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## SELLARSIAN PERSPECTIVES ON PERCEPTION AND NON-CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

**ABSTRACT.** I argue that a Sellarsian approach to experience allows one to take seriously the thought that there is something given to us in perception without denying that we can only be conscious of conceptually structured content. I argue against the traditional empiricist reading of Sellars, according to which sensations are understood as epistemically graspable prior to concrete propositional representations, by showing that it is unclear on such a view why sensations are not just the given as Sellars so famously criticizes it. I suggest an alternative transcendental reading, according to which there are two sides to the subject matter of perceptual judgments: The matter given in perception (sensation), and its form (intuition). I present an account of sensations and intuitions on which it is unproblematic to see sensations as what is given in perception: They are not intelligible independently of their role as the matter of intuitions, the content of which is accessible to us only in the context of a judgment.

It seems plausible that something is given to us in perception that is the basis for the judgments we form about objects in view.<sup>1</sup> And it is tempting to say that what is given in perception has content in some way without being conceptual. It seems plausible, on the other hand, that only conceptually structured content is accessible to us. Approaches that assume perception to be providing us with (non-conceptual) content, which cannot be expressed in a judgment, play down or circumvent the second of these two suppositions. In contrast, many

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approaches that assume perception to be concept-dependent drop the first supposition, arguing that our perception of objects must be conceptual from the outset.

Sellars is normally taken to be a radical supporter of the thesis that our perception does not involve a given (see most recently Alston 2002). I will argue, however, that a Sellarsian approach to perception allows one to take seriously the idea that perception is concept-dependent without denying that something is given to us in perception. My argument proceeds in two steps.

First, I argue that the concepts that we employ in perceptual judgments are related to objects in that they involve rules of application specifying the circumstances under which it is correct to use a word and the practical consequences of its use. But taking application rules into account is, I will argue, not sufficient to explain what is involved in directing a thought at this rather than that particular object in perception. In a second step, I address this more specific question. I show that we can consider ourselves to be referring to objects, not by setting up atomistic semantical relations between expressions and objects, but by picking out particular objects in the context of a full-blown language. I argue for this second point by distinguishing two possible readings of Sellars's interpretation of sensations (*sinnliche Eindrücke*) and Kantian intuitions (*Anschauungen*). On what could be called an empiricist reading, sensations are understood as the input on the basis of which we form basic conceptual representations, namely intuitions, and full-blown propositional representations. I argue that it is unclear on such a reading why sensations and intuitions are not the given as Sellars so famously criticizes it.

This understanding of the sensible conditions of perception will be contrasted with what could be called a transcendental understanding of sensations and intuitions. On such a reading, intuitions and sensations are what we must *assume* figure in our perception if we think of our perception as having a subject matter. On Kant's picture, there are two sides to the sensible conditions without which we cannot think of ourselves as having perception of objective reality: The matter given in perception (sensation) and its form (intuition). While intuitions are not graspable independently of being subsumed under concepts in the context of a judgment, sensations are not graspable independently of being formed into empirical intuitions. Although sensations can be seen as what is given in perception, they are intelligible only as the matter of intuitions, the content of which is intelligible only in the context of a judgment.

The question of what it means to have perceptions of this rather than that particular object is approached by thinking through Kant's understanding of intuitions and sensations because, I believe, we have much to learn from his insights in these matters. I see Kant as discussing the materials necessary for

the construction of a framework that leaves room for the suppositions motivating theories that assume the possibility of non-conceptual content, without thereby falling prey to a crude empiricist account of perception.<sup>2</sup> Thinking through Sellarsian and Kantian approaches to perception will serve as a springboard to bring out a way of making sense of the idea that something is given in perception that is not as yet conceptually structured. Thus, this paper meshes historical and systematic interests.

For Kant the fundamental nature of empirical judgments is their dependence on receptive intuitions. This dependence on intuitions is an insight shared with the empiricist tradition. But in contrast to philosophers standing in that tradition, Kant sees the intelligibility of empirical intuitions as necessarily relying on a conceptual framework. Intuitions provide direct links to objects, but these links are not atomistic content-generating links, since we can only grasp the content of intuitions in the context of a judgment. Discussing these issues quickly leads to the question of how the relation between intuitions and demonstratives should be understood. In a third part, I will address this question by discussing Sellars's interpretation of intuitions as having the form "that cube." Again I will distinguish two possible readings of such a view. I argue that intuitions must not be understood as a separable contribution to perceptual judgments, but as providing for the possibility of such judgments.

### **1. Functional Roles and Rules of Application**

The question of what it means to direct one's thought at a particular object has a semantical as well as an epistemological dimension. From a semantical perspective, the question is how the content of our thoughts determines what the thoughts are about. From an epistemological perspective, the question takes the form of how our thoughts are affected and guided by the objects that they are about. Sellars approaches the problem of perceptual content from both angles. He criticizes ambitions to ground the contents of our expressions by way of atomistic content-generating links to objects and develops his positive account by arguing that the contents of our expressions must be understood in terms of the functional roles of these expressions. This view leads him to maintain that there are no direct semantical relations between words and objects and, thus, to a radical non-relational semantics. The same thoughts take

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'non-conceptual content' is used rather differently in different accounts of perception. Throughout this paper, it will be understood as content that is accessible to the perceiving subject without bringing any conceptual capacities into play.

an epistemological twist when he argues against the possibility that sense data are given to us in perception as something that we know solely by acquaintance.

The main difficulties with Sellars's account are all connected to the question of how expressions can be seen as referring to particular objects in perception.<sup>3</sup> To bring out the nature of the problem it will be necessary to lay out the basic semantical ideas that motivate Sellars's account of perception. In "Being and Being Known," Sellars argues that conceptual episodes "differ intrinsically *qua* acts in a way which systematically corresponds to what they are about, i.e., their subject-matter" (1960, p. 43). He insists, however, that this is not meant to imply that there are semantical relations between the conceptual and the real orders. He contends that our thoughts can stand in semantical relations only to elements in the conceptual order and argues in *Science and Metaphysics* that this "non-relational character of 'meaning' and 'aboutness'" is the "key to a correct understanding of the place of mind in nature" (1967a, p. ix).

