) and the non-conceptual representational content of the experience, it seems the way is blocked to any further explanation of the move from the qualitative character of an empirical object to the account of its content. While the empirical object certainly plays a *necessary role* in the presentation of the content (this is what distinguishes it from mere presentations in thought, and makes Kant a transcendental idealist *but also* an empirical realist), we have no reason to think that this object alone, independent of concepts in the understanding, is *sufficient* warrant to conclude anything about the *specific* representational content of the perception. If Hanna ignores the objection, he must be assuming that the empirical object gives us representational content *directly*, and we have fallen into a version of the myth of the given by incorporating “non-conceptual impacts from outside the realm of thought” (McDowell, 1996, p. 7). On the other hand, if he intends (as I think he

9 For an account of the problem of the term “representation” in Kant and Husserl, see Julia Jansen's contribution to this volume.

10 Cf. Hopp, 2010, p. 13.

does) only to reject the need to give any further *explanation* of the sensory qualitative aspect of the non-conceptual content, but intends nonetheless to arrive at an explanation of representational non-conceptual content in cognition, he has shown at best only that qualitative non-conceptual content *somehow* causes representational non-conceptual content, but has blocked the way to any explanation of how this might occur.¹¹

Thus, in the passage above, when Hanna goes on to conclude that “what determines our cognitive reference to the uniquely individual material objects of empirical non-conceptual or intuitional representations, are the spatiotemporal features of those representations *alone*,” he limits the determining role of the non-conceptual content to the mode of spatiotemporal givenness belonging to the *object*. In other words, he seems to take the Kantian claim that the content of perception arises *via* space and time as the a priori forms of intuition to mean also that the representational content of non-conceptual intuition must be determined *exclusively* by characteristics directly dependent upon the spatiotemporal character of the object’s representation. In Hanna’s own words, “To cognize this or that individual material object non-conceptually or intuitively [...] is *simply* to locate it uniquely here-and-now or there-and-then [...]. [I]t’s *all about* location.” In considering the origin of non-conceptual content exclusively in terms of the a priori forms of time and space, Hanna assumes that what is determinate of the specific non-conceptual representational character of a given perception can be nothing other than the “representational” character of the intuition derived from the spatiotemporal character of the perception.

But this amounts to no less of a vague gesturing than does McDowell’s conception of “second nature,” and on the basis of Hanna’s account—assuming it is *not* intended as a form of “bald naturalism”—it is hard to see what further explanatory power his model of non-conceptual content could have, except to claim that the world provides abundant non-conceptual “fodder” which becomes meaningful only upon conceptualization. Since the non-conceptual representational content is supposed to be explained only by reference to “spatiotemporal features of those representations alone,” to unique locations “here-and-now or there-and-then,” the upshot of Hanna’s non-conceptualism seems to be just that the spatiotemporal character of experience *somehow* affects our concepts. From a transcendental-phenomenological perspective, this sounds much more like a starting point for inquiry than a hard-won epistemological insight. In Hanna’s account, as in McDowell’s, any substantive account of the *constitution* of conceptual content in experience has been scrupulously avoided.

11 This would seem to be a version of the position McDowell critiques as Davidson’s conception that “experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility” (see McDowell, 1996, p. 14), but a discussion of this critique is outside our scope here.

3. *Husserl's Critique of Kant*

From a transcendental-phenomenological perspective, an account of non-conceptual content that does not limit it to mere “fodder” for conceptualization is still possible by means of a *constitutional* theory. But we have not yet shown that or how such an account is *possible*. What would it mean to constitutionally explicate contents or structures of experience in a way that remains epistemically relevant while still distinguishable from its role as “fodder” for conceptual content? The beginnings of an answer can be found in Husserl's critique of the constitutional account.

As Husserl began to work out the details of his own account of the constitution of meaning in his later genetic phenomenology, he began to see his own project as a form of *expansion* of the Kantian conception of the Transcendental Analytic. Where Kant's account of the presentational origin of meanings in space and time as the a priori forms of intuition is intended to be explanatory of the conditions of the possibility of Newtonian science, Husserl, who is concerned not only with the apodictic grounding of *natural scientific* inquiry but with the wider project of grounding meaning and knowledge *as such*, proposes a radical rethinking of the character of the field of intuition. For, as we saw in our discussion of Robert Hanna's position above, even if we accept the Kantian account of space and time as the a priori forms of intuition, we have as of yet said nothing about the content appearing through those forms aside from indicating its status as fodder for conceptualization.

As Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, Kant ultimately finds the ordering of the manifold of intuition on *intellectual objectivity*, on the mechanism we discussed above in terms of Kant's conception of *formal intuition*, which, as an *intellectual* activity, is dependent upon the rational employment of concepts in the understanding. *Qua* non-conceptual content prior to objectification, the content of the intuition is a mere raw stuff that can only be *formally* demonstrated; the non-conceptual content of Kant's synthetic a priori does not seem to have much of a demonstrable *content* at all. For the later Husserl, however, “founding no longer constitutes elevating to intellectuality, but on the contrary it signifies building up on the basis of the primordial, of the pre-given. [For Husserl, JR] Hume's genius is precisely that of regressing in this way from signs, symbols, and images to impressions” (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 194). Through his “expansion” of the Kantian Transcendental Aesthetic, Husserl has carved out a space for elements of experience that are neither full-blown concepts, nor mere sensory fodder for conceptualization: whereas Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic was limited to the a priori forms of space and time, Husserl expanded its field to include elements which, while not fully conceptual elements of the understanding, are also not merely the forms of intuition or the formless fodder taken up in the manifold, but rather possessive of “a type of perceptual or aesthetic significance that Kant could only think of as ‘preconceptual’ and therefore, ‘precategorical’” (Welton, 2000, p. 298).

Such an expansion also serves to justify and further elucidate the Husserlian *Wesensschau*, which, while it operates upon experiences by means of the ongoing process of imaginative variation, is ultimately interested in essential a priori structures. Husserl's account of essences and their direct intuition in (and not mere induction from) experience thus attempts to guarantee for synthetic judgments a certainty even greater than that ascribed to them by Kant: in Iso Kern's words, synthetic judgments are for Husserl "not relativizable to a factual subject, but rather unconditionally valid, even for God" (Kern, 1964, p. 60, my translation).

This means that Husserl's synthetic *material a priori* can make evident to phenomenological inquiry essential structures derived *via* experience but not reducible to the spatiotemporal presentation of that experience, whereas for Kant the apriority of such content entailed a logical independence from everything delivered by intuition, such that the notion of a truly *material a priori* was for him a contradiction in terms (Kern, 1964, p. 57). On the Husserlian account, although our access to non-conceptual experiential content comes about *through* spatiotemporal experiences (intuition), we need not take that presentational origin to exhaustively account for the non-conceptual content of *the experience*, since Husserl's conception of the *material a priori* allows for the intuition not only of individual facts but also of *essences* pertaining to a priori laws governing meaning. Although they are manifest in experience, they are, because of this a priori status, *not contingent matters of fact for individual experiencing subjects*. This distinguishes Husserl's account from that of Kant:

Kant speaks of pure intuition as if it were a necessarily-factically constituted form, and yet an intuition; as if an invariable spatial background were there, according to which I should "direct" myself. But when I look into the matter—why must the synthesis then be accessible as an unconditionally generally-valid synthesis in the form of a universal judgment? Kant confuses the necessity and generality of the human fact for the necessity and generality that belongs to the content of the insight and which is the opposite of all facts. (Hua VII, pp. 358–359, my translation)

And later in the same passage:

Kant confuses the knowledge which the subject creates out of itself through the observation of its own peculiarity in operation and which is "a priori" knowledge [only] insofar as it does not look to the nature of the materials which "come from outside," for the a priority of a knowledge in the legitimate sense. To look to the material of sensation is to know *a posteriori*. (Hua VII, p. 364, my translation)

According to Husserl, Kant mistakes the merely contingent knowledge derived a posteriori from *factual* experience via the sensible manifold with true a priori knowledge revealed by experience but revelatory of a priori structures, of *essences*. Husserl conceives his expansion of the Transcendental Aesthetic as signaling the

recognition of a priori essential laws *in the domain of lived experience*, which consists of more than the spatio-temporal form of its presentation.

