

## KANT AND HUSSERL ON THE CONTENTS OF PERCEPTION

CORIJN VAN MAZIJK

**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on the contents of perception in Kant's first *Critique* and Husserl's later writings. Both Kant and Husserl are known for their appeal to synthesis in their transcendental accounts of perceptual experience and objective judgment. Especially regarding Kant, the precise nature of perceptual synthesis has recently been the cause of much debate. Whereas some argue that for Kant perception must have non-conceptual content, others believe he is a conceptualist. After offering an alternative solution to this interpretative problem in Kant's philosophy, I turn to Husserl's later theory of perception. My main claims here are that Husserl departs from Kant specifically regarding (i) the sort of synthetic contents that govern affective perception and (ii) the role of conceptual capacities in the contents of attentive perception.

### 1. PERCEPTUAL CONTENT AND TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Kant<sup>1</sup> and Husserl<sup>2</sup> can be credited for having written two of the most complicated philosophical theories of perception. Husserl's ideas about perception, known to us through his phenomenological analyses of sensible intuitions and later those on passive syntheses, are only now slowly entering

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**Corijn van Mazijk** is PhD candidate at KU Leuven, Belgium, and University of Groningen, Netherlands. His primary areas of research include phenomenology and philosophy of perception.

<sup>1</sup> References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* are given with standard abbreviations CPR followed by standard references for the first and second editions: A and B.

<sup>2</sup> References to the main later works of Husserl here discussed are given with standard abbreviations: Ideas I and Ideas II for the first and second book of *Ideas Pertaining to a Transcendental Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*; APAS for *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis*; EJ for *Experience and Judgment*; FTL for *Formale und Transzendente Logik*; and *Krisis* for *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*. For the first four, page numbers refer to English translations, for the latter two to the German *Husserliana* editions.

mainstream philosophy. In contemporary Kant scholarship, on the other hand, one can find extensive debates regarding all fundamental aspects of Kant's views on perception. Today, particular attention goes out to the question whether for Kant perception has conceptual or nonconceptual content.

At the heart of the debate about perception's conceptual or nonconceptual content lie questions concerning the conditions of possibility for having a knowledgeable experience as well as the scope of the field of knowledgeable experiences. Conceptualists such as McDowell (1986, 1996, 2009, 2013) claim that, contrary to a "Cartesian internalism," perception can offer a legitimate reason for believing something to be the case. The "space of reasons" (Sellars 1963; McDowell 1996) is not confined to an inner sphere; the outer world of perception is as much a part of rationality and reason as are our "inner" thoughts about it.

It is useful to separate two related claims a conceptualist may make regarding what this externalization of the space of reasons implies for the contents of perception. The first of them, which we may call *weak conceptualism* (Van Mazijk 2015), claims that the contents of perception are conceptual because they are open to being judged about, i.e., "fit to figure in discursivity" (McDowell 2013, 42) or "open to reflection" (McDowell 1996, 47). The second thesis, call it *full conceptualism*, adds a specific condition to weak conceptualism. For a full conceptualist, perception is open to judgment because rational capacities already figure in the perceptual content. Although McDowell himself could be said to endorse some version of full conceptualism in *Mind and World*, it appears that in more recent works he has nuanced this view.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of its popularity today, conceptualism regarding perceptual content is not a new theory; it plays a major role in the history of transcendental philosophy as well. For Kant, father of transcendental philosophy, conceptualism provides the solution to questions concerning whether and how concepts can be made to fit perceptual contents. For Husserl, inventor of transcendental phenomenology, analyzing the role of perception in conditioning knowledgeable experiences was a way to transcendently clarify judgment and logic.

This paper serves to bring out similarities between Kant and Husserl regarding their views on the contents of perception as well as ways in which Husserl departs from or expands upon Kant. In the next section, I offer an account of Kant's theory of perception and today's debates about it. Here I

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<sup>3</sup> There are also other issues at stake in McDowell's change of position, most notably regarding the propositional or nonpropositional content of perceptual experience, which I do not address here. See McDowell 2009, 258.

defend the view that Kant is a full conceptualist about perceptual content, even though he also operates with a nonconceptual faculty. In the following two sections, I turn to Husserl's later *layered* theory of perceptual experience, which I split into *affective* and *attentive perception*. Here I argue that Husserl's views differ from Kant's regarding (i) the contents that govern affective-perceptual experience and (ii) the role of conceptual capacities in attentive perception.

## 2. KANT'S THEORY OF PERCEPTION

There are several rather technical aspects of Kant's transcendental philosophy that one has to consider in order to clarify his ideas about perception. I will try to consider the most important ones here. The best place to start is with the very reason the problem of nonconceptual content is sometimes said to have originated with Kant. The reason is that Kant famously separated two sources of knowledge, sensibility and understanding, each of which produces its own products, intuitions and concepts, respectively, a function neither one can take over from the other (CPR A19/B33). It is important to see that this distinction and the rigidity with which it was made were unprecedented in Western philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Kant conceived of sensibility as a faculty of its own and the pure forms of space and time that inherit in it as pure intuitions. By this he meant that everything we perceive of the outer world is *a priori* structured in space and time. But it seems Kant could also, as some neo-Kantians argued, have simply added space and time to the pure concepts of the understanding, such as unity, causality, etc. For some reason, Kant preferred to keep them strictly separated. Why?

