

Perceptual Content and the Unity of Perception

Abstract: In recent work, Scott Soames (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) and Peter Hanks (2011, 2013, 2015) have developed a theory of propositions on which these are constituted by complexes of intellectual acts. In this paper, I adapt this type of theory to provide an account of perceptual content. After introducing terminology in section (1), in section (2) I detail the approach proffered by Soames and Hanks, focusing on Hanks' version. I introduce a problem that these theories face, namely how to account for the unity among the relevant intellectual acts. Section (3) provides an answer to this problem of unity, and section (4) extends it to a theory of the unity of experiential consciousness. In section (5), finally, I apply the preceding considerations to debates about the nature of perceptual representation. The upshot will be that experiential unity is not simply a phenomenal feature of consciousness, but central to an account of the role perceptual representation plays in perceptual cognition.

As we perceive something, we rouse ourselves, so to speak, as though from a sleep with respect to the object. We grasp [it], comprehend it, we grasp ourselves with respect to it, [and] reflect upon ourselves.

J. N. Tetens, 1913, p. 284

A concept should thus be understood as *consciousness of an act*, and more precisely of an act of *combining and grasping together*.

Béatrice Longuenesse 1998, p. 46

In recent years there has been an increased interest in Kant's theory of perception¹, and specifically Kant's view of the nature of "intuitions" (*Anschauungen*): immediate confrontations with objects.² Questions of interest include Kant's distinctive thoughts on the relation between perceptual awareness and self-awareness, the question whether or not intuitions have representational content in the contemporary sense of term, and if so, whether this content should be considered to be conceptual or non-conceptual.³ However, one difficulty approaching these issues from a contemporary point of view is that Kant appears to start from a very different mental metaphysics than is the contemporary standard. Specifically, Kant starts from a

¹ References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* use standard A/B notation. Further Kant references: R = ('Reflexionen') Kants handschriftlicher Nachlaß AA ('Akademieausgabe') 14-19; Prol. = (2001) *Prolegomena for Any Future Metaphysics*. Transl. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

² There is a distinction between "pure" and "empirical" intuitions, only the latter of which have a perceptual character. I will only be concerned with empirical intuitions.

³ For non-conceptualist readings, see Hanna 2005, 2008, 2011; Allais 2009; Tolley 2013; McLearn 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Schulting and Onof 2015. For conceptualist readings, see Ginsborg 2006, 2008; Wenzel 2005; Griffith 2012; Van Mazijk 2014a, 2014b; Gomes 2014, 2017; McDowell 2009; Engstrom 2006; Connolly 2013.

metaphysics of mind on which there is a critical place in cognition for certain mental *acts* associated with the mind's *faculties*. This model was standard for the early modern period, but contrasts with the contemporary model of understanding mental states in terms of attitudes or relations to propositions. Consequently, it is not entirely clear how to map a position in Kant's thinking to a position in 21st century philosophy of mind or perception.

In this paper I will bring Kant's thinking about perception into contact with an important recent re-appraisal of "activist" mental metaphysics.⁴ In recent work, Scott Soames (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) and Peter Hanks (2011, 2013, 2015) have argued that we should reject act-object conceptions of propositional attitudes, and have instead developed a view broadly in the early modern mold, on which subjects constitute propositions through mental acts, acts like predication and referring to objects.⁵ As I will argue, focusing on this contemporary development of the early modern conception of propositional representation brings to the fore an otherwise rarely-discussed feature of Kant's account. For Kant, a core function of our cognitive faculties is to bring *unity* to our representations, including those implicated in perceptual experience. As I will show, this notion of cognitive capacities as playing a unifying role has clear application to the type of re-appraisal of the early modern view developed by Soames and Hanks. Moreover, the role of such a unifying function is a central and distinctive feature of Kant's account of intuitions, and is of special significance when considering the relevance of Kant's account of intuitions for contemporary thinking about perception. Specifically, I will argue that the relevant perceptual unity provides a novel and compelling way of developing the notion of perceptual content, which is at the heart of most contemporary accounts of perception.

⁴ Strictly speaking, the work on which I will focus is in semantics, as it focuses on the nature of propositions. However, I will be focusing on the mental acts that, *per* these accounts, are involved in propositional representation.

⁵ For the connection between perceptual content and mental acts, see also Susanna Schellenberg's recent work: "perceptual consciousness is constituted by a mental activity. [...] this view is in fact a version of representationalism." (Schellenberg 2019, p. 530). For Schellenberg perceptual representation is constituted by the pre-conceptual exercise of "basic" or "simple" discriminatory capacities. By contrast, on the present account the relevant capacities will have a more intellectual character.

This paper will proceed as follows. After introducing terminology in section (1), in section (2) I detail the “activist” theory of propositions as developed by Hanks and Soames, focusing on Hanks’ version. I introduce a problem that these theories face, namely how to account for the unity among the relevant intellectual acts. Section (3) provides an answer to this problem of unity, and section (4) extends it to a theory of the unity of experiential consciousness. In section (5), finally, I apply the preceding considerations to debates about the nature of perceptual representation. The upshot will be that experiential unity is not simply a phenomenal feature of consciousness, but central to an account of the role perceptual representation plays in perceptual cognition.

1. Conscious Unity and Perceptual Representation

Conscious experience is a unified phenomenon, in which the parts of experience seem to belong to a single whole. I am making my way across a narrow bridge, flanked by stone cliffs on either side. I look at the depths around me, the floor of the gorge shrouded in a thick mist. I attempt to focus my view on the movement of my feet, as I strain to control my fear on my way across this narrow path. All these different aspects present themselves in a unified manner, all of them parts of a single whole that is my visual experience, which is in turn part of my lived conscious life. As Michael Tye has put this idea (Tye 2003, p. 97):

The simplest hypothesis compatible with what is revealed by introspection is that, for each period of consciousness, there is only a single experience – an experience that represents everything experienced within the period of consciousness as a whole.

