

# Non-conceptual Content or Singular Thought?

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## Abstract

**T**his paper is a new non-descriptivist defense of non-conceptualism, based on a new interpretation of Kant's metaphysics of concepts. We advance the following claim: What distinguishes non-conceptual from conceptual singular representations is the way partial representations of the object's features are integrated into the whole representation of the object: while at the non-conceptual level this integration takes the form of images of the object's features that are stored and projected, at the conceptual level this integration takes the form of the recognition that those features are properties of a same object, what Kant calls "synthetic unity of Apperception".

## 1. Introduction

**N**on-conceptual content is defined typically as content that can be ascribed to a subject even when she lacks the concepts required to specify that content canonically. Thus, in the most famous Kantian example, a person can see a country house in the distance as the very same object as someone else who is acquainted with it determinately as a dwelling established for men, even though the first person lacks the relevant concept of a house and the partial concepts of roof, windows, etc., required to specify with authority what her visual

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experience represents (see *JL*: V, Ak 9: 33). Stated in these terms, it is hard to see how anyone could possibly deny that, from experience, we are always capable of representing what we do not understand. Put this way, the question of whether there are non-conceptual contents is hardly an interesting one. The questions left open, however, are interesting: (i) how exactly we must understand the claim that the content of experience is non-conceptual?; (ii) what is the epistemic role of this non-conceptual content?; and (iii) how is this content related to conceptual contents, in particular to the content of the so-called nominative concepts (nominative singular concepts like *CICERO* and nominative general concepts like *GOLD*)? This paper is addressed to the third question.

Usually, defenders of non-conceptualism appeal to the alleged irreducible singularity of sensibility. In this regard, several arguments are focused on the allegation that the content of experience is far more fine-grained than conceptual contents. Our normal human perceptual experience represents the world around us with so many details that our conceptual repertoire could not possibly describe them. In the same vein, it is claimed that we are capable of perceptual discriminations without also being capable of describing the objects discriminated. Recently, Hanna (2008) has ingeniously reconstructed a further argument of Kant's based on so-called incongruent counterparts. Briefly, incongruent counterparts are enantiomorphs. Enantiomorphs are qualitatively identical but topologically different. Kant's argument, in a nutshell, is that the content of sensible intuition cannot be conceptual because by sensible intuition we can capture the numerical difference between enantiomorphs that we cannot capture descriptively.

In one way or other, however, all these extra arguments rely on the key assumption that nominative singular concepts (like *CICERO*) and demonstrative singular concepts (like *THIS HOUSE*) are essentially individuated by their cognitive content, made explicit by definite descriptions. We need intuitions to

have access to objects because, by thinking, we can never represent something singular. Now even though we may disagree with McDowell's conceptualism and, even more strongly, with his unacceptable conceptualist reading of Kant, he is right when he claims that arguments in favor of non-conceptualism based on the alleged irreducible singularity of intuitions are anything but compelling. It is hard to deny that we do possess singular concepts (nominative and demonstrative), enabling us to entertain singular thoughts about objects based on our sensible relation to them. Moreover, acceptance of descriptivism and insistence on the irreducible singularity of sensible intuition threaten to collapse the idea of non-conceptual content into the idea of *de re* thought. This paper is a new defense of non-conceptualism that is aligned with singularism, that is, the view that we have singular concepts and thoughts. This defense has, as its background, a new interpretation of Kant's metaphysics of concepts. In this regard, the paper has two aims: to make a modest contribution to the debate on non-conceptualism but also to provide a further historical clarification of Kant's position in the debate. All appearances notwithstanding, we aim to persuade the reader that Kant recognizes both the existence of singular concepts and of non-conceptual singular representations. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these notions are complementary.

The plan of this paper is as follows. The first section is devoted to a brief exposition of Kant's claim that the content of experience is non-conceptual (henceforth non-conceptualism). The next section is devoted to a critical exposition of two connected readings of Kant's metaphysics of concepts. The first leading idea is cognitivism, that is, the view that concepts are essentially individuated by the knowledge the subject possesses about the concept-reference. Cognitivism is closely connected to a further leading idea: pragmatism. To possess a concept is to know how to apply it correctly at least to some paradigmatic instances in intuition.

The next section is concerned with the critical exposition of the alleged Kantian descriptivist view of concepts, that is, the leading idea that by thinking in terms of nominative concepts we refer directly to properties and only indirectly to the objects instantiating those properties. Singular reference can only be carried over by intuitions and never by singular concepts in thoughts.

The last section is devoted to presenting a new reading of Kant's singular concepts aligned with non-conceptualism. In this section, we support the following claim: what distinguishes non-conceptual from conceptual singular representations is the way partial representations of the object's features are integrated into the whole representation of the object.

## 2. Kant's Non-Conceptualism

In the contemporary debate over the non-conceptual content of sense perception, Kant is seen as taking the side of the conceptualists. While non-conceptualists see the alleged 'Kantian model of experience' as the greatest challenge to anyone claiming that sense perception possesses non-conceptual content (see Gunther, 2003: p. 23), conceptualists, such as McDowell, attack non-conceptualism, referring to the alleged 'Kantian insight' that conceptual capacities are supposedly required 'to make it intelligible that experience is not blind' (McDowell, 1994: p. 60). The pivotal passage is Kant's famous dictum that, without concepts, intuitions are blind (KrV: A51/B75).

