

## EXPERIENCE AND CONCEPTUAL CONTENT IN KANT AND MCDOWELL.

### REMARKS ON “EMPTY THOUGHTS” AND “BLIND INTUITIONS”

- Anna Tomaszewska -

In his well-known and widely discussed (in the Anglophone philosophical world) book, *Mind and World*, John McDowell appeals to Kant's dictum about thoughts without content being empty and intuitions without concepts being blind as encapsulating the idea of conceptualism about the content of perceptual experience. It can be argued that the appeal might be considered inadequate, and that for a variety of reasons, one of them being that if Kant endorsed conceptualism, along the lines of McDowell, he would be committed to retrace to the position he was overtly critical with, namely the position of the rationalist metaphysics; alternatively, he would lapse into idealism very much akin to the Hegelian one. This is because McDowell's conceptualism ultimately downplays the role of sensibility in mediating the relation between “mind” and “world”, key to recognizing the limits on cognition which Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism imposes upon subjects.

#### 1. The debate about the nature of empirical content

The question concerning the nature of the *content* of perceptual experience can be formulated as the question about what it is that we come to be acquainted with when we see, hear, touch, smell and taste different things. Throughout the debate, it is assumed (1) that perceptual experience does have a content of a certain kind and (2) that the content of experience is structured. Neither of the assumptions remains self-evident and both would require thorough examination. Against (1), following B. Brewer, one could propose a view “of a Berkeleyan pedigree”<sup>1</sup> on which it would not be the case that “perceptual experience trades *direct openness to the elements of physical reality themselves*, for some intellectual act of clas-

---

<sup>1</sup> Brewer [2006] p. 9.

sification or categorization.”<sup>2</sup> Against (2) one could point out cases in which, rather than presenting objects with their properties and relations between them, experience would present us with particular qualities alone. (For instance, imagine a subject who experiences only one quality, say, a certain high-pitched sound, throughout his entire existence – the example does not seem to be logically incoherent.)

The debate under consideration has been dominated by two opposing camps: conceptualists and nonconceptualists. The former hold that the content of perceptual experience is, at least essentially, conceptual, whereas the latter deny that claim. For the content of experience to be conceptual means for it either (i) to involve the operations of conceptual capacities, or (ii) to consist (be composed) of concepts. T.M. Crowther has called the two versions of conceptualism state and content conceptualism, respectively.<sup>3</sup> It is not all too obvious what kind of relation obtains between the two kinds of conceptualism. That perception might be accompanied by the relevant kind of conceptual capacities, or even necessarily entail a belief, does not have automatically to render perceptual content conceptual through and through. However, it seems that we cannot think of the content of one’s experience as conceptual without the subject possessing at least some of the concepts used in the ascription of the experience to the subject.

Paradigmatically, conceptual content would be associated with propositional content. Thus, a conceptualist would claim that experiences involve propositions. This, in line with Crowther’s distinction, one could understand in two ways: (i) either in the sense that to have a perceptual experience means to be in a mental state analogous to thinking and other intellectual activities, such as believing or judging. The difference between thinking and similar acts, on the one hand, and perceiving, on the other, could be likened to a difference between (propositional) attitudes to a certain kind of content. Or (ii) the involvement of propositions in experiences could be understood in terms of experiences themselves providing the “vehicles” of propositional content. The propositional content of experiences could then constitute the basis for the content of beliefs or judgments but it would not have to be identical with or even similar to it. In other words, experiences and beliefs would yield different kinds of propositions. (For example, a subject can experience, or sense, that there is a red and bulgy sense datum in front of a yellow one – however awkward this may sound – and, on these

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18 (italics mine).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Crowther [2006].

grounds, say, as a result of an inductive inference, believe that there is a tomato on a plate.)

McDowell, who does not recognize the above distinction, expresses his conceptualist creed in the following way:

In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment: it becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value. So it is conceptual content. But *that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are.<sup>4</sup>

According to the author of *Mind and World*, there is a common factor shared by experiences, beliefs (or judgments) and facts, namely propositional content. Facts, therefore, incorporate propositions, i.e. entities which prove truth-evaluable, thinkable contents. I do not intend to deal with the charge of idealism, frequently raised against McDowell's view.<sup>5</sup> But it should be noted that the realm of facts, and so the range of corresponding propositions, depends, so to speak, on the kind of the "world" constituted by the facts. In the "world" of, e.g., Peano arithmetic, it is the fact that two plus three makes five, and in the "world" in which there are creatures equipped with the senses and sensitive to impacts of objects, it may be the case that there are red and bulgy sense data adjoining yellow ones. And so forth. All in all, what facts can be distinguished depends on the kind of ontology one adopts; and what ontology one adopts may be diversely motivated.

## 2. McDowell's Kant

In *Mind and World*, McDowell constructs a dialectical opposition between two stances, against which background he proposes his own "midway" solution. Coherentism, represented by D. Davidson, cuts empirical thought off from reality, since it holds empirical content (sense impressions, results of the stimulations of sense organs) irrelevant for the *justification* of empirical beliefs (beliefs can be justi-

---

<sup>4</sup> McDowell [1996] p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> The charge is discussed in Smith [2002] by R. J. Bernstein, M. Friedman, C. Wright, and J.M. Bernstein. Friedman writes: "given McDowell's own conception of what impressions of outer sense amount to, I do not see, in the end, how he has fully rebutted the charge of idealism. I do not see why his conception itself is not finally a version of Coherentism" (p. 35). However, Wright points to the way in which to avoid the idealist trap: "McDowell is quite clear, as he had better be if the accusation of Idealism is to be as underserved as he wishes, that facts are conceptual only in so far as [they are] essentially conceivable" (p. 150).

fied solely by other beliefs, on Davidson's supposition; of course, sense experiential content plays a due role in the *acquisition* of empirical beliefs). The Myth of the Given,<sup>6</sup> in turn, apparently secures thought's grip on reality but it frustrates rational connections between experience and thought. This, again, makes it impossible to regard experiences as proper justifiers of empirical beliefs.