In what follows I will refer to this part-whole relationship as the “unity of experience”.

My claim in this paper is that the unity of experience is related to a second feature of experience: its representational content. According to theories on which perception has representational content, these representations capture the cognitive contribution of experience.⁶

⁶ There are non-representational theories of perception, on which perception does not have content, but I will not consider such theories in this paper. For examples, see Campbell 2002 and Fish 2009.

Moreover, so-called phenomenalist representational views hold that perceptual representations determine the phenomenal character of experience.⁷ In this paper I will argue that all these features are connected: the unified character of experience is constituted by the way the experience has representational content, and both are associated with the cognitive apparatus of the perceiving subject. In short, I will argue for the following claim:

Unity Content Thesis: The unity of a conscious visual experience is constituted by the representational content of that state.

This claim raises a question that requires a brief answer for the purposes of this paper: what is perceptual representational content? Roughly put, perceptual representation constitutes a particular answer to the question of how perception affords us awareness of our surrounding environment. For a significant period of time, the dominant answer to this question in the analytic tradition was that perception includes direct awareness of *sense-data*, non-physical objects bearing particular sensory qualities.⁸ More recently, however, the most common answer has been that perception *represents* the environment to be some way, and that a subject can accordingly *judge* that the environment is that way.⁹ Martin Davies puts the idea as follows: “An experience may present to the world to the subject as containing something square in front of her; and the subject may take that experience at face value and judge that there is something square in front of her” (1992, pp. 22-23). Just so, John McDowell writes: “That things are thus and so is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment: it becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decided to take the experience at face value” (1992, p. 26). I will here refer to this view that visual experiences represent, or alternatively that visual experiences bear representational contents, as *representationalism*.

⁷ For example, Tye 2002.

⁸ As H.H. Price writes, “The term sense-datum is meant to be a neutral term [...] The term is meant to stand for something whose existence is indubitable (however fleeting) something from which all theories of perception ought to start” (Price 1932, p. 37).

⁹ While frequently still characterized as orthodoxy, the prominent debate between representational and relational views makes it more accurate to say the field is divided. I will not address this controversy here.

There are different popular forms of representationalism. The classic idea as articulated by John Searle in his seminal *Intentionality* is that perceptual experience partakes in the intentional character of other mental attitudes like belief and desire by relating the subject to propositions (Searle 1983, p. 40).¹⁰ Recently, the propositional version of representationalism has been less popular than a competing version, which understands perceptual content to be non-conceptual, i.e. cognitively less sophisticated than a propositional attitude.¹¹ Moreover, some representationalists have emphasized the role of representational *capacities* over experiences bearing representational *contents*.¹² On these views, we may recognize the role of these capacities in experience without attributing to experience any content. For purposes of keeping this paper straightforward, however, I will leave both of these distinctions and others aside, and focus on the traditional propositional view. Accordingly, I will consider the view that, like beliefs, experiences bear propositions as their contents.

What is it for perceptual experiences to bear propositions as their contents? On the standard view, it means that perceptual experience is a relation between the subject and an item, namely a proposition. To be sure, this is not to *identify* perceptual experience with a propositional attitude like belief, but nevertheless the experience is supposed to relate the subject to the same proposition that she can subsequently believe. In this light, consider the following claim:

Content Thesis: The cognitive contribution of perception, i.e. the significance perceptual experience has in the acquisition of perceptual knowledge, is captured by the experience's representational content.

Understood this way, the core idea of perceptual content is that it spells out what, on the basis of the experience, the subject can know, should judge, or has *prima facie* entitlement to believe.¹³

¹⁰ The idea that perception, like belief and desire, is a propositional attitude has more recently been defended by Alex Byrne and Michael Tye.

¹¹ Peacocke 1992, 2001.

¹² This distinction is sometimes referred to the opposition between 'content' and 'act' versions of representationalism. See for example the discussion in Toiribio (2008). I will not discuss this distinction here, although my view may be expressed in either mode.

¹³ Note in this context the aspect of both Davies' and McDowell's characterizations of the propositional view that characterizes a proposition as the "face value" of a perceptual experience. The idea of a "face

To take the full measure of the traditional representationalist view, it is worth asking how this is so. What makes perceptual content salient to capturing the cognitive contribution perception makes? Commonly, if often implicitly, the thought is that a representational content spells out *a way* that the environment can be judged to be. Matthew Boyle expresses this conception as follows:

The notion of perceptual content [...] is the idea that perception presents objects *as* being certain ways (or equivalently: as having certain properties or features.) [...] the idea is that perceptual content involves a referential element (marked by “things”), on the one hand, and a classificatory element (marked by “thus-and-so”), on the other hand.¹⁴

In this passage Boyle specifies what we can characterize as a content’s “attributive complement”: the part of the representation that assigns to a perceived particular a property. The reason why the attributive complement is essential to this conception of perceptual content is that it articulates the logic of perceptual cognition that the idea of perceptual content expresses. It is the fact that perception represents an item *as F* that licenses the subject to judge that the item *is F*. Note that this type of account simply does not work without specifying the attributive complement.

It will be part of the account of mental representation I develop below that the emphasis in perceptual representation will lie in something other than the attributive complement. But to mark the relevant contrast it is helpful to first trace the attributive complement to a traditional conception of the mental abilities involved. Propositions have conceptual constituents, and

value” is a gloss on the cognitive contribution perception experience makes. The strength of this contribution—whether it is *prima facie* or indefeasible—depends on the form of representationalism in question.

¹⁴ Boyle (Forthcoming), p. 10. Compare a similar characterization by Ned Block (2014, p. 560):

every percept is constituted by a “perceptual attributive” (that represents an attribute) and a singular element (that represents an individual).

