

Conceptualism and Non-Conceptualism in Kant's Theory of Experience¹

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ABSTRACT: Discussions about non-conceptualism, i.e. on the possibility or even the necessity of the existence of mental representations that may refer to or describe the world without using concepts, have been frequent in contemporary philosophical debate about perception and cognition. In this paper I intend to examine some central points of this discussion in the light of Kant's theory of the experience as developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, with the dual aim of exploring how Kant's proposals may help to elucidate or even decide some of the crucial issues involved in this debate, and, conversely, how the analytical and conceptual refinement produced by this contemporary debate can provide some clues for the interpretation of Kantian philosophy. Special attention will be devoted to the works of Wilfrid Sellars and Robert Hanna.

I Conceptualism and Non-Conceptualism

Non-conceptualism consists in the thesis that perceiving beings may represent the world (refer to or describe objects and events) by means of mental states whose content, at least in part, is not determined by any conceptual (discursive) representation. Thus, it is argued that there may be a perfectly determined perception of an object even if the subject of perception does not have the means to represent that object as a such-and-such, that is, even if the subject is not able to make a judgment that subsumes it to a certain type of object. It is easier to define non-conceptualism as the denial of conceptualism, which states that all objective representation is entirely composed of conceptual elements and that without this condition there can be no objective apprehension of the world.

Classical arguments for non-conceptualism consist in displaying situations in which an objective discrimination takes place in perception without the perceiving subject resorting to or having at his disposal concepts to support this discrimination. Thus, it is perfectly possible to distinguish between two extremely close shades of green when viewed side by side, without disposing of conceptual means to classify each of them under a specific type. One should notice that the question here is not the mere absence of tagging words to make this classification, but the absence of a representation of a *general* nature that is able to subsume other individual cases, *i.e.*, that makes it possible to recognize, at a *new* occasion, that one of those same colors is present to the perception, because this, after all, is the basis for assigning names to these colors.

¹ A preliminary Portuguese version of this paper was presented at last year's meeting of the GT Criticismo e Semântica, during the XV Encontro da ANPOF, in Curitiba, PR.

Another example is concept acquisition itself, which presupposes the occurrence of a first perceptual contact with an object of a type hitherto unknown, for instance, a pen-drive. By means of this example, it can be argued that non-conceptual representations of objects not only exist, but are indispensable for the existence of conceptual representations.

These and many other arguments based on the fact that the perceiving subject lacks the appropriate concepts to specify the contents of his representation are vulnerable to several conceptualistic replies, like McDowell's "demonstrative strategy"², according to which one can always point to a specific color shade and produce a "demonstrative concept" like "this shade"; and still more effectively when the conceptualist retreats to the position that Robert Hanna describes as "Highly Refined Conceptualism", according to which any perceptual state may be considered as conceptual, even if the subject does not possess any concept able to specify its content, provided that some possible non-specified subject, on some non-specified occasion, possesses or might possess the concepts necessary to minimally identify that content³. Thus, if grandpa does not know what is it that he sees on the table and has, say, only a non-conceptual apprehension of that object, his five-years old grandson can explain to him that it is a flash drive, which shows that that content was, after all, capable of conceptual specification. Similarly, the two extremely close shades of green could be identified, let us say, as "Paris Green" and "Lawn Green" and specified more precisely by the hexadecimal sequences #7FFF00 and #7CFC00, revealing themselves accordingly as conceptually determined, reproducible and recognizable contents. It is easy to see that, by means of this strategy, any example of perceptual state that is only contingently non-conceptual due to the absence, on occasion, of concepts able to subsume that perceptual content can easily be disqualified by the refined conceptualist.

Given this situation, Hanna declares that the only hope of the non-conceptualist is to provide an example of a perceptual content that is *essentially*, and not only contingently, non-conceptual and is, accordingly, able to withstand the strategies developed by the conceptualists. What is needed is to exhibit some aspect or component of perceptual experience that is radically irreducible to a conceptual apprehension. Hanna believes that Kant's theory of sensibility can effectively provide such an example, and I will come back to this point in the final section of this presentation. Before that, however, it is necessary to investigate more precisely what is the position that one should attribute to Kant in the context of this debate.