The answer is: for very specific reasons which had worked in on Kant from decennia before writing the *Critique*. Already in 1755, Kant had come to see that a connection of concepts in the mind is insufficient to establish anything about the existence of the proposition's reference.<sup>5</sup> Nothing about actual being can be inferred from a mere conceptual conceiving. Kant did not yet, however, exploit this idea in terms of a separate faculty of intuition. The 1768 work *Concerning the ultimate ground of the differentiation of directions in space* might be the most crucial in Kant's development of intuition as a non-conceptual faculty.<sup>6</sup> This time, Kant's argument fits debates about the nature of space popular at the time, particularly between Clarke's absolutist and Leibniz relational account.

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<sup>4</sup> See also Heidemann (2012) for a comparison of Kant's views on intuition with those of Leibniz.

<sup>5</sup> See Kant's *New Elucidations of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition*.

<sup>6</sup> See also Guyer 2005, 2010.

Boldly put, Leibniz's relational theory dismisses the necessity of positing absolute space, as he believes that objects can be exhaustively described by reference to points of relation between those objects. A mathematical, purely conceptual description of relations between points in space is all one needs for a mathematics of space. Kant's faculty of intuition started out as an argument against this view, often called the *argument from incongruent counterparts*. We can simplify Kant's point by considering an empty universe containing nothing but two perfectly similar hands in it, except for the fact that one is left and the other is right. The hands are thus incongruent counterparts: they are each other's identical twin, but they cannot be made to fit each other by rotation.

Kant's next step is to argue that any attempt to determine the being left or right of these hands by the relational approach is bound to fail, given that they are identical as far as their point to point description goes. Consequently, Kant concludes, our actual cognition of objects, which knows left from right, has to involve something that cannot be conceptual. This "something" is best understood as *an embodied viewpoint*; a perspectival point of spatial and temporal orientation.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, Kant would call this non-conceptual element of cognition intuition.

Now let us turn to the *Critique*. Kant's transcendental philosophy is probably most famous for synthesizing empiricist and rationalist trends of thinking, by showing that both sensation and *a priori* concepts are necessary for a knowledgeable experience. It is essential to Kant's critical project—critical regarding metaphysics done before him—that knowledge is always empirical knowledge: intuition has to get involved. The attempt at closure of an era of speculative metaphysics thus involves a division of the human cognitive apparatus in two faculties, producing concepts and intuitions respectively, the interplay of which alone establishes meaningful contents.

The *Critique*, then, in its general outline of cognitive faculties, yields a view on perception which not just notionally but necessarily sets it apart from concepts. This necessity is prescribed first by the argument from incongruent counterparts and second by the critical task of the *Critique*. But this is, as far as Kant's theory of perception goes, merely a first stage-setting. We have seen that intuition's specific transcendental contribution has to be nonconceptual, but we have not said anything about the *contents* of perception just yet. Kantian nonconceptualists generally emphasize the things said up to now. Conceptualists, by contrast, tend to focus on later parts of the *Critique*,

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<sup>7</sup> See also Kant 1996.

mostly the Transcendental Deduction and, although to a lesser extent, the schematism chapter.<sup>8</sup>

The primary aim of the Deduction is to establish the *a priori* validity of the pure concepts of the understanding. There are two steps in this argument.<sup>9</sup> In the second of these steps, Kant argues that in order to secure the possibility of application of the pure concepts to actual intuition, it must be the case that intuition itself already stands under the rules provided by the understanding. This way, the second step is supposed to yield evidence of the application of pure concepts to anything that enters experience through the senses. The *unity* involved in our representations of space and time in any intuition indicates the involvement of pure concepts here, because only the understanding can be responsible for synthesizing such unity—which then secures the rule of the pure concepts over all actual intuitions.

To make this point clearer it is useful to consider the three syntheses Kant distinguishes. Kant thinks that what is represented in any perceptual experience is never just a rhapsody of sense data. The data out of which an intuition is first constituted in an act of simple seeing is already a spatial *unity*, brought about by the *synthesis of apprehension*. The synthesis of apprehension takes place “in” the intuition and it is already a connection of sensible data. The two syntheses that follow, both of which are required for a knowledgeable experience, are that of *reproduction* and *recognition*. Interestingly, in the Transcendental Deduction, Kant claims that the pure concepts of the understanding are responsible already for the basic unity that is supplied already in the synthesis of apprehension. Kant is here not claiming that some intuitions (of the “blind” kind) could do without pure concepts, as in saying that a knowledgeable experience might require a concept but a simple seeing would not.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Kant believes it necessary for the proof structure of the Deduction that the content of intuition is conditioned by pure concepts throughout; through them “even perception itself becomes possible” (CPR B161).

Toward the end of the Deduction, Kant reconsiders his two options: either perceptual experience makes pure concepts possible, or the other way around (CPR B166–67). He again opts for the second; it is through the

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<sup>8</sup> In what follows I will focus mostly on the B-Deduction and more specifically on what is often called the second step of the B-Deduction, as most conceptualist readers of Kant do.

<sup>9</sup> See also Henrich 1969.

