

Why Kant is a Non-Conceptualist but is better regarded a Conceptualist

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Abstract

This paper deals with the problem of characterizing the content of experience as either conceptual or non-conceptual in Kant's transcendental philosophy, a topic widely debated in contemporary philosophy. I start out with Kant's pre-critical discussions of space and time in which he develops a specific notion of non-conceptual content. Secondly, I show that this notion of non-conceptual intuitional content does not seem to match well with the Transcendental Deduction. This incongruity results in three interrelated problems that are inherent to Kant's Transcendental Deduction in the *Critique*¹: the 'Independency Disagreement', the 'Conceptualism Contradiction' and the 'Intuition Inconsistency'. These three problems derive from apparently contradictory claims concerning the possibility of non-conceptual content. Contemporary Kantian conceptualists and non-conceptualists tend to take a stance at either side of the dilemma rather than trying to dissolve these tensions. In response to this, I propose a new solution to these difficulties based on a distinction between two kinds of conceptualism. This will reveal why Kant is a non-conceptualist in one significant sense, but also why he is still better regarded a conceptualist.

¹ I will use the standard A/B abbreviations for the first and second edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. For all other works of Kant no standard abbreviations are used.

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Recently, the question whether the content of intuition (or perception) is necessarily invested with concepts in some way or other has received a great deal of attention by philosophers of mind, phenomenologists and Kant scholars. The two canonical positions one can take in are that of conceptualism and non-conceptualism. Non-conceptualists may defend a variety of theses, but all of them involve the idea that there would exist mental contents that are not informed by concepts and/or are not open to being conceptualized by the subject. Conceptualism, by contrast, is often taken to be the doctrine that the kind of mental representations humans have when they sense and perceive the world are essentially reliant on capacities that are involved in thinking. Another way to put this is to say that the contents of human intuition would not have been the way they are without the subject's possession of the relevant concepts required to explicate the content in a judgment. Conceptualists may argue that those who believe in non-conceptual intuition invoke something we do not need, for what cannot be conceptualized cannot be appropriated into the 'space of reasons' and thus has no effect on our beliefs. Further, since it lacks such an effect, we could not even know whether they truly exist, and therefore non-conceptual contents are useless and mysterious 'Givens'.² Non-conceptualists often respond to this that to regard all mental content as conceptual involves an over-intellectualization of human experience.

This paper deals with the problem of (non-)conceptual content in the critical philosophy of Kant's first *Critique*. The aim of the first section is to show how Kant came to conceive of intuition as non-conceptual, for which I will take some of his pre-critical writings into account. In the following two sections I focus mostly on the Transcendental

² See: Wilfrid Sellars (1963) and also John McDowell (1994).

Deduction, which, as I will show, appears to contradict the relation between intuition and concept found in Kant's pre-critical writings and also in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*. This results in three interrelated problems. I dub these the *Independency Disagreement*, the *Conceptualism Contradiction* and the *Intuition Inconsistency*. In the following sections, I turn to contemporary readings of Kant that interpret Kant as a full-blown non-conceptualist. I will claim that these attempts fail. I then propose an alternative solution to the debate over Kantian conceptualism by introducing a distinction between two kinds of content. With this distinction in mind, one can see how Kant could have been a non-conceptualist, even though, in the light of his own critical project, he is better regarded a conceptualist.

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Already in his 1755 work *New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition*, Kant committed himself to the insufficiency of conceptual connections alone for making judgments about the actual existence of objects.³ Kant here develops an argument to criticize theistic lines of reasoning that serve to prove the existence of God. Simply put, he tries to show that ideal connections of objective and predicative elements do not yet say anything about objects and predicates really existing. Consider the following fragment:

Form for yourself the concept of some being or other in which there is a totality of reality. It must be conceded that, given this concept, existence also has to be attributed to this being. But if all those realities are only conceived as united together, then the existence of that being is also only an existence of ideas (Kant 1992, p. 15)

³ See also Paul Guyer (2005).

Kant's point is that to think of any object whatsoever as existing, even granted that there are no contradictions inherent to the object as thought, does not suffice to prove the actual being of that object. Kant does not yet, however, exploit this claim concerning the shortcomings of judgments of existence that are based merely on conceptual analysis by stipulating the necessity of a reference to what is given in an intuition. In 1768⁴, still over twelve years prior to the publication of the first *Critique*, Kant points once more to the importance of an element of experience operative besides the intellect. This time, the argument fits ongoing debates on the nature of space between Clarke's absolutist and Leibniz relational account. On the standard absolutist view of the time, the motion of objects has to be understood in relation to a background of absolute space which exists prior and independently of objects.⁵ Against this, Leibniz's relational theory dismisses the necessity of space by reducing it or making it wholly dependent upon relations that obtain between objects. In short, Kant wanted to show that certain properties of objects cannot be accounted for in terms of conceptual relations only. His most famous argument for this, usually called the argument from incongruent counterparts, is supposed to point to a shortcoming in Leibniz's account of space and to strengthen the absolutist position, which Kant would continue to adopt in altered form in the Transcendental Aesthetic of the first *Critique*.