What does it mean to say that there are no semantical relations involved in perception? On what one could call a strict non-relational view, perception does not represent particular objects at all. Such a view is motivated by the idea that the perception of two indistinguishable objects is exactly the same. Martin Davies, for example, argues that if two objects are perceptually indistinguishable for a subject, then the perception of one has the very same content as the perception of the other (1997, p. 314).

Such a strict non-relational view is counterintuitive: If the content of the perceptions of two indistinguishable objects is the same, neither perception seems to represent the particular object in view. Of course, it need not follow from such a view that perception does not represent the world. On Davies's account "[o]ne way to see how perceptual content can be truth conditional, although not object-involving, is to take perceptual content to be existentially quantified content" (1997, p. 314). This is just to say that two perceivers visually confronted with two distinct, but indistinguishable pens on a table represent that there is an object of a particular type lying on an object of another particular type. But this still leaves the question of how we can think of ourselves as perceiving this rather than that object: When a person perceives a pen, she *knows* which pen she is looking at, namely the one in view. As P. F. Strawson argues convincingly in his discussion of the possibility of

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<sup>3</sup> I thank Lionel Shapiro for long discussions that helped me see more clearly how to think about the questions addressed in this section.

massive reduplication in the first chapter of his *Individuals* (1959), knowledge about mind-independent objects depends upon perceptual representations of particular objects in the world. Such knowledge is not accounted for on the strict non-relational view: Perception only provides a perceiver with knowledge that there is a pen of a certain type lying on a table of a certain type.

One possible way to account for our ability to perceptually refer to this rather than that particular object is to acknowledge that demonstrative elements figure in the content of perception. By involving the reference of a demonstrative element that is fixed by the context of the perception in which it occurs, one can take into account that one and the same demonstrative element refers to different particular objects in different contexts. In contrast to the strict non-relational view, such a non-relational view involving demonstratives finds a place for the representation of particular objects in perceptual content.<sup>4</sup>

Sellars acknowledges that more needs to be in play than the functional roles that constitute conceptual content to account for the justificatory force of perceptual judgments and thus rejects a strict non-relational view (see for instance Sellars 1997, §32/pp. 68-71). The question is what more needs to be in play on a Sellarsian view and whether it suffices to account for how it is that we can refer to particular objects in perception while denying any semantical relations between words and objects.

On Sellars's view, there is an isomorphism between the conceptual and the real orders, without which knowledge of the physical world would be impossible. How can such an isomorphism come about if it does not involve semantical relations between the conceptual and the real orders? To give the same question a Kantian twist: how is it guaranteed that the conceptual order is not arbitrary and haphazard, but in some way constrained by the objects our thoughts are about?

The clearest account of how Sellars understands the isomorphism between the two orders can be found in *Science and Metaphysics*. He argues there that "expressions are involved in semantical uniformities (actual or potential) with the appropriate extra-linguistic items" (1967a, I §59/p. 82). He is quick to add, however, that this does not suggest that such semantical uniformities involve relations between conceptual and non-conceptual items, arguing that there is a relation *within* the conceptual order holding between words and functional

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<sup>4</sup> Tyler Burge (1991) can be seen as having a version of such a view. As John Campbell (2002) has pointed out, the question of course arises how the demonstrative element can provide the perceiving subject with knowledge of what the demonstrative term refers to. I will address this question in the next section.

roles, which he refers to as a relation of *signification*.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, there is a relation in the real order between sign-designs and objects, which he refers to as a relation of *picturing*. Picturing-relations map configurations of words onto configurations of natural objects, where the link between the word and the object is understood to be a causal one.

Sellars is led to such a non-relational semantics through his account of meaning-statements. In order to accommodate the different roles played in meaning-statements of the form

(1) ‘dreieckig’ (in German) means ‘triangular’,

one can distinguish shape-focused and meaning-focused quotations. While \*dreieckig\* picks out a sign-design, •triangular• picks out a certain conceptual role played by, for example, \*dreieckig\*. The words \*dreieckig\* and \*triangular\* are •triangular•s, which is simply to say that \*dreieckig\* plays the same functional role in German as \*triangular\* plays in English. While ‘\*dreieckig\*’ refers to tokens of the sign design \*dreieckig\* without depending on an abstract entity, the shape, ‘•triangular•’ refers to the functional role •triangular• without depending on an abstract entity, which one might want to call the “meaning” of the expression. The crucial point is that all we need to interpret (1) is a notion of two expressions having the *same* sign-design and a notion of two expressions having the *same* functional role. There is no third thing to which either of the two expressions flanking the semantic term ‘means’ refer that accounts for the fact that \*dreieckig\* and \*triangular\* have the same functional role. Thus, (1) is not a relational predication. By reformulating (1) as

(2) \*dreieckig\*s are •triangular•s.

or alternatively

(2’) A \*dreieckig\* is a •triangular•.

the sentence can be recognized more clearly as a sortal predication (or classification). The sortal ‘•triangular•’ classifies expressions that have the same functional role. Accordingly, the semantic verb ‘means’ in the earlier sentence no longer appears as denoting a semantical relation, but rather as expressing a functional classification.<sup>6</sup> Sellars argues that if his reconstruction

<sup>5</sup> It is misleading to be speaking of signification-relations, since Sellars insists that they are not relations at all, but just classifications.