II Conceptual and non-conceptual components of experience in Kant

With his famous statement that "thoughts without [sensible] content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (*KrV* A51, B75), Kant enters the history of philosophy as the father of conceptualism. In fact, by locating intuitions in the sphere of receptivity and concepts in the sphere of spontaneity of our mind, and by asserting that without the cooperation of these *two* elements no cognition (*Erkenntniss*) can be

² MCDOWELL, 2005, p. 93-97.

³ HANNA, 2008, p. 50.

attained, Kant may be understood as denying that there might be an objective representation of reality based simply on intuitions. In that interpretation, the saying “intuitions without concepts are blind” would imply a refusal of the possibility of a purely sensible experience, without the intervention of concepts. In an even more radical interpretation, one could suppose that the “blindness” of intuitions without concepts prevents even the identification of the separate contribution they bring to the experience. If they have some non-conceptual content, that content is just something that is available for the operation of spontaneity (understanding), and not something that would be intelligible to its subject as a conscious apprehension of some aspect, however primitive, of reality.⁴

This last implication, however, does not seem to have been what Kant had in mind. When he separated Aesthetics and Analytic, and applied himself to abstract, in the experience, what was proper of sensitivity as opposed to the contribution of the understanding (*KrV* A21, B35), Kant reveals that the necessary integration of the two components in an experience, far from being a license to confuse them, imposes the need for a careful distinction between the contributions of each one (*KrV* B76, A52)

Even the first interpretation, however, — that without concepts no objective epistemic contact with the world is possible—does not seem to have been unequivocally authorized by Kant. In fact, in B74, A50, he says that, by the receptivity of impressions, an object is *given* to us, and by the spontaneity of concepts, it is *thought* in relation to this representation, as a mere determination of the mind. What immediately leads to the question of whether an object could not be *given* to us even if it were not *thought*. What would be the character of such defective representation, and to what extent would it differ from the full experience of an object? Would it be a mere subjective determination of the mind, a mere *sense-datum*, or would it already put us actually in contact with an item of experience located objectively in the external world?

Although there are several passages in the *KrV* in which Kant seems to endorse the possibility that intuitions may provide us with objects without the intervention of the understanding⁵, the most explicit (and most quoted) passage occurs in the *Logic Jäsche*, V, AK33

In each cognition (*Erkenntniss*) one must distinguish *matter*, *i.e.*, the object, and *form*, *i.e.* the manner *how* we know the object. If, for example, a savage sees from far away a house whose use he does not know, he has represented before him exactly the same object as another man who decidedly knows it as a dwelling built for man. But, according to the form, this cognition of that one and same object is different in each of them. In the first, it is *mere intuition*, in the second, it is both *intuition* and *concept*.

“Mere intuition”, therefore, places before the savage *the same object* that is represented by a civilized man who knows the use to which it lends. This at once raises a question as to how to identify or describe this object that is common to both. If, indeed, the savage represents it in an entirely non-conceptual manner, it would

⁴ MCDOWELL, 2005, p. 91-92.

⁵ See HANNA, 2008, p. 45.

obviously be impossible to provide a description of *how* (in what manner) the savage represents it, because to describe it even as a mere sensible impression one would already need at least *this* concept.⁶ The only way left is to resort to the conceptual capacity of civilized man and — taking advantage of the identity of the object admitted by Kant — to say that the savage sees a house, but do not see it *as* house, since he has no such concept. In fact, in the situation as described by Kant, the representation of the savage is entirely sensible (*mere intuition*), that is to say, there is no concept under which he understands this object, which, nevertheless, is a physical object existing in space as much as it is for the civilized man that conceptualizes it properly.