Those on both sides of the controversy seem to agree that Kant was the greatest exponent of conceptualism in the history of philosophy. Kant's dictum has been misconstrued as reflecting the conceptualist assumption that, without conceptual capacities, sensible intuition refers to or represents nothing. What Kant had in mind with this famous dictum was something quite

different, however. Without concepts, sensible intuitions are blind not in sense of being devoid of reference (conceptualism), but rather in the sense of providing no knowledge or understanding of the objects to which sensible intuitions refer. For one thing, without concepts involved in the specification of what is represented, the subject cannot understand or know what her sensible intuitions actually represent. Thus, blindness does not reflect a lack of reference but rather a lack of understanding and of propositional knowledge about what is referred to or represented.

Kant's adherence to non-conceptualism is clearly manifested by his opposition between experience (sensible intuition and imagination) as a basic-level form of cognition and higher-order forms of cognition: to cognize something by experience is not necessary to conceptualize what is experienced by means of a judgment or a belief about that which is being referenced. So, for example, in many places Kant claims that non-rational animals are capable of intuition and perception but not of apperception by means of concepts. In the *Vienna Logic*, he says that, 'Animals also cognize their master, but they are not conscious of this' (VL: Ak 24: 846). Likewise, in the *Dohna-Wundlacken Logic*, he says,

'Due to the lack of consciousness, even animals are not capable of any concept - intuition they do have. - Consciousness is a wholly separate dimension of the faculty of cognition (therefore gradation from animals to man does not occur)' (DWL: Ak 24: 702).

But the same independence of a basic-level form of cognition from higher-order forms of cognition is also manifested in Kant's opposition between perceptual and logical distinctions. Normal human and non-human cognizers are capable of perceptual discriminations without also being capable of logical discriminations by means of concepts in judgments, and as

perceptual discriminations do not require concepts, human and non-human cognizers are capable of non-conceptual cognitions. In this regard, Kant states,

I would go still further and say: it is one thing to differentiate (*unterscheiden*) things from each other, and quite another thing to recognize the difference between them (*den Unterschied der Dinge zu erkennen*). The latter is only possible by means of judgments and cannot occur in the case of animals, who are not endowed with reason. The following division may be of great use. Differentiating logically means recognizing that (*erkennen dass*) a thing A is not B; it is always a negative judgment. Physically differentiating (*physisch unterscheiden*) means being driven to different actions by different representations. The dog differentiates the roast from the loaf, and it does so because the way in which it is affected by the roast is different from the way in which it is affected by the loaf (for different things cause different sensations). (FSS: §6, Ak 2: 60)

Kant's opposition can be couched in terms of Dretske's well-known opposition between non-cognitive and cognitive seeing. The dog sees the roast and the loaf differently insofar as he is able to discriminate between them physically (non-cognitive seeing). However, he does not *see that* the roast is not a loaf or *that* the loaf is not a roast (cognitive seeing). The capacity to know things by acquaintance does not entail the capacity to know the truth of propositions.

### 3. Cognitivism

There are different kinds of atomic concepts: singular nominative concepts like CICERO, HESPERUS, etc., general nominative concepts like GOLD, WATER, etc., predicative concepts like BEING BALD, BEING OLD etc., and demonstrative concepts like THIS, THAT, etc. Traditionally, concepts are individuated semantically by their extension and epistemically by their ‘cognitive content.’ The extension of a nominative concept is a set of objects *under* the concept, that is, the set of objects of which a set of predicative concepts is true. By contrast, the ‘cognitive content’ of a nominative concept consists of various properties by which we identify the extension of the concept. The central idea here is that even in the case of nominative concepts, the uses of concepts are always controlled by the information (criteria) the subject possesses about its reference. Following Fodor, let us call this *cognitivism* (Fodor, 1998: p. 124). Hanna identifies cognitivism as the essential feature of Kant’s view of the nature of concepts. He ascribes to Kant a sequence of seven claims. The first three are essential:

Here are the main points. (1) *A concept is an objective mental representation that is essentially general, and not singular like an intuition.* (2) A concept has both (a) an intension made up of partial concepts or characteristics, and (b) a sphere or comprehension. The intension is an ordered set of descriptive features; *and the sphere or comprehension includes whatever meets the intension’s descriptive criteria.* (3) A concept’s partial concepts or characteristics are contained in its intension. (Hanna, 2004: pp. 130–131.) [*My italics*]

Let's take the general nominative concept GOLD. Its sphere or comprehension (Umfang) is the element AU of the periodic table, while its intension (Inhalt) is made up of the partial concepts or characteristic marks, such as the ordered set of the following descriptive features: BEING YELLOW, BEING A PRECIOUS METAL, BEING SCARCE, etc., understood as the intentional descriptive criteria by means of which the subject identifies AU as the sphere or comprehension of the concept. The same can be said of singular nominative concepts like CICERO. Its extension is Cicero, while its intension is made up of partial concepts: BEING A PHILOSOPHER, BEING A ROMAN CITIZEN, etc., as the descriptive criteria by means of which the subject identifies Cicero. The key idea of the descriptive view of the nature of singular nominative concepts is that they are not *genuinely* singular. Rather, they are general concepts because they do not refer directly to any particular object but to whatever meets the descriptive features.