<sup>10</sup> This position, which I here oppose, is hinted at among others by Hanna (2008, 2011), Allais (2009), Grüne (2009, 2011), and De Sá Pereira (2013). To be abundantly clear: I am not suggesting here that for Kant every perception has to involve an act of judgment through which the particular is subsumed under the general rule. The point is only that a plain perceptual content *can* be made to fit judgment, while this is so *because* of the involvement of the understanding in that perceptual content.

conceptual unity that obtains in intuition that our experiences of the world conform to the pure concepts of the understanding in the first place, and, hence, knowledge is possible only due to the role conceptual capacities play in perception. Although many contemporary nonconceptualists have tried to dispute this point, it is in fact the central tenet of Kant's entire epistemology: pure concepts structure and thereby condition "everything that may ever come before our senses" (CPR B160). However, the motivation for resisting this claim is clear: it appears to conflict with the necessarily nonconceptual nature ascribed to intuition in Kant's precritical philosophy and the Transcendental Aesthetic. This is the tension central to the contemporary debate about Kantian conceptualism.

I think there is a satisfactory solution to this apparent conflict in Kant's work, but I first want to look at the schematism chapter, as it further develops Kant's transcendental theory of perception. The schematism sections are thematically closely tied to the Transcendental Deduction. Whereas the Deduction can be said to deal with the "what" part of the categories in relation to perception, the schemata concerns the "how" part, that is, how it is possible that perceptions can be subsumed under the rule of pure concepts. Roughly put, the problem with the application of pure concepts to perception is that there is not anything pure concepts are *like* such that they would match the empirical intuition, which is construed out of pure space, time, and sensible data. The intuition itself, of course, cannot contain the pure concepts, as that would put them back into the "Hereacleitean realm" of sensibility. The solution Kant proposes is a third thing that mediates pure concepts and intuitions. This third thing is the imagination, which is the faculty of synthesis, although it belongs to the faculty of understanding (CPR A120). The transcendental products of the imagination that have to bridge the relevant gap are called schemata.

On the one hand, a schema must resemble the category as an *a priori* rule prescribing structure to appearances. It delivers the procedure by which intuition comes to give us contents that are apprehensible by the pure understanding (CPR A137–43/B176–82). But at the same time, the schema must also sufficiently resemble the appearance. What does the schema have that allows it go both ways? The answer is: time. Kant takes schemata to be *a priori* time-determinations and thus also determinations of concrete intuitions, since intuitions inevitably take place through the pure form of time.

To explain this better we can appeal to the fact that for Kant time is the condition of possibility for having perceptions of the world. As Husserl (and other phenomenologists, e.g., Heidegger 1997, 2012) would later proclaim, the condition of all sense is that connections are made between contents of experience that stretch over time. For that reason, we inevitably live in the

past and future at the same time, as the contents of consciousness get their unity first through temporal synthesis. Kant assigns to the imagination the task of determining perceptual contents by means of a categorial rule through the loophole of pure time. The transcendental schema is, one could say, the temporal procession in the imagination of a pure concept, itself timeless, through which it has become apt to match the perceptual content, as the latter is itself conditioned by time. How exactly this process would take place, phenomenologically, empirically, or otherwise, is left undecided by Kant. In this respect, Kant appears to take contentment in noting that this procedure of the understanding ultimately is “a hidden art in the depths of the human soul” (A140/B179–81).

Given that the imagination is the source of unity in thought as well as in the perceived world, it may seem as if Kant has brought the radically separated sources of knowledge together again in the schematism chapter, as prominent philosophers (again including Heidegger) have claimed. That in turn might lead one to believe that the concepts of the understanding and nonconceptual intuitions are not radically distinct for Kant after all, from which a deconstruction of the whole problem of nonconceptual content could follow. However, the schematism section does not alter the fact that conceptual capacities synthetically structure perceptual contents and that this is a condition of possibility for synthetic judgments *a priori*. The function ascribed by Kant to the transcendental schema concerns the *act of judging*, and as such it is unrelated to the way in which (according to the Transcendental Deduction) pure concepts determine perceptual synthesis *prior to* acts of judgment.

Now let us return to the tension between Kantian conceptualism and non-conceptualism. The tension in question is between, on the one hand, the nonconceptualism central to the precritical writings concerning space and Kant’s critique of metaphysics, and, on the other hand, the conceptualism of the Deduction and schematism sections.

It is essential to Kant’s epistemology that the contents of intuition are “conceptual,” in the sense that the unity of an intuition is the result of a function of the imagination, which itself belongs to the understanding. Intuitional contents are not, therefore, propositionally articulated contents, nor does this mean that any perception would have to pair with a conscious act of judgment on behalf of the subject. The point is only that the first synthesis that structures received sense data provides a unity that (a) is made possible by the understanding and (b) allows a rational being to further articulate the content of that intuition in propositional structures and possibly through *a priori* judgment. Whereas the second proposition is that of *weak conceptualism*, the conjunction of the two corresponds to *full conceptualism*.