As a way to escape the pitfalls set by the opposing parties, McDowell introduces the idea of conceptualized experience. He envisages Kant as an advocate of the idea (or its counterpart) and one whose voice should be listened to in the recent debate on the nature of empirical knowledge. Crucial in this return to Kant is McDowell's appeal to what might be termed Kant's Cooperation Thesis (henceforth, *KCT*), spelled out as follows:

The original Kantian thought was that empirical knowledge results from a cooperation between receptivity and spontaneity. (Here 'spontaneity' can be simply a label for the involvement of conceptual capacities.) [...] receptivity does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation. The relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity [...]. It is not that they are exercised *on* an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity. We should understand what Kant calls 'intuition' - experiential intake - not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content.<sup>7</sup>

Also, in McDowell's Woodbridge Lectures, the above interpretative suggestion becomes reiterated in that the author declares:

This picture of visual experiences as conceptual shapings of visual consciousness is already deeply Kantian, in the way it appeals to sensibility and understanding so as to make sense of how experiences have objective purport.<sup>8</sup>

As one can clearly see, then, McDowell takes it that *KCT* allows both (1) to avoid the notorious Myth of the Given, by establishing the claim that there are no cogni-

---

<sup>6</sup> McDowell borrows the term from W. Sellars, to be more precise: from his classic essay *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. There, in § 1, Sellars characterizes the "framework of givenness" and claims that "it has, indeed, been so pervasive that few, if any, philosophers have been altogether free of it; certainly not Kant, and, I would argue, not even Hegel, the great foe of 'immediacy'." Among the (immediately) "given", Sellars includes things as diverse as: sense contents, physical objects, universals, propositions, real connections, first principles. He admits that even the givenness itself can be regarded as the "given". Cf. Sellars [1956/1995]. (References here are to the online edition of the text.)

<sup>7</sup> McDowell [1996], p. 9 (emphasis mine).

<sup>8</sup> McDowell [1998], p. 471.

tively relevant nonconceptual, “proto-rational” episodes underlying empirical beliefs, and (2) to maintain connections between thought and reality, by stipulating that perceptual experiences (the Kantian sensible intuitions) present us directly with objects. So far so good, but the question arises whether the place McDowell grants to *KCT* in his conception of experience adequately reflects the role the thesis plays in Kant’s theoretical system; in other words, does it mean the same for both philosophers? Arguably, what McDowell takes as much as for granted, Kant endorsed as a result of a long development of the whole system of his philosophical views. It seems, indeed, that McDowell builds on the assumption of an unproblematic character of *KCT*, which hence needs no warrant and calls for no further considerations. Besides, he never worries about its coherence, as well as about the coherence of his own account of perceptual experience.<sup>9</sup> For McDowell, Kant’s claim about thoughts without content being empty and intuitions without concepts being blind<sup>10</sup> might therefore provide an analytic truth, justified on the basis of the analysis of its terms, hence, given the accepted meanings of these terms, indisputable. Alternatively, it might constitute an hypothesis which best explains the possibility of the rational connections between thought and reality.

Recently, commentators have provided arguments which both foster and undermine McDowell’s reading. H. Ginsborg, on the basis of Kant’s account of imagination, argues that, according to Kant, perception is accompanied by the “consciousness of normativity”<sup>11</sup> which originates from the understanding but which “does not presuppose any antecedent grasp of concepts.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, perception comes prior to concept formation and judgment (a nonconceptualist motif) but it is conceptually informed to the extent that it is guided by that special consciousness of normativity (a conceptualist motif). By contrast, R. Hanna, in a number of articles, defends a nonconceptualist reading of Kant. In that he does so, he draws on Kant’s theory of intuitions (*Anschauungen*) as a *sui generis* source of specific cognitions – cognitions which it would not be possible to explain otherwise than as presupposing intuition, i.e. a kind of immediate acquaintance with objects.

---

<sup>9</sup> Importantly, McDowell does not see any problem about the application of concepts, which are general, to experience, which is individual and context-specific, hence particular, by its nature. Kant attempts to deal with this issue in the chapter on Schematism; cf. KrV, A 137/B 176 – A 147/B 187.

<sup>10</sup> KrV, A 51/B 75.

<sup>11</sup> Ginsborg [2008] p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

In particular, Hanna appeals to the doctrine of incongruent counterparts, as part of his argument for reading Kant in terms of nonconceptualism.<sup>13</sup>

However, Kant's account of experience, with what has been labelled Kant's Cooperation Thesis as one of its key constituents, can also be considered from an historical perspective. This might help to better understand its purport and overall contribution to Kant's transcendental theory of experience. Such a reading has been offered by M. Caimi who contends that *KCT* (more specifically, its first part: that thoughts without content are empty) is only seemingly tautological, for "Kant mit diesem scheinbar tautologischen Satz eine umstürzende Neuigkeit in die Logik seiner Zeit einführt."<sup>14</sup> The novelty consists in the fact that "[b]ei Kant hängen Fülle oder Leere eines Begriffs nicht mehr ausschließlich von seiner *logischen* Möglichkeit ab"<sup>15</sup> and in the fact that "die Sinnlichkeit als legitime Erkenntnisquelle anerkannt wird."<sup>16</sup> Thus, Caimi concludes, the understanding turns out to be insufficient to account for all (kinds of) cognitions.