On the cognitivist view, even for nominative concepts, there are some facts expressible using the concept that any user of the concept must believe. Because the cognitive content is delivered just by understanding it, it counts as a priori. That is probably why Kant also calls the 'cognitive content' of a concept the analytical unity of its characteristic marks (KrV: B134). Thus, in its simplest form, the cognitivist view distinguishes between analytic and synthetic thoughts. An analytic thought is 'true in virtue of its meaning': anyone who understands the thought is in a position to know a priori that it is true. Kant's account is well-known: anyone who understands an analytic thought knows it a priori because the cognitive content of the concept-predicated is a sub-set of the cognitive content of the concept-subject in basic categorical judgments. In this simplest form, then, grasp of a concept is to be equated with the a priori knowledge of all analytic thoughts expressible using the concept, along with any other concept the subject grasps. Thus, a person can only be credited with the concept GOLD if she



able to entertain analytic thoughts such as ‘gold is yellow,’ ‘gold is a metal,’ ‘gold is precious,’ etc.

Few philosophers (if any) would subscribe to this cognitivist view today, at least when it requires the concept user to have the ability to entertain all analytic thoughts expressible with the concept in question. Nevertheless, the core idea of cognitivism still survives under different labels, namely, the idea that concepts are individuated by their ‘cognitive content,’ that is, by the information the concept user associates with the concept that functions as the *criteria* for concept-possession. In this regard, the cognitivist account of the metaphysical nature of concepts is tied to what we may call a pragmatist view of concept-possession. The basic idea can be couched in the following terms: For every concept C, there is some body of information (characteristic marks) such that anyone who grasps C must believe that the objects in the extension of C satisfy those characteristic marks.

It is not hard to find passages in which Kant *seems* to endorse such a view. Thus, for example, in the pre-critical period, Kant states that a subject can only be credited with a distinct concept BODY if she is capable of recognizing objects that satisfy the descriptive features (characteristic marks) associated with the intension of that concept, and that is precisely what Kant calls judgment:

A *distinct* concept demands, namely, that I should clearly recognize something as a characteristic mark of a thing. But this is a judgment. In order to have a distinct concept of body, I clearly represent to myself impenetrability as a characteristic mark of it. This representation, however, is nothing but the thought: a body is impenetrable (FSS: §6, Ak 2: 58). [*My italics*]

To be sure, Kant always believes that concepts are predicates of possible judgment. In this regard, a subject can only be credited

with a concept if she is capable of using that concept as a predicate in possible judgment (we will come back to this point in the last section). Still, it is doubtful that Kant has ever endorsed the strong verificationist requirement that, to master a concept, the subject must be capable of identifying objects by means of the characteristic marks of the concept and capable of making sound inference on the basis of that concept (inferentialism). Burge's examples show that it is possible for a concept user to possess a concept C even though her conception of C is extremely vague and inaccurate, and Kant's *Dialectic* assumes that a subject can be credited with concepts (ideas) without being capable of recognizing objects by means of their characteristics.

To understand Kant's remark clearly, we should distinguish between *concepts* and *conceptions*. Concepts are mental representations that are a component of thoughts and judgments. By contrast, a conception is a collection of beliefs and thoughts associated with a concept. My concept of gold is the mental representation GOLD, while my conception of gold is that it is a precious, scarce yellow metal and so forth. On a closer look, Kant is not claiming that one could not be credited with the concept BODY unless one is able to recognize bodies by their characteristic marks, such as impenetrability, in the respective judgment. What he claims is that one can only be credited with a *distinct* concept BODY, that is, a clear and distinct *conception* of body (a collection of thoughts or beliefs), if one is able to recognize bodies by means of their characteristic notes, that is, by means of thoughts and judgments.

#### 4. Descriptivism

The core of cognitivism comprises the ideas that (i) nominative concepts (either singular or general) never refer directly and (ii) there are no genuine singular concepts or genuine singular thoughts. Nominative concepts refer to whatever meets the descriptive features of the cognitive content of the concept. Concept-reference is always description-determined, even in case of nominative concepts. Thus, for example, the reference of the nominative concept GOLD to AU is mediated by the subject's judgment that AU satisfies the characteristic marks, roughly the descriptive features of BEING YELLOW, of BEING PRECIOUS, of BEING METAL, of BEING SCARCE, and so on. Likewise, the reference of singular nominative concepts (what Kant calls *nomina propria*) is also mediated by the subject's judgment that one object and no more than one object meets the characteristic notes expressed by a definite description. For example, the reference of the nominative singular concept HESPERUS is mediated by the subject's judgment that Venus uniquely satisfies the definite description of being the evening star, while the reference of the nominative singular concept PHOSPHORUS to the same planet is mediated by the subject's knowledge that Venus uniquely satisfies the definite description of being the morning star. In a nutshell, there is no difference between descriptive and nominative concepts. Hanna summarizes the core idea in terms of Kant's main opposition between intuition and concepts:

So the Kantian distinction between conceptual (mediate) reference and intuitive (immediate) reference is most accurately construed as the difference between, on the one hand, indirect or description-determined reference to an object, and, on the other, direct or non-description-determined reference to an object. More plainly put, intu-

itional reference is *direct reference* (Hanna, 2004: p. 197).