<sup>6</sup> In his very early papers (see, for example, Sellars 1950), Sellars makes a slightly different distinction between sign-designs and functional roles, arguing that the pragmatic quotes (star

of meaning-statements is correct, then “it follows at once that semantical statements of the Tarski-Carnap variety do not assert relations between linguistic and extra-linguistic items” (1967a, I §59/p. 82). If meaning-statements express functional classifications rather than semantical relations between words and objects, the difference between expressions must, on Sellars’s view, be seen as a difference in their semantic roles, not as a difference in what they refer to, be it an abstract object or an object in the real order.<sup>7</sup>

So, semantical relations holding between the conceptual and the real orders are avoided by splitting the assumed word-object relations into signifying relations on the one hand and picturing relations on the other. While the sentence

Tokens of the word \*dreieckig\* *picture* triangles,

means that the word \*dreieckig\* represents a triangle, the sentence

Tokens of the word \*dreieckig\* *signify* •triangular•,

means that the word \*dreieckig\* is functionally classified as a •triangle•. This just is to say that there is a language-language relation of signification and a world-world relation of picturing, but no semantical relation holding between the conceptual and the real orders. What connect the picturing-relation with the signification-relation are only the words that play a role in both relations.

The question arises as to how much philosophical weight the picturing relations can carry. According to Sellars, picturing relations guarantee that the structure of configurations of objects is preserved in our language by establishing referential relations between words and objects. Picturing relations constitute the isomorphism between the picturing language and the pictured world through a causal link between words and objects. He does not, however, want such causal relations to figure as content-generating links. What leads Sellars to his strong non-relational claims is his view that sentences of the form “a \*cat\* is a •cat•” do not involve any *direct* atomistic content-generating relations between \*cat\*s and cats. Avoiding such atomistic relations, however, does not conflict with seeing concepts as involving semantical relations insofar as they are related to objects through the rules of

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quotes) specify token classes of sign-designs, while the syntactical quotes specify functions in a language. Token classes are taken to be kinds of visual or auditory patterns that embody conceptual functions in historical languages. Thus \*dreieckig\* and \*triangular\* are two token-classes of the metalinguistic function that the relevant sign-design plays.

<sup>7</sup> For the most elaborate presentations of this argument, see Sellars (1963a) and (1983).

application that specify the circumstances under which it is correct to use the relevant word and the practical consequences of its use. Such a view does not imply that functional roles depend on atomistic content-generating links, since the rules governing a word's application are only intelligible in the context of semantical relations within the conceptual order and thus only graspable by someone who is already a proficient speaker of a language. The suggestion is that the functional role in virtue of which a \*cat\* is a •cat• is embedded in the real order because it involves rules governing the application of the word \*cat\*. What makes the sentence "a \*cat\* is a •cat•" true is that \*cat\*s have the role played by \*cat\* in a speaker's language.

It seems that taking such application rules into account involves taking relations between words and objects into account. But Sellars denies that. There are at least two ways in which Sellars might respond to the suggestion that acknowledging the importance of application rules involves acknowledging semantical relations between language and objective reality. He might argue that although the sentence "a \*cat\* is a •cat•" cannot be true unless \*cat\*s refer to actual cats, the sentence itself does not *express* such a hook-up. The sentence merely *depends* on picturing relations between the conceptual and the real order, which are what bring about application rules. In this sense, the rules governing \*cat\* include not only inference rules but also application rules. Such an argument, however, amounts to introducing a rigid distinction between the necessary conditions of the validity of a sentence and its content. It is arguable whether it makes sense to say that the necessary conditions of a sentence are not themselves expressed by the sentence.

The closest Sellars gets to acknowledging semantical relations is in his discussion of semantical uniformities:

[I]n the case of expressions which stand for senses which are intensions, it will also be true (and necessarily so) that these expressions are involved in semantical uniformities (actual or potential) with the appropriate extra-linguistic items. Thus in order for it to be true that . . .

'Dreieckig's (in German) are •triangular•s

German 'Dreieckig's must participate in uniformities with triangular things, uniformities which parallel those involving our word 'triangular'. But this does not mean that these statements themselves have the form (Linguistic item) R (non-linguistic item).

(1967a, III §59/p. 82; similarly IV §55ff./pp. 111ff.)

But even semantical uniformities can be understood without appeal to semantical relations between words and objects, if they are understood as picturing relations, that is, as relations between a word, say \*cat\*, considered as an object in the real order, and other objects in the real order, namely actual



cats.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, even the quoted passage can be read as expressing Sellars's official line of thought, according to which an account of the content of our thoughts need not be made to depend on semantical relations between words and objects.<sup>9</sup>

This argument, however, relies on uniformities already being established in our language. Nothing has been said about what brings about these uniformities in the first place. Sellars's idea is that the uniformity of our linguistic behavior establishes picturing relations between words and objects and thereby secures that our language preserves the structure of the real order. The crucial point of Sellars's argument is that the picturing relations are only linked to the signification relations in that our expressions play a role in both relations. This allows him to write that "the causal aspect of perceptual takings . . . accounts for the selecting of *one* world story *rather than another* and connects the 'is' of this selecting with the rule-governed or 'ought to be' character of the language" (1979, p. 110). An obvious line on which to criticize Sellars would be to argue that his account of picturing depends on linguistic objects *correctly* picturing non-linguistic objects. This would involve regarding the links they bring about from a normative semantical point of view and not just as elements in the natural order. Sellars might argue that to say that a linguistic object correctly pictures a nonlinguistic object is not a normative matter, although normative language is used: corresponding to every espoused principle of correctness there is a matter-of-factual uniformity in performance which link words with the objects they picture (compare Sellars (1962a, p. 222).

As Sellars argues in "Truth and Correspondence" (1962b) the uniformity of our behavior is only brought about *because* our language use is rule-governed in the first place and thus only reflects that our linguistic actions are rule-governed. Since picturing relations are established because of the uniformity of our linguistic behavior, such a view suggests that picturing relations depend on our language use being rule-governed. If this is correct, then picturing relations depend on conceptual capacities. And if an expression pictures an

<sup>8</sup> See, in particular, Sellars (1967a, III §66/p. 86).