Kant's basic line of reasoning runs as follows. Imagine that God would create the three-dimensional universe and subsequently went on to install one human hand in it. According to Kant, given that there are as of yet no

⁴ Immanuel Kant (2003) *Concerning the ultimate ground of the differentiation of directions in space*, In: *The Cambridge Edition to the Works of Immanuel Kant: Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, ed. D. Walford, E. Meerbote, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ See also: John Earman (1991) and Janiak (2012) for introductions to this debate.

embodied observers in this universe obtaining a perspective relative to the hand, it would be impossible to determine the being left or right of it, given that these objects are mathematically identical in every other respect. Accordingly, the relational account, which only considers intellectually the various conceptual relations manifest between different points in space, must also be unable to decide whether the hand is a right or left one. The connections of spatial points considered solely from a geometrical point of view do not allow one to differentiate between objects that are identical *qua* formal spatial relations. This led Kant to believe there to be something in our experience of hands and similar objects which does not derive from nor is explainable solely in terms of mathematical relations.



In the above figure, reduced to two-dimensional space for simplicity's sake, the left two objects can be made to fit onto each other by rotating them. Although counterparts, Kant would say that an assessment of their being in terms of spatial relations suffices for complete description. The two objects on the right, however, cannot be made to fit each other through rotation, and are thus different in a way transcending capacities for geometrical conceptualization. The conclusion is twofold. First, incongruent counterparts are such that they cannot be consistently accounted for if one considers space relationally. Second, some part of our empirical cognition of real objects must depend on how they are given to us in a specific manner that is extra-conceptual.

Two years later, in 1770, Kant takes one step further in explicating the consequence of his argument from incongruent counterparts in new terms. Since space does not belong to our capacity for conceptualization, it is now taken to belong to intuition. Again later, in a paper called *What Does It Mean To Orient Oneself in Thinking?* published in

between the two editions of the *Critique*, Kant once more draws on the non-conceptual nature of what he now calls our ‘orientation’ with regard to objects. To know left from right is not just inexplicable intellectually; it belongs to a part of our subjective constitution that is independent from capacities that belong to the understanding and the concepts inherent to it.

The importance of a second constitutive element of knowledge besides the intellect thus pressed upon Kant from the beginning of his academic career, first through his refutation of arguments for the existence of God and later through his views on space. His position in both discussions shaped the content of the first *Critique*, especially with regard to the Transcendental Aesthetic. The main argument here presented for the subjective ideality of absolute space differs from his earlier ones. In the Metaphysical Exposition, Kant shows that the structuring capacities of space and time already underlie any possible representation whatsoever. One cannot even perform mathematical or geometrical calculations purely in the head without having invoked absolute space or time (A19/B33-A49-B66). Kant believes it follows that (a) space and time cannot be empirically deduced from any experience since every experience must already contain them, and (b) that they can only be transcendently deduced, that is: their operations have to be taken as necessary conditions to any experience. It follows that (c) space and time are *a priori* forms of intuition which (d) cannot as such be representations in themselves.⁶ Although there is a brief mention of it in the *Prolegomena*, the Transcendental Aesthetic makes no explicit reference to the argument from incongruent counterparts, which is slightly confusing, for the claim that space and time are *a priori* intuitions rather than concepts seems now less supported than it could have been. It is thus useful to look at Kant’s pre-critical writings to get an impression of why there has to be a non-conceptual element to experience.

⁶ See especially: CPR A22/A31, B37/46.

The *Critique* exploits the required non-conceptual element in terms of pure intuitions that belong to a faculty of receptivity. Here the manifold of sensations are combined into intuitions. Space and time, in this respect, are pure intuitions; they contain only the form of intuition. Whereas intuitions represent external objects immediately, concepts – which belong to the faculty of understanding – do so in a mediate fashion. Intuition is *repraesentatio singularis*; concept *repraesentatio universalis*. The human cognitive apparatus has thereby essentially been split into two: sensibility and understanding, which produce concepts and intuitions respectively, each of which has both an empirical and a pure part. It is interesting to note that in contrast with his account of pure intuitions (Metaphysical Exposition) and pure concepts (Transcendental Deduction), Kant does not provide any transcendental arguments for this divide. The dual structure of our cognizing systems appears to be a bare fact that cannot be explained any further (CPR B145-146).

Kant's views regarding the necessity of the non-conceptual – and thus intuitional – nature of our experiences of space and time fits his critical aims of the *Critique* that followed in 1781. Kant believed that metaphysics before him had never yielded any progress due to a lack of understanding of the limits and conditions of cognition. It is essential to Kant's critical project that experience and cognition are conceived of as consisting of a cooperation of intuitions and concepts. Knowledge is always empirical knowledge: it is the product of combining empirical intuitions – intuitions with *a posteriori* sensational content – with the categories of the understanding (*a priori* concepts). The pure understanding has no meaning of its own (CPR B146-147, A246/B303); it has to be applied to intuition if it is to serve any purpose. All sense and experience is, then, ultimately conditioned by the 'raw material of sensible sensations' (CPR A1), as that to which all cognition must have its possible reference if it is to avoid taking part in the progressless efforts of the dogmatic metaphysicians that

preceded Kant.