The historical motivation for descriptivism is clear: It provides straightforward explanations for problems of so-called cognitive significance, that is, problems of co-reference and of lack of reference. We have a straightforward explanation of how referential isomorphic thoughts can express different contents and hence how it is possible for a rational subject to think that ‘Hesperus is visible’ while denying the referential isomorphic thought ‘Phosphorus is visible’: the singular concepts ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ coincide in reference but possess different cognitive contents. Descriptivism also provides a straightforward explanation of empty thoughts. When we entertain the thought that Vulcan is the first planet of the solar system, what we are thinking is, roughly, that ‘the intra-mercurial planet is the first planet of the solar system.’ Therefore, even if there is nothing that satisfies the characteristic note of being the intra-mercurial planet, there is a sense expressed by the definite description itself, and hence a content.

The descriptivist reading finds support in the Kantian claim that concepts are universal representations *in the abstract*, while sensible intuitions are singular representations *in concrete*. In his *Dissertation*, Kant states:

There is (for a man) no intuition of what belongs to the understanding, but only a *symbolic cognition*; and thinking is only possible for us by means of universal concepts in the abstract, not by means of singular concepts in concrete (Diss: §10, Ak 2: 396).

However, nothing indicates that when Kant characterizes concepts as universal representations, he is (i) excluding the possibility of genuine singular concepts or that (ii) he is endorsing the assumption that even nominative concepts can only refer to objects by means of a previous reference to the

properties the object instantiates. On a closer look, the reference to a ‘symbolic cognition’ suggests that what he has in mind is the opposition between tokens and types. Like a word (symbolic cognition), a concept is a mental type in the relevant sense that it is always possible to employ different tokens of it in thought.

Thus, if we are right, by saying that it is a tautology that concepts are universal, Kant is not saying that the very idea of a singular concept is a *contradiction in adjecto*, as Coffa states (1991: p. 375). What makes a mental representation a concept is not the fact that it always first refers to something universal, but rather the fact that it is a mental type that has different uses or tokens. Being a mental type, a concept can be used to refer to properties like redness (atomic predicative concepts) and to natural kinds like gold (nominative general concepts), but also to individuals like the nominative singular concept CICERO. CICERO is a concept in someone’s mind because it is a mental type that can be used on different occasions to refer to the same individual. By contrast, the singular representation CICERO is an intuition when it cannot be re-used on different occasions to refer to the same individual (see *DWL: Ak 24: 754*). Thus, two sensible intuitions of the same individual are not tokens of the same type, but different mental particulars.

The key idea of descriptive reading, however, is the assumption that a nominative concept never refers directly, regardless of whether it is a general concept like GOLD or a nominative singular concept like CICERO. If descriptivism were right, we would never have direct cognitive access to objects and natural kinds, only an indirect access mediated by means of the identifying properties or characteristic notes the object exclusively satisfies. Such an idea seems to find support in Kant’s claim that objects cannot be given through understanding:

The latter (cognition) is either an *intuition* or a *concept*

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(*intuitus vel conceptus*). The former is immediately related to the object and is singular; the latter is mediate, by means of a mark, which can be common to several things (KrV: A320/B376).

To be sure, concepts are not intellectual intuitions but discursive representations that can only refer to real objects by means of a previous reference to the same objects by means of sensible intuitions. In that sense, conceptual reference is always mediated by a previous reference of sensible intuitions. Still, that does not mean that nominative concepts refer directly to characteristic marks and only indirectly to the objects that instantiate those characteristic marks. Indeed, when Kant characterizes concepts as mediate representations, he explicitly admits that conceptual reference must be based exclusively on sensible intuitions on pain of launching an infinite regress (see *KrV*: A68/B93). When conceptual reference to objects is based exclusively on some previous intuitions of them, the reference is determined relationally rather than satisfactionally (see Bach, 1987: p. 12), that is, is determined by the sensible relations the subject bears to the object rather than by the subject's knowledge that the object meets the descriptive features or characteristic marks of the cognitive content associated with the concept. In those cases, when the concept is nominative but general, the thought is *de re*, but when the concept is nominative and singular, the thought is both *de re* and singular.

Hanna provides two arguments in favor of the descriptivist reading. First, the acceptance of genuine singular concepts would make the cognitive-semantic function of sensible intuitions theoretically otiose (2004: p. 205). The singular concept would play, by hypothesis, the same semantic role as the intuition, namely, that of referring rigidly to the same object across all possible circumstances. Moreover, a singular concept that rigidly refers to the same object across all possible circumstances could not take the form of definite descriptions, but

rather the form of Leibniz's *conceptus infimus*. The Leibnizian doctrine, in a nutshell, is that a singular concept expresses a sum of attributes the possession of which is necessary and sufficient for being that individual. Because Kant rejects Leibniz's *conceptus infimus*, however, Kant's *nomina propria* cannot be genuine singular concepts (Hanna, 2004: p. 205).

Descriptivism is implicit in several arguments in defense of non-conceptualism. From the assumption that concept-reference is description-determined and from the assumption that we must possess a direct access to objects, it follows that singular representations cannot be conceptual. According to Hanna:

The best overall theory of the demonstratives 'this' and 'that' includes the thesis that demonstrative reference is fixed perceptually, essentially indexically, and therefore non-descriptively by normal human speakers. But essentially indexical, nondescriptive perception is non-conceptual. Therefore normal human speakers are capable of non-conceptual perception with non-conceptual content. (Hanna, 2008: p. 43)

In defense of the descriptivist view, one could claim that this identification of non-conceptualism with non-descriptivism also provides a clear distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual contents and a simple argument in defense of non-conceptualism. Conceptual contents are representations whose reference is *always* determined satisfactorily, that is, by the subject's knowledge that the objects satisfy the properties or characteristic marks associated with the concept. In contrast, non-conceptual representations are those whose reference to their objects is determined *de re* or relationally. Thus, since perceptual reference is determined demonstratively, rather than descriptively, the representational content of perceptual experience must be non-conceptual.