<sup>9</sup> See also Sellars (1967a, IV §56/pp. 111-112): "If we know, for example, that

'Sage's (in F) are •wise•s

we know, by virtue of our knowledge of what 'wise's do in our language, that the French word 'sage' must occur in uniformities involving both tokens of 'sage' and extra-linguistic objects. But the uniformities do not consist of tokens of 'sage' standing for wisdom, but are rather to be characterized as complex uniformities involving many configurations of many French words and forms of behavior, on the one hand, and, not wisdom, but wise people, on the other."

object only because it is embedded in a complex framework of semantical relations, then picturing relations can secure that our language preserves the structure of what it is about only by presupposing conceptual capacities. Thus on Sellars's view, conceptual capacities are not only dependent on picturing relations, our capacity to entertain picturing relations is in turn dependent on our conceptual capacities.

Acknowledging such a mutual dependency between the two capacities fits smoothly with Sellars's "psychological nominalism." As Sellars elaborates in the so-called Myth of Jones in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," thoughts should be understood on the model of linguistic acts. We acquire conceptual capacities by acquiring linguistic competence.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, all exercises of conceptual capacities are a linguistic affair. What the Myth of Jones aims to show is that the idea of inner episodes is unproblematic, since we can model it on overt speech. Thus, operations of conceptual capacities are not limited to overt uses of language, although overt speech might be considered as the primary use of conceptual capacities. In this sense, Sellars understands language not as the expression, but as the medium of our thoughts (see for example Sellars 1979, p. 74).

Sellars is aware that this position involves the danger of equating words with concepts. What is crucial is "the denial that there is any awareness of logical space prior to, or independent of, the acquisition of a language" (1997, §31/p. 66). Everything that is philosophically significant about our capacities to have thoughts is, in other words, mirrored in what is significant in our capacity to be competent speakers of a language.

So far I have argued that concepts, such as *•cat•*, involve not only inference rules but also application rules for *\*cat\**. Saying that *\*Katze\** is a *•cat•* does not only imply that it plays the same role in German that *\*cat\** plays in English: it is also to say that a person who knows that *\*Katze\** is a *•cat•* knows when to use the word to refer to cats. I have argued that even if one accepts that concepts involve application rules, Sellars's account of conceptual roles is successful as relying solely on signification relations and picturing relations and thus not involving semantical relations between words and objects. Sellars's non-atomistic semantics is, therefore, compatible with the idea that the functional roles determining the use of words are related to objective reality through application rules. But this still leaves open the

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<sup>10</sup> Compare Sellars (1997, §58/p. 105): "the ability to have thoughts is acquired in the process of acquiring overt speech . . . only after overt speech is well established, can "inner speech" occur without its overt culmination."

question of how particular objects figure in the content perception. I will address this more specific question in the next section.

## 2. Relating Thoughts to Objects

According to Sellars, the most striking change between Kant's approach and that of his predecessors is his insistence "that the class of contents should be expanded to include individual contents, e.g. the content of an intuitive representing of *this-cube*,<sup>11</sup> or the content *Socrates*, which, though an individual content, is not the content of an intuitive representing" (1967a, p. 60). It is not obvious how in the framework of Sellars's conceptual role semantics we can think of ourselves as accommodating this Kantian insight and picking out particular objects in perception. More needs to be in play than the rules of application governing our use of expressions to understand what it means for a person to direct a thought towards this rather than that particular object. Addressing this question will bring together Sellars's account of functional roles with his account of perception.<sup>12</sup>

It will be helpful to look at some elements of Sellars's reading of Kant to get a clearer view of the issue in question. There are two possible readings of Sellars on Kant that give a very different place to the role of sensations and

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<sup>11</sup> 'This-cube' refers to an intuitive representation. Since these representations are not straightforwardly conceptual, it would be wrong to put 'this-cube' in dot-quotes. This should not be read as implying that they are non-conceptual representations, whatever that would be.

<sup>12</sup> In contrast to Sellars, Robert Brandom (1994, in particular, pp. 199-229) deals with the problem of singular thought in his version of a conceptual role semantics without appealing to any conception of experience. The empirical content of our perceptual judgments is explained by arguing that our responsive dispositions allow us to react to our environment in a reliable and differential manner. On Brandom's view, reliable differential responsive dispositions allow us to make observation reports. Since observation reports are brought about by our dispositions, rather than being derived from inferences, they present us with non-inferential knowledge. Their content, however, is determined by their inferential role. Furthermore, for an observation report to count as knowledge the reporter must endorse the claim contained in the report. By taking these two additional requirements into account, Brandom argues that our reliable differential responsive dispositions are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for observational knowledge and, thus, distances himself from the kind of reliabilist approach taken, among others, by Alvin Goldman (1976 and 1986). By arguing that the reliability of our differential responsive dispositions is not assessed by the perceiving subject, but rather in an intersubjective context, Brandom deals with skeptical worries that Sellars's account faces. The question remains whether such an account can explain how we can direct our thought at this rather than that particular object in perception, but it would lead too far a field to discuss this question here.

intuitions in perception. I will argue against what I will call an empiricist reading of the sensible conditions of perception and embrace what I will call a transcendental reading.