Right at the opening of the *Critique*, Kant strengthens the foundations of his groundbreaking idea that a cooperation of intuitions and concepts is necessary for experience. He asserts that both elements are brought forth by their own distinct source of knowledge. The function of bringing forth intuitions and concepts is, in each case, restricted to that single source from which it rises, and thus cannot be taken over by the other:

Objects are therefore given to us by means of sensibility, and *it alone* affords us intuitions; but they are thought through the understanding, and *from it* arise concepts (CPR A19/B33 *my italics*).

With this assertion Kant seems to make it unambiguously clear that the human cognitive apparatus has two distinct sources which produce two equally distinct elements of experience. One source, receptivity or sensibility, provides me with intuitions, while the spontaneity of the understanding brings forth concepts. This separation seems to require upholding the following three important claims pertaining the cooperation and independency of intuitions and concepts:

- (1) Sensibility and understanding are two heterogeneous sources that provide intuitions and concepts *independently* from each other. Neither can take over this specific task from the other (the ‘Independency Thesis’).
- (2) Intuitions must be *non-conceptual*.⁷

⁷ To summarize why: (a) they are produced distinctly from concepts and the understanding, (b) the immediate experience of space/time cannot itself be a concept, (c) the immediate experience of space/time as pure intuitions must already underlie all representations of them, and (d) conceptual analysis only cannot yield expression of incongruent counterparts.

- (3) Intuitions and concepts must *cooperate* if experience and objective knowledge are to come about.

These three claims all express Kant's positive attitude toward non-conceptual content which today's Kantian non-conceptualists wish to highlight. In the next section, I will try to show why claim (1) and (2) contradict other important claims made in the *Critique*, mostly found in the Transcendental Deduction. The Transcendental Deduction is a section central to the *Critique* where Kant establishes the *a priori* rule of the concepts of the understanding with regard to all intuition. For that reason, it has been the major point of focus of Kantian conceptualists. The argument central to it, however, appears to slight the independency intuition is supposed to have according to the Transcendental Aesthetic and Kant's pre-critical works. This will result in three interrelated problems regarding the relation between concept and intuition as expressed in (3). I will address these three problems as follows: the *Independency Disagreement*, the *Conceptualism Contradiction* and thirdly the *Intuition Inconsistency*.



The important question to consider at this point is, given the necessity of a cooperation of concepts and empirical intuitions for objective knowledge and experience in general, how exactly Kant conceives of this to work. In the Transcendental Deduction, Kant deals explicitly with the transcendental structure of this necessary cooperation, which takes the form of what he calls synthesis. Objective knowledge must be the mixed product of *a priori* concepts and intuitions, and thus requires an act of the understanding, to which these concepts belong, through which empirical intuitions can be 'subsumed' under pure concepts. The primary aim of the Transcendental Deduction is, however, not just to prove a necessary cooperation, but to

show that the *a priori* concepts of the understanding – a limited set of pure concepts which he exposed earlier in the Metaphysical Deduction – apply to and are conditions for all possible experiences, and are thus truly transcendental. To establish this, Kant further deems it necessary to show that all appearances, i.e., intuitions, must stand under the rules of the understanding. Concepts thus have a double function: they serve as components in judgments and as rules in appearances. This latter part, through which concepts come to be involved in the perception, thus enabling experience, is called synthesis. The primary aim of the Transcendental Deduction is then to show that the *a priori* concepts that belong to the understanding apply as rules to all possible experience. If they would not do so, they would not truly condition all experience and hence would not be *a priori*. Since concepts are by their very nature mediate, they require – unlike the pure intuitions of sensibility, which are immediate – a special kind of proof that affirms their *a priori* status. This demand is to be fulfilled by the Transcendental Deduction.

In brief, according to Kant's A-Deduction, the acts of syntheses constitutive of experience demand from the side of our subjective constitution three sources: *sense*, *imagination* and the *synthetic unity of apperception* (CPR A115). Sense here simply means empirical, contentful intuitions as they are supplied through perception (intuition). The synthetic unity of apperception is best explained in the B-Deduction, where Kant writes that:

The I think must be able to accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me (CPR B132).

Kant here asserts that it is only because I can potentially

combine any given manifold of sensations into a single, unitary consciousness that I can make judgments about it, and only to that extent can the content be said to exist at all. The unity of apperception is therefore a transcendental condition for all objective experience. In the B-edition of the Deduction, Kant calls it the ‘supreme principle’ of all cooperative activities of sensibility and understanding, thus of all synthesis, knowledge and significance in general (CPR B136, A240/B299).