Regardless of whether Kant endorses it or not, descriptivism makes non-conceptualism a trivial claim. Nobody disputes today that we do possess *de re* attitudes in general whose reference to their objects is determined relationally rather than satisfactorily, that is, by the different kinds of relations the subject and her mental states bear to the objects in question. Nonetheless, even when reference is not determined descriptively, the thought may still be fully conceptual in the relevant sense that it is composed of concepts (see Burge, 1977). Thus, assuming that non-conceptual contents are those whose reference is determined ‘indexically or non-descriptively,’ the very idea of non-conceptual content collapses into the idea of a *de re* attitude. Moreover, under descriptivism, a sophisticated conceptualist might accept Kant’s claim about the independence of intuitions from descriptions but still hold that Kant’s intuitions are nothing but singular concepts. The non-conceptualist reply that the content of experience is finer-grained than conceptual contents is ineffective against the idea of nominative singular concepts, in particular against the idea of demonstrative concepts of perceptual objects.

In virtue of rejecting the possibility of genuine singular concepts in Kant, Hanna embraces Strawson’s traditional assumption (1966) that in Kant, ‘only intuitions (and their functional equivalents) are genuine singular terms’ (Hanna, 2004: p. 209). Nevertheless, that assumption is clearly incompatible with Kant’s rejection of Meier’s conception of intuitive judgments composed of intuitions rather than of concepts, and with his own view on judgment as being composed exclusively of concepts. Taking Kant seriously, we must assume that the proper name ‘Caius’ (*nomina propria*) in ‘Caius is mortal’ is a singular concept rather than a sensible intuition. Likewise, we must assume that the demonstrative ‘this house’ in the singular categorical judgment ‘This house is plastered in this way or that’ (see *VL*: Ak 24: 909) is a concept rather than a sensible intuition.



Indeed, regardless of Kant's own view, under the descriptivist view of the nature of concepts we can hardly see how sensible intuitions could figure as terms in judgments. For one thing, while intuitions are *per definitio* singular representations for Kant, for descriptivism concepts and thoughts are always general (even nominative singular concepts like CICERO or demonstrative concepts like THIS HOUSE). In short, for descriptivism, whenever we think about an object, we refer to it indirectly, that is, by means of a reference to some property it uniquely possesses. Thus, for example, the thought 'this house is plastered in this or that way' refers directly to some property, roughly THE HOUSE I AM NOW LOOKING AT and only indirectly to the object in my visual field that uniquely instantiates it. By contrast, the sensible intuition of the house refers to it directly, that is, on the basis only of the perceptual relation the subject bears to the house.

Perhaps, then, what Hanna has in mind is not that only intuitions are singular *terms* in judgments, but rather the claim that only intuitions refer directly (or are genuine proper names in Russell's sense). Under this assumption, however, he faces Russell's old problem of cognitive significance. Assuming that propositions are the content of judgments, it must be impossible for a rational subject to believe and disbelieve the same proposition consisting of the same objects, properties, and relations. It must be impossible for a rational subject referring to a house to wonder whether *this house* (looking at the house) is *this house* (remembering the house seen a moment ago). This is a typical example of a co-reference problem. In Kantian terms, the problem of co-reference takes the form of the misrecognition that that which we now think is the same as what we thought a moment ago: the subject may misrecognize that what she is now thinking is the same thing that she thought before. (see *KrV*: A 103).

The recognition that reference to material objects raises traditional problems of cognitive reference led Russell to restrict

his principle of direct reference to objects that raise no problems of identity (sense-data, ourselves, universals) and to embrace descriptivism. We are never acquainted with material objects. On his view, we can only account for the subject's behavior, in the above scenario, as a rational attitude on the assumption that what the subject really believes is not the proposition that this house is plastered in this or that way but rather the alternative proposition that *the house I am seeing now* (or, in Russell's own formulation, *the object causing this data of a house in me*) is plastered in this or that way.

To be sure, the acceptance of the descriptivist view does not force us to deny that we have direct access to material objects. Like contemporary non-conceptualists, we may assume, alternatively, that we are acquainted with material objects by means of our senses quite independently of whether we do possess the concepts required to specify canonically what we are directly referring to (non-conceptualism). However, the problem of cognitive significance remains. Two remarks are in order here. First, this is a problem that cannot be solved at the non-conceptual level: because non-conceptual contents are not sufficient for the conceptual contents of doxastic states, the assumption that a subject may represent a house non-conceptually cannot account for the possibility that the subject may think, believe, doubt, or wonder whether *this house* (the house she is now seeing) is the same as *this house* (the house she saw a moment ago). Second, the descriptivist account is unsatisfactory. For one thing, it is quite implausible to assume that, in the above situation, the subject is representing identifying properties, such as *the house that I am seeing here and now* (or *the object that is causing this sense-datum as of a house*). Therefore, the only reasonable explanation for these otherwise irrational attitudes is to assume that the subject possesses two unlinked demonstrative concepts of the same house. What the subject wonders is whether *this house* (the house she is now seeing) is the same as *this house* (the house

she saw).