In *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars reads Kant as allowing solely for semantical relations between conceptual episodes, and consequently takes Kant to be struggling with the problem of how our thoughts are guided by the objects they are about, ensuring that our conceptual order is not arbitrary or haphazard. The following passage brings out the elements of Sellars's reading of Kant with which I will be concerned:

[W]hen [Kant] speaks of the productive imagination as "taking up" (A 120) the manifold of outer sense into its activity . . . the metaphor implies . . . that the manifold is an independent factor which has a strong voice in the outcome. On the other hand, it is only if the manifold is mistakenly construed as belonging to the conceptual order that it makes sense to suppose that it, so to speak, bodily or literally becomes a part of the resulting intuitive representation. If it is, as I take it to be, non-conceptual, it can only guide "from without" the unique conceptual activity which is representing of this-such as subjects of perceptual judgment. (1967a, I §34/p. 16)

Sellars's guiding question in the first chapter of *Science and Metaphysics* is how perceptions of objects can yield knowledge. He explains how our thoughts are directed at objects by appealing to sense impressions, that is, mental states that are not shaped by the understanding. What seems clear is that perception about objective reality must involve representations that are brought about in a passive manner by having objects in view. The problem is that if these representations are considered to be conceptually formed, it is unclear how they can be thought of as constraining our conceptual framework. If, on the other hand, they are considered to be non-conceptual representations, it is not clear how they can guide at all. Such a view seems to imply that they (causally) determine our responses and determining a response is not the same thing as guiding a response. Sellars presents Kant as saying that sensibility guides the conceptual realm by "sheer receptivity," thereby yielding non-conceptual sense impressions. Since Sellars argues that there cannot be direct semantical relations between words and objects, he turns to "purely passive representations of receptivity" as what constrains the conceptual activity.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> I profited from John McDowell's Woodbridge Lectures (1998b) while thinking through this part of Sellars's writing. I am not concerned here with the question of the immediacy of the presentness of objects to the intuitionally structured consciousness, which is central for McDowell's criticism of Sellars's reading of Kant. McDowell spells out a transcendental role for sensibility in terms of the immediate presence of objects to the conceptually shaped sensory

On what one could call an empiricist understanding of the sensible conditions of perception, “sheer receptivity” brings about representations that are not as yet conceptually shaped on the basis of which we form conceptual representations. This view can be found in Sellars when he complains that Kant has two notions of intuition between which he fails to distinguish clearly. According to Sellars, one notion accounts for the non-conceptual impact that guides our representations “from without,” while the other accounts for the role of perception in understanding. He writes

[I]t is clear that Kant applies the term ‘intuition’ to both the representations which are formed by the synthesizing activity of the productive imagination and the purely passive representations of receptivity which are the “matter” (A86/B108) which the productive imagination takes into account.<sup>14</sup> (1967a, I §18/p. 7)

Sometimes, Sellars refers to the former as intuitions and to the latter as sense or sense impressions, distinguishing the “guidedness of intuition” from the “receptivity of sense.” In other passages, he speaks of “the conceptual character of the synthesis of apprehension in intuition” and “the radically non-conceptual character of sense” (1967a, I §40/p. 16). For reasons that will become clear in due time, I will refer to the former as *intuitions* and to the latter as *sensations*.

I will argue that Kant’s notion of intuition in no way conflates two different kinds of representations. Granted, Kant opens the *Critique of Pure Reason* by distinguishing two different sources of knowledge – understanding and sensibility – and then speaks of concepts and intuitions as corresponding to these two sources of knowledge, thereby suggesting that intuitions are

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consciousness of thinkers. On this reading, thoughts are about things in the real order because objects are immediately present to conceptual consciousness in intuition. By suggesting a relational understanding of intentionality, he can argue that “nonsheer receptivity is operative in intuition” and thereby undermine the threat of idealism with which Sellars’s project is confronted. McDowell goes along with Sellars insofar as he argues that conceptual episodes differ intrinsically. But by taking the immediacy of intuitional representations into account, he takes a different approach than Sellars, arguing that conceptual episodes differ intrinsically, not in a way that systematically corresponds to what they are about, but because the difference in what they are directed towards is itself an intrinsic difference in conceptual episodes.

<sup>14</sup> Shortly before this passage Sellars writes: “Kant’s use of the term ‘intuition’, in connection with human knowledge, blurs the distinction between a special sub-class of conceptual representations of individuals which, though in some sense a function of receptivity, belong to a framework which is in no sense prior to but essentially includes general concepts, and a radically different kind of representation of an individual which belongs to sheer receptivity and is in no sense conceptual.”

non-conceptual. But this reading becomes unintelligible in light of Kant's argument in the *Transcendental Analytic*. Kant there shows how the picture drawn in the *Aesthetic* is too simplistic, arguing that intuitions can only be grasped in the context of a judgment and thus cannot be understood as non-conceptual representations. The simplistic dualistic picture with which Kant opens the first *Critique* can be seen as a rhetorical move that allows him to gain the sympathy of his contemporary readers. Kant does, however, have a notion of sensations, which on the reading of Sellars I aim to defend can be seen as corresponding to what Sellars means when he speaks of sense impressions.<sup>15</sup>

According to Sellars, sensations yield non-conceptual representations of the real order, whereas intuitions conceptually represent the object. The purely passive manner in which sensations are brought about guarantees that intuitions are of the objects the perceiving person takes them to be of. Sensations are thus necessary for guaranteeing the objectivity of our conceptual representations.

What does it mean to say that non-conceptual sensations guide our perceptual judgments? On what I have called an empiricist understanding of the sensible conditions of perception, we first have basic mental representations that are not as yet apperceived, on the basis of which we arrive at conceptual representations. The notion of sensations involved in such a view is problematic in that it raises the question of what representational status sensations should have. More importantly, such representations are subject to the very same objections that Sellars raises against the sense-data view.<sup>16</sup> On such a view, sensations are intermediaries that allow us to form conceptual representations of the objects in view. Sensations and the conceptual capacities which they feed into are understood on the model of a scheme-content dualism, meaning that we have conceptual resources that are void of content, on the one hand, and are able to grasp empirical content that does not have any conceptual structure, on the other. The conceptual scheme is considered to be abstracted (or abstractable) from the sensory content, and the sensory content is considered to be given and in some way accessible to us independently of

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<sup>15</sup> In the following, I will always speak of sensations to stick to a more standard translation of Kant's 'sinnliche Eindrücke' or 'Empfindungen'.

<sup>16</sup> I will not recapitulate these objections here. They have been discussed in detail and with different outlooks by Robert Brandom (1995 and in his study guide to Sellars in 1997), Willem deVries (2000), John McDowell (1995 and 2002), and Jay Rosenberg (2000, 2002, and 2003), among others.

the concepts we use to form judgments.<sup>17</sup> The picture suggests that we start with a scheme and a content and only in a *second* step *bring* the two together to form a conceptual representation. It is unclear on such a reading of sensations, why sensations are not a version of the given that Sellars criticizes.