As far as I can see, full conceptualism of the sort illustrated above is exactly the core of Kant's theory of perception that McDowell wants to abide by in *Mind and World*. But it is worth noting that Kant appears to have a more nuanced view than McDowell regarding the value and, indeed, necessity of ascribing to experience a nonconceptual role as well. Perhaps the McDowell of *Mind and World* believes that he does sufficiently acknowledge nonconceptual content. However, McDowell's acceptance of nonconceptual content nowhere seems to go beyond reflections upon the sort of notions that might be of use to empirical psychology or other fields of study that belong to the "space of nature." For that reason, he seems to leave no place for a *transcendental* nonconceptual element in an account of perceptual consciousness, an element that would be requisite to having full-fledged perceptual contents.<sup>11</sup>

Although this might be a genuine weak spot in McDowell's objection to nonconceptual content, it is not so in Kant. For Kant, as we have seen, does ascribe to the necessity of a nonconceptual element for empirical cognition—namely the faculty of sensibility. Many Kantian nonconceptualists seem to believe this legitimizes Kantian nonconceptualism about perceptual content. For one, Hanna (2008), who is among the best known defenders of Kantian nonconceptualism, thinks the argument from incongruent counterparts proves Kant's adherence to essentially nonconceptual content.<sup>12</sup> But if we consider the argument closely, we find this conclusion unwarranted (Van Mazijk 2014a, 2014b, 2015). Kant's point against Leibniz was only that without nonconceptual intuitions, or a bodily point of orientation, certain conceptual explications would be impossible for us. But it does not follow from this that these or any other conceptual explications would involve nonconceptual content. The point pertains, so to say, to someone who would have only a cognitive faculty; such a person would not be able to have an experience involving the content of left or right. This, however, has no direct implications for someone who does in fact have both faculties. We can readily observe this in reflection upon ourselves: it is no problem for us to judge being to the left or right of objects, and, hence, we have all the contents of perception within the scope of reason, albeit *on the condition* of some nonconceptual point of orientation. This means that although perception is transcendently conditioned by a nonconceptual faculty, Kant can consistently maintain that the contents of perception receive synthetic structure from the understanding. Kant is thus, at least on my compatibilist reading, a

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<sup>11</sup> See also Foreman (2006) and De Vries (2011) who to my mind rightly point out this shortcoming in McDowell's reading.

<sup>12</sup> Heidemann (2012) makes a point similar to Hanna's in his defense of Kantian nonconceptualism.



conceptualist about perceptual content, even though he admits of a nonconceptual faculty of intuition to sustain this.

### 3. HUSSERL'S THEORY OF AFFECTIVE PERCEPTION

Husserl considers his later transcendental analysis of perception, by him addressed as "passive synthesis," as both a continuation of as well as a significant departure from Kant's philosophy. The radicalism of Husserl's phenomenological approach, which includes a suspension of all empirical methods and knowledge in order to allow pure reflection upon transcendental consciousness, is of course unknown to Kant's transcendentalism. But occasional references to Kant in his mature works show that Kant's influence runs deep. Husserl believed that Kant set out on the right track with his *Transcendental Deduction* (*Ideas I*, 142), but also that his obsession with objectivity blinded him from investigating the deeper lying syntheses that condition both cognitive as well as noncognitive experiences (*Ideas II*, 22; APAS 171–74). Toward the end of his life, Husserl appears to have become increasingly critical of Kant's first *Critique*, referring to it time and again as a mythical construct (*Krisis* 116–19, 203).

As with Kant, the importance of Husserl's analyses of perception is closely tied to his interest in objective knowledge. In *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl illustrates this by means of his understanding of evidence (EJ 19–21). A first notion of evidence is the one familiar to any theory of judgment; it is the self-evidence with which a true judgment can be given, as in having a knowledgeable experience of something being the case. But Husserl takes this form of evidence to be founded by a prior self-evidence through which the object about which is judged comes about. This second self-evidence is the mere *self-giveness* of the object in experience. Without an object giving itself, Husserl claims, there is nothing to make assertions about.

It is important to take this foundational role of the second notion of self-evidence in a distinctively "genetic" sense, which is characteristic of Husserl's later phenomenology. "Statically" considered, as Husserl did, for instance, in *Ideas I*, not every act of judgment is founded upon a perception of a self-given object. Purely geometrical judgments, for one, are in a certain sense independent from perceptual objects. The Pythagorean Theorem does not need actual triangles; actual triangles conform to *it*. However, in the genetic sense, even *a priori* judgments are transcendently founded by apprehensions of self-given objects. This is because any judgment whatsoever is about objects in the widest sense, that is, about *ideal unities*. This restriction, according to Husserl, it receives by being ultimately derived from "prepredicative experience"; from the self-giveness of an object as an individual thing

[*tode ti*] in perception. This explains the great importance Husserl ascribes in his later work to analyzing perceptual experience for a clarification of judgment and logic (EJ 22–28; FTL 214–20).

Unlike Kant, Husserl does not adopt on transcendental grounds the distinctness of receptive and conceptual experience. He instead prefers to speak of passive and active synthesis. The exact meaning of these notions always depends on the context in which they appear, but they can roughly be taken to denote the degree of attention and participation of the “pure ego” involved in an experience.<sup>13</sup> Phenomenologically speaking, the disadvantage of the term “perception” or “sensibility” is that it suggests an exclusive focus on sensible capacities. Husserl, however, as early as the lectures published as *Thing and Space* (1907), regarded perception essentially entwined with *kinesthesia*, together forming what is now often called a sensorimotor field (O’Regan and Noë 2001; Noë 2004, 2006). Husserl’s theory of perception is thus simultaneously one of embodiment and of their cooperation, that is, of ego-passive experience.