Accordingly, Husserl finds in Kant a kind of deep-seated if implicit naturalism, since the latter's account grounds the ultimate structures of cognition in contingent, possible human experiences of *fact*, instead of a priori essences. For Husserl, although essential structures are shown through genetic analysis to always arise *from* experience, such essences are not equivalent to the empirically given facts (or possibly given facts) of experience, since, as Hume showed, these latter cannot provide *universally valid* a priori laws. For Husserl, then, Kant's focus on the synthetic a priori mistakes the *mode of givenness* of non-conceptual content (in the forms of intuition) for *what is ultimately given* in that content.

4. *The Husserlian Case for the Non-conceptual Role of Non-conceptual Content*

The above account shows that Husserl's later thought includes a conception of non-conceptual content. But I have not yet explained how non-conceptual content might function for Husserl in a way which is not merely that of a "fodder" for conceptualization. While a full explication of this notion is well beyond the scope of this paper, I wish to conclude by briefly indicating the first and most basic steps for developing such an approach on the basis of Husserl's work, and showing how such an approach follows from Husserl's critique of Kant as discussed above.

As Husserl writes in a discussion of the relation of theoretical reason to spatiotemporal objects in *Ideas I*,

what does this reference to rule or law mean phenomenologically? What is implied in the fact that the inadequately given *region* 'Thing' prescribes rules for the course of possible intuitions?—and therefore manifestly for the course of possible perceptions? The answer is as follows: to the essence of a thing-noema there belong, as can be seen with absolute clearness, ideal possibilities of '*limitlessness in the development*' of agreeing [einstimmiger] intuitions [...].

(Hua III, p. 346/Husserl, 1958, p. 413, translation modified)

A footnote makes clear that this is an explicit reference to a passage from the first edition of the first *Critique*, where Kant maintains that "if there were no limitlessness in the development of agreeing, no concept of relations could yield a principle of their infinity" (KrV, A 25, my translation). Husserl claims that transcendental-phenomenological examination of an object in the thing-region leads to an examination of the conditions of the possibility of the meaning-object involved in a way which is not exhausted by the formal analysis of the *concepts* involved. The object serves as a "transcendental clue" (Hua III, pp. 348–352/Husserl, 1958, pp. 415–419) insofar as it leads us to the recognition that the meaning-object

in experience involves the a priori structures which allow for the “limitlessness in the development of agreeing,” i.e., for the fact that there is always the a priori *possibility* of the subsumption of additional cases under a given concept which are not analytically contained *within* the concept. This suggests that there are elements of lived experience not directly reducible to concepts nor exclusively to spatiotemporal features of individual experiences, but that nonetheless help to reveal the a priori laws on the basis of which those concepts and descriptions arise, and which are expressed in them. And this allows us to see what might count as an example of the Husserlian conception of the non-conceptual role of non-conceptual content.

In a passage from the *Erste Philosophie* lectures, Husserl expresses his above-noted criticism of Kant in terms of the notion of the apriority of space in the Transcendental Aesthetic, and then extends the critique to Kant’s understanding of color. He argues that the inconceivability (*Undenkbarkeit*) of materials of sensation (such as color) without spatial extension “does not indicate the inability to form a differing intuition—a chance inability—but rather *an essentially-determined impossibility*, analogous to the essentially-determined and visible impossibility that Red is a [musical] tone and a color is nothing different than a love” (Hua VII, p. 358, my translation). Husserl maintains that such inconceivability is the result of, and manifests a material law, and yet is a priori, insofar as it is a condition for the possibility of experience and not simply inductively derived from a *particular* experience. Though not analytic, there is an *essential, materially* necessary relationship between redness and extension which is revealed immanently in experience but transcends that experience.

Although this conception of the material a priori radically expands Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic, Husserl still clearly recognizes the importance of Kant’s conception of space and time as the a priori forms of intuition, as is evident in the following passage from the *Crisis*:

Prescientifically, the world is already a spatiotemporal world; to be sure, in regard to this spatiotemporality there is no question of ideal mathematical points, of “pure” straight lines or planes, no question at all of mathematically infinitesimal continuity or of the “exactness” belonging to the sense of the geometrical a priori. The bodies familiar to us in the lifeworld are actual bodies, but not bodies in the sense of physics. The same thing is true of causality and of spatiotemporal infinity. [These] categorical features of the life-world have the same names but are not concerned, so to speak, with the theoretical idealizations and the hypothetical substructions of the geometrician and the physicist.

