

Opening Up Towards the Non-Conceptual: From Kantian Judgment to Creative Oscillation

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1. Introduction

What exactly does the notion of “reflecting judgment” in Kant’s third *Critique* signify? It is clear from the outset that Kant has a specific application in mind. At first glance, it is possible to interpret reflective judgment as an addition to the account of human cognition developed in the first *Critique*. As contrasted to the determining judgment that subsumes objects under concepts, the reflecting judgment takes the particular as point of departure for constructing a new concept.

A second, and related, interpretation is that the reflecting judgment starts from something singular in order to open up the established framework of concepts.¹ In the absence of a given concept under which to subsume a given object, the reflecting judgment pauses for a moment and takes a step back. It starts over, as it were, opening up an established architecture of concepts towards the non-conceptual domain. Extending this line of interpretation, we can say therefore that the reflective judgment is thoroughly generative: its nature allows one reflectively to generate the new out of the existing, or to enrich the domain of concepts with genuinely new inventions.

By taking a step back and reflecting, a new evaluation of the particular object is created. Its incompatibility with existing concepts is cause for reflection. But what kind of reflection is this? And how is a new concept or conceptual category or theory formed through such reflection? In this essay, I explore these questions by reference to the following sources: first, Kant’s accounts of reflection in the first and third *Critiques*; second, the idea of “negativity” found in a range of philosophers, notably from Hegel onwards and more recently in Object-Oriented Ontology; third, the notion of re-understanding that we encounter in the *Meno*. Throughout, I will refer often to artistic and architectural design practices, as they provide a wealth of material that demonstrates how object-constitution functions.²

Undoubtedly, the questions posed in the preceding paragraph could be pursued from a host of alternative angles. However, for the terrain I explore here these sources will suffice, although they could be readily supplemented by others who concur with them.

One additional remark: in reading Kant in the manner I pursue here, I think it is possible retrospectively to reconstruct a picture of his thought as emphasizing *creativity*. With this, I do not mean that Kant can be read as having developed a well-circumscribed “philosophy of

¹ Those two interpretations are not the only possibilities, but they suffice for the argument that I’m developing here.

² Often, object-constitution is viewed as the operations of complex of capacities that allow us to think objects at all. It is in such cases an account of the cognitive capacities involved in this process. Kant himself sets the prime example of such a project with the first *Critique*. In this essay, I discuss the range of cases that mostly refer to the processes with which actual, physical artefacts are conceived and produced. However, it seems plausible to me that there is a basic set of rules that grounds both (i) our capacities to perceive/constitute objects as such, and (ii) our capacity to conceive, design, understand, and produce physical artefacts.

creativity”, but as a thinker for whom creativity—and more specifically the imagination—in all its multifaceted richness forms a foundation for thinking itself.

2. Kantian Reflection as Generative Reasoning

What kind of reflection goes on in the reflecting judgment? If we let Kant speak for himself, the act of reflecting judgment is required for three reasons. First, it is required to define a new concept or class under which a particular given object can be subsumed (EEKU, 20:220). In this case, the object encountered falls outside what has hitherto been encapsulated in an overarching conceptual architecture. Second, it is required to define an overall concept that functions as background for providing explanations for phenomena in a given domain (EEKU, 20:220-221). Third, it is required to provide the best explanation within a set of alternative good explanations, for a given object or fact/state-of-affairs, and to guide and unify theoretical activity more generally.

All three activities are instances of concept formulation, yet on different scales. In the first case, the reflecting judgment positions a particular in a predefined field of references. In the second case, the particulars are subsumed or united into a single, overarching concept (sometimes even a complete world) in order to make their connections or very appearance intelligible (EEKU, 20:218-219). And in the third case, a best explanation or ideal unifying representation is offered for particular objects, facts or states-of-affairs.³ Formulated as general definition:

To reflect (to consider), however, is to compare and to hold together given representations either with others or with one’s faculty of cognition, in relation to a concept thereby made possible. (EEKU, 20: 210)

The distinction that Kant introduces here is crucial for identifying how reflection works. Either a set of given representations can be held together with others, so that they can be compared or aligned in an overall concept, or, alternatively, one can hold a set of representations together with one’s faculty of cognition, in relation to a concept. What Kant has in mind here is not completely clear, but we can reasonably assume that he is speaking about comparing an independently given representation or set of representations with concepts one either already possesses, or has newly created, in order to position or understand or explain them.