A slightly different variant on this characterization is endorsed by Charles Travis (2013), who holds that perceptual content spells out a *way* the world can be, but does not appear to think of this as the attribution of a property to an individual. (The idea is that the putative fact in general is a way of being that the particularity of the world is taken to instantiate).

require conceptual abilities to entertain.¹⁵ On a canonical understanding of these capacities, they must conform to what Gareth Evans has called the ‘generality constraint’ on conceptual abilities. In Evans’ view, conceptual abilities must be *generally* deployable, such that, for example, I can judge of *a* not merely that it is *F*, but also *G*, *H*, etc.; and such that I can ascribe *F* not merely to *a*, but also to *b*, *c*, etc. While Evans’ generality constraint has gained very general acceptance, a somewhat more implicit aspect of Evans’ discussion has received less attention: the fact that Evans’ discussion posits not merely a constraint on conceptual capacities, but also adopts a conception of the capacities over which the generality constraint ranges. Articulating this conception, Evans writes that conceptual abilities come in two varieties, since “thought is a joint exercise of two distinguishable abilities” (Evans 1982, p. 104). As Evans develops this point in more detail (Evans 1982, p. 101):

It seems to me that there must be a sense in which thoughts are structured. I [prefer] the sense in which thoughts are structured, not in terms of their being composed of several distinct elements, but in terms of a complex of the exercise of several distinct conceptual abilities.

In this passage, Evans characterizes the type of conceptual capacities employed in thought as inherently bearing a type of structure. For present purposes, the critical feature of this characterization is that it represents conceptual capacities as *bifurcated*: a combination of what Evans terms “Concepts”, which pick out properties, and “Ideas”, which pick out objects. For Evans, these are intrinsically different types of representational capacities that are only together capable of relating a subject to a propositional content (Evans 1982, p. 102). This point is relevant because it underlies the emphasis on the importance of the attributive complement: while by an “Idea” the subject (or the perceptual state) picks out an item, by a “Concept” she specifies *the way* this item is represented to be.¹⁶ Evidently, there is a level at which Evans’

¹⁵ This point is sometimes characterized by saying that the constituents of propositions are Fregean senses, but nothing in this regard should turn on their *Fregean* character; what matter is that they are the contents of thoughts.

¹⁶ This narrow gloss on “Concepts” as identified with predicate-like abilities is common, as for example in the following passage from Alex Byrne (Byrne 2005, p. 231):

bifurcated characterization of conceptual capacities is unassailable: there is no denying that thoughts involve both referential and predicative capacities. Nevertheless, Evans' influential account raises a question it does not answer: what combines referential and predicative capacities as *conceptual* capacities, i.e. as capacities operative in thought? In what is to follow I will argue that Evans' account misses out a more fundamental *unity* between conceptual capacities, which is essential to them as capacities for thought. Moreover, I will argue that this more fundamental character is essential to the role representational capacities play in perception, and that appreciating this fact provides us a novel gloss on the notion of perceptual representation.

2. *The Act Conception of Propositions*

On the representationalist conception at issue in this paper, perception is relevantly akin to a propositional attitude: a mental state in which, on the traditional conception, the subject is related to a proposition, i.e. an item with intrinsic representational features that are logically prior to the mental acts by means of which subject holds the propositional attitude. Recently, however, Scott Soames (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) and Peter Hanks (2011, 2013, 2015) have done important work done to revive an understanding of an “activist” account of propositional attitudes, which was dominant among early modern philosophers but largely neglected in post-Frege analytic philosophy. For Soames and Hanks, propositions themselves should be understood terms of a

Concepts are certain kinds of Fregean senses, specifically Fregean senses of predicates (e.g., “is a horse”). They are supposed to be constituents, together with other kinds of senses (e.g. senses of singular terms like “Seabiscuit”) of the senses of sentences (e.g., Seabiscuit is a horse”), otherwise known as Fregean Thoughts.

Byrne here explicitly characterizes “concepts” as *one kind* of constituent of a full proposition, namely predicate-like constituents. Clearly this is an acceptable way to use the term “concept”, but the present point is that there must *also* be a use of “concept” that extends to constituents of thoughts generally, i.e. to Fregean senses *qua* their character as senses (cf. McDowell 1996, p. 107).

type of mental *act* that *constitutes* a representational structure.¹⁷ The representational character of propositions accordingly does not precede the mental activity of the thinking subject, and propositional attitudes are not attitudes towards pre-existing items. As Peter Hanks has characterized this view (Hanks 2015, p. 4):

[I reject] a picture of the relation between content and thought on which the contents of judgments have their representational features in a way that is explanatorily prior to the representational features of particular acts of judgment. [...] Representations and truth conditions begin with acts of predication, and propositions inherit their representational features from these acts.

Call this idea

Activism: Propositional representation is constitutively associated with certain mental acts, i.e., the exercises of certain representational capacities.

While Soames' and Hanks' accounts differ in some important respects, they are relevantly similar in taking propositions to be constituted by a complex of various sub-propositional mental acts. I will here focus on Hanks' account specifically. For Hanks, propositions are constituted by mental acts that are (a) *types* and (b) *complex*, and which have as their tokens individual mental judgments or their verbal expression, assertions. Consider the following example Hanks introduces (Hanks 2011, p. 12):

Suppose Ann asserts that George is clever. Ann's assertion is a composite action; it is composed out of more basic actions. In asserting that George is clever, Ann *refers* to George and she *predicates* the property of being clever of him.

Taking this example, we can understand Hanks' view as follows.

a) Propositions are *types* of actions because individual assertions can constitute tokens of the same propositional action-type. For example, Ann might assert that George is clever, but so might Betty. Indeed, the relevant type of action can be specified without being tokened.

b) Second, propositions are *complex* because they are composed out of more basic acts.