Returning, however, to the discussion of the preceding section, we could notice that the savage's representation, whatever it may be, is *only contingently* non-conceptual, due to the conceptual limitations of the subject, but the precise content he apprehends reveals itself as able to be *conceptualized*, given the existence of other subjects that possess the cognitive skills necessary for its identification. Notwithstanding, however, the conceptual or non-conceptual character of the representation, Kant's example seems to bind him with the idea that it is possible to establish an epistemic contact with a *given* singular physical object merely by means of the receptivity of the senses, without any conceptual mediation.

But is this really so? Would Kant be aligning himself with the “myth of the given” that for several centuries dominated the landscape of philosophical discussions about perception and that was definitely called into question by the work of Wilfrid Sellars in the middle of the twentieth century? To answer this question, we need to investigate how Sellars himself understands Kant's theory of perception and cognition. This will be the subject of the next section.

III A conceptualist reading: Sellars

Wilfrid Sellars himself was a deep and original philosopher, and his approach of Kant's philosophy is not, understandably, the same as that of a scholarly interpreter, but that of an independent thinker who seeks in Kant's philosophy elements to guide his own thinking in addressing the questions in which he is interested. It is natural, therefore, that he does not hesitate to point out what seems to him to be ambiguous and unclear in Kant's exposition, and to propose ways to preserve its consistency in essential points.

One of these points is the treatment that Kant gives to the notion of intuition. Sellars notes that Kant introduces the dichotomies concept-intuition and sensitivity-understanding as reflecting the opposition between receptivity and spontaneity, but this simple characterization, for Sellars, cannot resist the demands of the argument, and it soon becomes clear that intuitions — or at least those intuitions capable to give us an object — cannot proceed entirely from mere receptivity, but should already involve a “synthesis” which is an act of spontaneity, or, more precisely,

⁶ BIRD, 2006, p. 129.

of the understanding acting in a particular way, under the name of productive imagination.⁷

Drawing on Kant's another way of distinguishing between intuitions and concepts — namely, that intuition is a singular and immediate representation of an individual, and a concept is a general representation that comprises a class of individuals by means of a set of characteristic marks —, Sellars proposes that one could plausibly conceive of intuition as a kind of concept that grasps in its scope a single individual, not in the manner of a definite description, but in the manner of the demonstrative pronoun “this”. Intuition would be conceptual, says Sellars, in the same sense that the representation of something as a “this” is conceptual.⁸ Sellars does not tell us what this sense would be and why we would be allowed to characterize such representation of a “this” as conceptual, but it is worth noting that, for him, that object never appears as a mere “this”, but in view of the synthesis of imagination, as a “this of such and such a kind,” at least in the case of intuitions that proceed from that synthesis and are not confined to the mere field of receptivity.

Thus, intuition would have, for example, the form “this-cube”, or “this-cube-white-with-black flecks”, and its character would be manifestly conceptual, though not yet constituting a judgment like “this is a cube” or (in a more conceptually rich, and experience-informed manner) “this is a die”, judgments in which the understanding operates at its full capacity of analyzing previously synthesized representations and subsuming them to general discursive concepts. In this latter capacity, it is presupposed that the subject possesses these concepts, in order that the judgment can be issued, but at the level of the intuition “this-cube”, “cube” does not appear as a general concept nor is it assumed that the subject of the representation possesses this concept or knows that what he sees is a cube. The only claim is that which appears in intuition is a cube, or has a cubic shape,

On the other hand, in the case of more mature and experience-informed representations as “this-die” or “this-pen-drive” or “this-house”, the predicative (judgmental) use of these general representations is presupposed. However, even in these cases, one requires the existence of “thises” that can be characterized in terms of sensible forms and qualities, that is to say, basic “thises” that are completely determined in perceptual terms.⁹ In this way one solves the problem posed by Kant's example of the savage who sees a house. Both he and the civilized man see (intuit) exactly the same object, in the sense that there is a common basic object (specifiable in purely perceptible terms) that both see, although the higher functions of the understanding act differently in each case in subsuming of that object to the concepts that each possesses.