### 3. Kant's unconceptualized intuitions

It has been claimed by philosophers and commentators alike that Kant adopted his dualist distinction between sensibility and understanding, and consequently, the distinction between intuitions and concepts, in an arbitrary fashion. Indeed, when one looks into the beginning of the *Transzendental Logik*, one can be disappointed by a mere reference to "our nature" which Kant makes as the purported explanation of why he recognizes the distinction. For he writes:

*Unsre Natur bringt es so mit sich, daß die Anschauung niemals anders als sinnlich sein kann, d.i. nur die Art enthält, wie wir von Gegenständen affiziert werden.*<sup>17</sup>

L. Falkenstein remarks that "the sense/intellect distinction is not one for which Kant ever obviously argues, or even explains in anything more than the most perfunctory way"<sup>18</sup>, adding that Kant must have borrowed the distinction from Aristotle and the Schools. Hegel, in turn, complains that Kant based the dualism of

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hanna [2003], Hanna [2005], and also very recently Hanna [2011], where he attributes to non-conceptual content the function of mediating our pre-reflective, proto-rational intentional relatedness to objects.

<sup>14</sup> Caimi [2005] p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 144 (italics mine).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 146.

<sup>17</sup> KrV, A 51/B 75 (italics mine).

<sup>18</sup> Falkenstein [2004] p. 29.

sensibility and understanding on empirical observations and psychology of the human mind, thus on (what might be called) a “brute fact”. In *Glauben und Wissen*, Hegel makes the point in the following way:

Kant hat keinen anderen Grund als schlechthin die Erfahrung und die empirische Psychologie, daß das menschliche Erkenntnisvermögen seinem Wesen nach in dem bestehe, wie es erscheint [...].<sup>19</sup>

But it seems fairly implausible that a philosopher like Kant would overlook the necessity to justify an evidently unobvious, but explicitly stated claim. Rather, perhaps we should expect that what apparently Kant takes for granted in his mature works has been justified and established as true in some earlier writings, and therefore can now be presented as obvious.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Kant insists on reading single claims against the background of the whole system of which they form part,<sup>21</sup> and with the idea of the whole (“die Idee im Ganzen”<sup>22</sup>) in mind. Thus, what appears as ungrounded when we abstract from the context where it belongs, can acquire its due justification as a part of a system.

Noteworthy, already in his pre-Critical writings, Kant abandons the idea that mathematics (or geometry, to be more specific) can be reduced to knowledge of the so called truths of reason (Leibniz’s finitely demonstrable truths) or to knowledge of the relations between ideas, as envisaged by Hume. For instance, from the analysis of the concept of space, understood as a system of relations between physical objects, it does not follow that space must have three dimensions; the statement, for Kant, is necessarily true, though. Our knowledge that space must have three dimensions would rather be derived from the intuition of space, given “*in concreto*.”<sup>23</sup> In the 1768 essay on directions in space, where he counters Leibniz’s conception of *analysis situs*, Kant offers a number of examples to illustrate the point that certain properties of physical objects, such as directionality, cannot be determined by reference to mutual positions of parts of an object or to the positions of objects relative to one another. The examples comprise artefacts,<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Hegel [1968] p. 37 (341-2).

<sup>20</sup> For an account of the evolution of Kant’s arguments for his faculty dualism, see Guyer [2000].

<sup>21</sup> “Es ist wenig daran gelegen, ob einige Satze der reinen philosophie über das object wahr oder falsch seyn; es ist wichtiger, ob sie in der gehörigen Methode gedacht sind und im Gantzen der Erkenntnis ihre gehörige stelle haben, wie auf der generalcarte.” Refl, AA 18:53.12-15.

<sup>22</sup> KrV, B xliv.

<sup>23</sup> UDGTM, AA 02:281.28.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., a piece of writing remains legible and intelligible as long as we read it, say, from left to right, or from top to bottom, rather than vice versa, and so if we give it a certain direction.

natural phenomena or creatures,<sup>25</sup> and geometrical figures, which he terms incongruent counterparts, i.e. objects which are “völlig gleich und ähnlich, jedoch an sich selbst so verschieden [...], daß die Grenzen der einen nicht zugleich die Grenzen der andern sein können.”<sup>26</sup> One’s hand and its reflection in a mirror provides an example of an incongruent counterpart. All in all, these examples are meant to show that, in our cognition, there are elements which cannot be explained in terms of conceptual knowledge; cognitions which do not have their origin in the understanding and which cannot be justified by discursive methods. These observations, perhaps far from providing foolproof arguments, at least give rise to distinguishing the intellectual from the non-intellectual kind of cognition.