Specifically, as Hanks continues to develop the view, propositions are actions consisting of a

¹⁷ To be sure, it is not by and large correct to think of a proposition as the "product" of mental acts: this suggests more of an act-object model than is appropriate. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper I will be happy to speak of "constitution" as the relevant relation. Likewise, I will say that mental acts "combine" representations, but again this should not be taken as metaphysically substantive.

referential act and a predicative act, where predicative acts are in turn composites of more basic acts: acts in which a property is singled out (Hanks calls this “expressing” a property), and acts in which the relevant property is applied to an object. Accordingly, the proposition in the example consists of three basic elements: (i) a referential act singling out George; (ii) an “expressive” act picking out the property “clever”; (iii) an attributive or “applicative” act of applying “clever” to George.

As Hanks and Soames discuss at length, any activist account of this broad shape must address at least three traditional objections: (1) the accounts seem to violate Frege’s context principle by construing full thoughts from more basic elements; (2) the accounts seem to violate the force-content distinction by taking predicative acts to involve an assertive element; and (3) the accounts can seem to endorse a type of pre-Fregean psychologism in identifying representational contents with mental acts. For purposes of this paper, however, I will focus on a fourth difficulty raised in a recent paper by Jeff Speaks (Speaks Forthcoming).¹⁸ This difficulty is a version of the so-called “problem of the unity of the proposition”: the problem of securing a suitable coherence between the various elements that co-constitute a single proposition. As Speaks notes, the “problem of the unity of the proposition” has historically been used to describe a variety of topics, and arguably there is no *general* difficulty concerning unity that accounts of propositions are required to solve.¹⁹ However, activist accounts of the proposition in particular cannot afford to be blasé about the question of unity. After all, if for Hanks a proposition is a *complex* act, then it is a requirement of the view that the various “basic” acts cohere suitably. In order for these acts to be co-executed in such a way as to form a proposition, it does not suffice if somehow the subject were to engage in acts of reference and predication *separately*. Without suitable coherence, the

¹⁸ Suffice to say that the extensive discussion by Hanks and Soames shows it is far from clear that (1) – (3) are insurmountable. For example, Hanks proposes to deal with (2) by introducing *force-canceling contents*, as opposed to *force-neutral contents* (for discussion of this proposal, see Brigham 2017). For the account in this paper (1) will not arise, since it will attribute priority to acts that encompass the full proposition over sub-propositional acts.

¹⁹ For a thorough treatment of the problem in both a historic and systematic context, see Gaskin 2009.

“activist” account simply fails to explain how the mental acts it posits co-constitute a proposition.

In an example of the type of unity that requires explanation, consider the following proposition as understood by Hanks:

Paul von Hindenburg was a hero of World War One



Referential Act

Predicative Act

For this to be a proposition, the referential act and the predicative act must be executed *together* in such a way that the referential act is suitably “unified” with the predicative act. What might be meant by this “togetherness” or “unity”? To focus discussion, I will here concentrate on one particular feature that clearly is part of a suitable “togetherness”: the *identity* of the referential act needs to carry over to the predicative act, so that in thinking of *someone* as a hero of World War One, I am aware it is *Paul von Hindenburg* I am thinking of that way.

To appreciate the challenge here for the activist view, consider that it is a feature of Hanks’ view that propositions can be individuated by different ways of referring to the same item. For example, two propositions may be differentiated by the way I refer to Von Hindenburg through two distinct types of referential acts: the act expressed by “Paul von Hindenburg”, say, and the act expressed by “The Victor of Tannenberg”. Now, suppose I single out an item *o* by an instance of a referential act *A*, rather than *B*. Suppose further that I, as part of the same propositional act, predicate *F* of *o*. Now, as Jeff Speaks helpfully observes, whatever else goes under “the unity of the proposition,” it includes the following: my propositional act is unified in such a way that in predicating *F* of *o*, I do so of *o as singled*

out in way *A*.²⁰ One way to put this point is that propositional unity rules out a certain *identity question*: that the predicative act concerns *o*, but leaves open whether it concerns *o* as singled out by *A*. In what follows I will refer to this relation between the elements of a propositional act as follows:

Identity Condition (IC): Propositional unity includes a common identity between the elements of the proposition, such that the identity of the referential and predicative acts necessarily coheres.

As Speaks notes, it is not immediately clear how an activist view along the lines proposed by Hanks might provide an account of (IC). Speaks considers three salient options, but convincingly show none of these none of these appear satisfactory:

- (i) *Co-exercise*: The mere co-exercise of referential and predicative capacities does not ground (IC). Merely simultaneously engaging in *A* and predicating *F* of *o* does not ensure the act meets (IC).
- (ii) *Causation*: It is not clear that a referential act *A* causing the predicative act *F* of *o* suffices to meet (IC). After all, there may be a causal relation between *A* and predicating *F* of *o* while nevertheless the predicative act does not retain *the identity* of *A*.
- (iii) *Intention*: It would be problematic to introduce into the propositional act an intention to meet (IC) (i.e., the intention to not merely predicate *F* of *o*, but to do so of *o* as singled out by *A*.) Intentions are themselves states with propositional contents, and accordingly an infinite regress ensues.

For the purposes of this paper I will agree with Speaks, and I will set aside attempts to accommodate (IC) on versions of (i)-(iii). However, where Speaks does not provide a positive

²⁰ From a desire not to introduce further unnecessary terminology I will not speak this way, but one way to put the point is that the *Fregean sense* of the Referential Act is (necessarily) maintained through the Predicative Act.

solution, I will suggest there is a natural fourth alternative, which indeed has a clear pedigree within early modern treatments of judgment. I will turn now to this account.

3. *Propositional Acts and The Capacity to Judge*

The “activist” view of propositions is not new: it revives an early modern conception of the relation between propositions and intellectual activity.²¹ In an example, consider the view presented in the standard textbook of early modern logic, Arnauld and Nicole’s *Port-Royal Logic* of 1662. Introducing the nature of judgment, the *Logic* provides the following characterization (Arnauld and Nicole 1996, p. 82):

we unite or separate [ideas]. This is called *affirming* or *denying*, and in general *judging*. This judgment is also called a *proposition* [...] It is not enough to conceive [the terms of the proposition], but the mind must connect or separate them.