Whatever Sellars meant with his appeal to sensations, it must have been something subtler. I will argue that one can find in Sellars a very different view than the one that emerges from what I have called the empiricist understanding of sensations. Shortly after introducing his notion of sensations in *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars argues that

[t]heir “receptivity” is a matter of the understanding having to cope with a manifold of representations characterized by “receptivity” in a more radical sense, as providing the “brute fact” or constraining element of perceptual experience.

The latter manifold has the interesting feature that its existence is postulated on general epistemological or, as Kant would say, transcendental grounds, after reflection on the concept of human knowledge as based on, though not constituted by, the impact of independent reality. It is postulated rather than “found” by careful and discriminating attention. The concept of such a manifold is, in contemporary terms, a theoretical construct. (p. 9)

Sellars states here that he wants to understand sensations as “theoretical constructs.” In “Some Reflections on Perceptual Consciousness” Sellars makes a similar point when he contends that sensations “are not yielded by phenomenological reduction, but postulated by a proto-(scientific)-theory” (1977b, p. 179), arguing that to have a sensation of a pink cube “is not to sense something *as* a cube of pink, though it is a state postulated by a theory designed to explain what it is to *see* (or seem to see) a cube of pink as a cube of pink” (p. 181). Here sensations are not thought of as unappereceived representations on which perceptions are based, but rather as that which we must *assume* figures in our perception if we think of them as being about objective reality. Symptomatically, Sellars uses the words ‘epistemological’

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<sup>17</sup> The scheme-content dualism that Donald Davidson (1974) argues against has been interpreted in various other ways. The scheme has been understood as a system of concepts, an equivalence class of intertranslatable languages, a theory, and a worldview. Similarly, the content has been understood as everything from objects, events, sense data, to Quinean stimulations. The plausibility of Davidson’s argument rises and falls depending on how these different interpretations of the scheme and the content are combined. Some combinations do not amount to a dualism at all. I thank Anil Gupta for making me aware of this fact. The argument I wish to bring out against the scheme-content dualism is general enough that it will not be necessary to address the various possible interpretations of Davidson’s argument.

and ‘transcendental’ synonymously when he discusses the role of sensations in perception (1967a, I §22/p. 9 and §28/p. 11). The idea suggested is that we must assume that there is something given that figures in our perception, if we want to think of our perception as yielding knowledge of objective reality, that is, of objects as existing independently of our mental capacities.

This is the crucial insight of Sellars that I would like to hold on to. Understanding sensations in this second way is to see the role of sensations in perception as a transcendental condition of perception rather than as a primitive building stone in an empiricist framework. By contrast to the empiricist understanding, sensations can now be understood as something other than intermediaries between our conceptual thoughts and the objective reality we perceive, or alternatively between the causal impact and the conceptual outcome of perception.

Such an understanding of sensations is much closer to the Kantian notion of *Empfindungen* or *sinnliche Eindrücke*. On a Kantian view, sensations are the *matter* of perception that we must assume figure in our perception.<sup>18</sup> But the matter that is given in perception (sensation) is just one side of the sensibility of perception, the other side being its form (intuition). On such a view, the distinction between intuitions and sensations is not understood as one between conceptual and non-conceptual representations or between two kinds of representation understood in any other way, but rather as a distinction between form and matter. Kant does not allow for the possibility of sensations independently of their role in perception and, thus, independently of their role in empirical intuitions. Sensations and intuitions necessarily come together and in this sense are just two sides of one coin. In this sense, Sellars’s talk in *Science and Metaphysics* of *sensations* as that which is given, the matter of experience, does not invoke speaking of the given as Sellars attacks it.

But why are *intuitions* not candidates for the given?<sup>19</sup> No doubt, Kant understands intuitions as representations that fulfill the role of linking thoughts to objects, thereby providing a possibility for judgments and, in contrast to sensations, he thinks of intuitions as mental representations proper. Nonetheless, intuitions are not intelligible in isolation either. The *content* of intuitions is only accessible to us in the context of a judgment. Although intuitions are related to an object independently of their role in empirical

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Kant ([1781] 1965) A20/B34, A42/B59-60, A167/B209 or A218/B266. I follow the usual practice in referring to passages in the *Critique of Pure Reason* by citing the pagination of the original editions, indicated by A for the 1781 edition, and B for the 1787 edition.

<sup>19</sup> For the sake of ease of formulation, I will speak just of intuitions in the following passages, but it should be kept in mind that empirical intuitions and sensations always go together.



judgments (intuitions are related immediately to objects), we can only have a grasp on their *content* if they figure in a propositional representation.

How does this bear on the question of how we can direct our thoughts at particular objects? Kant argues, on the one hand, that we can direct thoughts at something particular only when an object is given to us in intuition. On the other hand, he says that intuitions are not enough to have knowledge, “properly so called,” of objects (A78/B103). In other words, the immediate representation we have in intuition is not enough to recognize an object. These two lines of thought can be brought together in light of Kant’s understanding of concepts as universally applicable rules that can serve as predicates of possible judgments. As rules of synthesis, concepts determine intuitions. Accordingly, intuitional representations are what we grasp when a rule of synthesis is applied to the sensible manifold. Kant’s metaphor of intuitions *falling* under concepts or being *subsumed* under concepts can be understood along these lines. The talk of subsumption of intuitions under a concept need not be understood as implying that intuitions are independently intelligible representations that we in a second step recognize as falling under a particular concept. Nor should subsumption be interpreted as suggesting that intuitions are recognized as having a common *property* that the concept stands for. The point is rather that we can identify the content of an intuition only as a *result* of applying a rule.<sup>20</sup>

On the reading of Kant I would like to urge, we *presuppose* intuitive representations when we make judgments about an object. We thereby subsume the intuitive representation under an empirical concept and thus bring about a conceptual representation. In this sense, we can only retrospectively say (when we analyze a judgment) that the intuition in the judgment is the immediate representation of an object, but we cannot have knowledge properly so-called of an object by means of an intuition alone.

