

Anna Tomaszewska

The Contents of Perceptual Experience: A Kantian Perspective

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Managing Editor: Anna Michalska

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Introduction

I

Philosophy can be considered a collection of ideas and problems that remain the same across history and terminological changes. Different philosophical traditions, on such a construal, do not contribute to the development of philosophy but provide distinct conceptual resources by means of which to express perennial questions. Communication between representatives of different traditions in philosophy would thus resemble translation from one language into another, rather than a genuine dialogue. But philosophical problems can also emerge in response to certain developments witnessed in human history: for instance, to the development of scientific thought or to the alterations in social and political conditions. On this view, philosophy remains a collection of problems but philosophical problems undergo evolution as does everything else. It seems, however, that a combination of these two ways of understanding philosophy is also possible. In one of the introductory passages of John McDowell's *Mind and World*, one can read:

"It is true that modern philosophy is pervaded by apparent problems about knowledge in particular. But I think it is helpful to see those apparent problems as more or less inept expressions of a deeper anxiety – an inchoately felt threat that a way of thinking we find ourselves falling into leaves mind simply out of touch with the rest of reality, not just questionably capable of getting to know about it."¹

McDowell presents a modern philosophical problem, raised in a determinate historical context, as an instantiation of a more universal problem. In particular, the problem of justifying empirical beliefs can be viewed as a special case of the problem of the relation between thought and experience or, even more generally, between thought and reality, or mind and world. Thus, it can be concluded that, since particular problems, emerging in particular historical contexts, express more general or universal ones, parallels can be sought between problems across different philosophical traditions. As Wilfrid Sellars has put it:

"The history of philosophy is the *lingua franca* which makes communication between philosophers, at least of different points of view, possible. Philosophy without the history of philosophy, if not empty or blind, is at least dumb. Thus, if I build my discussion of contemporary issues on a foundation of Kant exegesis and commentary, it is because, as I see it, there are enough close parallels between the problems confronting him and the steps he took to solve

1 J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1996, p. xiii.

them, on the one hand, and the current situation and its demands, on the other, for it to be helpful to use him as a means of communication, though not, of course, as a means only. In their most general aspect both his problems and our perplexities spring from the attempt to take both man and science seriously.”²

According to Sellars, historians of philosophy work on problems shared by philosophers both recently and in the past. It is because philosophy builds on rational argumentation that communication between philosophers, distant in time, is possible. What is more, Sellars seems to appreciate an approach, adopted by Hegel and later German philosophers, such as Dilthey, on which the work of a historian of philosophy is the work of a philosopher proper.

The expression “man and science,” one may surmise, refers to two different domains: the “space of reasons” and the “realm of (causal) law.” The overarching problem is how to bring together these two domains, symbolizing human rationality, on the one hand, and nature, on the other. The problem is indeed Kantian in spirit and can be traced back to the Third Antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant investigates the possibility of reconciling the spontaneity of freedom with the determinism of nature.³ To take man and science seriously means to find room for both the freedom of will and the determinism of nature, thus to make morality compatible with science.

But the problem of how to take “man and science seriously” also echoes the kind of concerns that were manifested at the beginning of the twentieth century by Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology.⁴ These concerns were related to the critique of scientism, a philosophical outlook, represented by logical positivists, on which only empirically verifiable statements can pretend to truth-valuation, and all the “non-scientific” discourse of other disciplines (in particular metaphysics) is considered meaningless.

2 W. Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics. Variations on Kantian Themes*, Ridgeview, Atascadero CA 1992, p. 1.

3 An antinomy is a conflict of two theses which, taken together, generate a contradiction. Thus, in the third antinomy the first thesis reads: “Causality in accordance with laws of nature is not the only one from which all the appearances of the world can be derived. It is also necessary to assume another causality through freedom in order to explain them.” And the second thesis (“antithesis”) reads: “There is no freedom, but everything in the world happens solely in accordance with laws of nature.” I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 484-5 (A 444/B 472-A 445/B 473).

4 According to Christopher Norris, contemporary analytic authors who recruit Kant in the debate on the relation between thought and experience have completely overlooked Husserl and the phenomenological tradition, to the detriment of the debate. See: “‘Second Nature,’ Knowledge, and Normativity: Revisiting McDowell’s Kant,” *Diametros* 27, 2011.