As this passage describes, on this view thought-contents—propositions—are constituted by the subject’s introduction of either of two relations among its elements: “connection” by affirmation, and “separation” by denial. While this conception does not explicitly posit the referential and predicative acts of Hanks’ account, the views are clearly akin in conceiving of propositions as constituted by the subject bringing together (or in this case, holding apart) more basic sub-propositional referential and predicative elements.

The account of the *Port-Royal* is worth mentioning because it serves to introduce Kant’s distinctive contribution to the theory of thought: Kant’s focus on the *unity* of representations in a judgment, which is our present topic. As stated in the above passage, the *Port-Royal Logic* characterizes judgment in terms of either combining representations (“affirmation”) or separating them (“negation”). By contrast, Kant famously insists that *any* judgment presupposes a prior *combination* of representations, insofar as this union is required for the “comparison” of

²¹ For an exposition and defense at length of early modern activist approaches to the intellect, see Marušić 2014.

subject and predicate that judgment involves.²² Suppose for example that I am “comparing” some curtains with my representation of the color white, and I come to the conclusion that the curtains are *not* white. While my ultimate judgment may be characterized as a “separation” of the idea of the curtains and the idea of white, still I must first have brought the representations together mentally in order to conduct the comparison. In other words: to see that a proposition is false, it must first meet the unity required to be a *proposition*. In Kant’s terminology, this mental unity required by all cognition is the result of what Kant calls the “synthetic function” of the intellect (i.e. the faculty Kant calls the understanding). As Kant characterizes “synthesis” it is “[the] action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition” (A77/B103). I will suggest this is a natural place to look for an account of (IC).

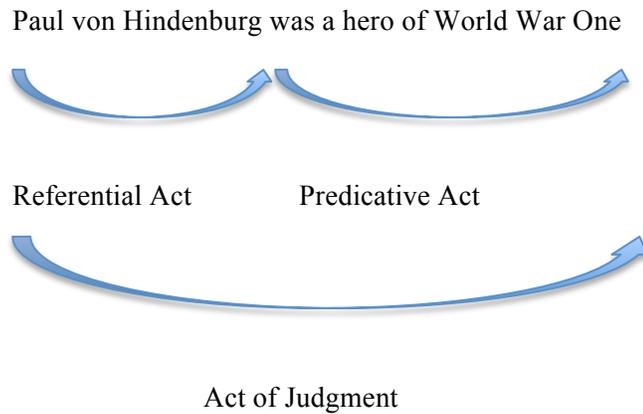
What is the “unity of the proposition” that the activist account needs to secure? The requirement captured by (IC) is that there must be a common *identity* between the sub-propositional mental acts that co-constitute a proposition. In judging “*A* is *F*”, I judge that *F* is true of an item *as singled out by A*. The Kantian account that I will here develop meets this requirement through a natural idea: the common identity of the sub-propositional acts is grounded in a *further* act, which spans the full proposition, namely a *judgment* (or, in other words, a thought). That is, the manner in which the subject engages in a unity of the various sub-propositional acts is determined by way these acts are elements of the overarching act of

²² As Kant writes on the nature of the comparison (R 4634, 17: 616; cf. A260-1/B316-7):

In every judgment, therefore, there are two predicates we compare to one another. One, which constitutes the given cognition of the object, is the logical subject, the other, which is compared with it, is called the logical predicate.

I do not here consider complexities in Kant’s account, as for example here the idea judgment involving *two* predicates. Likewise, since my concerns are not historical I will not draw fine-grained distinctions between Kantian usage of ‘judgment’ (*Urteil*), ‘cognition’ (*Erkenntnis*) or ‘thought’ (*Gedanke*). I will speak of a judgment or thought interchangeably. For further discussion of Kant’s use of “comparison,” see Longuenesse 1998, p. 111ff.

judgment in which she is engaged.²³ To take up the example introduced above, then, the picture I develop below will look as follows:



Now, introducing an “act of judgment” does not by itself settle the question about (IC). This is because characterizing sub-propositional acts as elements of a unified judgment does not by itself ensure that the *identity* of the referential act carries over to the predicative act. Consider the above example. It is one thing to say that my singling out of Von Hindenburg and my predicating of the same person that he is a hero are both elements of the same united thought. But it is quite another thing to ensure that heroism is predicated of this person *as singled out* as Von Hindenburg. An account needs to be given of the distinctive coherence of the sub-propositional elements within the whole act of judgment.

It is on this topic—the way sub-propositional representations cohere in a judgment—that the Kantian account introduces its most distinctive posit: the *self-awareness* (or “apperception”) with which a subject engages in an act of judgment. Since this is a difficult topic, I will in this section provide a schematic account of the relevant type of self-awareness, counting on further sections to provide its concrete application to representational states like perception. To see the

²³ Hanks briefly considers the idea that there are full propositional acts that are “primitive,” but rejects this view because it cannot provide genuine explanation of propositional unity as truth-evaluable unities (Hanks 2015, Ch. 2). However, Hanks’ idea is not quite the one considered here: judgments will not be “primitive” or “unanalyzable”. While the topic lies beyond the purview of the paper, for the Kantian view the relation between judgment and truth will lie in the faculty responsible for judgment, which for Kant is a faculty for *knowledge* or *cognition* (*Erkenntnis*).

application of the Kantian account to (IC), consider:

- (iv) *Constitution*: In the relevant respect, the “unity of the proposition” is constituted by the subject’s self-awareness of engaging in a unified act that encompasses the full proposition, viz. thinking a unified thought. Specifically, the identity of the referential act is retained in the predicative act in virtue of both acts being aspects of a single self-consciously unified propositional act.

