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Debunking Conceptual Creationism[1]

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1. Introduction

There is already a plethora of philosophical literature proposing that Kant is a conceptualist, or that he is a nonconceptualist, or that he is something in between (see, e.g, Allais, 2016; McLear, 2021). I take the ultimate issue in the debate to be how the mind-world relation is constituted. Basically, the issue stands on the question of how the mind connects with the world, and what is the role of concepts and judgments in that connection, or whether we should regard sensibility or understanding as primary in establishing that connection.

In what follows, I mostly maintain a bird's eye viewpoint on the debate. My starting point is what Panayot Butchvarov calls *conceptual/linguistic creationism*, or "the … view that there is nothing we have not conceptualized or verbalized" (Butchvarov, 2002: p. 300). In addition to being an antithesis of the metaphysically realist idea that that there is a reality independent of us, conceptual/linguistic creationism refers to the kind of thinking that sees human cognitive experience—and with it, reality itself—as constituted according to our concepts or language.[2]

I will go through some reasons why such a highly anti-realist view is not, strictly speaking, a Kantian position on the mind-world relation. Yet, as I will also

[1] This article is a slightly modified version of my presentation at the 6th Annual Workshop of the Contemporary Kantian Philosophy Project, "Kant and the Primacy of Sensibility", held at the Washington University in St. Louis, May 19-20, 2023. I thank the participants for fruitful philosophical discussion and helpful comments.

[2] Butchvarov (Butchvarov, 2002) himself promotes moderate antirealism that aims to avoid conceptual creationism:

> Our nonrealism acknowledges the virtual tautology that nothing unconceptualized can be the content of judgments or statements and thus serve as evidence or enter in other epistemic relations. But, unlike most current versions of nonrealism, it does not deny the need for something like Kant's distinction between things-in-themselves and things-for-us. It avoids what might be called conceptual or linguistic creationism, the heady view that there is nothing we have not conceptualized or verbalized. Nor does it deny, on the side of things-for-us, the difference between what Kant called sensibility and understanding. That there is such a difference is evident, however difficult it may be to state it. We might say that understanding is up to us, while sensibility is not, but this, though in the right direction, would be misleading or at least vague. It would be better to say that we have some idea of how we may choose to conceptualize differently the things we find, but not of how we may choose to find different things.

argue, the Kantian conceptualist or intellectualist understanding of the mind-world relation leans towards such an unwanted view. In the end, I examine the co-operation of sensibility and understanding, and whether this idea favors Kantian conceptualism or not.

2. Conceptual Creationism vs. Commonsense vs. Kantianism

Let's start by slicing up Butchvarov's description of conceptual/linguistic creationism into two separate claims: (1) There is nothing we have not conceptualized. (2) There is nothing we have not verbalized. By adding the notions of "creation" and "reality" into the picture, we may modify these two claims as follows: (1*) Reality is basically a product of conceptualization. (2*) Reality is basically a product of verbalization, limited to what can be expressed in a language.[3]

All in all, conceptual/linguistic creationism says that reality is "up to us"—fully dependent on human concepts or language or both. If we assume that there can be no proper language use, or meaningful verbal expression, without concepts, then the claim (2*) entails the claim (1*). However, the opposite is not necessarily true: perhaps there can be concept use without the use of language.

The commonsensical reaction to any such creationism is that reality is *not* up to us: Whatever the role of concepts and language is in making sense of reality, most certainly the world we live in is not our own creation. We are *in* the world rather than its makers (cf. Goodman, 1978). The world constantly pushes and pulls us, so to speak. Reality is as much (or more) like a constraining factor as it is an outcome of the cognitive processes of an individual. Most importantly, worldly objects exist independently of us, and this idea is not under threat due to claims such as the one that the perceptual system of an organism shapes the way the organism perceives objects. It is also phenomenologically evident that even if our descriptions of the world did depend on concepts and language, as they most certainly do, we also feel and perceive things in ways that go beyond the reach of our concepts and capacities of linguistic expression. In a word, much of reality is ineffable. Or at least some of it is, and in any case the world is "richer" or "denser" than our somewhat limited cognitive attempts at capturing it in everyday descriptions, scientific theories, religious belief, worldviews, and the like.