In this book, I deal with a particular philosophical problem, raised within contemporary epistemology, philosophy of mind and perception, against the background of Kant's theory of cognition. More specifically, my considerations focus on the question about the nature of representational content in experience. This is a very specific question that one can also address by studying the Kantian account of empirical cognition in general, and intuition in particular. Such an approach has been adopted by a number of authors: Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, Robert Brandom, and Gareth Evans, to mention but a few. Many authors work at the intersection of Kant commentary and contemporary theories of mind and cognition; as it seems, the majority of commentators and historians of philosophy recognize the great relevance of the Kantian doctrines to current issues.⁵ Thus, I do not aim to add up more than a voice in an ongoing debate that has both Kant and contemporary philosophers as its participants.

Moreover, the problem to be dealt with here – namely, one of the nature of experience – can be connected with more general background provided by Kant's transcendental philosophy. Again, these more general problems bear on the relation between thought and reality, as well as on the relation between man and nature. It is in Kant that one can find a thorough reshaping of the mind – world relation as a result of the so-called Copernican revolution. With his claim that objects must conform to the rules intrinsic to the human faculty of cognition, Kant goes beyond both classical metaphysics, which endorsed the idea of the universal intelligibility of the world, and some modern “veil of perception” doctrines, which equated objects with ideas in the mind.

Kant's “science of sensibility,” another name for the Transcendental Aesthetic, provides a framework within which to discuss the relation between man and nature, the “space of reasons” and the “realm of law,” the mental and the natural (in the sense of the Aristotelian “first nature”). As I read him, however, Kant does not offer a comprehensive picture of the relation, free from inconsistencies; rather, he leaves us with a number of puzzling questions.⁶ This signals a need to overcome the dichotomy

⁵ To name several examples: recent publications include a book on Kant and the content debate: D. Heidemann (ed.), *Kant and Non-Conceptual Content*, Routledge, London and New York 2013; and on Kant and the psychology of the unconscious: P. Giordanetti, R. Pozzo, M. Sgarbi (eds.), *Kant's Philosophy of the Unconscious*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 2012. The list of names of scholars writing in a similar vein would be long and one could include therein: Henry Allison, Lucy Allais, Richard Aquila, Andrew Brook, Hannah Ginsborg, Paul Guyer, Dieter Henrich, Robert Hanna, David Hamlyn, Jaakko Hintikka, Patricia Kitcher, Beatrice Longuenesse, Christopher Norris, Leslie Stevenson, Wayne Waxman, Kenneth Westphal, Markus Willaschek, Crispin Wright, John Yolton, and many others.

⁶ To illustrate the point, one may consider the so-called problem of affection. According to Kant, the origin of the “matter” of cognition should be traced back to the affection relation between the mind and its object(s), which involves no more than the subject's receptivity. How this relation should be construed has been subject to numerous debates. John Yolton, for example, distinguishes between

in terms of which we tend to think about the issue: for we either consider mind as part of nature, or as radically autonomous from it. McDowell's account of "second nature" marks an attempt at abandoning the dichotomy; in my opinion, though, it reaches piecemeal success only.

II

Opening the first chapter of *Mind and World*, McDowell writes:

"One of my main aims is to suggest that Kant should still have a central place in our discussion of the way thought bears on reality."⁷

As much as I share this aim, I do not agree with McDowell that Kant can be read as an advocate of conceptualism, a view on which perceptual experience is concept-dependent, or structured by concepts. On the contrary, my aim is to show that Kant's theory of empirical cognition has much more to offer to the proponents of the opposite view. Thus, it can be shown that Kant held the view that there is a concept-independent and pre-conceptual way of representing objects. This way is provided by intuition or intuitive cognition (*Anschauung*). In a number of places, throughout his philosophical writings, both pre-critical and later, Kant furnishes arguments for this view. Let me give a few examples.