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<sup>20</sup> Thus, I am suggesting to read Kant on different lines than Manley Thompson (1972), who writes: “It is thus possible to regard an empirical intuition as in a sense knowledge, and to speak of it as blind without concepts because only as unified through concepts can it become knowledge properly so called” (p. 323). According to Thompson, we can have blind empirical intuitions that provide us with a preliminary form of knowledge, yielding knowledge proper only when combined with concepts. The main problem with this view is that it remains unclear what it is that we grasp or represent with an intuition if the intuition is not subsumed under concepts. On Thompson’s view, intuitions are representations the content of which we have access to independently of their role in judgments. On such a view, intuitions just are a form of the given as Sellars criticizes it.

Concepts as general representations become singular in the context of a judgment by subsuming an intuition under them.<sup>21</sup> On such a reading, it becomes unproblematic to see intuitions as picking out objects immediately towards which thoughts are directed only mediately. Thus, although in perception we are *affected* by an object and, in this sense, it is not up to us what our perceptions are about, this does not imply that we can grasp the content of intuitional representations outside of the context of a judgment. In this sense, Sellars's talk of intuitions does not involve speaking of the given as he attacks it any more than his notion of sensations involves speaking of the given.<sup>22</sup>

I have argued that the role of sensibility is to account for how it is that we can understand our perceptions as being about objective reality. On Kant's picture these sensible conditions are twofold: The matter given in perception, sensation, and its form, intuition. On what I have called an empiricist understanding, intuitions are *epistemically* graspable prior to being embedded in propositional representations. By contrast, on a transcendental understanding, the content of intuitions is only graspable when brought under concepts in a judgment, even though intuitions are what in a judgment link us to the object that the judgment is about.<sup>23</sup> While intuitions are not graspable independently of being subsumed under concepts in the context of a judgment,

<sup>21</sup> In "Particulars," Sellars introduces a notion of basic particulars that integrates both a "this-factor" (accounting for the particularity of a perceptual representations) and a "such-factor" (accounting for their generality). In *Naturalism and Ontology* (1979), he uses this same notion of basic particulars to play the role of the "medium of alteration" in his process ontology. For an excellent study of Sellars's process ontology, see Seibt (1990).

<sup>22</sup> I am taking a different line than William Alston (2002), who argues that Sellars's critique of the "Myth of the Given" is incompatible with the view that there is a non-conceptual mode of "presentation" or "givenness" of particulars that is the heart of sense perception. By contrast, I am arguing that a Sellarsian approach is committed to the view that there is something given in perception, but it is only accessible to us if we bring our rational capacities to bear on what is given. Speaking of something being given in perception need to involve speaking of non-conceptual content. I take the view of perception that Alston endorses to be much closer to Sellars's own account than Alston makes it out to be. I am arguing, however, that it is misleading to think of the central distinction for a Sellarsian approach in terms of conceptual and non-conceptual content. What must be distinguished are rather the elements accounting for the singularity and generality of perception, on the one hand, and the form and matter involved in perception, on the other.

<sup>23</sup> This way of thinking about intuitions is influenced by Gareth Evans's (1982) discussion of information links. On Evans's view, our ability to relate to an object is dependent not only on our ability to receive information about the world, but also on our ability to act in the world. Although I focus only on the thought-dependency of perception in this paper, I take its dependency on action to be at least as important.

sensations in their role as the matter for perception of objects are not graspable independently of being formed into empirical intuitions. Intuitions and sensations just are the conditions without which we cannot think of ourselves as having perceptions about objective reality. As will become clearer in the next section, the central distinction for a Sellarsian approach should not be understood as one between non-conceptual and conceptual representations, but rather as between the elements of empirical judgments that account for their generality (concepts) and the elements that account for their singularity, the latter involving both form (intuition) and matter (sensation).

### 3. Intuitions and Demonstratives

Now, Sellars interprets intuitions on the model of demonstratives, and thus understands locutions such as ‘that cube’ as providing the linkage to objects perceived. ‘That cube’ is a way of picking up Kant’s phrasing that intuitions are immediately of objects (A68/B93). Here again I would like to distinguish two different ways of reading Sellars. On the face of it, understanding intuitions on the model of demonstratives should strike one as puzzling: ‘That cube’ is a singular use of concepts, however, empirical intuitions are not a basic kind of conceptual activity, but rather the sensible condition for the empirical use of concepts.

No doubt, when our thought is directed at a particular object in perception, we give a concept a singular use. But intuitional content is not a fragment of the content we form in perceptual judgments, but rather a necessary condition for such judgments. For whatever it is worth, Kant is very explicit that it is concepts that are used in a singular, general, or universal manner, and that a singular use of concepts is not the same as an intuition.<sup>24</sup> While it is the intuition that picks out the object in view, it is the concept that determines our understanding of the object. The content of intuitional representations must therefore not be understood in analogy with the content of conceptual representations. Indeed, the distinction between intuitions and concepts need not be understood in terms of their content at all. What are distinguished are rather the *manners* in which the representations *refer* to what they are about. While intuitions refer immediately and account for the singularity of

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<sup>24</sup> See Kant ([1800] 1992, §1, Note 2): “It is a mere tautology to speak of concepts as general or universal; a mistake that rests on an improper division of concepts into general, particular, and singular. Not concepts themselves but only their use [Gebrauch] can be so divided.”

perceptual judgments, concepts refer mediately by subsuming an intuition under them.