Thus, in Sellars's reading, we can understand how, for Kant, intuition can represent, or give us an object: this is possible only because the object is not passively received in our sensibility, but results from a synthesis of imagination without which

⁷ SELLARS, 1992, p.10-11.

⁸ SELLARS, 1992, p.10-11.

⁹ SELLARS, 1992, p.13.

we would never represent an object, but would be confined to the realm of fleeting sensations.

The above discussion has not explained, however, what role is played by sensibility in experience, or what contribution it brings to it in its purely receptive capacity. We have seen already that Kant takes that contribution to be indispensable: without it concepts would be “empty” and understanding would be an idle gear that performs no work. In his own theory of experience (clearly inspired in Kant’s), Sellars discusses the same issue. His solution is also a dualism of components: experience contains a propositional component which involves the use of concepts, and a component that he calls “descriptive”, which is not conceptual.¹⁰ Thus, if I have a visual experience of “this-cube-green”, there is a sense in which this experience involves thinking “this” *as* a green cube. But in order that experience is not reduced to a mere thought, another component must be present: something must be *felt*, *i.e.*, my receptivity must be called to provide an aspect of visual experience that goes beyond mere thought. It is necessary that a green cube, so to speak, be *actually present* to my consciousness, and not just thought about. And this presence is ensured by the existence of sensations, or sensory impressions that form the *matter* of the experiment.

However, it is very important to stress that, for Sellars, a sensation is not a separate item with which consciousness enters into some relationship. Sellars has an adverbial theory of sensation: to say that I have a visual sensation of a green surface is not to say that there is (an impression of) a green surface in the inside of my mind with which I come into contact, but that I *sense in a certain way* (“I sense greenly”). But it is necessary to explain why I have the visual sensation of green on some occasions, and of red on others—and that is when introducing entities as “sensory impressions” proves to be useful. They are not accessible to our consciousness and are introduced by Sellars as unobservable theoretical entities¹¹ that act as intermediaries between our conscious perceptual states and the impact of objects and physical processes on our sense organs. They are not, in themselves, colored nor have spatial forms, but present a structure that is analogous to that of the space of colors and geometrical shapes (the same “logical multiplicity” in the terminology of the *Tractatus*) by means of which they can guide “from outside” the operation of the imagination in its synthesis, without being in no way incorporated to the end result.

This brief and very incomplete exposition of Sellars’s theory of experience suffices already to understand the criticism he directs to Kant regarding the undifferentiated application of the notion of intuition both to the brute and non-conceptual manifold of sensations given in pure receptivity and to the properly conceptual and representational flow of perceptual states resulting from the synthesis of the imagination. Because of this, it may seem that Kant is still stuck to the empiricist model according to which sensations, for instance, colors, would be given in receptivity exactly as they will appear in our experience of colorful objects, and that the synthesis would simply arrange and incorporate them as they are in the final result. By recognizing the existence of non-conceptual elements in the constitution of our

¹⁰ SELLARS, 1991, §22, p. 151-52.

¹¹ SELLARS, 1991, §22, p. 150-51.

experience, though taking them only as external factors that guide the synthesis without appearing as components in its result, Sellars's corrective reading of Kant's theory of experience manages to present it as an authentically conceptualistic theory, for which no cognitive representation of the world, including intuitions, can take place without the operation of concepts.¹²

IV A non-conceptualistic reading: Hanna

It is now time to return to where we ended the first section of this presentation and to examine Hanna's suggestion that the only line of defense of non-conceptualism capable to provide some hope of success against the strategies developed by conceptualists is to find an example of some aspect or component of perceptual experience that is radically irreducible to an apprehension by means of concepts. In fact, Hanna believes that arguments that merely appeal to the fact that a perceiving subject does not, in a particular situation, possess the relevant concepts for the characterization of the contents of his perceptual state are vulnerable to the argument that once some other subject, real or possible, is potentially in possession of the relevant concept, this is already enough to classify that perceived content as conceptually determinable. It remains to be seen whether Hanna is successful in providing such an example of an essentially non-conceptual content.