So how does Kant bridge the cooperation of two heterogeneous sources of knowledge, sensible intuitions and categories of the understanding respectively? In the A-Deduction, this question seems to come down to the role of the imagination in the transcendental structure of experience. Imagination in the A-Deduction is at times described as the ‘faculty of synthesis’ (CPR A120). It is taken as a faculty of its own that stands in mediation between sensibility and understanding. Furthermore, Kant distinguishes three types of synthesis which together constitute the ground of cognition. I will briefly explicate them here. First, there is the synthesis of apprehension, which takes place in the empirical intuition and makes a coherent image of the manifold of sensations that come in through the senses. The mere receiving of sensations is thus insufficient to create a perception; a synthesis of apprehension in intuition must take place which precedes an actual judgment on behalf of the understanding. At times, Kant also refers to it as a synopsis in sense (CPR A94/B127, A97). The second synthesis is that of reproduction, which belongs to the imagination, and cannot be regarded separately from the first synthesis (CPR A102). The third synthesis is that of recognition in the concept. In brief, then, we have a synthesis at the level of sensibility, a second synthesis in the imagination, and a third one bringing about the judgment.⁸ But only the three syntheses combined let one experience objects, whether cognized *a priori* (through productive) or *a posteriori* (through

⁸ See also Béatrice Longuenesse (1998, pp. 35-58).

reproductive) imagination. Experience is thus nothing other than the activity of synthesizing concepts and intuitions, which consists in the apprehension, reproduction and thirdly the recognition of intuitions (the latter in the concept). These syntheses bring together the understanding, as ‘faculty of rules’ (CPR A126), with the sensible data to which they must relate in order to be about anything. In the Introduction to the *Critique*, Kant seems to refer to the imagination conducting these syntheses as the ‘common, but to us unknown, root’ of the two stems of human knowledge (CPR A15/B29). Consequently, the imagination takes place between the two sources:

Both extremes, namely sensibility and understanding, must necessarily be connected by means of this transcendental function of the imagination, since otherwise the former would to be sure yield appearances but no objects of an empirical cognition, hence there would be no experience (CPR A124).

But the Transcendental Deduction has not succeeded yet by way of introducing a third faculty. In order to assure that the *a priori* concepts of the understanding apply to all possible and actual experiences, it would have to be proven that our intuitions also stand under the rules that the former provide. Intuition, then, Kant believes, must be governed and indeed made possible by the rules supplied by the understanding. If not, then the categories arguably do not apply to all possible and actual experience, and therefore they would lose their transcendental significance. This task is most clearly carried out in the B-Deduction, which is usually taken to consist of two steps of which the latter should provide proof of the application of the categories to everything provided by the senses.⁹ In the A-Deduction, as we have just seen, the

⁹ I here follow Rauscher’s (2012) recent interpretation: ‘I interpret the two steps of the B-Deduction as an attempt to justify the validity of the categories as *a priori* synthetic for experience by first showing their necessity and second explaining their universality’ (pp. 1-2).

imagination ensures that concepts of objects constitute an experience. This means that the having of an object of experience is dependent largely on the imagination as a separate faculty; it can create ‘images’ out of the manifold of impressions given in an intuition in order to re-present that which is not immediately given. It thus appears to be the case that transcendental apperception, in this respect, which in combined use with the imagination is called understanding (CPR A119), is needed only to supply the *a priori* categories which may ‘render its function intellectual’, thus allowing objective cognition (CPR A123-125). If this is the case, then the understanding does not appear to play the dominant part in providing me with an object. The imagination does most of the job already, for it enables the production of images out of the manifold of intuitions.

In the B-Deduction, as is well known, Kant significantly alters his earlier conception of the imagination, to the extent that he almost omits it. Whereas Kant previously spoke of three sources of experience – sense, imagination, and apperception – he now falls back to the two sources he opened the *Critique* with: sensibility and understanding. This time, the power of synthesis is located entirely inside the understanding:

Yet the combination (synthesis) [...] is an act of spontaneity of the power of representation, and since one must call the latter understanding, in distinction from sensibility, all combination, whether we are conscious of it or not, whether it is a combination of the manifold in intuition or of several concepts [...], is an act of the understanding (CPR B129-130).

In line with this, the second step of the B-Deduction¹⁰ puts extra weight on an additional argument for the pervasiveness of the categories regarding intuitions. Kant argues that the fact of the unity of our representations of space and time in

¹⁰ The second step of the B-Deduction starts from CPR B160.

sensibility must already imply that all sensible intuitions, which are governed by space and time, depend on the categories, for they alone can be responsible for synthesizing any kind of unity, also at the level of pure sensibility.¹¹ This further strengthens the rule of concepts with respect to intuitions, for the lowest syntheses, that of apprehension in intuition (or synopsis) and reproduction, are now said to depend on the faculty of the understanding. The second step of the B-Deduction offers proof of the transcendental use of *a priori* concepts in all sense perception, showing that they condition ‘everything that may ever come before our senses’ (CPR B160). ‘All synthesis’, writes Kant, ‘through which even *perception itself* becomes possible, stands under the categories’ (CPR B161 *my italics*). This reading is arguably more successful than the A-Deduction in establishing the demanded connection between the categories and empirical intuition, which is the primal aim of the Transcendental Deduction. For if all synthesis reigns from the understanding, and the understanding harbors the categories, then the categories must apply to all experience. Relocating the power of synthesis to the understanding therefore has two consequences. The positive result is that the transcendental use of the categories for all possible experience is better supported. The downside is that the intuited manifold of sensations itself has become essentially a product of the understanding and its concepts. Whereas earlier Kant asserted that intuitions are provided by a separate stem of