The distinction becomes further developed in Kant’s 1770 Inaugural Dissertation (*De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis*). There, Kant characterizes sensibility as a faculty of receptivity, dependent in what it represents on the affection by objects, and names the objects of the senses phenomena, whereas those of the understanding (“per intelligentiam cognoscendum”)<sup>27</sup> – noumena. He also states that sensible cognitions present things as they appear, whereas intellectual cognitions – as they are (“sensitive cogitata esse rerum repraesentationes, uti apparent, intellectualia autem, sicuti sunt”<sup>28</sup>), a view to be modified in the first Critique. Sensible cognitions are composed of matter, furnished by sensations, and form, originating from a law internal to the mind and applied to the *sensa* in order to arrange, or to “coordinate” them (“lex quaedam menti insita, *sensa* ab obiecti praesentia orta sibimet coordinandi”<sup>29</sup>). Furthermore, Kant defines appearances as sensible cognitions which are presupposed by the logical (as opposed to the real) use of the understanding. Discursive cognition, which involves such acts as comparing (and otherwise ordering) sense data by the understanding, he equates with experience. In opposition to Wolff and his school, Kant stresses that sensible and intellectual cognitions do not differ with regard to the degree of their distinctness; rather, each kind of cognition should be traced back to a different source. Kant denies the ability to intuit to the understanding. Intuition, pertaining to sensibility,

---

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Kant notices that snails coil from left to right, and winds “vom neuen zum vollen Lichte gerne von der Linken zur Rechten den ganzen Compaß durchlaufen” (GUGR, AA 02:380.22-3), in accordance with the law of Mariotte. Other examples concern the human body: Kant remarks that it is a “klare Empfindung” which allows one to distinguish between its sides (GUGR, AA 02:381.09) or that its right side manifests more skill than the left one.

<sup>26</sup> GUGR, AA 02:381.24-6. Kant returns to incongruent counterparts in § 13 of *Prolegomena*, where he argues for the transcendently ideal character of space. Cf. Prol, AA 04:289.

<sup>27</sup> MSI, AA 02:392.18.

<sup>28</sup> MSI, AA 02:392.27-9.

<sup>29</sup> MSI, AA 02:393.06-7.



has its own form which makes it possible for the mind to relate to an object in an immediate way.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, the understanding, with general concepts at its disposal, cognizes things discursively (“discursive”<sup>31</sup>) and by means of symbols (Kant qualifies it as “cognitio symbolica”<sup>32</sup>). Subsequent analyses deal with the idea of time (“idea temporis”<sup>33</sup>) and space (“conceptus spatii”<sup>34</sup>); both “ideas” are characterized as presupposed by sensible cognition, as intuitions, hence singular and immediately related to their objects, as pure intuitions, i.e. “untainted” by any sensory component, and continuous magnitudes. Also, rather than being objective and real, they furnish subjective conditions for ordering sense data in accordance with a certain law inherent in the mind. Thus, already in the 1770 Dissertation, Kant regards space and time as underlying all sensible representations and the formal principles of the “sensible world” (“principium formale mundi sensibilis”<sup>35</sup>). Moreover, Kant claims that even our grasp of the most basic principles of thought, such as the principle of contradiction, rests on our possessing the intuition of time.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Cf. “Omnis enim intuitus noster adstringitur principio cuidam formae, sub qua sole aliquid immediate, s. ut singulare, a mente cerni et non tantum discursive per conceptus generales concipi potest.” MSI, AA 02:396.21-4.

<sup>31</sup> MSI, AA 02:396.21-4.

<sup>32</sup> MSI, AA 02:396.19-20.

<sup>33</sup> MSI, AA 02:398.32.

<sup>34</sup> MSI, AA 02:402.16.

<sup>35</sup> MSI, AA 02:405.06.

<sup>36</sup> One may hold that, according to Kant, cognitively valuable conceptual content of judgments *constitutively* depends upon the nonconceptual content of intuitions. This empiricist motivation remains central to Kant’s theory of cognition. It underlies the above mentioned contentious claim articulated in the 1770 Dissertation, which reads: “Tantum vero abest, ut quis unquam temporis conceptum adhuc rationis ope aliunde deducat et explicet, ut potius ipsum principium contradictionis eundem praemittat ac sibi condicionis loco substernat. A enim et non A non repugnant, nisi simul (h. e. tempore eodem) cogitata de eodem, post se autem (diversis temporibus) eidem competere possunt. Inde possibilitas mutationum nonnisi in tempore cogitabilis, neque tempus cogitabile per mutationes, sed vice versa.” MSI, AA 02:401.12-18. It might be objected that Kant is wrong inasmuch as he does not recognize that a given “A and *not-A*” can be inconsistent, whether anyone has noticed the contradiction, or not, thus independently of the psychological process of understanding which indeed occurs in time. (Contradictions in mathematical proofs would provide an adequate example.) But Kant might have two things to say in order to defend his position: (i) concepts are representations, “tools” by means of which to comprehend mind-independent realities, hence one cannot consider concepts and conceptual relations in abstraction from the cognitive processes in which they are exercised (and these processes *are* temporal); (ii) conceptual relations unaccompanied by intuition fail to meet the requirement of objective validity, and in the passage quoted at stake is cognition of the empirical world, i.e. cognition which demands the cooperation of concepts and intuitions. In other words, Kant would consider here the application of the principle of contradiction to the *mundus sensibilis*.