[3] Of course, (1*) and (2*) do not directly follow from (1) and (2), since the latter could be regarded as merely characterizations of our epistemic limitations, as opposed to ontological claims about reality as such. It seems to me, however, that this distinction—or the lack of it—brings up the core problem with any such "creationistic" views: namely that they tend to run epistemological and ontological considerations together.

Kantianism appears to balance between the creationist view and commonsense realism. Creationistic looking Kantian items include space and time as "transcendentally ideal", or as the necessary sensible features of possible experience that structurally precondition the actual perception and imagination of objects (see *CPR*, esp. the Transcendental Aesthetic). The categories make another example: the Kantian concept of Substance, for example, does not pick out some sort of absolute or ultimate existents of the world as such, but, rather, indicates a cognitive rule employed in regarding spatiotemporally appearing objects as feature-bundles that exist over time (e.g, *CPR* B6). In short, the mind-world relation is to be understood in Kantian terms "representationally", and on one possible interpretation, this means that the worldly objects are objects only in so far as we represent them as being such objects. And in any case, one of Kant's main points would be that our cognitive apparatus both affects and (at least partly) dictates the outputs of the mind-world relation.

Still, the Kantian position does not appear to be utterly "creationist" or "irrealist" (cf. Goodman, 1978). For one thing, the things in themselves—things regarded independently of our representations—play an important, albeit negative role in the Kantian story. This is to say that the representations must be metaphysically grounded on something—it is just that we are not in the position to know much about this ground. Alternatively, one could take the main Kantian lesson to be that speaking of things utterly independently of our representations of them just does not make much sense in the end. Yet, we are in touch with reality all the time—surely representationalism does not need to mean that reality is purely a construct, or some sort of intra-mental collection of ideas, as the hardcore idealist would have it (see *Prol* 4: 374-375). Kant's position would also be an antithesis of sheer subjectivism, or what might be called the pluralism of actual worlds (Goodman, 1978: p. 2): after all, space-time and the categories are supposed to be the universal features constitutive of all human cognition or (at least humanly) possible experience (e.g., *CPR* A42/B59, A96-97, B148).

What's more, the stark Kantian distinction between sensibility and understanding suggests that *conceptual* creationism would in any case be an unfitting term in the Kantian context. This would be so even if we admitted—whether for real or for argument's sake—that Kantianism implies some sort of cognitive "creationism" or "constructionism." This is because the contributions of sensibility—sensations, intuitions, perceptions, feelings, and the like—are not supposed to be conceptual (and even less verbal) items in the Kantian view. Quite the contrary, the whole point in introducing sensibility as a separate faculty from the intellect—also known as the faculty of concepts and judgments—has to do with the idea that there are elements in our experience that we have not (or need not have) conceptualized or verbalized.

Indeed, some such elements might simply be unreachable through conceptual thinking, and still be of utmost cognitive significance. Kant is quite explicit on this.

Take, for example, the representation of space and time as non-discursive, the singularity of intuitions, or the distinguishing between incongruent counterparts, which cannot be based on a conceptual analysis of the objects in question, or the representation of apperception as nothing but a feeling of existence in the end:

> Time is no discursive or, as one calls it, general concept, but a pure form of sensible intuition. Different times are only parts of one and the same time. That representation, however, which can only be given through a single object, is an intuition. (*CPR* A31-32/B47)

> What indeed can be more similar to, and in all parts more equal to, my and or my ear than its image in the mirror? And yet I cannot put such a hand as is seen in the mirror in the place of its original; for if the one was a right hand, then the other in the mirror is a left, and the image of the right ear is a left one, which can never take the place of the other. Now there are no inner differences here that any understanding could merely think and yet the differences are inner as far as the senses teach. (*Prol* 4: 286)

> If the representation of apperception, the *I*, were a concept through which anything might be thought, it could then be used as a predicate for other things, or contain such predicates in itself. But it is nothing more than a feeling of an existence without the least concept, and is only a representation of that to which all thinking stands in relation (*relatione accidentis*). (*Prol* 4: 334n)