Hanna believes to have found such an example in the case of incongruent counterparts that Kant discusses in several works, more particularly in *Prolegomena* §13. Hanna notes that Kant used this example both in his pre-critical period, to prove the intrinsic reality of space as opposed to relational conception of Leibniz, as in his critical period, to prove the ideality of space, and concludes that Kant's argument is therefore indifferent to the acceptance or rejection of Transcendental Idealism.

I will not dwell here on the details of Kant's example, which is quite familiar. In the *Prolegomena*, the case is exemplified by two spherical [and scalene¹³] triangles that are exactly alike as regards the magnitudes of their sides and internal angles, but when their vertices and sides are made to coincide, their overlying surfaces do not fit together because one is concave and the other convex. This scientifically accurate example is followed by the more popular example of a hand and its reflection in the mirror. In both cases the reasoning is the same: these figures or objects are exactly corresponding and identical in every point, so that no intrinsic description in terms of their internal relationships can pick any difference between them. Yet, the difference manifests itself as soon as the observer apprehends them intuitively as located in the space at his front, that is, as soon as he is able to establish a relationship between them and the orientation (left, right, front, behind, above, below) that his own body determines in that space.

¹² Or "protoconcepts", if we want to maintain a distinction between the understanding acting in its proper function of "giving unity to the various representations in a judgment" and, in the role of imagination, of "giving unity to the mere synthesis of various representations in an intuition." (Cf. *KrV* A78, B103)

¹³ Kant does not mention this condition, which is, nevertheless, essential for the success of the example.

The crucial question that arises now for Hanna is to establish conclusively that this difference between the two incongruent objects of perception cannot be expressed in conceptual terms. The first obstacle is presented by McDowell's demonstrative strategy: in the same way one could create a concept for specifying a certain shade of green by pointing to it and uttering the phrase "this shade", one could as well point to a right hand and say "this hand", thereby producing a demonstrative concept that would specify exactly that type of hand, and not the other.

Against this, Hanna's response is simply to deny that demonstrative concepts are genuine concepts. For Hanna, they would rather be like a hybrid animal, with the head of a singular deictic and the body of a general concept; and since an animal with a lion's body and an eagle's head cannot be considered a special kind of lion, by the same token, says Hanna, demonstrative concepts cannot really be considered as concepts.¹⁴

It seems to me, however, that before raising a general objection to demonstrative concepts as such, it would be useful to investigate a bit more whether the example of incongruent counterparts could not afford us a deeper reason to prevent the use of such concepts in that case, even if we accepted their legitimacy in other cases as, for instance, the case of the two very close shades of green. Let us notice that, in this last case, a problem for the demonstrative concept "this shade" is that it does not, by itself, allow a re-identification of that precise color in future occasions, that is to say, it is not certain that we would later be able to pick that exact shade of green among a collection of very similar shades based only in our memory of the ostensible act that defined it. The use of such terms like "Paris green" and "Lawn green" would not help us either, because to understand and employ these terms we must be able to previously discriminate the very shades to which they apply, and this lead us back to our original difficulty.

If, however, instead of vague and conventional terms like "Paris green" and "Lawn green", we employed one of the several scientific systems of naming colors that codify the proportion of each of the components of that color, like the hexadecimal strings #7FFF00 and #7CFC00, then the problem of re-identification would apparently be solved and we could say that the discrimination of the two shades has actually been made in conceptual terms. Suppose, now, that McDowell, instead of just pointing to a color and saying "this shade", hoping that the observer somehow would store it in his or her memory, produced a card of that color that the observer could use to make comparisons and re-identify that particular shade in future occasions – wouldn't this be as good and as effective as the conceptual characterization as "color #7CFC00"?