The dualist distinction between sensibility and understanding, which Kant's discovery of the pure forms of sensibility seems to have given rise to, is brought to light several times in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. For instance, Kant mentions it in the *Stufenleiter* passage, where he divides conscious representations (perceptions) into sensations, i.e. subjective modifications of the mind, and cognitions (*Erkenntnisse*), which he qualifies as objective. Cognitions are either intuitions or concepts. Intuitions directly refer to objects and are singular. Concepts are mediate and refer to objects by means of a mark ("Merkmal"<sup>37</sup>) which can be common to a number of objects. Emphasis on concepts and intuitions constituting different forms of cognizing an object is also evident in Kant's famous example with a "savage" which we can find in the Jaesche edition of his lectures on logic:

Sieht z. B. ein Wilder ein Haus aus der Ferne, dessen Gebrauch er nicht kennt: so hat er zwar eben dasselbe Objekt wie ein Anderer, der es bestimmt als eine für Menschen eingerichtete Wohnung kennt, in der Vorstellung vor sich. Aber der Form nach ist dieses Erkenntniß eines und desselben Objects in beiden verschieden. Bei dem einen ist es bloße Anschauung, bei dem Andern Anschauung und Begriff zugleich.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, to complete the account of the Kantian unconceptualized intuitions: let us remember that, closing the introduction to the first Critique, Kant spells out what we may call a Priority Thesis in that he contends that "die Bedingungen, worunter allein die Gegenstände der menschlichen Erkenntnis gegeben werden, denjenigen vorgehen, unter welchen selbige gedacht werden."<sup>39</sup> Since temporal precedence must be ruled out here (in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kant does not take much interest in the genetic aspects of human cognition), as must be any merely logical dependence of concepts on intuitions (as in the account of Spinoza, where *modi* logically depend on substance), what seems to be at stake is a kind of a *constitutive* dependence of concepts on intuitions; for concepts acquire object-relatedness exclusively by virtue of their relation to intuition.

#### 4. "Empty thoughts" and "blind intuitions"

In the famous dictum which inspired McDowell's conceptualism, Kant claims that thoughts without content are empty and intuitions without concepts

---

<sup>37</sup> KrV, A 320/B 377.

<sup>38</sup> Log, AA 09:033.17-22.

<sup>39</sup> KrV, A 16/B 29.

are blind.<sup>40</sup> Yet, according to the evidence adduced in the previous section, it seems that Kant's Cooperation Thesis cannot be taken as true without qualifications. In the *Stufenleiter* passage, concepts are described as representations which refer to objects, so to speak, by definition alone. Likewise, the "savage" example shows that intuitions have their objects without it being the case that there must be concepts which become associated with them. It seems, therefore, that concepts and intuitions have their own kind of content each, irrespective of KCT.

Let us deal with thoughts (concepts) unaccompanied by intuitions first. For sure, Kant does not pretend to claim as much as that they make no sense at all. On the contrary: we do understand them insofar as we understand all thoughts which do not thwart the principle of contradiction (such is, e.g., the thought that space has more than three dimensions).<sup>41</sup> Such thoughts may even have some objective content – in the sense in which the idea of God, in Descartes' *Meditation III*, has objective content before the proof of God's existence has been carried out. But what empty thoughts lack is reference to a real (as opposed to what some philosophers call merely intentional) object. For, as one can read in the chapter on phenomena and noumena:

Zu jedem Begriff wird erstlich die logische Form eines Begriffs (des Denkens) überhaupt, und denn zweitens auch die Möglichkeit, ihm einen Gegenstand zu geben, darauf er sich beziehe, erfordert. Ohne diesen letzteren hat er keinen Sinn, und ist völlig leer an Inhalt, ob er gleich noch immer die logische Funktion enthalten mag, aus etwanigen datis einen Begriff zu machen. Nun kann der Gegenstand einem Begriffe nicht anders gegeben werden, als in der Anschauung [...].<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, thoughts (concepts) unaccompanied by intuitions represent logically possible objects. But, importantly, logically possible objects are not *really* possible objects. To be really possible, an object must conform not only to the conditions of thought but also to the conditions of sensibility, very much diverse from the former. Thus, Kant takes a significant step in the history of the rationalist metaphysics: by rendering our cognition of reality constrained by the a priori conditions of sensibility, he deprives thought, divorced from experience, of its usurped power

---

<sup>40</sup> KrV, A 51/B 75.

<sup>41</sup> In fact, the issue is slightly more complicated: in the *Transzendente Dialektik*, Kant talks about problematic concepts which we can apply to the objects of the transcendental ideas (soul, God, the world as a whole). Such concepts do not generate knowledge, since they cannot be associated with any intuitions. Cf. KrV, A 339/B 397 – A 340/B 398.

<sup>42</sup> KrV, A 239/B 298.

to cognize any reality.<sup>43</sup> Otherwise put: Kant's revolution consists in bringing down the rationalist dogma which equates being (*ens*) with possible being (*ens possibile*).<sup>44</sup> Real possibility becomes explicitly set against mere logical possibility in the following passage from *Preisschrift über die Fortschritte der Metaphysik*:

Die [M]öglichkeit eines Gedankens oder Begriffs beruht auf dem Satze des Widerspruchs [...]. Das Ding, wovon selbst der bloße Gedanke unmöglich ist (d.i. der Begriff sich widerspricht), ist selbst unmöglich. Das Ding aber, wovon der Begriff möglich ist, ist darum nicht ein mögliches Ding. Die erste Möglichkeit kann man die logische, die zweyte die reale Möglichkeit nennen; der Beweis der letztern ist der Beweis der objectiven Realität des Begriffs, welchen man jederzeit zu fordern berechtigt ist. Er kann aber nie anders geleistet werden, als durch Darstellung des dem Begriffe correspondirenden Objects; denn sonst bleibt er immer nur ein Gedanke, welcher, ob ihm irgend ein Gegenstand correspondiere, oder ob er leer sey, d.i. ob er [ü]berhaupt zum Erkenntnisse dienen könne, so lange, jenes in einem Beyspiele gezeigt wird, immer ungewiß bleibt.<sup>45</sup>