¹¹ I quote: ‘But space and time are represented *a priori* not merely as forms of sensible intuition, but also as intuitions themselves (which contain a manifold), and thus with the determination of the unity of this manifold in them (see the Transcendental Aesthetic). Thus even unity of the synthesis of the manifold, outside or within us, hence also a combination with which everything that is to be represented as determined in space or time must agree, is already given *a priori*, along with (not in) these intuitions, as condition of the synthesis of all apprehension. But this synthetic unity can be none other than that of the combination of the manifold of a given intuition in general in an original consciousness, in agreement with the categories, only applied to our sensible intuition. Consequently all synthesis, through which even perception itself becomes possible, stands under the categories’ (CPR B161).

knowledge, a task which supposedly could not be taken over by the understanding, Kant now says that a relation of dependency obtains from concepts to intuitions. The following syllogism based on the B-Deduction makes this apparent contradiction more clear:

- (P1) Intuition is first made possible through the synthesis of apprehension.
- (P2) All synthesis is conditioned by the understanding.
- (C1) The synthesis of apprehension is conditioned by the understanding.
- (C2) Intuition and perception are first made possible by the understanding.

Although clearly motivated by the overall purpose of the Deduction, this move is ultimately left unsupported by Kant.¹² For why would all synthesis, those that enable perception included, be governed by the understanding? Following this reading, we are bound to submit that to intuit an object means already to employ concepts. Consequently, there is no experience other than conceptual experience.

From this some important conclusions may be drawn. Firstly, claim (2), according to which intuitions are non-conceptual and inexpressible in terms of concepts, is directly endangered. It now appears that concepts are determinative for the structure of intuition, and hence the domain of experience comprised by intuition is in fact dependent on concepts. This, however, also contradicts the Independency Thesis contained in claim (1). Whereas Kant originally stated that the two stems of knowledge have unchangeable functions – that sensibility and the understanding bring forth intuitions and objects independently from each other – it now seems that intuitions are dependent on the functions of

¹² See also Henry Allison (1983, pp.161-166).

the understanding. The first of these tensions I will call the *Conceptualism Contradiction*, the second the *Independency Disagreement*.

IV

In the previous section I exposed a major interpretative problem that unfolds in Kant's Transcendental Deduction, namely that of conceptualism or non-conceptual content. Kant's separation of two stems of knowledge whose cooperation is necessary for experience turns out to result in a problem regarding the contents of intuition. It seems Kant has two different and irreconcilable answers to the question whether there exists non-conceptual content. If we follow the pre-critical works as well as the Transcendental Aesthetic, we are bound to conclude that intuition and concept are fundamentally different from each other. The distinct contribution intuitions make has to be non-conceptual, firstly because they are provided by a separate source whose function cannot be taken over by the understanding, and secondly because conceptual analysis alone cannot exhaustively describe the world as it appears to us, as the argument from incongruent counterparts has shown. At the same time, Kant wants the categories of the understanding to apply not just to some possible intuitions. As he repeatedly expresses, all experience falls under the *a priori* rules of the understanding. The unity of apperception conditions all that can be called mine, and therefore all that can rightfully be taken as existing. 'All appearances', writes Kant, 'insofar as objects are to be given to us through them, must stand under *a priori* rules of their synthetic unity' (CPR A110). Consequently, it seems that intuitions that cannot be synthesized in combined use of apperception and imagination (the understanding), cannot be experienced at all, and hence such intuitions cannot even be made out to exist or not (CPR B131-132). It is tempting to conclude,

then, as some conceptualists have done,¹³ that ‘blind intuitions’ do not actually exist.

Does Kant really intend to say that all experiences that may rightfully be called mine are dependent on transcendental apperception and that, by consequence, it is nonsensical to speak of blind intuitions? The best clue we have for this comes from one of Kant’s most famous dictums:

Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. [...] Only from their unification can cognition arise (CPR A50-B74).

This phrase has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Most often, it has been taken to express Kant’s conceptualism. If ‘cognition’ in the latter sentence is taken in its wider sense, as signifying the apprehension of any object of experience whatsoever, then the unification of thoughts and concepts would be requisite to any possible experience. Similarly, if the blindness of intuitions without concepts is taken as a rhetorical expression serving to indicate that such blind intuitions do not actually exist, then the reach of concepts must include all possible intuition, whereby the content of intuition becomes conceptual at least in some significant sense. On the other hand, one could also take cognition here in a more narrow sense, referring to the possibility of objective judgments only, as for instance Hanna (2008, 2011a, 2011b), Grüne (2009, 2011) and De Sá Pereira (2013) insist. In line with this reading, the alleged blindness of intuitions without concepts could indicate an actual kind of intuition that might contain meaningful experiential content even though being insufficient for objective knowledge. Being blind would mean that such intuitions do not yet allow me to make judgments of experience, even though they do represent the world independently from concept-application.

The first reading, according to which blind intuitions do

¹³ For instance McDowell (1994).

not exist, is well supported by Kant's B-Deduction and strengthens the conceptualist's position that all experiential content is conceptual in some sense yet to be determined. We may formalize this position as follows:¹⁴

- (P1) The *a priori* concepts of the understanding are necessary conditions of possibility of all synthesis and thus all experience.
- (P2) If a concept (the application of which requires apperception) is a necessary *a priori* condition of the possibility of experience, we are justified in applying it to all objects of experience.
- (C1) We are justified in applying the categories to all objects of experience (blind intuitions do not exist).