Be that as it may, our aim here is not to refute descriptivism. Rather, we want to show that there is no contradiction in the acceptance of singular concepts (that refer rigidly and directly) and of non-conceptual singular intuition. On the contrary, we want to suggest that the claims are complementary. First, we reject Hanna's claim that singular concepts play the same semantic role as sensible intuition. To be sure, as Hanna insists, both sensible intuition and singular concepts directly refer to their objects by picking out the same object across all possible circumstances. Still, only singular concepts can account for problems of cognitive significance, e.g., how a rational being, referring to the same object on different occasions, can ask herself, wonder, or disbelieve that they are the same item.

Moreover, the acceptance of singular concepts does not make the cognitive-semantic function of intuition otiose. For one thing, singular concepts are *de re* modes of presentation that present the reference by exploiting the perceptual relations the subject bears to the objects by means of her senses. Thinking of *this house*, I do refer rigidly to a same object across all circumstances as the same object, regardless of whether I believe that the object meets the notes of cognitive content of the concept THIS HOUSE. However, that is just because reference is determined relationally, that is, by means of the sensible relation I bear to this house. Thus, singular concepts require sensible intuition of the same object.

But let's go back to Kant. Like Coffa (1991), Hanna rejects the idea of singular concepts in Kant's work. However, in different places Kant clearly recognizes the existence of nominative singular concepts (*nomina propria*):

All *conceptus* are either A. *conceptus singulares* or

B. *conceptus communes*.

In the former I think only one thing, but through the latter I go further, namely, I think that which is common to many things. (BL: Ak 24: 257.) [*Underlining is mine*]

According to Hanna, in this passage Kant uses the word ‘concept’ non- technically, meaning ‘representation’ in general (Hanna, 2004: p. 209). To be sure, for all we know, Kant cannot identify singular concepts with sensible intuitions on pain of embracing conceptualism of the kind suggested by McDowell (1994). Still, Hanna’s reading does not fit well to Kant’s statement that by means of a singular concept we *think* only one thing.

Hanna mentions another key passage in support of his descriptive reading of Kant’s metaphysics of concepts (2004). Let’s take a look:

But the use of a *conceptus* can be *singularis*. For what holds of many things can also be applied to an individual case. I think of a man *in individuo*, i.e., I use the concept of man in order to have an *ens singulare*. I can make use of a concept insofar as it is applied to many objects[;] then the concept is used as a *repraesentatio communis*, i.e., is used *in abstracto*, e.g., house. If I say of all houses, now, that they must have a roof, then this is the *usus universalis*. It is always the same concept, however, and is here used wholly universally. For having a roof holds for all houses. This use of the concept is concerned universally with all, then. But a particular use is concerned only with many. E.g., some houses must have a gate. Or I use the concept only for an individual thing. E.g., *this house* is plastered in this way or that... (VL: Ak 24: 909). [*Underlining and underlined italics are mine*]

Once more, what makes a mental representation a concept is not the fact that it always first refers to something universal (a

property or a class of objects), but rather the fact that it is a mental type that has different tokens: when a mental type is used to pick out a property or a class of objects, the concept is used as a *representatio communis* (an atomic predicative concept like REDNESS or a nominative concept like GOLD). By contrast, when the same mental type is used on different occasions to pick out a same individual, the concept is singular (nominative like CICERO or demonstrative like THIS HOUSE or THAT MAN).

To be sure, whenever the subject uses the concept *in individuo*, having an *ens singularis* in mind, she must exploit the salient features of the object in her perceptual field in order to pick it out from the background of other objects. Thus, for example, by thinking of *this house*, I use the salient features of the house (gate, roof, windows, etc.) to pick it out. Nevertheless, in this case I am not thinking a general thought about *whatever* meets the characteristic notes (roughly, being the object that here and now appears to me as possessing a gate, windows, doors, etc.). Rather, I am thinking of *this particular* house in my visual field.

Thus, what Kant has in mind here with his opposition between abstract and individual uses of a concept is something similar to Donnellan's opposition between referential and attributive uses of a definite description, used against Russell's well-known descriptivist account (Donnellan, 1966). In Donnellan's famous example, when I use the definite description 'the man drinking a martini' *referentially*, I am picking out (mentioning) the individual by using some of its salient features, viz. the fact that he is drinking a martini. In contrast, when I use the same definite description *attributively*, I am saying that someone and nobody else is drinking a martini. In the referential use, it is irrelevant for the truth of what I am saying whether the guy I refer to is actually drinking a martini, while in the attributive case what I am saying turns out to be false if the guy is not drinking a martini.

Likewise, when I use a concept, e.g., THIS HOUSE, *referentially*, I pick out (mention) an object in my visual field *by using* its salient features, roughly ‘the object that appears to me here and now as having a gate, windows, a roof, etc.’ In this referential use, it is irrelevant to the truth of what I am thinking whether the object actually meets the characteristic marks of BEING THE ONLY OBJECT IN MY VISUAL FIELD THAT HAS A GATE, WINDOWS, A ROOF, etc. What I am thinking is that THIS (whatever it is) is plastered in this way or that. In this referential use, the concept is singular: the subject is thinking directly and *de re* about a particular object in her visual field, based exclusively on her perceptual relation to it. In contrast, when I use the same concept THIS HOUSE attributively, what I am thinking is that something meets the characteristic marks of BEING THE ONLY OBJECT IN MY VISUAL FIELD THAT HAS A GATE, WINDOWS, A ROOF, etc. In that case, what I am thinking turns out to be false in case the object does not instantiate the characteristic marks in question.