Now, let us turn to the other part of Kant's famous statement, which says that intuitions without concepts are blind. Literally, blindness consists in the lack of the ability to see. Also, perhaps slightly less literally, one can be blind to certain things or facts – in the sense that one, purposefully or not, would omit or neglect these things or facts which anyway there are for one to experience. A colour-blind person cannot discriminate, say, blue from green. Drawing on this analysis, based on commonsensical observations, one could read Kant's contention as implying that: (i) without concepts applied to perceptions, subjects are unable to perceptually experience objects, as much as a blind person is unable to see anything (with his eyes); or that (ii) without relevant concepts, "attached", as it were, to intuitions, one fails to take account of the content of one's experience in its variety and richness (one would not, then, be aware of particular x-s and y-s, given in experience, but one would be only vaguely aware that there is something); or, which is similar to the previous claim, that (iii) lacking concepts, one cannot be discriminatively

---

<sup>43</sup> This attainment may, in fact, be regarded as echoing Hume's empiricist postulate to reject all ideas for which we cannot point to any corresponding impressions. Of course, Kant's insistence on the necessary (a priori) character of the forms of sensibility makes the difference; Hume may regard the cognitive mechanisms which he describes as acquired in the course of evolutionary processes.

<sup>44</sup> Perzanowski [1994] highlights the rationalist conception of *ens* as *ens possibile* in his commentary on Leibniz's theological philosophy.

<sup>45</sup> HN, AA 20:325.29-38, 326.01-3.

aware of what is actually presented to one in experience, analogously to a person who, while lacking the concepts “red” and “violet”, fails to distinguish red objects from violet ones.

However, read in this way, Kant’s contention would go against the grain of much of his otherwise clearly stated views (already discussed in section 3). For Kant did not consider unconceptualized intuitions unfit to represent objects and properties in a variety and richness of their details. On the contrary, against Leibniz’s doctrine of a complete concept, Kant holds the view that intuitions are, to use a contemporary turn of phrase, much “richer” representations than concepts:

Da nur einzelne Dinge oder Individuen durchgängig bestimmt sind: so kann es auch nur durchgängig bestimmte Erkenntnisse als Anschauungen, nicht aber als Begriffe, geben; in Ansehung der letztern kann die logische Bestimmung nie als vollendet angesehen werden.<sup>46</sup>

What should we understand by “blind intuitions”, then, if not mental occurrences or states which, by themselves, do not represent anything? The issue of “blindness” reemerges in the A-edition version of the transcendental deduction of the categories, where Kant remarks that a manifold of *unsynthesized* perceptions “würden [...] zu keiner Erfahrung gehören”, and thus would be “ohne Objekt”<sup>47</sup>, hence “*nichts als ein blindes Spiel der Vorstellungen, d.i. weniger, als ein Traum.*”<sup>48</sup> In the context of the transcendental deduction of the categories where the statement appears, it means that blind intuitions would not belong to experience because they would not represent objects subordinated to the rules (concepts) and principles of the understanding. All intuitions, prior to their being subordinated to the understanding, must be blind: this means that they cannot represent objects (states of affairs) which, e.g., could remain in causal connections with other objects (or states of affairs), or any other relations specified by the categories.<sup>49</sup>

But this does not come down to stating that, according to Kant, e.g. the very ability to see red (or just seeing red) presupposes that the subject possess the con-

---

<sup>46</sup> Log, AA 09:99.13-16.

<sup>47</sup> Kant employs the terms “Objekt” and “Gegenstand” interchangeably, in the first Critique, as the equivalent of the English term “object”. Therefore, if one attempts to read into Kant’s text the distinction between intentional and real objects (or what modern philosophers referred to as the objective existence of an object in the mind, on the one hand, and its formal existence without the mind, on the other), one should be more sensitive to the context rather than the terms in which the distinction is outlined.

<sup>48</sup> KrV 112 (italics mine).

<sup>49</sup> R. Hanna in Hanna [forthcoming] calls the objects of unconceptualized intuitions elusive objects.

cept “red” and the ability to employ it in judgments. Seeing red objects is not logically dependent upon believing or judging that the objects are red, just because intuitions are in no way logically dependent on concepts. What Kant says, therefore, is only that unconceptualized intuitions lack cognitive value. As such, they could not be used to justify our empirical beliefs. To remind McDowell’s observation: there can be no logical (in particular justificatory) relations between the mere “given” and our empirical beliefs based on it. However, this by no means entails that “receptivity does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation [between the senses and the understanding]”, nor that “the relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity.”<sup>50</sup> On the contrary: unconceptualized intuitions contribute their own kind of content. To use an analogy with neuroscience and cognitive psychology: it is as though concepts were there to account for “binding” different features of objects, registered separately in different areas of the brain. It is not registering the features that presupposes binding; conversely, binding appears as a “higher order” cognitive process emerging from the brain’s being responsive to the diverse features, which then become synthesized into an experience of an object.<sup>51</sup>

## 5. Was Kant then a nonconceptualist?

At the beginning of this paper, I referred to the suggestion that we should distinguish state and content conceptualism (by parity, we may now distinguish state and content nonconceptualism) about the nature of perceptual experience. To recap: according to state conceptualism, perceptual experiences involve conceptual capacities; e.g., to see a red tomato means to *see that* the tomato is red. Perception, on that account, resembles belief or judgment in that it too involves a proposition made by the subject. Thus conceived, perception is a form of the awareness of facts. Content conceptualism, in turn, would amount to the claim that the content of perceptual experience consists of (or is constituted by) concepts. What normally consists of concepts are propositions. What propositions capture are facts. The latter make up the “world”, providing the frame of reference for our beliefs or judgments.