In *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, Kant introduces a distinction between logical and real possibility. What can be thought without contradiction is logically possible. But what is *really* possible is thinkable on account of the fact that it has been or can be experienced. Thus, merely intellectual cognition and empirical cognition go separate ways in that the latter involves a nonconceptual ingredient: the experience of existence, or reality, of an object. Kant writes about the disparities between purely conceptual and empirical cognition, for instance, here:

"The motive force of a body in one direction and an equally strong tendency in the opposite direction do not contradict each other. They are also really possible in one body at the same

a merely causal (hence physical) perceptual relation and a cognitive or epistemic relation that does not presuppose any temporal sequence of events in a causal connection. Kant's affection relation would be of the second kind, according to Yolton. (Cf. *Perception and Reality: A History from Descartes to Kant*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1996, ch. 7.) A different reading can be found in: R. Aquila, *Representational Mind: A Study of Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1983. According to Aquila, the affection relation involves "stimulation of sense organs by an object" (p. 64) and results in producing sensory content.

⁷ J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, op. cit., p. 3.

time. However, one motive force annihilates the real consequences of the other motive force; and since the consequence of each motive force by itself would otherwise be a real movement, the consequence of both together in one subject is naught. That is to say, the consequence of these opposed motive forces is rest. But rest is, indubitably, possible. From this it is also apparent that real opposition is something quite different from logical opposition or contradiction, for the result of the latter is absolutely impossible.”⁸

In the same work, Kant makes a point that there are limits to conceptual analysis and that terms that defy any further analysis acquire their meaning by virtue of their relatedness to some sort of the “given.” A similar claim is advanced in a later essay, entitled *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality*. The claim will later transform into a “principle of significance” according to which, roughly speaking, concepts derive their meaning from intuitions.⁹ Compare:

“Suppose that you can now no longer break up the concept of extension into simpler data in order to show that there is nothing self-contradictory in it – and you must eventually arrive at something whose possibility cannot be analysed – then the question will be whether space and extension are empty words, or whether they signify something. The lack of contradiction does not decide the present issue; an empty word never signifies anything self-contradictory. If space did not exist, or if space was not at least given as a consequence through something existent, the word ‘space’ would signify nothing at all. As long as you prove possibilities by means of the law of contradiction, you are depending upon that which is thinkable in the thing and which is given to you in it, and you are only regarding the relation in accordance with this logical rule. But in the end, when you consider how this is then given to you, the only thing to which you can appeal is an existence.”¹⁰

And another passage:

“Before I set about the task of defining what space is, I clearly see that, since the concept is given to me, I must first of all, by analysing it, seek out those characteristic marks which are initially and immediately thought in that concept. Adopting this approach, I notice that there is

8 In: I. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755 – 1770*, translated and edited by D. Walford in collaboration with R. Meerbote, Cambridge University Press, New York 1992, p. 130 (2:86).

9 More specifically, the “principle of significance” has been defined by Peter Strawson in the following manner: “This is the principle that there can be no legitimate, or even meaningful, employment of ideas or concepts which does not relate them to empirical or experiential conditions of their application.” *The Bounds of Sense. An Essay in Kant’s ‘Critique of Pure Reason’*, Methuen, London 1966, p. 16. My understanding of the principle above draws upon Kant’s famous claim, formulated in the introduction to the *Transcendental Logic*, that concepts unaccompanied by intuitions are “blind.” Cf. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, op. cit., pp. 193-4 (A 51/B 75).

10 In: I. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755 – 1770*, op. cit., pp. 125-6 (2:81).

a manifold in space of which the parts are external to each other; I notice that this manifold is not constituted by substances, for the cognition I wish to acquire relates not to things in space but to space itself; and I notice that space can have only three dimensions *etc.* Propositions such as these can well be explained if they are examined *in concreto* so that they come to be cognised intuitively; but they can never be proved.”¹¹

It would perhaps be slightly anachronistic to say that Kant approaches the view that logic is based on the mechanisms by means of which the mind works. However, he does emphasize an asymmetry between intuitive and conceptual cognitions. While there are intuitive cognitions that cannot be analyzed by means of concepts, or cognitions that originate directly from intuition, without conceptual mediation, grasping even basic logical principles, such as the law of contradiction, requires recourse to intuition. Thus, in Kant’s *Inaugural Dissertation*, marking transition into the critical period, and entitled *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World*, one can read:

“Indeed, far from it being the case that anyone has ever yet deduced the concept of time from some other source, or explained it with the help of reason, the very principle of contradiction itself presupposes the concept of time and bases itself on it as its condition. For *A* and *not-A* are not *inconsistent* unless they are thought *simultaneously* (that is to say, at the same time), about the *same thing*, for they *can belong* to the same thing *after one another* (that is to say, at different times). Hence, it is only in time that the possibility of changes can be thought, whereas time cannot be thought by means of change, only *vice versa*.”¹²