One could also stress that the worldly objects, understood in Kantian terms as *apparentia*, are at least partly strictly tied to the laws of sensibility (see, e.g., *Prol* 4: 346; *CPR* B273; *CPR* A441/B469). If nothing else, the objects obeying these laws are practically forced upon us: we do not make them appear, nor do we make them appear the way they do (at least not in any proper sense of the word 'make'). The appearances simply define our *perceptual* or *sensory consciousness*, as one could put it. Take for example a ball flying suddenly through a window: there is no escape from the fact that something simply happens—a thing moves and breaks another thing—and makes us see and hear these things and react primitively in a certain way, and all this independently of how we may describe or interpret the situation, or how we may react to it in a more sophisticated manner after the initial shock. There is little we can do to contribute to reality through our concepts and language in that basic sense. I believe Kant would totally agree on this, and I also believe that his further idea that understanding prescribes the laws of nature (see, e.g., *CPR* B164; *Prol* 4: 319-320) does not change any of that. After all, the same Kant would also maintain that "the conditions under which alone the objects of human cognition are given precede those under which those objects are thought" (*CPR* A16/B30).

Or at least all of the above is true if the Kantian nonconceptualist, sensibilist, or "sensibility first" view (Hanna, 2015, 2021) of the mind-world relation is true. On the Kantian conceptualist or intellectualist understanding of the mind-world relation,

however, the cognitive roles of sensibility and understanding are to be understood not only as strictly dependent and intertwined, but understanding is seen as primary. As it is sometimes put, the contributions of sensibility must be governed or guided by concepts, especially by the pure concepts of understanding also known as "the categories" (e.g., Williams, 2012). On one possible interpretation, like the one advocated by McDowell, there is no such thing as *nonconceptual sensory consciousness* or "bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given" (McDowell, 1994/1996: p. 9) at all—not even when you primitively perceive the ball hit the window before you realize what just happened. This is because the conceptual capacities are supposed to be "already operative in the deliverances of sensibility themselves" (McDowell, 1994/1996p. 39), which is also why the contents of perceptual experience must be conceptual contents according to the conceptualist. This opens the door for conceptual/linguistic creationism: if even sensations, intuitions, perceptions, feelings, and the like, are "concept-infused" from the start, then it looks like there is indeed nothing we have not conceptualized and/or verbalized.

3. Conceptualism Implies "Judgmentalism" Implies "Verbalism" Implies "Creationism"

A way to defend the conceptualist position—but which does not go very far if one wants to altogether avoid the view that there is nothing we have not conceptualized or verbalized—is to insist that in so far as we aim to make sense of reality, we need to express the contents of perceptual experience in judgments. And everybody agrees that making judgments means the employment of conceptual capacities. This much also seems true: if I want to understand what happened in the episode of the ball hitting the window, and communicate the details of the event to you, I surely do have to express myself using concepts that constitute my judgments. Indeed, I have to think and say things like: "Did you see the ball break the window? Is that a baseball or tennis ball? Who's the culprit?"

At the same time, the "judgmentalist"—or should I say the "verbalist"—kind of conceptualism basically shrinks perceptual experience to *sentences*. If this much is true, and in addition, if the notion of nonconceptual sensory given is excluded from the equation, it is difficult to see how to avoid the slide towards the position according to which concepts and language dictate the mind-world relation. Stress the language-dependence enough and you are left without some of the core reasons to debunk conceptual creationism: You cannot anymore say that reality cannot be fully captured by judgments or expressed through linguistic means. You cannot say that reality is ineffable. You cannot say that we are in the grip of something independent from us, directly evidenced by simple perceptual situations, for example. You cannot legitimately do such things because you are married to conceptual content, or more generally, to the kind of position that sees even a simplest perception *propositionally*,

that is, in terms of *things being thus and so* (see McDowell, 1994/1996: p. 9). As I already pointed out, such a theoretical move basically reduces the contents of perceptual experience to sentences, or to be more precise, to propositions necessarily *expressed* in sentences. And so reality more or less becomes a product of verbalization, limited to what can be verbalized or otherwise linguistically expressed. As Wittgenstein famously put it: "*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein, 1922: prop. 5.6.).

Surely there are conceptualists who do not want to "deplete" reality that much. Perhaps McDowell is one of them, though that is easier said than done from someone who also thinks that "receptivity does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation [between receptivity and spontaneity]" (McDowell, 1994/1996: p. 9). Be that as it may, the kind of conceptualist who thinks that the "deliverances" of sensibility must be guided or "put under" concepts to play any cognitive role whatsoever, can still avoid the "verbalist" version. All they need to do is to show that concepts ought to be understood in some other manner than merely as the constituents of judgments that can only find real use by being expressed in the sentences of some language or another.