What (iv) posits is that in engaging in an act of judgment, the subject is self-aware of engaging in a single act that unifies multiple representations within it. For Kant, it is important that this self-awareness is not a type of *meta*-awareness: as if the subject *cognizes* or *judges* that her act of judgment contains multiple representations. Rather, this self-awareness is *part of* the act of judging itself.²⁴ In other words, a single act of thinking is associated with an *awareness of its own unity*. Being part of the very act of judging, this self-awareness is intended to be neither prehensive of (logically posterior to) the relevant unity nor productive of (logically prior to) this unity: the awareness does not grasp an independent unity, nor does it produce such a unity. Rather, the self-awareness *is* the unity: it “holds together” the representations contained within the judgment.²⁵ This sounds more mystifying than it needs to be, given that our discussion concerns the nature of thought. Consider again the referential act of singling out Von Hindenburg and the predicative act of describing him as *F* (a hero of World War I). On the present view, the coherence between these two acts is nothing other than the subject’s self-awareness of the coherence: the way, when the subject predicates *F* of *o*, she is self-aware of predicating *F* of *o* as

²⁴ First-order self-awareness is the centerpiece of discussion at Rödl 2007 (contrast Gennaro 2006 who enlists Kant in defense of a higher-order view of consciousness). I will not defend this view at length here, and focus instead on the association between unity and representation.

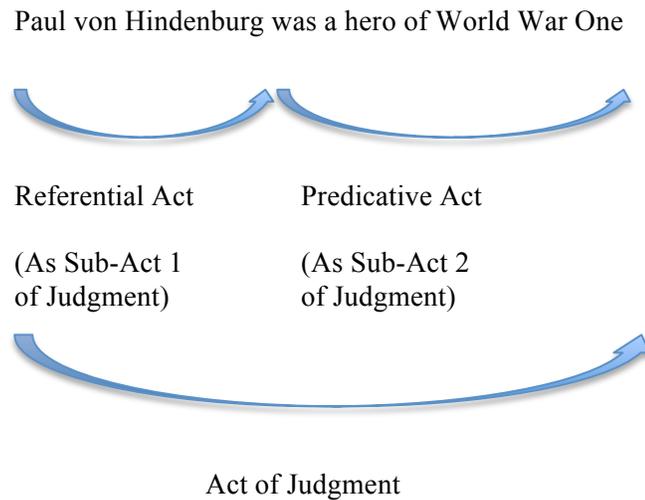
²⁵ This notion of self-awareness is remarkable, but it has recently been given increased attention. For a sustained treatment see Rödl 2007 and Rödl 2013. More can also be found in the lucid discussion of empirical self-knowledge and apperceptive self-knowledge at Boyle 2009.

singled out by A. Given that the topic is thought, i.e. an activity within the subject's self-conscious management of her mental life, it really is not surprising or mysterious that she could engage in two acts *as self-consciously united* within a larger act. This is the present account of (IC). In this sense, (iv) should not seem unnatural as an account of (IC). When a subject singles out an item and predicates a property of it, she does so being self-aware that the two acts are united within a single act of judgment.

I should forestall two salient confusions that will be relevant to the discussion to follow. The first is that the point of (iv) is not *temporal*, as if being self-aware of the relevant unity is an act of *memory*. In predicating *F* of *o*, the subject does not *recall* referring to *o* by *A*. Instead, the ordering between the two acts is logical: the unity is between two (in principle) temporally simultaneous but logically complementary and “successive” mental acts.²⁶ Second, it is not as though the self-awareness of judgment so-to-say “glues” the sub-propositional representations together. Instead, there is a sense in which the act of judgment is logically prior to the sub-propositional acts. To appreciate this contrast, consider that for Hanks sub-propositional acts are “basic,” and full propositional acts are *composites* of such basic acts. On this picture, an act that suitably unifies the relevant “basic acts” must take a broadly relational form, forging a coherence-relation between its elements. By contrast, on the present account sub-propositional elements are “unified” because *within their character* as sub-propositional acts is included a self-awareness of the unity of the full thought. Consider a subject engaging in an act of judgment that encompasses a referential and a predicative act. On (iv), the subject's referential conscious will include a self-awareness of engaging in *one part of a larger act*, viz. a judgment. Just so, in her predicative act the subject is self-conscious of engaging in another part of the same single act. Stephen Engstrom has characterized this as Kant's idea that “the consciousness of the whole [thought] must [...] *precede* the specific consciousness of the components” in the sense that “[consciousness] of the

²⁶ Of course it is possible that study of the brain reveals a temporal order, but this is not part of what the subject *thinks* in thinking her thought, while the relevant unity is part of this.

whole must be *in* each of the conscious thinkings that make up the components” (Engstrom 2009, p. 99). Referential acts and predicative acts are united because one does not engage in the former without self-consciously doing it in union with the latter, and *vice versa*. Accordingly, we can now give the following visual rendering of our example as meeting (IC):



4. *The Perceptual Concept*

So far I have followed Scott Soames and Peter Hanks in their suggestion that propositions are constituted by certain mental acts. More specifically, I have argued these mental acts should be associated with an intellect that “combines”, i.e. that meets the Kantian view that all empirical consciousness “must be combined in one single self-consciousness” which Kant characterizes as “the absolutely first synthetic principle of all our thought as such” (A117n; cf. Prol. §22 4: 304). However, what does this mean for *perceptual experience*? The answer is forged in the Kantian claim that the same mental unifying capacity implicated in judgment also plays a role in a sensory perceptual state. As Kant puts this claim: (B103/A79):

the same understanding, and, to be sure, by just the same transactions [by which] it created the logical form of judgment, also [brings] synthetic unity to an intuition’s multiplicity.

Kant here explicitly links the intellectual capacity to judge, the understanding, to the unity of representations in an intuition, i.e. a perceptual confrontation with an object. Based on this idea,

consider the following

Unity Thesis: The same manner in which the intellect, the capacity for thought, unifies sub-propositional acts in a judgment, so it also unifies the elements of visual consciousness within a single unified experiential episode.