By the end of the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant raises a point about the priority of intuition to thought, by stating:

“[T]he conditions under which alone the objects of human cognition are given precede those under which those objects are thought.”¹³

Since the conditions under which objects can be given in intuition are presupposed by the conditions of thought, they must be more basic and essential, and hence independent of the latter: at issue here is constitutive dependence rather than conceptual or genetic (temporal) priority of one kind of cognition to the other. It follows that objects can be given in intuition without at the same time having to be thought. Interestingly, whereas the pre-critical Kant acknowledged the autonomy of purely conceptual cognition, the critical Kant does not seem to appreciate this kind

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 253-4 (2:281).

¹² Ibidem, p. 394 (2:401).

¹³ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, op. cit., p. 152 (A 16/B 30).

of cognition. In addition to that, he thinks that it is intuition that makes conceptual cognition – thought and judgment – laden with meaning, or related to an object. This means that Kant endorses the reversal of the conceptualist claim that only concepts can endow experience with an intelligible structure. Therefore, as I argue in this book, Kant is much closer to nonconceptualism than to the opposite position.

III

Yet one may assess the approach presented above as somewhat flawed. Indeed, its flaws may become evident at different stages and levels of the discussion. Some of them would result from what may look like a conflation of incompatible discourses and from bringing together philosophical traditions that do not have much in common, others would signal flaws inherent in the conceptualism vs. nonconceptualism debate itself. Let me briefly address these two possible objections.

1. The first objection would point to the fact that analytic philosophy came into being due to, roughly speaking, two factors: the development of mathematical logic, with the works of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, and the “linguistic turn,” with Wittgenstein as its main motive force. Neither of these two pillars of the analytic philosophy seems to be essential to Kant. With his invention of the transcendental logic – that is, logic discovering the necessary ways of thinking about the objects of cognition¹⁴ – Kant can be situated much closer to those cognitive scientists, like Eleanor Rosch or Peter Gärdenfors, who investigate the basic categories by means of which subjects organize the field of experience.¹⁵ What is more, Kant seems to overlook the importance of language as the main factor which affects the way we think about the world, and stay in line with the Cartesian “mentalist” paradigm.

All this can be granted. However, one can observe that for the past (more or less) thirty years in contemporary philosophy the analysis of language has given way to the analysis of mind and cognition; analytic philosophy seems to have been outranked by cognitive science or at least by the kind of philosophizing that takes into account the results of scientific research. Since, on certain readings, Kant comes close to this paradigm, there is a good reason to look for similarities, interdependencies and inspirations between the two philosophical traditions. As I have pointed out, there are “big problems” behind the debate on the nature of perceptual experience, problems

¹⁴ See: *ibidem*, pp. 195-6 (A 56/B 80 – A 57/B 82). In Kant’s definition: “Such a science, which would determine the origin, the domain, and the objective validity of such cognitions, would have to be called transcendental logic, since it has to do merely with the laws of the understanding and reason, but solely insofar as they are related to objects *a priori*” (*ibidem*, pp. 196-7, A 57/B 82).

¹⁵ Cf. Robert Piłat, *Doświadczenie i pojęcie [Experience and Concept]*, IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2006, ch. 1.

whose origin one can trace back to Kant. Also, it is worth noting that Kant's account of cognition significantly diverges from the Cartesian one, for example in the theory of judgment: whereas for Kant judgment is a complex representation, a combination of concepts, furnished with objective validity, that is (roughly speaking), reference to an object, for Descartes judgment consists in a mental act in which the will accepts or rejects a particular cognition (or idea, in the Cartesian parlance).¹⁶ Since judgments, according to Kant, mediate cognition, it would perhaps be more appropriate to think of them as intersubjectively shareable and therefore expressible in a language, rather than in terms of (private) mental acts. Last but not least, some scholars emphasize that it is in fact already in the British empiricist tradition that the importance of language for cognition comes into view,¹⁷ thus the roots of the "linguistic turn" could perhaps be shifted back as early as to Locke. Interestingly, also philosophers such as Thomas Reid, who founded the eighteenth-century Scottish school of common sense, claimed that language reflects the basic structure of human thought.