According to *KCT*, concepts combined with intuitions render the content of experience cognitively valuable. Concepts secure the rationality of the relations between experience and thought; and (sensible) intuitions furnish the *empirical*

---

<sup>50</sup> McDowell [1996] p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> For the application of Kant’s theory of cognition to the problem of binding in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, see: LaRock [2010].

content, hence they guarantee the grip on the “world”. Thus, Kant’s account aptly satisfies the two requirements: for rationality and for object-relatedness, and this is what McDowell finds so attractive about the Kantian dictum. However, the cooperation between concepts and intuitions in experience does not arise, according to McDowell, from merging, as it were, the two kinds of representational content. Somewhat in a Berkeleyan vein, he claims that we even cannot think about intuitions as separate from thoughts, as concept-independent. A Hegelian idiom may be appropriate here: for we might regard the empirical content as posited in the course of reflection about the nature of experience. But precisely for this reason it cannot be construed as genuine content. In this way, we come to a conclusion which Kant most probably would like to avert. For if we no more than *posit* the empirical content as partly constitutive of our cognition of objects, we leave it unexplained why Kant insisted on sensibility constraining the claims to knowledge entertained by the understanding. And the idea that the bounds of (cognitively valuable) thought must be determined by the limitations intrinsic to our nature as sensible creatures remains key to understanding the Kantian doctrine of transcendental idealism. Without it, Kant would go back to the rationalist, Leibnizian-Wolffian, positions or lapse into the Hegelian kind of idealism.

Was Kant then a nonconceptualist? It might be difficult to answer this question, since there seems to be no unitary account of nonconceptual content in the recent literature on the topic. Indeed, what nonconceptual content is, is a subject matter of an ongoing debate which it is not my purpose to elaborate on here.<sup>52</sup> By way of an illustration, let me just briefly consider an instance of what has been called state and content nonconceptualism.

State nonconceptualism, as I see it, one can attribute to F. Dretske; in a number of essays on perception, he distinguishes thing-awareness from fact-awareness.<sup>53</sup> *Simple seeing* of an object, property or relation, which he identifies as thing-awareness, does not entail or presuppose *seeing that* an object has a certain property or *that* some objects form a relation of a definite kind, which he identifies as fact-awareness. Arguably, we often perceive things without recognizing any or at least some of the facts about them: think about meeting a friend, who always (as you have otherwise got to know) wears a tie in his office, without being able to say, shortly after the meeting, what colour your friend’s tie was (and let’s suppose that you do not suffer from anterograde amnesia). Or think about the all too well known instances of change blindness and inattentional blindness, such as the story

---

<sup>52</sup> For an overview of existing standpoints and arguments in the debate, see: Gunther [2003].

<sup>53</sup> Cf., e.g., Dretske [1993]; Dretske [1995, 2000].

with a man in a gorilla suit dancing a jig on a playground without being noticed by observers counting how many times basketball players pass the ball to one another.<sup>54</sup>

Content nonconceptualism can be illustrated by Ch. Peacocke's account of scenario content. A scenario is a possible way of perceiving the scene around the subject, a way which is determined by relations between the body of the subject and his environment.<sup>55</sup> For instance, a person looking at the Buckingham Palace, whilst standing in front of the edifice, and a person looking at the Palace with his head turned left towards it should be ascribed two different scenario contents, even though they see the same thing.<sup>56</sup> For the experiences of both persons would be subject to different correctness conditions. Thus, according to Peacocke, scenarios form part of the content of perceptual experience precisely because they have correctness conditions:

I use the phrase 'the content of experience' – he explains – to cover not only which objects, properties, and relations are perceived, but also the ways in which they are perceived. The ways [...] all contribute to the representational content of experience. That is, when something is perceived in one of these ways, the claim that the object really is the way it is experienced as being is one which has a correctness condition.<sup>57</sup>

Although one might hesitate to read Kant as an adherent of state nonconceptualism (in the transcendental deduction of the categories he aims to establish the claim that all experience must involve the categories of the understanding, and so the conceptual capacities), he can certainly be regarded as an advocate of content nonconceptualism. For intuitions do "contribute to the representational content of experience"; without intuitions, no real objects could be represented by concepts alone. Space and time, the forms of all empirical intuitions and pure intuitions themselves, yield the *ways* in which objects can be experienced as endowed with

---

<sup>54</sup> I borrow this funny example from Tye [2005].

<sup>55</sup> Here is how Peacocke defines a scenario: "We are now in a position to say with slightly more precision what one of our spatial types is. It is a way of locating surfaces, features and the rest in relation to such a labelled origin and family of axes. I call such a spatial type a *scenario*", in: Peacocke [1992], p. 107. "Origin" and "axes" are Peacocke's terms of art naming specific abstract entities. Intuitively, the notion of origin refers to the point on which to orientate or center a scenario, like the centre of one's chest or palm for visual and tactile experiences. Axes would then be constituted by lines dividing one's perceptual field in relation to the origin, e.g. back/front, left/right or up/down.

<sup>56</sup> This is of course Peacocke's example and can be found in Peacocke [1992].