We can find a different account of this thought in the first *Critique*, where the two-stage process of imaginative synthesis is explained. During the first stage, individual representations are grouped; in the second, they are comprehended *as a unity* in a single cognition (A76-79/B102-104). An object comes to be represented *as* object.⁴ Not every act of synthesis creates a coherent outcome – the result itself may be “raw and confused” and therefore in need of further analysis. Put differently, the resulting manifold must itself become an object of reflection. The form under which the object is first encountered must be broken up and put back together (Hegel, 1977:18). It must be re-presented in a manner that opens up hidden structures, and that allows for re-understanding in a new light.

Thus, reflection is especially required for objects that are ambiguous, ambivalent, or open-ended: for such objects, mechanical or purely deductive logical determination is impossible. In reflecting judgments of the aesthetic kind, the faculties of cognition (imagination

³ Indeed, the process of reflection on objects can be extended to include states-of-affairs (i.e., a given set of perceived relationships). As the phrase “objects and states-of-affairs” is somewhat long-winded, I have opted to use “objects” instead. However, what is being argued about objects can be applied to state-of-affairs as well.

⁴ See also (Mersch, 2011).

and understanding) work out a “sensitive relation” between object and concept. Conversely, in the aesthetic judgment of sense “the predicate of the judgment cannot be a predicate of an object at all, because it does not belong to the faculty of cognition at all” (EEKU, 20:224). This line of thinking demonstrates how reflection can be pre-conscious and non-conceptual, although it cooperates with an intellectual grasp of a given object. Moreover, it highlights how intimately judgment is tied to sensibility (KU, 5:192-193). Without sensibility, a kind of intellectual operation is possible, but if our entire cognition was constituted in such a way, we would end up with cognition without affect—a world of pure ratiocination (Sartre 2004:69). This distinction introduces here two dialectical poles positioned around the capacity for reflection: one is *affective* (pleasure), and the other is *intellectual* (understanding). Both effects are causes for reflection and also caused by reflection. Yet, reflection is especially required in situations in which either something prevents the formation of a determining judgment or else the mind experiences an inherent need to go beyond the determining judgment.

It follows that reflection not only uncovers the hidden properties of a given object. It is also a form of apprehending an apparently closed object in ways that opens it up again. A once-familiar object that seems to be well-understood can—through reflection and associated new forms of representation—acquire all over a sudden a new and unexpected meaning. Marcel’s Duchamp’s unexpected deployment of a urinal is the paradigmatic example, but the same principle applies equally to long, empty hotel corridors that, after watching Stephen King’s *The Shining*, are not the same thereafter. Thus, a newly initiated process of reflection transfigures the familiar, breaking up its closed character. In opening up an object again, it emerges out of an indistinct background and re-appears as something that needs to be re-understood. What happens in such a reflective process is a *purposive estrangement*. The object of reflection appears as estranged, as a partially alien object that does not fit in the usual coordinates of the world any longer.

A Kantian understanding of our access to the world fully includes the need and opportunity for repeated reflection and analysis. Comprehension of particulars, or the very meaning that grounds the appearance of particulars either eludes us completely or partially and is cause for reflection, or else the mind experiences an inherent need to transcend mere determining judgments. The reflecting activity seeks either a new concept, a grounding purpose, or “antecedent concept” for what it encounters (KU, 5:192-193). Kant explicitly describes the openness of our representations:

In an object given in experience purposiveness can be represented either on a merely subjective ground, as a correspondence of its form in its apprehension (apprehensio) prior to any concept with the faculties of cognition, in order to unite the intuition with concepts for a cognition in general, or on an objective ground, as a correspondence of its form with the possibility of the thing itself, in accordance with a concept of it which precedes and contains the ground of this form. (KU, 5:192)

This passage opens the door for thinking a pre-conceptual or non-conceptual grounding of the understanding. We can apprehend or represent a form of purposiveness independently of applying any concept to a given intuition (EEKU, 20:224). The intuition is represented as having a purpose, but this decision is reached on subjective grounds. Following this decision, concepts are then applied to the intuition for achieving a “cognition in general” (*Erkenntnis*).

