

## Sellars on Kantian Intuitions

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In an essay entitled “Sensibility and Understanding” Wilfred Sellars exploits an ambiguity implicit in Kant’s notion of intuition.<sup>1</sup>

“Intuition”, he points out, “is Janus faced” for, as he explains, what Kant speaks of as “intuitions” might well be conceptual in a broader sense, so that they turn out to be representations of ‘theses’. This paper is an attempt to explore this observation.

Inasmuch as Kant never wavers in his insistence on the distinction between concepts, essentially mediate and discursive<sup>2</sup>, and intuitions, essentially immediate and singular, is evident that the notion of a ‘conceptual intuition’ would be incongruous if not mistaken.

And this would seem especially so in view of the fact that Kant strongly rejects the possibility of intellectual intuition for anyone but the “primordial being”.<sup>3</sup>

Sellars, of course, is aware of his. But to substantiate his view that there are intuitions which involve something over and above mere receptivity, that is, ‘conceptual intuitions’, he points out that the productive imagination is said to be the understanding functioning in a special way and to be engaged in the representing functioning in a special way and to be engaged in the representing of individuals involving receptivity. Textual evidence is found for this in the second edition Deduction<sup>4</sup> although as Sellars himself suggests, such an interpretation would not be firm if reference were made to the first edition.<sup>5</sup> The point is nevertheless an interesting one.

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in his book *Science and Metaphysics* Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kemp Smith translation, A320/ B377. Hereinafter, the first edition pagination is signified by ‘A’, the second by ‘B’, in accordance with convention.

<sup>3</sup> B72

<sup>4</sup> B 151- 53.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A II 8, and the *Anthropology*, Vol. “The imagination is a faculty of intuition without the presence of an object.”

Much of Sellars' argument depends on his assumption that an empirical intuitional representation can be linguistically represented. Hintikka has a similar view when he says that Kant's notion of intuition "is not very far from what we would call a singular term"<sup>6</sup>. Now Sellars has already suggested the intuitions, in certain contexts, have a form which could be said to be conceptual in virtue of their synthetic character. But it is difficult to see how this minimal, and yet unclarified claim, should entitle him to assume that intuitions can be linguistically represented and, moreover, can be represented as the object of sentences. He argues, however, as follows:

For of intuitions those, at least, which are synthetized by the productive imagination would seem to have a form illustrated by

'this cube'.

which, though not a judgement, is obviously closely connected with the judgement

'this is a cube'

'This cube' is then said to have a 'this such' from which although conceptually rich is 'incomplete' until it is attached to a predicative expression to form a singular proposition. There are a number of points to be made here about this linguistic representation of an intuition and the form it is said to enjoy :

- (A) It may be said that, rather than "illustrate" the form of an empirical intuition in the broader sense, which he assumes, the expression 'this cube' would more plausibly be said to express a concept the addition to which of an indexical expression could at best be said to limit its extension.

Inasmuch as the reference of this indexical expression will be

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<sup>6</sup> J. Hintikka, « On Kant's Notion of an intuition » from the First Critique : Reflections on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, ed. T. Penelhum and J.J. MacIntosh (Belmont, California : Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1969), p. 43.

indeterminate (unless a number of conditions are appended) the singular hyphenated expression could not even be said to refer to at most one object.

The argument that

‘this cube’

expresses just a ‘singular concept’ would account, then, for its being ‘conceptually rich’, so that when Kant says that intuitions without concepts are blind he means, not that they must be conceptual to be expressible and therefore intelligible, but that they cannot be intelligible without concepts or in abstracto: this is quite another matter.

(B) Although Sellars does not explicitly say so, the demonstrative expression “this” as it occurs in the judgement ‘this is a cube’.

And it must be said that the demonstrative pronoun would seem to be a plausible choice to represent an empirical intuition for it expresses singularity and possibly immediacy and we can be said to subsume it under a concept by attaching it to a predicate (“this is a red circle”). It seems simply to represent an indeterminate, or at least undetermined, object which has submitted to the conditions of sensibility and therefore to be an adequate representation of an empirical intuition.

There are important difficulties associated with this view, however, and the seemingly ingenuous demonstrative conceals more than might at first appear. A minimal prerequisite of an expression representing an empirical intuition is, if it refers at all, that it refer to at least and at most one object, for Kant insists throughout the Critique on the singularity of

intuitional representation<sup>7</sup>. And in order that this be achieved by a demonstrative expression, as I have suggested certain conditions must be fulfilled. Hence, “this” may be said to refer to at least and at most one object if, it is added: “as uttered by speaker P at place I. And at time T”. But the only condition which Kant places upon intuitional representation is that, in order to be such, it must have submitted to the forms of sensibility. The introduction of the coordinates of speaker, place, and time is an introduction of conceptual determinations of the intuitional representation. The demonstrative pronoun must therefore be discounted as a possible candidate for the linguistic representation of an empirical intuition.

(C) It may be further argued against the possibility of representing an empirical intuition linguistically that an intuition, however empirically indeterminate is at least categorically determinate; that is to say, is at least something.<sup>8</sup> If it is possible to linguistically represent an intuition, the intuition will necessarily be represented as an object and will be seen, therefore, not merely to have submitted to the conditions of sensibility, but to the concept of an object in general. The expression “this”, for example, represents an object, albeit empirically indeterminate, and cannot, therefore, represent an intuition for it already expresses a representation which has submitted to minimal conceptual determination. Consider Sellars, however:

“The view that before we can have representations of the form

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. A 320, B 376, a 713/B 741

<sup>8</sup> A250 : « All our representations, it is true, are referred by the understanding to some object.”

‘X is a cube’

we must have representations of the form

‘this cube’

is a puzzling one”.

But this is only puzzling when the expression

‘this cube’

is said to represent an intuition, at least in the manner of referring to it, and I have been arguing against this. What ought to be said, a view to which Kant would subscribe, is that judgement is not possible without intuition and intuition cannot be represented apart from judgement. It is doubtful, in any case, that Kant would have accepted Sellars’

formulation:

“Before we can have judgement we must have intuition.”

Talk of having judgements and intuitions would certainly lead one to believe that posses such “thing”. And the question here is whether analytic device is being interpreted ontologically- that is, whether the method of distinguishing elements is being mistaken for an interpretation which demands separating “things”.

In any case the point Sellars wishes to make here is that .....

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