In his later philosophy, Husserl distinguishes between a number of different acts that we today would call perceptual.<sup>14</sup> For the sake of his “genetic” investigations, which aim to understand how various necessary ingredients of intentional acts of judgment are developed by consciousness over time, he starts with the most basic form of perceptual experience. Importantly, Husserl’s transcendental philosophy never posits bare sense data that function as a bridge from the natural world to consciousness (Ideas I, 112–16, 118–19). There is phenomenologically speaking no sense to the idea that one could experience bare data prior to their synthesis by consciousness. Instead, Husserl prefers to speak of “fields of sensations” (EJ 72–79) as a kind of “broad lived experiential field” (APAS 18) that counts as the lowest form of perceptual experience. These fields, which figure on the background of our intentional awareness, belong to purely passive synthesis, which means they do not require any subjective attention to be brought about.

It is today quite commonplace to interpret Husserl’s analyses on passive synthesis as a kind of historical investigation pertaining to the development of consciousness over time. In this respect, some scholars take Husserl’s

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<sup>13</sup> In these contexts, the “ego” is no mythical entity, but rather a phenomenologically purified term for the subject or agent that “lives in” intentional experiences. (See especially Ideas II, 103–27). For more on the distinction between passivity and activity, see Yamaguchi 1982.

<sup>14</sup> I have in mind primarily (and in order of increasing complexity) *fields of sensations* (EJ 72), *simple apprehension* (106), *explicative contemplation* (112), and *relational contemplation* (152). In addition to this, there are also various forms of judgment about perceptual objects, which Husserl locates on the side of active synthesis.

analyses of fields of sensations to pertain to experiences of one's childhood, which means they no longer need to be operative in "mature" consciousness (e.g., Mooney 2010, 38–43). Such a reading clearly has a profound impact on the debate about Husserlian conceptualism, as it would rule out any kind of nonconceptual content found at the passive levels. However, as I have also shown elsewhere (Van Mazijk 2014a), I take this reading of genetic methodology to be unwarranted. In transcendental phenomenology, there are no questions about childlike versus mature consciousness; there is only transcendental consciousness. Reflection on passive synthesis is therefore not an obscure attempt to retrieve what experience as a child supposedly would have been like. As Husserl unambiguously explains in *Experience and Judgment*, it rather involves an additional epoché in transcendental consciousness, by which the phenomenologist disregards higher levels of synthetic achievements in order to get lower level ones better into sight (EJ 56). The forms of perception I will discuss next are thus not abstractions from actual consciousness (Barber 2008; Mooney 2010); they are instead synthetic achievements that are still fully operative (APAS 167).

For Husserl, the kind of awareness one has of fields of sensations is radically different from the knowledgeable objects of intentional acts. Husserl does not believe that these passive fields are intentionally constituted in the same way the objects of the ordinary attentive perception it conditions are.<sup>15</sup> That they are not intentionally constituted means as much as that the experiencing subject's attention is inessential to them. A field of sensations cannot itself be intentionally constituted like the objects of perception it conditions, for it is not itself an individual, knowledgeable object. Instead, it belongs to consciousness only in a wider sense, as a passively pregiven field in which our lives as conscious subjects properly speaking take no part.

Related to the preintentionally constituted background is the notion of a radically passive *Urdoxa* (EJ 28–31). Genetically speaking, Husserl considers the *Urdoxa* as operative at the ground of consciousness. It is not something that can be brought into reflection in the way intentional objects can; it is rather the very ground of possibility of any sense-making and belief modalizations. Because of this, the background field cannot be *questioned* either, for it does not posit things in a way that would make a modification (such as doubting or negating) possible.

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<sup>15</sup> It is today still common to interpret Husserl's notion of consciousness solely in terms of intentionality. However, as Husserl wrote already in *Ideas I*, "intentionality is what characterizes *consciousness* in the pregnant sense," but "we cannot say of *each* mental process that it has intentionality" (*Ideas I*, 199). Further on, Husserl remarks that intentional experience involves a background that has no intentional structure, even though it is present as a "*potential field of perception*" (200).

So how precisely does Husserl give flesh to the idea of passive fields of sensations? A first characteristic of this structure is *temporality*. Anything that enters experience is temporally synthesized through “retentions” and “protentions” that ray backwards and forwards. For instance, any sound we hear already consists of passively synthesized time moments. We do not hear just an endless stream of unconnected sound data when we passively perceive a car passing by outside our window while being absorbed in work. Instead, a continuous synthesis takes place already between these various sound moments; each new moment blends, as it were, with sound-moments just passed while yielding new protentional expectations regarding sound-moments to come. Nothing in consciousness is ever given *just* in the now; all content must spread out over the co-givennesses of past and future. At the same time, however, such temporal synthesis, as with Kant, only concerns the form of any experience (EJ 73; APAS 173). It is therefore, at least on Husserl’s later views, by itself insufficient to establish any sort of contentful experience.