Indeed, reflection is the capacity that must be applied to objects with sensitivity and an eye for context (EEKU, 20:213-214). One cannot reflect in a standardized manner and apply the same procedure to every individual object. Reflection opens up new affective or discursive spaces through which an object can be understood more accurately or can be positioned into a richer intellectual framework, but it must take the non-mechanical, non-logical uniqueness of the object itself as point of departure. As such, reflection in the Kantian sense is not just a

retrospective operation, as it is simultaneously a generative, creative strategy for reasoning forward or explanatory reasoning that extends well beyond narrowly deterministic explanations of phenomena and deductive extensional logic.⁵

To reflect is *creatively to define or formulate a new concept or explanation, or to work out its relation to other concepts and other explanations in more detail*. A given particular object or state-of-affairs must be positioned in relation to an existing conceptual structure or alternatively a broader worldview. Reflection goes therefore significantly beyond that which is empirically, mechanistically, conceptually, or logically contained in a given particular object or state-of-affairs. Whatever can be said about it is not exhausted by the properties that can be probed by natural science or deductive logic. The sum total of particulars is not an exhaustive description of an object or manifold—it remains always open-ended, promising to reveal new depths or possibilities. Reflection is *generative* because it provides this addition on top of observable mechanical or purely deductive logical properties. It actively generates a new conceptual or theoretical framework that cannot be completely derived from the sum total of particulars, but that has to be creatively constructed by taking their properties as a point of departure.

This line of thought does not apply only to our cognitive operations, but also to its technological extensions, namely our tools and their associated representations, for example, diagrams, models, and other imagistic representations. The invention of scale drawing, mathematical modelling, the production of what Vilém Flusser called “technical images”, or the creative application of “epistemic objects” enables us to create new forms of reflection and consequently new forms of understanding.⁶ The associated representations that our tools afford us build on the art of reflection that Kant identifies.

Such associated representations are themselves perceived as objects. The graphs, drawings, diagrams, models, and other imagistic artifacts that result from our tools and imaginal representative techniques become the new material for our cognition to work on. Like ordinary objects such as telephones and coffee mugs, and ordinary states-of-affairs such as using maps, such purposively produced objects and states-of are shot through with openness, or alternatively “negativity”. Their essentially open character requires a perceiving subject to reflect on them and to -use them repeatedly. In doing so, reflection and mechanistic or logical determination cooperate in a dialogic process. This exploration of the essential openness of objects and states-of-affairs leads consequently to a renewed understanding of them.

3. Openness and Re-Understanding

That openness is an essential feature of objects and states-of-affairs is a line of thinking that can be traced back at least to Hegel and Heidegger, but that has also recently received considerable attention in Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology under the heading of “withdrawn properties” or “real objects and qualities”.⁷ The Hegelian notion of understanding presents understanding as a progressive, dialectical process in which negativity plays a key role. The dialectic reasoning process gradually uncovers more and more properties of a given object. This implies that some properties are not visible when first encountering it: they require attention in order to be perceived. This is implied in the Kantian thought that our conceptual capacities cannot completely capture all that objects offer or present on the surface, and also that without concepts we still can have meaningful intuitions. One way of developing this

⁵ A similar approach was taken by C.S. Peirce, who, in working out the notions of hypothesizing, abduction and retroduction tried to formulate a form of logical inference that extended beyond induction and deduction.

⁶ See (van Fraassen, 2008; Flusser, 2010; Whyte and Ewenstein, 2010; Turkle, 2008).

⁷ See (Harman, 2010; Heidegger, 2008).

thought has become known as the “fineness of grain” argument. The idea is that manifest reality is always richer, deeper, more fine-grained, and more intimately textured than our existing concepts can grasp. Consequently, the richness of manifest reality presents one with a gap that existing concepts cannot fill. This thought partially animates non-conceptualism in philosophy, but some of its variations can also be found in theory regarding artistic creation or architectural design.⁸

Anticipating this line of thinking, Heidegger’s interpretation of Kant, in terms of the transcendental synthesis of the imagination and through the notion of unconcealment or (*aletheia*), deals with the process of un-covering that which is hidden (Heidegger, 2008:56–57). In relation to the contemporary debate on non-conceptual content, we can also read Heidegger the other way around: what is hidden is often that which concepts cannot catch or describe easily. The hidden part of the object remains “under the conceptual radar” and must be brought out by other means. Artworks may provide a glimpse of such worlds that extend beyond the foreground we perceive, but they must be closely examined to grasp the expanse of thought they indicate.