<sup>57</sup> Peacocke [2001] p. 241.



a variety of other, not only spatial and temporal characteristics. These ways of representing objects cannot be reduced to, or substituted by any act of the understanding. They must then be what renders at least part of the content of our experience independent from the concepts we have mastered.<sup>58</sup>

## References

### A. The works of Immanuel Kant

All the quotations from Kant's texts are from the *Akademie-Ausgabe von Immanuel Kants Gesammelten Werken* (hrsg. von der Königlich-Preussischen Akademie de Wissenschaften zu Berlin 1902-). Only the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* is quoted after Jens Timmermann's edition. The following abbreviations have been used in this paper:

GUGR – *Von dem ersten Grunde des Unterschiedes der Gegenden im Raume* (AA 02).

HN – *Handschriftlicher Nachlass* (AA 14-23).

KrV – *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, hrsg. von J. Timmermann, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg 1998.

Log – *Logik* (AA 09).

MSI – *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis* (AA 02).

Prol – *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können* (AA 04).

Refl – *Reflexion* (AA 14-19).

UDGTM – *Untersuchung über die Deutlichkeit der Grundsätze der natürlichen Theologie und Moral* (AA 02).

### B. Secondary literature

Brewer [2006] – Bill Brewer, *Perception and Content*, "European Journal of Philosophy" 14 (2) 2006: 165-181, available at: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/philosophy/people/faculty/brewer/pc2.pdf> [24.03.2011]: 1-30 (quotations in this paper come from the online version of Brewer's article).

Caimi [2005] – Mario Caimi, "Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer", "Kant-Studien" (96) 2005: 135-146.

Crowther [2006] – T.M. Crowther, *Two Conceptions of Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism*, "Erkenntnis" 65 (2) 2006: 245-276.

Dretske [1993] – Fred Dretske, *Conscious Experience*, "Mind" 102 (406) 1993: 263-283.

---

<sup>58</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous referee for helpful remarks on the earlier draft of this paper.

- Dretske [1995] – Fred Dretske, *Meaningful Perception*, [in:] *Visual Cognition. An Invitation to Cognitive Science*, vol. 2, D.N. Osherson, S.M. Kosslyn et al. (eds.), The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1995: 331-352.
- Dretske [2000] – Fred Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge, and Belief. Selected Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000.
- Falkenstein [2004] – Lorne Falkenstein, *Kant's Intuitionism. A Commentary on the Transcendental Aesthetic*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2004.
- Ginsborg [2008] – Hannah Ginsborg, *Was Kant a nonconceptualist?*, "Philosophical Studies" 137 (1) 2008: 65-77.
- Gunther [2003] – *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, York Gunther (ed.), The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, London 2003.
- Guyer [2000] – Paul Guyer, *Absolute idealism and the rejection of Kantian dualism*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, K. Ameriks (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000: 37-56.
- Hanna [2003] – Robert Hanna, *Kant, Science and Human Nature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003.
- Hanna [2005] – Robert Hanna, *Kant and Nonconceptual Content*, "European Journal of Philosophy" 13 (2), 2005: 247-290.
- Hanna [2011] – Robert Hanna, *The Myth of the Given and the Grip of the Given*, "Diametros" (27) 2011: 25-46.
- Hanna [forthcoming] – Robert Hanna, *Kant's Non-Conceptualism, Elusive Objects, and the Gap in the B Deduction*, available at: [http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/paper\\_hanna\\_KNC\\_elusive%20objects\\_and\\_the\\_gap\\_march11.pdf](http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/paper_hanna_KNC_elusive%20objects_and_the_gap_march11.pdf) [05.05.2011]: 1-22.
- Hegel [1968] – G.W.F. Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen oder die Reflexionsphilosophie der Subjektivität in der Vollständigkeit ihrer Formen, als Kantische, Jacobische und Fichtesche Philosophie*, *Hegels Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 4: *Jenaer kritische Schriften*, Felix Meiner Vg., Hamburg 1968.
- LaRock [2010] – Eric LaRock, *Cognition and Consciousness: Kantian Affinities with Contemporary Vision Research*, "Kant-Studien" (101) 2010: 445-464.
- McDowell [1996] – John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, London 1996.
- McDowell [1998] – John McDowell, *Lecture III: Intentionality as a Relation*, "The Journal of Philosophy" 95 (9) 1998: 471-490.
- Peacocke [1992] – Christopher Peacocke, *Scenarios, concepts, and perception*, [in:] *The Contents of Experience. Essays in Perception*, T. Crane (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 1992: 105-135.
- Peacocke [2001] – Christopher Peacocke, *Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?*, "The Journal of Philosophy" 98 (5), 2001: 239-264.
- Perzanowski [1994] – Jerzy Perzanowski, *Teofilozofia Leibniza*, [in:] G.W. Leibniz, *Pisma z teologii mistycznej*, transl. by M. Frankiewicz, Znak, Kraków 1994: 243-351.
- Sellars [1956/1995] – Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, [in:] *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1, Herbert Feigl, Michael Scriven (eds.),

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1956: 253-329; available at: <http://www.ditext.com/sellars/epm.html> [05.05.2011] (edited in Hypertext by Andrew Chrucky, 1995).

Smith [2002] - *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, N.H. Smith (ed.), Routledge, London-New York 2002.

Tye [2005] - Michael Tye, *Nonconceptual Content, Richness, and Fineness of Grain*, [in:] *Perceptual Experience*, T. Gendler, J. Hawthorne (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2005: 504-530.