Second, the field of sensations has, this time with regard to its content, a kind of *felt* or *affective* structure. Consider, for instance, the sensations of your feet touching the floor or of your tongue touching the roof of your mouth. According to Husserl, these sensations are prestructured through temporal synthesis into affective fields prior to us directing our attention at them. These fields may harbor affections in varying degrees of strength. A particularly strong affective allure may “penetrate the ego,” thereby “awakening” it by which it may turn its attentive regard toward the source of affection. If that happens, an intentional act of perception can first be brought about.

Interestingly, it follows from this that affections, for Husserl, or low-level “phenomenal contents” generally, are not some kind of meaningless, supervening *surplus* of intentional experience, as is one standard view in more recent representationalist philosophies of mind (e.g., Dretske 1995; Tye 1995; Byrne 2004). For Husserl, affective fields contain a *sui generis* kind of structure and affective meaning. Furthermore, without such prestructured affective fields, no intentional act could, genetically speaking, be brought about in the first place, for it is on the basis of them that the ego’s attention is awakened and enticed to perform intentional acts. Affective contents thus take a uniquely central place in Husserl’s theory of experience which could be taken to challenge many of today’s popular representationalist theories, which often dispute that qualitative experiences contribute much to the structure of intentionality.

According to Husserl, the syntheses constitutive of fields of sensations and their weaker and stronger affective allures takes place on grounds of the *association* of data to the extent they resemble or differ from each other (EJ 72–76;

APAS 162–214). For instance, sound-moments as opposed to visual impressions are passively associated as belonging together. This establishes a field of vision and a field of sounds, respectively. This very same principle can also be applied on different scales, for instance with respect to the sound-moments of a passing car. Husserl thinks that these sound-moments are passively taken by consciousness as being alike—relative to for instance the humming sound of one’s computer—and therefore as belonging to two separate background fields. Likewise, the sensations in one’s mouth are prestructured as having little or nothing to do with the sounds one hears. In such ways, consciousness synthesizes various data as belonging to different fields of sensations prior to any subjective awareness getting involved.

Although we are usually aware only of the kind of attention-driven intentional activities in which “we” to some degree actively participate, it is important to emphasize that it is Husserl’s view that immanent association is silently doing its work all the time (APAS 167). Consequently, they do not just belong to a story about the developmental history of consciousness. We may not notice the sensations in our feet at all as we hastily walk through the streets. In spite of this, there is in fact a field of sensations preconstituted here (on the basis of resemblance and difference between data) which harbors varying intensities. We only notice that these sensations were already there when, for instance, we suddenly step onto a sharp object; now a strong affective allure rises from the background, forcing the ego to turn-toward and see what is going on.

It is worth briefly recalling that for Kant, objective judgment about perceptual contents is possible because the latter are already determined by the same principles that have their seat in the understanding. Kant further believes it a necessary condition of any epistemically efficacious content that it is at least *possible* to relate it to the “I think.” This means that any perceptual content must be potentially capable of being brought under this *a priori* “synthetic unity of apperception.” Any content unable to live up to this condition would fall outside of the scope of objective judgment and thereby threaten the transcendental status of the pure concepts of the understanding.

It remains to be seen what Husserl thinks about Kant’s transcendental principle of apperception regarding *attentive* perception, that is, acts of perception in the proper sense. Ultimately, the difference for Husserl between intentionally constituted perception (or generally ego-acts in the widest sense) and preintentional fields of sensations (which are nonegoic) comes down to *ego-attention*. It belongs to the essence of an act in general that it involves a “regard-to,” a kind of “ego-advertence” (Ideas I, 201). But not *all* mental processes are acts in this sense. As we have seen, the contents of immanent association only serve to prestructure sensory data into fields of sensations.

The contents thus yielded are primarily characterized in terms of affective fields—not in terms of intentional relations toward objects.

For Husserl, affectively structured fields form the lowest stratum out of which all full-blown perceptual objects are construed, and in this sense they have a central place in Husserl's theory of intentionality. They provide the "stuff-stratum" which, through noesis and ego-advertence, can be "animated," that is, endowed with noematic or intentional sense. However, as long as no further attention is awakened by the affective allures of the field, these sensations remain plainly at the background. In that case, they do not receive any further noetic animations, and therefore will also not present any intentional correlate (noema) to the subject that could function as a direct substrate for conceptual explication.<sup>16</sup> More accurately, one could say that it in fact belongs to the very "essence" of background affective fields that they contain no intentional correlates, since the latter already imply an animation that takes one into higher levels of perceptual activity. It follows from this that one cannot make direct judgments about these low-level affective contents either, which means fields of sensations cannot live up even to the condition of weak conceptual content.<sup>17</sup>

It might appear to follow from this reading that fields of sensations are wholly insulated from our lives as conscious subjects. If fields of sensations do not contain any intentional correlates, then they cannot yet give one substrates for judgment. But if that is the case, it seems they must be cut loose from the space of reasons as a kind of mythical "Given." We have seen, however, that Husserl believes that the affective allures contained in fields of sensations are the condition of possibility for intentional perception. Without something affectively rising to prominence from the background, there can be no motivation for the ego to attentively engage in a perceptual act. Fields of sensations thus *do* have a genuine relation to the perceptual world about which we can form judgments; they are not bare givens. But at the same time, perceptual contents that are without a self-giving substrate cannot be

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<sup>16</sup> See also Bower's (2014) excellent paper on affectively driven perception in Husserl, where it is also argued that affective contents need not contain noematic correlates.