Here emerges a new picture of Kant’s metaphysics of concepts. As we saw, the descriptivist reading denies the possibility of genuine nominative concepts in Kant by claiming that those concepts are actually descriptions in disguise. In this regard, nominative concepts are individuated essentially by their cognitive content. By contrast, in the alternative reading we are proposing, the characteristic notes play a quite different role. We want to suggest that the characteristic marks contained in nominative concepts (singular or general) play the role of what Kripke calls the ‘reference-fixing’ use of a description. The reference-fixing use of a description conveys a package of contextually identifying properties of the referent. It conveys properties of the referent that are epistemically salient in a given context for the object-identification but are neither strictly necessary nor sufficient for semantically determining the reference of a nominative concept.

## 5. Nominative Concepts As Dossiers

If the main opposition between conceptual and non-conceptual contents cannot be drawn as the opposition between descriptive and nondescriptive reference, however, we need to find an alternative way of supporting non-conceptualism. Our starting-point is the very notion of a characteristic mark. Kant's definition (JL: §8, Ak 9: 58) suggests that a mark is not only a property of an object but also the partial representation as *a ground of cognition* of a whole representation. The 'whole representation' stands for an object, and 'partial representations' for the object's features. Still, the idea of a ground of cognition is not to be identified with the analytic features of a concept. For one thing, Kant distinguishes partial intuitive representations from partial discursive representations (see *HN*: R 2286; Ak 16: 299–300)

The same opposition we find at the propositional level between 'whole representations' and 'partial representations' is also to be found at the non-propositional level between 'whole representations' and 'intuitive partial representations.' At the propositional level, 'whole representations' are subject-concepts in categorical judgment, while 'discursive partial representations' are predicative concepts in those same judgments. The question is how we should understand Kant's further claim that 'intuitive partial representations' are also grounds of cognition of objects represented by 'whole representations' when these singular representations are not concepts in categorical judgments, but rather intuitions.

In different passages (see *HN II*, Ak. 16: 77–78), Kant clearly suggests that, at least at the non-propositional level, sensible representations are picture-like mental structures. An iconic representation pictures an object because there is some degree of isomorphism between the elements (the partial representations) of the picture as a whole representation and the

elements (the features) of the object. So, for the favorite Kantian example, the ‘whole representation’ of a house is a picture-like representation that agrees with its object to the extent that it is composed by its partial picture-like representations of windows, of doors, and of a roof in the same way (isomorphism) as the house itself is composed of windows, doors, roof, and so on.

Now, to the extent that intuitions are not mental types, different intuitions of the same object do not represent it as the same particular. Thus, for example, successive intuitions of Cicero walking down the streets of ancient Rome do not represent him as the same particular. Likewise, Cicero’s salient features, such as BEING BALD, BEING OLD, and BEING MALE, are not represented by intuition as universal properties instantiated or shared by other individuals. Instead, they are represented as *particular instancing* of properties, what philosophers today call *tropes*. The property BEING BALD is represented as a *particular instancing* rather than as a universal property shared by different individuals.

We want to suggest here that Kant’s claim that the partial representations are *grounds of cognition* of the whole representation of an object must be understood as the claim that the subject can only *perceive* an object—single it out from the background in the perceptual field and keep track of it over the time—by taking successive intuitions of features/parts/stages/positions (manifold) as representations of the features/parts/stages/positions of the same object, that is, by taking successive intuitions as tokens of the same mental type (see *KrV*: A 99).

Of course, this is something the cognitive system does blindly or sub-personally: to keep track of an object by taking intuitive representations of the features or intuitive representations of stages as representations of the features/stages of a same thing, the mind does not need to possess the concept required to specify the object that is being represented. The subject sees Cicero lecturing in ancient Rome. Let us suppose that she sees first at time  $t_1$  the property of BEING BALD, at  $t_2$



the property of BEING A MALE, at t3 the property of BEING OLD. So the picture of Cicero as a single object first emerges when the mind, without the concept CICERO, manages to integrate each intuition as representations of Cicero's salient features.

Let us now suppose that the subject sees Cicero walking down the street. This perception emerges when, without the singular concept CICERO, the mind manages to take successive intuitions of Cicero's features/positions/stages as representations of the features/positions/stages of the same object. The perceptual system has now to accomplish two tasks. One task is to form new whole pictures of the object, with crucial information about the current properties of the object at a given location, at the new time, t2. The other task is to achieve pictures of identities over time between the objects currently perceived at this later time, t3, and the objects perceived as being at particular places at the earlier times t1 and t2.