In this section I will develop this notion of sensory unity. In the next section I will relate that unity to a conception of perceptual representation.

Kant tends to illustrate the unity operative in sensory consciousness with certain examples, and it will help us to do the same here. In one such example, Kant considers the imagistic awareness of drawing a circle. Here is how Thomas Land describes the example (Land 2015, p. 24):

consider one of the geometrical examples Kant mentions, viz. the act of ‘describing a circle’: In drawing a circle, to apprehend what is before my mind as the representation of a single object, I must conceive of my act of drawing as a single act, in the sense that all the phases of this act belong to the generation of a single representation. I must not, for instance, forget that this is what I am doing as I move e.g. from the top right quadrant of the circle to the bottom right quadrant. More generally, during each phase of my activity I must think of this phase as being part of a more encompassing process; the process, namely, of generation the representation of a circle.

To take up Land’s description, suppose I am drawing a circle on the blackboard. Starting from the top, I move my hand clockwise in a smooth motion until in due course I arrive back at the point I started, closing the circle. Suppose for purposes of this argument we divide up my drawing of this circle in a number of temporal segments: the first starting at t , the second at $t+1$, the third at $t+2$, and so on. The question animating the example is how we should think about the character of the acts determined by these temporal segments. The suggestion is that one cannot understand these acts without seeing them as unified in the subject’s consciousness as parts of a larger act she is self-consciously undertaking, viz. drawing the circle on the board. After all, unless throughout these acts I am self-aware what my project is (drawing the circle) and my way my current act is a particular part of this larger act, I would not be able to execute the particular act in which I am engaged. In this case, the subject does not unify referential and predicative acts into a proposition, as was the case in the previous section’s discussion. Nevertheless, the Kantian point is that the same type of unity characterizes the act, i.e. the elements are unified in the same manner within a

single self-conscious act. In other words, the suggestion is that the same structure that characterizes the intellectual act of judgment also characterizes other aspects of conscious life, and in particular imagistic consciousness. To use the same type of visual representation as above:

Segment drawn at t ; Segment drawn at $t+1$; [...]; Segment drawn at $t+n$.



Act of Drawing a Full Circle

For my present purposes the important point is that Kant takes this same unity to apply to conscious perceptual experience: for Kant, a “manifold” of sensory representations is unified within the subject’s self-consciousness as a single experience (B131).²⁷ Consider being perceptually confronted with a pink-hued translucent cube.²⁸ For Kant, my sensory experience of this cube will involve a self-conscious unity of the same sort as the unity in judgment. Clearly, in this case the elements unified in the sensory experience are not referential expressions and predicates. Instead, the picture may include something like the following:

“This”; “Translucent”; “Pink”; “Cube”; (“Before me”; “Visually Present to Me”)



Single Unified Sensory Experience

As these “elements” of experience show, the point does not depend on perception being a temporally successive range of individual sensations.²⁹ By contrast, as was the case in our

²⁷ For an account, Golob (2011).

²⁸ This is the classic example introduced by Wilfrid Sellars (1982). Sellars himself develops the example in an attempt to capture the Kantian view.

²⁹ Despite frequent criticism of Kant to this effect, as for example from Lewis White Beck criticizes Kant as follows (1978, p. 144):

Kant assumes that the manifold of representations is always successive. This is certainly wrong. When I open my eyes I do not scan the visual field as if my eyes or my attention worked like the electron ejector in a television tube, aiming first at one point and then at an adjacent point. But [...] Kant assumes that my apprehension does work in this way.

discussion of sub-propositional acts, Kant's point concerning sensuous unity does not assume a *temporal* progression but rather a *logical* unity of elements in a self-conscious state.³⁰ To see that Kant's thought in all these examples is logical, consider Kant's application of the same point about the relevant type of self-conscious unity to the process of counting, i.e. adding units successively to a previously accumulated total (A103-4):

If, in counting, I forget that the units that now hover before my senses were successively added to each other by me, then I would not cognize the generation of the multitude through this successive addition of one to the other, and consequently I would not cognize the number.

In this example Kant makes explicit that it is a *logical* presupposition of the concept of counting that it requires awareness of the sub-act as part of a full act.³¹ In the above passage, Kant points out that the subject must keep in mind her overall act of counting so as to be aware both of the accumulated total, and the subsequent step of adding a further unit. However, Kant makes clear that this is a logical point by—immediately continuing on the above quotation—*identifying* the unity of consciousness with the concept of addition, writing that “this concept [i.e. a number reached in addition] consists solely in *the consciousness of this unity of the synthesis*” (A104). The point Kant makes here is that counting depends on elements that exhibit a certain *homogeneity*, allowing them to be units that can be treated as belonging to the same order (allowing me to count “one apple”, “two apples”, and so on.) Accordingly, this concept of a number *just is* the way items belong to the same self-conscious unity: the way the subject views the element as belonging to a single whole.³² The same logical point applies to perceptual

A similar idea is present in the reading of Golob (2011). By contrast, I think such an idea does seem present in the thinker Condillac, but there is much in Kant's work to resist this type of empiricist “sensationism”. See Falkenstein 1990.

³⁰ In this sense it seems to me it is not quite accurate to understand Kant's point as “I must not [...] forget what I am doing [...] during each phase of my activity.” *Forgetting* describes a failing in a distinctly temporally extended act, but the proper point is logical: any element of an intuition must be included within the same self-consciousness.

³¹ To be sure, actual human counting is presumably a necessarily temporally extended act. But this is not the feature of counting on which the Kantian point depends.