(Hua VI, pp. 142–143/Husserl, 1970, pp. 139–140)

Like Kant, Husserl recognizes the role played by the *forms of intuition*, and sees that these must be distinguished from the “theoretical” formal intuition involved in exact sciences such as geometry. But for Husserl, simply acknowledging the a priori forms of intuition does not go far enough, since for him the ultimate topic of inquiry for a transcendental philosophy is not a universal *content* in the

sense of truths and facts about experience, but the uncovering of a fundamental universal *meaning structure* of the lifeworld. Although it is true that our everyday activities occur in space and time, the necessary spatiotemporal character of experience cannot be what makes our experience *meaningful*. For, as we saw above, Husserl's late genetic phenomenology can be distinguished from the Kantian position insofar as it seeks to provide a pure theory of *essences*, and not simply a means of establishing the objectivity of the sciences. The non-conceptual content of experience is precisely that aspect of experience which is ultimately determining of the essential structures which define it by delimiting the *construction* of concepts, and thus, on a Husserlian conception, non-conceptual content is no mere fodder for conceptualization, but rather plays a determining role in *meaning constitution*.

Husserl's account of the material a priori and the notion of the "transcendental clue" show that the transcendental structures of experience cannot be directly reducible to the spatiotemporal conditions of their presentation or to a raw, preperceptual "fodder." Since Husserl has relocated the material a priori in the realm of immediate experience, he does not need to appeal to the Kantian noumenal realm standing "before" all categories, and thus outside the world of humanly perceivable phenomena, in order to explain spontaneity. Husserl's "essential structures" are thus manifest at a *prescientific* level of experience which Kant's *Critique* (on Husserl's reading, at least) ignores because of its focus exclusively on the a priori conditions necessary for the table of the categories derived with an eye to Newtonian science.¹²

Thus, whereas naturalistic accounts would claim that our experience records inexactly what scientific measurement can record in its actual, conceptual exactness, Husserl is able to take the inexactness and partial non-conceptuality of experiential life at face value by treating it as evidence not for an ontology of spatiotemporal existence, but for a more primordial ontology of essential meaning in the logically prior lifeworld. While the exact concepts of geometry and other sciences are arrived at through a characteristic process of "idealization" beginning from experiences which in their originarity exhibit only a "vague and fluid typification" (Husserl, 1964, p. 42/Husserl, 1973, p. 44), the method of arriving at the lifeworld will move in precisely the opposite direction, via a "regressive analysis" which seeks to uncover the vague and fluid fundamental structures of lived experience underneath the sciences' "garb of ideas" (Hua VI, p. 51/Husserl, 1970, p. 51). This "regressive" method is undertaken not in order to discredit scientific knowledge, but rather to reassure us of its absolute certainty by grounding it in a prior ontology of lived experience. Husserl's project thus remains analogous to Kant's in the first *Critique*, in that it seeks to ground scientific knowledge by a *constitutional* account that recognizes the limits to knowledge set by experience, but it rejects Kant's own conception of ultimate grounding in the a priori forms of intuition for what it sees as even more

12 Cf. Luft, 2007, p. 381.

fundamental: a world of meaning which constitutionally precedes the exact world of conceptual thought and amounts to much more than the “stuff” conceptualized by it.

Whereas Kant’s limiting of the role of intuition by means of the fixed table of categories resulted in a conception of meaning in which the spontaneity of experience make appeal—notoriously—to the thing in itself, Husserl’s expansion of the domain of intuition to include a phenomenological dimension in which meaning transcends the immanent appearance of the object according to the a priori forms of intuition allows him to explain spontaneity in terms of a most basic phenomenological observation: he insists *it simply is the case* that we experience the world as always-already meaningful, and that that experience is conceptually-mediated to a large degree. But he also insists that our experience is not limited to our concepts, and that it carries a certain weight by means of which we constantly reevaluate its meaning, not by means of conceptual reflection or calculation, but through the constant imaginative variation of the immediate—and non-conceptual—content of experience.¹³ And thus it seems that Husserl’s critique of Kant can be applied equally well to contemporary debates about non-conceptual content, debates which—on all sides—manifest the same implicit naturalistic tendency in Kant that is a major subject of that critique: in focusing on the spatiotemporal form of the presentation of non-conceptual content instead of on the a priori essential structures revealed through it, Kant, like the contemporary non-conceptualists who have used him in support of their views, misses the more fundamental and originary a priori forms of our lifeworld.

13 Cf. Lohmar, 1998, p. 263.