If we follow this line of argument, then it seems the *Critique* excludes the possibility of non-conceptual content, at least insofar as all content is now essentially conceptualizable and made possible by concepts. This can be further illustrated by the following formalization:

- (P1) The categories and the synthetic unity of apperception are necessary *a priori* conditions for all possible experiences.
- (P2) It is possible to have an experience to which no category is applied, i.e. to have non-conceptual content (blind intuitions are possible).
- (C) It is not the case that the categories are necessary *a priori* conditions of the possibility of the experience of all objects.

¹⁴ See also Stephanie Grüne (2011) and Robert Hanna (2011a) for their versions of this syllogism.

In the above syllogism, the conclusion which follows from the second premise leads to a contradiction in the first premise. Consequently, if the first premise is true, the second must be false. Given that Kant explicitly endorses the first premise, there can be no non-conceptual experience according to Kant's *Critique*.

Although there seems to be nothing wrong with this line of argument, it is clearly highly unsatisfactory. I have already shown that Kant's account of pure intuitions is fundamentally indebted to his early views on the necessarily non-conceptual nature of our experience of space. Our experiences of space and time, the possibility of incongruent counterparts, and similarly our sense of orientation (Kant 1996) all require a faculty of intuition as a non-conceptual source of cognition. To follow Kant on these latter remarks one must concede that all possible and actual intuitions have to have essentially non-conceptual components (Hanna 2008). It seems, therefore, that Kant's position is paradoxical: to follow the Transcendental Deduction means to deny the Transcendental Aesthetic, and *vice versa*.

Thus far, then, Kant's *Critique* does not seem to offer a unitary solution to the problem of how to relate concepts and intuitions. But things become even more abstruse once we focus on Kant's at best equivocal and at worst directly conflicting formulations concerning what is presented in intuition. Throughout the *Critique*, there are fragments that run in favor of both positions. I will not cite them all here, but it is worth looking at a few. In the following fragments, Kant seems to take a favorable stance toward conceptualism by denying that blind intuitions can represent the world:

Without that sort of unity [...] these (intuitions) would then belong to no experience, and would consequently be *without an object*, and would be nothing but a *blind play of representations*, i.e., *less than a dream* (CPR A112 *my italics*).

Combination [...] is rather *only an operation of the understanding* (CPR B134-135 *my italics*).

Consequently, *all synthesis*, through which *even perception itself* becomes possible, stands *under the categories* (CPR B161 *my italics*).

Now in favor of non-conceptualism:

Objects can indeed appear to us *without* necessarily having to be related to the functions of the understanding (CPR A89/B122 *my italics*).

Appearances would nonetheless offer objects to our intuition, for *intuition by no means requires the functions of thinking* (CPR A90-B123 *my italics*).

That representation which can be given *prior to all thinking* is called intuition (CPR B132 *my italics*).

The inconsistency of these and many other fragments represent what I here call Kant's *Intuition Inconsistency*. The latter fragments seem to make it unambiguously clear that objects can appear to us without the operations of the understanding. The former, however, clearly indicate that it is meaningless to speak of objects prior to the involvement of the understanding. The first is the dominant line of thought in the Transcendental Deduction, which serves to show that all objects of intuition fall under the rule of concepts. The second better reflects Kant's position in the Metaphysical Exposition in the Transcendental Aesthetic. Part of the Intuition Inconsistency can, however, be resolved by stipulating the didactic function these non-conceptualist fragments serve in the *Critique*. Some of them appear right before the Transcendental Deduction; they do so because they illustrate the necessity of a deduction of the categories by setting them off against pure intuitions, which do not

require a similar deduction as they apply immediately to experience. But because concepts work only mediately, their necessary application has first to be proven in a special way. Hence when Kant writes that objects can appear to us without the functions of the understanding, this has primarily a heuristic function. Unfortunately, many commentators seem to have missed this point and have used the Intuition Inconsistency as a direct argument for a non-conceptualistic reading.

The three problems distinguished can, I think, be brought down to a basic core dilemma: if intuitions alone present objects, then the understanding is superfluous; if intuitions do not present objects by themselves, they become bare, mysterious givens about which we can gain no knowledge but whose existence we must somehow presuppose.



In the previous section I distinguished three problems concerning the respective function and relations obtaining between intuitions and concepts. It is now time to take a look at how contemporary philosophers have proposed to address this problem of non-conceptual content in Kant's philosophy. Recently, a number of Kant scholars has become involved in the debate over conceptual content in Kant's thinking. Some have argued that inconsistencies can be solved by reading Kant as a non-conceptualist. In what follows, I set out to give an overview of the various arguments these philosophers have presented. After that, I will explain why I think both conceptualists as well as non-conceptualists are *partially* right. I will argue that although Kant is indeed in one sense a non-conceptualist, it is still better to regard him a conceptualist.

The most often heard arguments for Kantian non-conceptualism are the following:

Even though Kant writes that (a) all synthesis is governed by

the understanding and (b) that concepts must apply to and condition all possible intuition . . .

- (1) Kant needs intuition to be non-conceptual to retain the critical function of the *Critique*.
- (2) Kant's pre-critical work shows that he believes space and time to be non-conceptual.
- (3) Kant occasionally writes that intuition can present objects without the involvement of concepts.
- (4) Kant is here only talking about the conditions of possibility for objective judgments, not experience altogether.