Oddly enough, however, nobody seems to have ever *concretely* shown *what* such a concept-use would really mean, or *how* exactly it is supposed to take place. Does the conceptualist mean that when I saw the ball hit the window, I could only make sense of the situation by *implicitly subsuming*—just like that—the ball, the window, and their clash, under the concepts of Substance and Cause? Then again, what would this even mean if the judgmentalist/verbalist view is deemed unacceptable (as *too* intellectualistic, say)? That the implicit idea of an object that exists over time (and has got some sort of powers to affect other objects, etc.) is somehow implanted in our perceptions, already at the level of sensory intakes perhaps?

While the idea of implicit subsumption (or similar) of perceptions under concepts is definitely something to look into, it suffices for the purposes of this paper to note the following. Instead of arguing for the de facto conceptuality of appearances as such, the main conceptualist argument is that for the appearances to be judgeable for us, they must be *intrinsically compatible* with concepts—most notably with the categories, at least in the Kantian context. And if that is so, it must then mean (says the conceptualist) that the ball hitting the window taken seemingly merely phenomenally must share the same cognitive structure as the ball hitting the window taken propositionally as an explication of *things being and behaving thus and so*. Therefore, they say, every perceptual experience must possess conceptual content, to which they are eager to add that otherwise the contents of perceptual experience could not enter in rational relations of justification or "the space of reasons" (see, e.g., McDowell, 1994/1996: pp. 4-5).

4. Can the Compatibility between Sensibility and Understanding Be Fully Explained?

Let's look at the intrinsic compatibility view closer. It is based on a kind of transcendental argument that basically says that if the contents of perceptions were not isomorphic with the contents of judgments, then cognitive experience as we know it would not be possible. It is telling that such an argument is not an explanation of *how* cognitive experience takes place, and it effectively overlooks the abovementioned reasons to believe that perceptual contact with reality is much more direct and uniquely different from judgments. This makes the argument rather weak, and certainly not a definitive argument against nonconceptualism. As a matter of fact, the conceptualist argument reminds the refutation of *substance dualism* on the grounds that the mind-body causation would be very hard to understand anyway. While that is certainly true, that alone does not make substance dualism untrue in the slightest.

How about Kant? What kind of an argument he gives for the compatibility view? A good place to look for is the notorious Transcendental Deduction, especially the section 26 of the B version, where Kant makes a notable move as he explicates his previous claim that "all synthesis, through which even perception itself becomes possible, stands under the categories" (*CPR* B161). Kant gives two examples of this "standing under" relation. The first example concerns the perceptual grasping of the spatial form of a house in outer intuition and its abstracted counterpart, namely the category of Quality, which suggests the attribution of size to the house, and, moreover, the "agreement" of these two "synthetic unities" (*CPR* B162). The second example concerns the perceptual recognition of water going from a fluid state to a solid state. This time the crucial element is the sequence between the two states, either considered in terms of their relation in time in inner intuition or as the abstraction of that relation in terms of effects and causes (*CPR* B162-163). In a word, the category-application is a process of *abstraction* that presumably requires something *concrete* to be abstracted *from.* What else would this concrete thing be but appearance given in intuition? In addition, take notice of the following: In the first example, the category-application concerns the quantification of the house, but *not* having the intuition or appearance of this particular object as such. Similarly, in the second example, the appearances of water turning from liquid to ice are already available for the perceiver, whereas the category-application concerns how to causally determine the event as a whole.

Is it just me, or doesn't Kant's view here look like the one *opposed* by the likes of McDowell, according to whom there cannot be anything like nonconceptual sensory consciousness, or "getting of an extra-conceptual Given"? Doesn't the appearance—elsewhere defined by Kant as the "undetermined object of an empirical intuition" (*CPR* A20/B34)—play the role of the nonconceptually given? I would say it does. Some of Kant's conditionals are quite revealing too. He says: "*if I abstract* from

the constant form of my inner intuition" and "*if I apply* [the category of cause] to my sensibility" (*CPR* B163, my italics). This does not at all suggest that the intuition or appearance itself would have to be "infused" by the category.