<sup>17</sup> Note that it does not follow from the idea that Husserl would subscribe to perceptual experiences that do not represent objects that these experiences would involve no representational contents at all. This conclusion is warranted only if one defines representational content exclusively in terms of object-representation, which I and many others with me do not. Rather than proposing a kind of "no content view" for affective perception, as can be found for instance in more radical enactivist approaches (Hutto and Myin 2013) but also in Bower's (2014) reading of Husserl, my interpretation is compatible with the idea that for Husserl affective-perceptual experiences do have structure and content, although of a kind which is not assessable in terms of propositional or (weak or full) conceptual contents.

propositionally articulable and to that extent do *not* belong to the space of reasons.

Rather than yielding an awkward contradiction, I think this reading should be taken to indicate that the conceptualism controversy simply applies poorly to Husserl's theory of affective perception. The term conceptualism is ill-fitted to it because there is neither an involvement of conceptual capacities (full conceptualism) nor a direct openness to reason (weak conceptualism) in place here. The term nonconceptualism, however, seems equally ill-fitted because the kind of "welling-up to the surface" of our conscious contents that Husserl's picture provides is not of the kind McDowell believes must be denied (McDowell 1996, 55). To the contrary, Husserl agrees with McDowell and Sellars in discarding all epistemological theories that assume a real external world impinging upon consciousness (Ideas I, 118–19). The kind of nonconceptualism that belongs to Husserl's views on affective perception is thus not one that simply falls prey to the myth of the Given either.

#### 4. HUSSERL'S THEORY OF ATTENTIVE PERCEPTION

What has been said thus far does not reflect Husserl's complete theory of perception. Husserl does not think that background awareness, association, and affection are truly isolatable from ordinary attentive perception, in which something does get represented according to a sufficient unity that allows it to figure in judgment. Associative synthesis is permanently operative in our active lives, but it is only the latter in which *we* engage when we perceive the world. In this respect, Husserl unambiguously asserts that the world we perceive is always invested with cognition, and that the field of perception is from the beginning a field of "possible substrates of cognitive activities" (EJ 37). As with Kant or McDowell, then, the world of attentive perception is said to constitute a world of objects to whose essence it belongs that it is open to rationality. Moreover, Husserl ascertains us that this world is always already "impregnated by the precipitate of logical operations" (EJ 42).

As should be clear by now, I think it would be a mistake to let these remarks convince us straightaway of Husserl's adherence to conceptualism, as Barber (2008) and Mooney (2010) have more recently argued. For these quotations cannot be taken to withstand the distinction pointed out earlier, that for Husserl the wider sphere of consciousness includes a passivity that conditions conscious object-perception and which does not itself constitute objects of possible knowledge. Notice also that Husserl consistently refers to "us," "we," "conscious experience" or to "cognition" when making overly

conceptualistic claims, thus excluding contents of pure passivity.<sup>18</sup> Conceptualism for Husserl can thus only refer to a restricted sphere of the mental.

In order to see how attentive perception relates to the affective contents formed in fields of sensations, it is useful to look at the lowest form of attentive perception, called *simple apprehension*. Husserl thinks a simple apprehension may come about if a particular affective content in the background starts to stand out and yields perceptual attention. As an example of this, we can again imagine hearing a car passing by. Already prior to the attention of the subject, the various sound-moments are prestructured as belonging together on grounds of being alike to one another. This passive preconstitution may, according to Husserl, even already involve a sense of spatial location, which is referred implicitly to the position of one's own body (EJ 106–7). However, the sound will only become an object for a perceptual consciousness if it is apprehended by the pure ego. This may happen when the immanently structured sound yields an affective allure strong enough to awaken the ego's attention. For one, there is a sudden increase in the intensity of the sound. A turning-toward of the ego may now follow; the ego has been "awakened" by the stimulus and gives in to it. Such a turning-toward does not yet have to be a deliberate ("spontaneous") performance; it can happen simply as a habitual response to a strong affective allure.

The ego has now been "awakened" and is perceptually turned-toward what was affectively preconstituted for it. In doing so, the ego is directed not at the continuously changing sound data, but rather *through* them, at "the sound as a unity which by its essence presents itself in this change, in this flux of appearances" (EJ 107). The object that now appears to the ego has a different *temporal structure* than the prestructured field of continuously changing data. Whereas earlier the sound was merely a part of a poorly delineated field of vague affections, the sound now falling within one's attention is a single temporally enduring phenomenon. Such a constitution is possible *only* as a correlate of the ego; it is thus entirely unknown to background fields of sensations taken in isolation.

Still the "object" one apprehends by turning-toward is not yet an object or state of affairs in the proper sense of the term. For one, to see a car and grasp the state of affairs "this is a blue Porsche 911" is an activity of a higher level which is properly speaking unknown to the passive perceptual field (EJ

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<sup>18</sup> For instance: "Everything which . . . is a *goal of cognition* is an existent on the ground of the world" (EJ 30); "what *affects us* is known in advance . . . as something with determinations" (37); "what *affects us* . . . is known . . . not merely as an object . . . but as a thing—as a man, a human artifact, and so on" (38); "The world in which *we live* and in which *we carry out activities of cognition and judgment* . . . is always already pre-given to us as impregnated by the precipitate of logical operations" (42).