I do not think it is hard to see how one could reject (3) and (4) without too much difficulty. Argument (3) concerns what I have dubbed the Intuition Inconsistency. Certainly, the fact that Kant is inconsistent about what intuition provides does not by itself justify non-conceptualism. Moreover, however, that side of the Intuition Inconsistency favored by the non-conceptualist can be significantly reduced by pointing to the heuristic character of these fragments as I have done earlier. I doubt whether argument (4) as adopted by Hanna (2008), Allais (2009) and De Sá Pereira (2013) could hold much water either. Allais writes that although 'the categories are necessary for anything to be an object for me' this does not imply that 'the categories are necessary for me to be perceptually presented by a particular'.¹⁵ Allais thus draws on a distinction in the notion of intuition itself: to 'perceive a particular', which does not require the understanding, and perceptually 'representing a full blown object', which is what Kant would have in mind in the Transcendental Deduction. This certainly is a viable reading of Kant and it seems to make sense to think of

¹⁵ Lucy Allais (2009, p. 405).

intuition this way as it would solve the Independency Disagreement. But one problem I have with this is that it is completely unclear (possibly unthinkable?) what it would mean to ‘perceive a particular’ without the kind of unity provided by the understanding. But even granted such a conception, the B-Deduction explicitly demands that *all intuition* – regardless of its involvement in objective cognition – is synthesized by the understanding. Nowhere does it say that there is a special sort of receptive sense-making that could do without synthesis. So it is not easy to see that Kant adopts such a view. Claim (1) and (2), to the contrary, are not so easily explained away. In fact it seems that, one way or other, some form of non-conceptual content has to be appropriated in any interpretation of Kant’s philosophy if one is to take these claims seriously.

Can these tensions be resolved in a way that stays true to both Kant’s conceptualist and his non-conceptualist exclamations? I believe it is possible to respect claim (1) and (2) distinguished above while at the same time honoring Kant’s conceptualism of the Transcendental Deduction. A distinction between two kinds of (non-)conceptual content might solve the concerns I earlier addressed as the Independency Disagreement and the Conceptualism Contradiction. This distinction has been drawn by a number of philosophers and in a variety of ways, but most of them did not exploit this in two different kinds of conceptualism. Crane, for instance, separates within mental content the *real* and the *general* content,¹⁶ a distinction which he borrows from Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*. Siewert seems to be talking about the same thing when he discusses the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of the givenness of the object in intuition.¹⁷ The general line of reasoning found here is this: intuition presents me with some object, say, a cup of coffee on my desk. The cup of coffee is the intentional content toward which the act is directed. We could ask whether content of this kind already involves

¹⁶ Tim Crane (2013, pp. 239-243).

¹⁷ Charles Siewert (2013).

concepts and/or is conceptualizable. However, at the same time, another kind of content is in play to which one is not intentionally related. For one, the precise way in which the cup of coffee is given alters incessantly. As the act of perception proceeds, I view the cup of coffee from a slightly different angle each and every moment, for instance due to the movements of my body. It is *through* content of this kind that I am intentionally related to the cup of coffee. Now try imagining that for every slight variation in the ‘how’ of a (for instance) perceptual appearance there would be a corresponding variation in what is given intentionally. This means that for every variation in how the cup is presented a different object would be given to me intentionally. This is, I think, hard if not outright impossible to do. Even though my eyes scan may scan the cup of coffee on my desk and present it a bit differently every time, I still see the same cup of coffee. We can thus separate what I propose calling the ‘general content’ (‘what’ is given intentionally) from the real content (‘how’ it is given).¹⁸ The question of (non-) conceptualism can now likewise be split in two: that of general and real (non-) conceptual content.

How does this relate back to the problem of non-conceptual content in Kant’s philosophy? Taking Kant’s Transcendental Deduction into account, I think it is hard to see how Kant could have been a general content non-conceptualist. Kant holds that the understanding has to be involved in the production of unity in intuitions. Concepts are constitutive of the unity of the intentional or general content of any possible or actual perception. Likewise, these intentional contents are open to the synthetic unity of apperception: they can be judged about by the subject. By consequence, I believe it can hardly be denied that Kant is a general content conceptualist. Whatever is intentionally presented in intuition is to some degree informed by concepts

¹⁸ Sometimes the ‘how’ is used to refer to the *mode* of the act, for instance perception, imagination, recollection, etc., but it should be clear that this is not how I wish to use it here.

and is by transcendental necessity open to conceptualization. However, considering Kant's views on space, time and subjective orientation, it is extremely unlikely that he would have considered himself at the same time a real content conceptualist. Our non-conceptual intuitions of space and time are responsible for the particularity of each intuitive representation. They provide perspective and orientation with regard to objects – particularity conditions – which are, conform the argument from incongruent counterparts, non-conceptual.