Of course, the abstraction process can only succeed if there *is* compatibility between understanding and sensibility, but as far as I see, the Deduction remains silent on the question *how* this process is supposed to happen (see also Laiho, 2019: pp. 45-46). In a letter to Herz, Kant himself says that this is something we cannot really explain:

> we are absolutely unable to explain further how it is that a sensible intuition (such as space and time), the form of our sensibility, or such functions of the understanding as those out of which logic develops are possible; nor can we explain why it is that one form agrees with another in forming a possible cognition. (*C* 11: 51)

Given this, the case for Kantian conceptualism remains weak: there is the idea of the necessary compatibility between sensibility and understanding, but no specific explication of their link. Besides, couldn't one suggest nonconceptualism *all the way up* on the same grounds (cf. Stalnaker, 1998/2003: pp. 105-106)? Say, by admitting that understanding and sensibility must operate together at some point of the cognitive process, while emphasizing that the main Kantian point would nevertheless be that their co-operation must be *grounded* in nonconceptual intuitions for it to have any significance at *any* point of the cognitive process?

A little later in the same section, Kant makes another interesting move as he explicates the two examples further by referring to the laws of nature in general, as opposed to particular laws of nature that are always partly empirical (B163-165). These laws of possible experience, as Kant calls them in the *Prolegomena,* are "prescribed" by space and time "in combination with" the categories (*Prol* 4: 375). Yet, and this I find worthy of emphasis, these laws are *very general* in character. The category of Cause, for example, implies "the law, that if an event is perceived then it is always referred to something preceding from which it follows according to a universal rule" (*Prol* 4: 296). This in turn implies the more general view that nature as a whole must comply with such principles, since otherwise it would not be possible for us to know anything necessary and *a priori* about it. But what this more general view does not imply is that the appearances themselves must be governed or "infused" by the categories to count as appearing objects in the first place.

Of course, one might still argue that in order to count as fully-fledged objects, understood as epistemic items self-consciously available to the cognitive subject, the appearances need to be combined with the categories (see, e.g., Allais, 2009: p. 405). A textually based variation of this argument would go that mere representations need to be "related to an object", understood as "that in the concept of which the manifold

of given intuition is united" (B137). This, in turn, points towards the categories, and "the unity of consciousness" (B136-137) constituted by them, which is supposed to secure how every intuition, and the manifold contained in it, is thinkable (see B138). To my mind, however, the introduction of the one consciousness acts as just another compatibility argument, which leaves the *how*-question intact—this time, more specifically, the question about how the unity of the categories in one consciousness is relatable to the appearances. In support of this reading, I would like to point up Kant's remark earlier in the Deduction (§21):

> In the above proof, however, I still could not abstract from one point, namely, from the fact that the manifold for intuition must already be given prior to the synthesis of the understanding and independently from it; how, however, is here left undetermined. (B145)

Nor do I see any further proof forthcoming in the text. Apparently the Schematism—not the Deduction—should give us some insight into the *how*-question, that is, "how is … the application of the category to appearances possible" (*CPR* A137/B176). Yet, as everybody familiar with the Schematism chapter knows, Kant is, again, sparing on the details, and gives better examples of geometrical and empirical concepts and their respective schemata, though his ultimate point is supposed to concern the categories and their transcendental schemata. It almost seems like he was in a rush, and that this question, or providing an exact answer to it, was never his primary concern. As we have seen, the same might be said about the Deduction.

5. Conclusion

In the last section I argued that the Deduction is not exactly an explanation of how the co-operation of sensibility and understanding takes place. Instead, the Deduction shows at best that sensibility and understanding, though separate and distinct, must be compatible in their operations. As such, however, the compatibility argument does not show preference for Kantian conceptualism over Kantian nonconceptualism. Earlier, I proposed that not only does Kantian nonconceptualism better appreciate the uniqueness of the two faculties and their cognitive contributions, but also it helps us keep with Kant's realist tendencies that disfavor any such position that might be called conceptual or linguistic creationism. Taken together, these points support, even if indirectly, the kind of Kantianism that emphasizes the primacy of sensibility. In fact, maybe we should here follow the arch-conceptualist McDowell himself and insist that we do not even "[need] to give an account of how concepts and intuitions are brought into alignment" (McDowell 1994/1996: p. 457). Indeed, why not accept that we do not really need to (perhaps because we are unable to) fully understand the co-operation between sensibility and understanding? It is just that this argument works in favor of nonconceptualism too.

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