The interesting question here is how the mind manages to take successive intuitions as tokens of the same mental type: *a manifold contained in one representation*. We want to suggest that Kant's idea is best understood as being what cognitive psychologists call *object files*. Object files are mid-level representations in- between lower-level non-conceptual registering (intuitions) and processing of information about objects and higher-level recognition of them by concepts. They are posited as mental states responsible for bridging stimulus discontinuities produced by occlusion, saccades, and shifts of attention, enabling the subject to keep track of the object over time in on-line visual processing, by sub-personally or unconsciously storing and updating information about that object's properties (Kahneman et al., 1992). The file is indexed egocentrically by where and when the object is given. Thus, to say that the mind *takes* intuitions of features/parts/stages/positions as representations of the features/stages/positions of the same object is to say that a file is opened in the subject's

mind to store sensible intuitions about the object's features/parts/stages/positions as representations concerning the same object in terms of images or replicas of the object's salient features/parts/stages/positions and recreates encounters with the object or projects future encounters with it.

According to Kant, however, it is an empirical law of nature that when different representations of the object's salient features 'have often followed or accompanied one another,' the token of one of them in the subject's mind brings about transition (Übergang) of the mind to the token of the other when the object is no longer present in the subject's perceptual field (KrV: A 100). That operation is what Kant calls the *synthesis of reproduction*. It is also unconscious and sub-personal. The subject has seen Cicero a few times, and every time she sees him she sees the property of BEING BALD in connection with the property of BEING OLD. Subsequently, every time the subject sees CICERO instantiating the property of BEING BALD, it brings about a transition in her mind to a token of the associated representation of the property of BEING OLD, even when this last property is not visible. However, the idea of *a manifold contained in one representation* is also used by Kant to characterize the relationship between 'partial concepts' or characteristic notes and concepts. This also suggests that concepts are sorts of mental clusters in the sense that they contain (enthalten *unter*) information concerning an object in the form of predicative concepts of the object's properties. Here we face the problem of identifying the principal distinction between pre-conceptual object files in apprehension and reproduction and genuine conceptual clusters. According to what Kant calls the *synthesis of recognition in the concept*,

Without the consciousness that that which we think is the same as what we thought a moment before, all reproduction of the series of representation would be in vain (KrV: A 103).

Synthesis of recognition here is the propositional consciousness that the object seen in t1 is the same as the object seen in

t1. Let's suppose that a token of the representation of the property BEING BALD brings about a transition (Übergang) in the mind to a token of a representation of the property BEING OLD in virtue of both being representations mutually associated by a synthesis of reproduction as representations of properties of the same individual, say Cicero. In this way, by apprehension and reproduction, the mind might represent the same individual instantiating both the properties of BEING BALD and BEING OLD. Still, the crucial point is the following. Because that integration is blind, the mind is not in a position to appreciate the representation of Cicero as being both bald and old *as a logical consequence* of the representation of Cicero as being bald and of the representation of Cicero as being old. From the fact that the subject is in a mental state (intuition) representing Cicero as being bald and in another mental state associated with the first representing Cicero as being old, it by no means follows that the she is in a position to *recognize that* someone (the same individual) is instantiating both properties. The singular concept CICERO is required.

In this regard, it becomes crystal clear that the main opposition between pre-conceptual and conceptual representations is not the traditional opposition between direct non-descriptive (conceptual) and indirect descriptive reference. Thus, what distinguishes a conceptual cluster of information from a pre-conceptual sensory template is the way that partial representations of features/parts/stages, etc., are integrated. In apprehension and reproduction, the intuitions of Cicero's features/positions/stages are integrated blindly by the sub-personal operation of synthesis by creating, storing, and projecting mental images of Cicero's features/stages/positions. By contrast, in the nominative singular concept CICERO, sensible intuitions of Cicero's features/stages/positions, etc., are cognitively and inferentially integrated by the subject's ability to recognize those features as properties of a same object. That is what Kant calls "synthetic unity of Aperception" in the concept

of an object (see *KrV*: B 137; *HN*: R.6350, Ak 18: 676–7). It is recognition of the features BEING BALD and BEING OLD as properties of a same individual represented by the singular concept CICERO that enables the subject to make categorical judgments about Cicero and to appreciate the representation of Cicero as both bald and old as a logical consequence from her representations of Cicero being bald and Cicero being old.

Thus the role of predicative concepts (“partial concepts”) associated with nominative concepts is not to determine the reference. Rather, it must be understood in connection to what Evans calls Generality Constraint on concept-possession (Evans, 1982: p. 104): The subject can be credited with the predicative concept BALD *iff* she is capable of predicating that property of whatever object she has a nominative concept for (say, Socrates, Plato, or Cicero): Socrates is bald, Plato is bald, Cicero is bald, etc. Likewise, the subject can only be credited with a nominative concept CICERO *iff* she is capable of predicating of that individual whatever properties she has a predicative concept for (say, BEING BALD, BEING OLD, BEING MALE, etc.): Cicero is bald, Cicero is old, Cicero is a male, and so on.

A ‘whole representation’ is a pre-conceptual representation of an object when the ‘partial representations’ of the object’s salient features/parts/stages are integrated unconsciously by the operation of synthesis (apprehension and association). Thus, to re-iterate, a subject sees Cicero walk down a street in ancient Rome and an object file is opened in her mind, storing images of Cicero’s features/parts/positions and projecting them in future encounters with Cicero. This is an operation that enables her cognitive system to perceive Cicero: to single it out from the background and to keep track of it as he walks down the street.

That singular representation of Cicero is not a concept because the subject is not in a position to predicate of that individual whatever properties she has a predicative concept for. Therefore, without the singular concept CICERO, the

subject is not in a position to appreciate the proposition that Cicero is both bald and old from that fact that one of her mental states represents Cicero as being bald, another represents Cicero as being old.

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