Intuitions are involved whenever thought is directed at objective reality. Understanding intuitions as fragments of judgments would just be to understand intuitions as a product of receptivity that makes a separable contribution to the perceptual judgments we form when having an object in view. Such a view would fall prey to the very same objections that Sellars raises against the sense-data view. Therefore, Sellars must be after something else when he understands intuitions as having a demonstrative form.

If we think of intuitions as being a necessary condition for any perceptual judgment (demonstrative or not), we can understand intuitions as providing for the possibility of perceptual judgment. Another way of expressing this idea is that intuitions provide us with invitations to judgments or that intuitions are “petitions for judgments” – to use Robert Brandom’s (2002) wording. On such a view, intuitions are conceptual representations that potentially find verbal expression in perceptual statements when subsumed under concepts. When looking at a white wall, we can abstract from unimportant details and can correctly judge the wall as white. Given the circumstances, it might also be correct to say that parts of the wall appear green and pink and that the corners have a brownish tint. The two judgments only seem to be incompatible: although they are about the same object, they refer to different levels of detail. In an analogous way every situation of perception brings about different possible perceptual judgments. Indeed, one might want to say that when a perceiver has something in view there is an open-ended string of possible demonstrative propositions that she is invited to form.

One might object that such a view invokes a superfluous and potentially problematic intermediary stage in perception, namely, a stage in which we make a choice of what we direct our attention to. When a person perceives a tree swaying in the wind, she might not be aware of its many leaves fluttering in the wind: It is tempting to say that she is not perceptually aware of the leaves fluttering in the wind, because her *attention* is not directed at the leaves. But saying that intuitions only provide for the possibility for judgments need not mean that in perception we make a choice of what we direct our attention to. When we perceive a tree swaying in the wind, we might not be aware of its many leaves fluttering in the wind, but that is not to say that the content of our

perception does not represent the leaves fluttering in the wind. One might want to say that we have not made this content explicit.<sup>25</sup>

It certainly is not the case that we actively decide to direct our attention to this or that in perception: We do not look out of the window, assess the situation, the many possible judgments we could form, and decide to direct our attention to this or that. We do not *decide* on what we pay attention to, rather we *find* ourselves directing our attention to this or that. Only when we have already distinguished possible different ways of perceiving an object (say when we have become aware that it is both correct to say that the wall is white and to say that it appears to have patches of pink and green) that we can think of ourselves as choosing to perceive it in this or that way. But to say that there *is* a choice about what we direct our attention to, is not to say that in perception we *make* a choice about what we direct our attention to. It is in this sense that perception is passive: We find ourselves perceiving this or that. This is how one can read Sellars interpretation of intuitions as having the form “that . . . ” without thinking of intuitions as being primitive mental representations that are accessible to us prior to conceptual representations proper.

### Conclusion

Sellars understands the word *\*cube\** to be at the same time *semantically classified* by the functional role in virtue of which a *\*cube\** is a *•cube•* and to be *picturing* an object, namely a cube, at least in the veridical case. As I argued in the previous section, the application rules involved in *•cube•*, can be seen as setting up the mapping relation between *\*cube\*s* and actual cubes. This is not enough, however, to explain how it is that we can direct our thought at this rather than that particular cube in perception. On Sellars’s view, our ability to refer to particular objects depends on individual links between judgments and the objects the judgments are about. There are two sides to such a subject matter: The matter given in perception (sensation), and its form (intuition). On

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<sup>25</sup> Indeed we might want to say be that we perceive the tree swaying in the wind, because we see the leaves fluttering in the wind. The idea underlying this thought is the same idea that motivates Leibniz’s distinction between *grandes* and *petites* representings. On Leibniz’s view our perception of a the ocean roaring, to use his example, is constituted of a multitude of micro perceptions of the noise that a grain of sand makes when water crashes on it. We are not aware of the noise that every single grain of sand makes when listening to the roaring of the ocean. Nonetheless, we hear the roaring of the ocean because we hear the noise of many grains of sand.

an empiricist understanding, intuitions and sensations are *epistemically* graspable prior to a concrete propositional representation. I argue that it is unclear on such a view why sensations and intuitions are not just versions of the given as Sellars criticizes it. By contrast, on a transcendental understanding the role of sensibility is to account for how it is that we can understand our perceptions as being about objective reality. Intuitions and sensations are what we must *assume* figure in our perception if we think of our perception as having a subject matter. Intuitions and sensations necessarily go together in perception of objective reality. While sensations are not graspable independently of being formed into empirical intuitions, the content of intuitions is not graspable independently of being subsumed under concepts in the context of a judgment. On such a view it is unproblematic to see sensations as what is given in perception: They are not intelligible independently of their role as the matter of intuitions, the content of which is accessible to us only in the context of a judgment.

One might want to insist on saying that such sensations have non-conceptual content. In the contemporary philosophical context, it is, however, misleading to use the phrase, unless the content in question is understood to be accessible to the perceiving subject without bringing any conceptual capacities into play. Although Sellars speaks of sensations as having non-conceptual content, he is very explicit that the content provided with sensibility is graspable by the perceiver only in the context of a judgment. If intuitions can mean nothing to us unless we bring our conceptual capacities to bear on them, it is just as misleading to say that they are conceptual representations as it is to see them as non-conceptual representations when isolated from their role in judgments. The conceptual/non-conceptual distinction, thus, does not bring us far in a discussion of the sensible conditions of perception understood in the way I have presented. The crucial distinctions in play are between the form and matter of the sensible conditions of perception as well as the manner in which intuitional and conceptual representations refer to an object: While intuitions account for the singularity of perceptual judgments, the concepts in play account for their generality. As I argued, this is compatible with understanding conceptual activity as constrained by that towards which it is intentionally directed. Indeed, only by allowing that thoughts are *about* something can the transcendental requirement that conceptual activity is intentionally directed *towards* something be met. In contrast to the empiricist understanding, sensations and intuitions are not understood as intermediaries between our conceptual thoughts and the objective reality we perceive, but rather as the conditions without which we cannot think of ourselves as having empirical knowledge.

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