251). The propositional sense “this is a blue Porsche 911” has a temporal structure that Husserl characterizes as “omni-temporal”: regardless of its empirical validity, that is, whether the actual Porsche exists or not, the propositional sense is communicable and can be freely repeated for years to come. But such higher level ego-accomplishments are not in place here for two reasons. First, the perceptual content involved in a simple apprehension is not yet one that is propositionally articulated and principally shareable with others. It is rather *my* apprehension, and the content constituted in this act belongs to *my* temporally flowing stream of experience. The object is thus not “omni-temporal” like the state of affairs, but lasts roughly as long as the actual perception lasts (EJ 157).<sup>19</sup> Second, it should be noted that higher level judgmental accomplishments are in fact completely bracketed by Husserl at this point of analysis. The kind of perceptual apprehension under discussion is one that is *principally independent* of propositional explications, for it is taken to genetically *condition* such higher level activities. By consequence, it should at least be considered possible for a (nonrational) consciousness to engage in perceptual acts of simple apprehension and constitute a corresponding intentional (noematic) unity without having capacities for knowledgeable judgments in the proper sense.

Starting from a simple apprehension, one can now move to a new kind of perceptual awareness and corresponding perceptual contents. This second activity is called *perceptual explication*, characterized by Husserl as an activity of “entering into the internal horizon” of the object (EJ 112), that is, of explicating parts and moments of the noema/intentional correlate constituted in simple apprehension. Explication involves a new level of perceptual interest, one that goes out not just to the perceptual object as a unity, but to one or more of its parts or determinations. Whereas simple apprehension consisted of a plain perception of a thing, say a car, one now shifts attention to its bright blue color. The ego is now directed at the blue color, but not simply as an object for itself: the color is rather interpreted as a moment of the car, which is “retained-in-grasp” by the ego while the explication of the color endures. The car is thereby implicitly turned into a substrate while the color blue is implicitly apprehended as a predicate belonging to it—even though no categorial or syntactical relations properly are in play here.

We can now see that Husserl’s remark concerning the “precipitate of logical operations” in perception does not so much concern the *transcendental* side of the conceptualist claim in the way it does for Kant and McDowell.

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<sup>19</sup> This should not withstand that for Husserl any perceptual experience still lingers retentionally after it has taken place and is also protentionally anticipated in an empty way beforehand.

Although Husserl believes rationality and intersubjectivity figure in any ordinary perceptual experience of a car—since the experience presents an object that is there for me as much as it is there for others (EJ 58–63)—this is *not a necessary condition* for having perceptual experiences that present possible substrates for conceptual explications. Part of Husserl’s genetic approach is to strip perception of the complex sense-endowments it ordinarily has in order to reflect upon a field of “pure perception” (EJ 56). After doing so, we can make the phenomenological discovery that the world of perceptual experience is *by itself* the necessary and sufficient condition for “having the world in view” (McDowell 2009). Of course higher levels of ego-activity are still required to form judgments about perceptual objects and to constitute states of affairs. But for Husserl, in sharp contrast with Kant, the contents of attentive perception are already and out of themselves prefigured in logical ways (Ideas II, 8, 23). All the basic categories of apophantic logic, among which are substrate and predicate, are preconstituted in passive experience without help from the understanding. On Husserl’s account, then, the perceptual world is not open to judgment because of the way logical categories structure it. Reversely, a rational being draws those categories from the world of passive experience, where they are at work already before any capacity or desire for knowledge is at work.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have emphasized two points regarding Husserl’s departure from Kant’s philosophy of perception. The first concerned Husserl’s idea of affective-perceptual contents that lack intentional correlates (or noemata), which would be required to explicate those contents propositionally. From this it followed that perceptual contents of the lowest levels are neither weakly nor fully conceptual. The second difference concerned the transcendental necessity of conceptual capacities in the contents of attentive perception. Here, I argued that on Husserl’s genetic account, perception is principally capable of bringing about substrates of possible judgment by itself, which amounts to a rejection of full conceptualism at the level of attentive perception.

Both disagreements highlighted are, I think, expressive of a larger methodical difference between both authors. In his lectures on passive synthesis, Husserl expresses his dissatisfaction with Kant’s sole obsession with the “higher lying problem of the constitution of a spatio-worldly object” (APAS 171–74). We can translate this sentiment to contemporary debates by saying that the Kantian approach seems to be interested in perception almost exclusively to the extent that it brings an indispensable element to judgment in the

form of intuition, that is, that it belongs to the “space of reasons” (Sellars 1963; McDowell 1996). For Kantian philosophers, perception is foremost an activity in the light of objectivity. Transcendental phenomenology, by contrast, studies perceptual experience in its own right, in order to examine not merely its openness to reason, but also its role in enabling the capacity to judge. Put differently, Husserl’s method alone allows for an investigation of the *genesis of the space of reasons itself*—which is ultimately what enabled him to put the relation between perception and knowledge in a wholly new light.

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