It can thus be denied that Kant's B-Deduction invokes what I have earlier called the Conceptualism Contradiction. The solution lies in distinguishing two kinds of conceptualism. For the B-Deduction does not necessitate a real content conceptualist reading of the *Critique*; it only demands general content conceptualism. Therefore, Kant can maintain the arguments from the B-Deduction without contradicting his earlier remarks on space and time. The distinctive transcendental contribution of pure intuitions can in turn be exhausted in terms of real content non-conceptualism while maintaining a conceptualist stance at the level of general content. The distinction might similarly dissolve the Independency Disagreement: although at the level of general content intuitions are conditioned by concepts, their independent contribution shows up at the level of real content. This is my case for Kantian general content conceptualism and real content non-conceptualism.

Hanna (2008), however, and similarly Allais (2009) and Heidemann (2012), are convinced of having good reasons to plead for a non-conceptualist interpretation of Kant. Hanna in particular does not seem to accept half measures; he wants to consider Kant a full non-conceptualist. Throughout his works, he draws on a number of arguments that I will not all treat here. I will instead focus only on the argument he draws from Kant's assessment of incongruent counterparts, which he presents as the *Two Hands Argument*, in order to show how my interpretation contrasts with his:

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According to THA ('Two Hands Argument'), the content of perceptual states that pick out a perceivable natural object – such as a human hand – that has an actual or possible incongruent counterpart, is essentially non-conceptual. But it is clearly and distinctly conceivable, and therefore logically possible, that *any* perceivable natural object, and also *an* external part of *anyone's* body, has an actual or possible incongruent counterpart. [. . .] So the cognitive need for essentially non-conceptual content is ubiquitous in our world, in order for us to be able to discriminate between things and their incongruent counterparts (Hanna 2008, p. 57).

Hanna thus sums up the Kantian doctrine against Leibnizian space theory, but makes it serve his own purpose of proving what he calls 'essentially non-conceptual content'. The claim is both profound and important: Hanna extrapolates Kant's argument by saying that every perceptual state must have essentially non-conceptual content, since all perception draws on capacities of (spatial and temporal) orientation that are endemic to intuition and which cannot be explained by someone having only a conceptual apparatus. I think Hanna is correct about this point, which conceptualists often miss out on. The primary function of pure intuitions is not to present things as 'numerically distinct', as Allison claims in his 1983 reading of the Transcendental Aesthetic. Although this is arguably what Kant is ultimately after in his search for providing a foundation of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, pure intuitions specifically provide something that is beyond conceptual or numerical description. However, in spite of its originality, Hanna's argument, it seems to me, fails to transcend the level of real content non-conceptualism and is insufficient to rebut the claim that Kant is a general content conceptualist. This is what Hanna, Allais and Heidemann overlook: although the essentially intuitional character of

experience is indeed such that it cannot be addressed by someone with only conceptual capacities, it can *nevertheless* be conceptualized by any rational creature which *does* have both stems of knowledge. It is correct that merely the having of concepts is insufficient for explaining our experiences of space and time. But that does not mean the latter are *qua* general content closed off from conceptualization. Put differently, Hanna misses out on the fact that Kant can maintain both general content conceptualism and real content non-conceptualism. Kant can and to my opinion does regard the content of perception to be partially non-conceptual – according to the Transcendental Aesthetic – but he also believes that this very same content can be conceptualized – conform the Transcendental Deduction. This view becomes all the more clear once we recall that for Kant space and time as non-conceptual intuitions are, although constitutive of, not themselves objects of experience. Hence they are non-conceptual *qua* real content, while insofar as they can become objects of experience by means of a synthesis of the understanding, they conform to general content conceptualism.

The interpretation I have offered is equally a criticism of conceptualists. At the other side of the debate, recent Kantian conceptualists such as Ginsborg (2008) and Gomes (2014) are so caught up in the B-Deduction's overt conceptualism that they tend to neglect the non-conceptualism of the Transcendental Aesthetic and the pre-critical works. Although they are partially right, their fallacy is to either ignore or try to reject altogether the point made by Hanna which I just transformed into a kind of Kantian real content non-conceptualism. Neither of the two parties, then, seems to consider the option that Kant endorses conceptualism and non-conceptualism at the same time. With this interpretation at hand, it can be denied that Kant's B-Deduction invokes what I have earlier called the Conceptualism Contradiction and the Independency Disagreement: although at the level of general content intuitions are conditioned by concepts, their

independent contribution shows up at another level one might call real content.

VI

In this paper I first explained Kant's pre-critical views on the non-conceptual nature of our experiences of space and time. Second, I distinguished three problems that come to the fore mostly in the Transcendental Deduction of the first *Critique*. Third, I argued that recent debates over Kantian non-conceptualism are best addressed by means of a distinction between general and real content (non-) conceptualism. This resulted in the following reading:

Kant is a real content non-conceptualist:

- (C1) Receptive experience is conditioned by bodily orientation and experiences of space and time which are necessarily non-conceptual.

Kant is a general content conceptualist:

- (C2) All intentional content must be conditioned by synthesis provided by the concepts of the understanding and be relatable to the 'I think' expressed in the principle of the synthetic unity of apperception.

Current debates thrive in part on a confusion of these two kinds of conceptualism. Still, if one has to take a stance, I think the *Critique* leaves no doubt that Kant puts the most weight on general content conceptualism. This is why Kant is indeed in one sense a non-conceptualist, but is still better regarded a conceptualist.

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