Let us now try to apply this solution to the case of re-identification of a right hand. McDowell, instead of just pointing to a hand and saying "this hand" or "this type of hand" hoping that the observer will keep that image in his or her memory, produces a picture of that hand which could serve as a standard of comparison for future identifications of the same type of object. Better yet, since the observer already has his own right hand, he may use it safely as a standard for the subsequent recognition of this type of hand anywhere and anytime. But here we begin to realize why the

¹⁴ HANNA, 2008. p. 56.

argument fails in this case. For the recognition of that supposed standard as “my right hand” *itself does not appear to be purely conceptual in nature* but involves, again, an intuitive confrontation with an object in space. In the attempt to provide a conceptual expression for an intuitive grasp, one ends up reaching a representation which, to be itself re-used, needs or presupposes a new intuitive apprehension. It seems clear that this circle will inevitably occur in any attempt to provide demonstrative concepts *à la* McDowell (whether pictures, objects or memorized images) to capture contents that are intrinsically linked to our form of spatial representation.

Hanna himself, in fact, had already guaranteed against this possibility by listing the *minimum requirements* that a representation should satisfy in order to be characterized as a conceptual representation¹⁵: (i) its content must be intrinsically descriptive; (ii) its content must be inherently intersubjectively shareable, (iii) its content should be intrinsically such that the conscious observer does not need to be directly in contact or be faced with what is represented by it. Hanna meets these minimum requirements in the following characterization:

At the very least, the function of a concept is to provide for definite or indefinite categorization, classification, discrimination, or identification of objects, and it must also be possible to linguistically convey the content of a concept to someone else who is not directly acquainted with or confronted with the object or objects represented by that conceptual content – e.g., it must be possible to linguistically convey that conceptual content to someone else over the telephone.¹⁶

The requirement of a telephone communication is very opportune, and Hanna’s objective is to avoid that the explanation of the concept may include, spuriously, visual signs or indications of a gestural nature that go beyond the domain of a purely discursive, i.e. conceptual, representation (“the spring turns in *this direction*” “the handle is bent to *this side* ...”). However, Hanna would still need to refine his characterization in order to exclude from the vocal communication any signs that make a determinate reference to the bodily orientation of the receiver – thus, even though the conversation takes place over the telephone, statements such as “to your right” and “counterclockwisely” etc. cannot be allowed, because, since physical space has the same orientation in all its parts¹⁷, those expressions would convey to the receiver the very intuitive relation that the transmitter maintains with the object of the concept he wants to specify.

Having made this observation, it seems to me that the case of incongruent counterparts effectively provides Hanna with an example of perceptual content able to withstand conceptualists replies such as McDowell’s demonstrative strategy and, chiefly, the argument of the highly refined conceptualist. In addition, the example can be easily extended to cover the entire perceptual universe, because every object in the world has a real or possible incongruent counterpart and thus, in the perception of any

¹⁵ HANNA, 2008, p. 50-51.

¹⁶ HANNA, 2008, p. 50.

¹⁷ That is to say, it never happens that the same shoe is perceived as a right shoe in some regions of the universe and as a left shoe in others, as it could happen if physical space had the structure of a Klein’s bottle.

spatial object, it is already involved a discrimination of a non-conceptual character, in the sense that we perceive *that* object and not its counterpart. Hanna seems to me, for the moment, to have succeeded in establishing the validity of non-conceptualism, but certainly the debate is far from complete.

V Final considerations

My intention in this communication obviously was not to go through all arguments that have been or are being developed within the controversy conceptualism *versus* non-conceptualism, much less come to a definitive conclusion on the issue. What I meant to show, through the example of philosophers like Sellars and Hanna, was that Kant's thought remains a crucial and even indispensable referential for those working with philosophical issues today, even if they are formulated in a conceptual framework rather distinct from that which existed in Kant's time. Conversely, our understanding of Kant is increasingly enlivened when we do not treat him as a museum object, to be left to the care only of historians of philosophy, but explicitly insert him in these debates as a lively and timeless interlocutor, in whose work are still to be found vital contributions to the problems that are of interest to contemporary philosophy today.

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