2. Another objection may state that participants in the conceptualism vs. nonconceptualism debate not only use certain concepts that do not figure in Kant's vocabulary (such as intentionality or content), and not only do they use certain concepts in a different way than Kant does (as is the case with the concept of representation or experience), but there are also concepts which are employed throughout the debate without being properly defined. This pertains to, for example, the concept of concept: since it is difficult to see which theory of concepts underlies the debate, it may also be unclear what it means to claim that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual, or structured by concepts. And, since we do not know what concepts are, we cannot determine the conditions of concept-possession. Finally, even if particular authors explain how they understand concepts, there is no unitary account of concepts that would be accepted by all theorists of conceptual and nonconceptual content. This may lead to confusion and render the whole debate pointless.

Again, I quite agree with this objection. Terminological confusion is a real problem. Whereas neo-Fregeans would define concepts as abstract entities encapsulating the senses of linguistic expressions, cognitive scientists would regard them as a kind of mental representations, an approach Kant would perhaps be more sympathetic to. Laurence and Margolis, in their anthology on concepts, provide a systematic overview of theories of concepts including: classical theory, prototype theory, theory-theory, neoclassical theory, and conceptual atomism – a wide palette of options from which

¹⁶ For more on the anti-Cartesian dimension of Kant's theoretical philosophy, see: Arthur W. Collins, *Possible Experience. Understanding Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1999.

¹⁷ See, e.g.: A. Flew, "Was Berkeley a Precursor of Wittgenstein?" in: W. B. Todd (ed.), *Hume and the Enlightenment: Essays Presented to Ernest Campbell Mossner*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1974.

to choose.¹⁸ McDowell speaks of “conceptual capacities” involved in experience but he is not at all explicit about what exactly possessing these capacities involves. Is it necessary for concept-possession to exercise certain abilities – such as discrimination, re-identification, recognition, belief-formation – taken jointly, or does any of these abilities, separately taken, suffice to have the “conceptual capacities”?¹⁹ If the conceptualist and nonconceptualist hold different requirements as to what qualifies as a concept, or a conceptual capacity, and what does not, a debate between them will unavoidably end up in mere disagreement about words.

The debate I discuss in this book is flawed by the notorious lack of clarity about what concepts are. A way out of this predicament would be to admit that how concepts are understood throughout the debate is not really essential to it. The idea would be that the debate develops at a higher level of generality, which allows leaving certain issues, like that of the theory of concepts, unspecified. As much as Descartes, in the fifth part of the *Discourse on Method*, did not need to define language in order to formulate an argument for the distinctively human character of rationality, which precludes that animals have reason,²⁰ philosophers who argue for or against the conceptual nature of experience would not need to provide a definition of concept because what is at issue is the *rationality* of experience and hence of the mind – world relation itself, a feature which implies conceptual representation, whatever the nature of concepts might be. In other words, one would not need to explain what concepts are in order to recognize the merely *explanatory* value of arguments appealing to conceptual and/or nonconceptual content.

18 The most popular (perhaps until recently) classical theory of concepts is currently in retreat. One may criticize it for imposing too strict epistemic requirements on subjects; also, for its failure to provide a plausible account of the structure of most concepts (very few concepts have definitions, subjects can competently apply concepts without knowing their definitions, etc.). Cf. Stephen Laurence, Eric Margolis, “Concepts and Cognitive Science” in: E. Margolis, S. Laurence (eds.), *Concepts. Core Readings*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1999, pp. 3-81.

19 Robert Brandom suggests a different approach: following one of Kant’s ways of understanding concepts, he defines concepts as rules in that he writes: “To call something ‘necessary’ is to say that it happens according to a rule, and everything that happens in nature, no less than everything done by humans, is subject to necessity in this sense. Concepts are rules, and concepts express natural necessity as well as moral necessity. So according to him [i.e., Kant] there is strictly no non-normative realm – no realm where concepts do not apply. Kant’s fundamental innovation is best understood to consist in his employment of a normative meta-language in specifying *both* what merely happens and what is done.” *Making it Explicit. Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1998, p. 624.

20 R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, translated by P. J. Olscamp, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis 1965.