³² Accordingly, Kant writes that “number” is “simply the unity of the synthesis of the manifold of a homogeneous intuition in general” (A142-3/B182). Golob (2011, p. 516) understands this awareness of homogeneity in terms of a “second-order capacity” to form “representations of our representations” based

experience, in which any of its elements are enjoyed within a self-conscious experience. In other words, Kant's point is that we as self-conscious subjects have sensations (or other sub-perceptual states) only as parts of a self-consciously unified experience.³³

5. *Perceptual Representation*

The central claim of this paper is that attributing representational contents to experience can express the following idea: the same capacity exercised in judgment is also exercised in perceptual experience. The more particular claim is that this changes our understanding of what the notion of perceptual representation amounts to. This section develops this latter claim.

In effect, the idea that perception bears representational content expresses a way of conceiving perceptual rationality: a way perception is taken to contribute to empirical knowledge. Recall

Content Thesis: The cognitive contribution of perception, i.e. the significance perceptual experience has in the acquisition of perceptual knowledge, is captured by the experience's representational content.

As I noted in introducing the idea of perceptual representation, the traditional version of the Content Thesis centers on the "attributive complement": perception representing a perceived item *as F*, which licenses the subject to judge that the item *is F*. Likewise, the traditional conception implies a conception of the capacities involved in such representation, viz. "two distinguishable abilities" (Evans 1982, p. 104) in which the subject selects an item and attributes to it a property. Implicit in this understanding of the Content Thesis is a conception of *how* perception contributes to judgment. of understanding the nature of perceptual representation, it is something about the *logical form* of a perceptual representation that grounds its distinct

on their shared properties." By contrast, I have argued this type of unified self-awareness is *part of* first-order acts like judging and (for Kant) perceiving.

³³ *Pace* criticisms like the above from Lewis White Beck, this point shows up an *anti-empiricist* tendency in Kant: like judgments hold logical priority over sub-propositional acts, so too experiences hold logical priority over "sensations". We do not start with sensations in need of unification; rather we have sensations only as already understood against the background of self-consciously unified experiences.

rational role. Consider in this light the

Premise Principle: The rational contribution of experience *E* to the judgment that *o* is *F* is determined by *E* bearing the structure of a premise supporting the conclusion that *o* as *F*.³⁴

Of course, representationalists do not hold the implausible position that perceptual judgments are inferences from the contents of experience. Instead the critical idea is that the *rationality* of such perceptual judgments is understood as in some sense modeled on of the rationality of inference. Understood this way, the representationalist view of experience in effect imposes a type of *restriction* on how experience can contribute to judgment: without the way representation logically articulates the “attributive complement”, we are not supposed to find such a contribution.³⁵

As I will now argue, considering the sensory deployment of the intellectual capacities involved in judgment does not carry the restrictive conception of perceptual reality expressed by the Premise Principle. Indeed, the present view explains why there is *no need* for something like the Premise Principle to explain how perception contributes to judgment. In having a perceptual experience, the perceiving subject is self-aware of undergoing her experience within exactly the same unified self-conscious subjective life as that from which she conducts her activity of judgment. Indeed, the subject enjoys her experience precisely *as* something that provides the basis for the formation of judgments: what is unified now in sensory consciousness may be articulated subsequently in judgment. After all, it is the *same* capacities that constitute a subject’s unified sensory experience as allow her subsequently to form perceptual judgments. In a recent paper in *Mind*, Anil Gomes expresses the upshot of the Kantian view as follows (2017, p. 571):

[For Kant] consciousness of the world in perception thus involves *self-conscious* awareness of oneself consciously perceiving the world; perceptual consciousness is a form of self-consciousness. [I take] the representational element [of experience] to have a distinctive first-personal content: it seems to the subject as if *she* is intuiting the empirical particular. This first-personal content to visual experience arises whenever discursive

³⁴ For explicit adoption of this idea, Brewer 1999, p. 149.

³⁵ While this is not the present topic, this point is central to the motivation for anti-representationalist views, e.g. Brewer 2018 and Travis 2013.

subjects stand in intuitive relations to empirical particulars: perceiving an empirical object *ipso facto* puts one into a state with first-personal content.³⁶

As Gomes makes clear in this passage, the role of self-consciousness gives the experience a character that is naturally expressed through the first-person: to the subject, it seems *she* is confronted with a pink-hued translucent cube, or that *she* is perceiving a pink object over there, and so on. Of course, experience does not somehow *merely* concern the self: it expressed a subject's self-consciousness of perceiving.

The point I want to conclude on here is that understanding perceptual representation in this sort of way does not share the emphasis on the *form* of perceptual representation—and specifically the “attributive complement”—that characterizes the Premise Principle. On the Premise Principle it is the judgment-like logical form of perceptual representation that explains its connection to judgment.³⁷ By contrast, what matters here is not an attributive complement. What matters is that experience—owing to the subject's representational capacities—involves self-awareness of being visually confronted with one's environment. In this sense, the idea of attributing to experience representational content is not, so-to-say, to pre-articulate the particular perceptual judgment made. Rather, the idea is to characterize the *basis* on which the subject makes her judgment, and this basis is her self-awareness of experience, not an *articulation* of what she might judge on the basis of this experience. In this sense, there are different ways to characterize the right conception of perceptual content, as long as they give expression of the subject's self-awareness in perceiving: “this red cup here”; “I'm seeing a red cup”; “this stuff before me”; and so on. On the present view, any such characterization can fit the representationalist view. Moreover, finally, the character of the intellectual representational capacities implicated in experience does not fit Evans' bifurcated conception of conceptual

³⁶ There are several important differences between the account in Gomes 2017 and the present one, including Gomes' view of the subject the *object* of the representation (in this sense Gomes' view resembles self-representational theories as developed by, for example, Uriah Kriegel (2003, 2009) and Keith Lehrer (2006)). These differences lie beyond the purview of this paper.

³⁷ This is the point of representationalist language that characterizes experience as having a “face value” which the subject “accepts” in judgment.

capacities. Experience involves the intellect not in the particular subject-predicate articulation that characterizes a “structured thought”, but rather in its more general unified self-awareness, which is involved both in judgment and perception. On the present account, this is the point expressed by describing both judgment and perception as bearing representational content.

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