By careful examination and reflection, the hidden properties of an object emerge out of the background in which they were submerged (see fig. 1 directly below this paragraph). To reflect, then, is to impose a rift or division onto an object to disclose and release its withdrawn properties. It must be divided into a background and a foreground. This imposition or disclosure is in one sense a *subjective* act: it is the moment one “takes up a new position” as it were (Schönwandt et al., 2014), but in another sense it is an *objective* act, since the object then exists in its new and unique specific character. We can as it were not “unsee” or “unhear” the newly acquired properties. Out of the indistinct and largely (but not completely) non-conceptual background, an intelligible foreground composed of particulars emerges. The representational content that makes up an object must be either disassembled or else “purposively estranged” in order to re-understand it. In each reflective cycle, different properties of the object are made to stand out against an undifferentiated background.

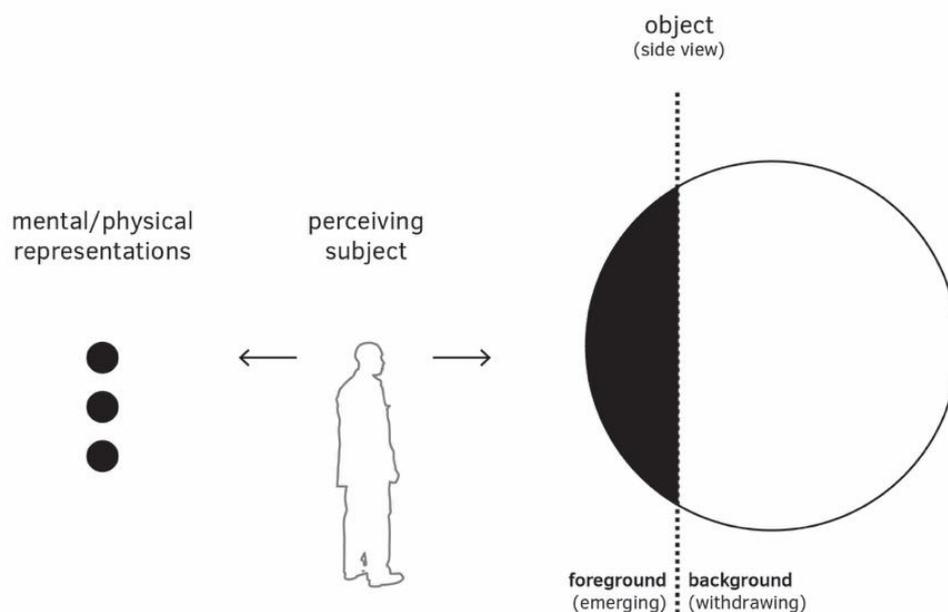


Figure 1: Object divided between foreground and background. Each time one's viewpoint changes, new properties of the object emerge from out of its withdrawn background

⁸ For different takes on this idea, see (Berger, 2002; Zumthor, 2014; Hubig, 2013).

An example of such disassembly is statistical analysis. By subjecting a conglomerate of original data to statistical analysis, repeating patterns, outliers and correlations are brought to the fore. These patterns are not visible when the mass of data is considered as an undifferentiated whole but can only be made visible by analysing it, prying apart its hidden structures. This operation singles out specific properties by which an object may be understood or re-understood.

In artistic practices, the act of drawing and sketching the same idea over and over serves as a form of purposive estrangement to invite certain novel properties of an (imagined) object into the foreground. Drawing is an invocation—an injunction for properties to reveal themselves. Likewise, the repetition of a word or phrase severs the link between sound and meaning, and the phonemes are suddenly perceived as estranged auditory objects. Through repetition, the link that tethered them to a fixed conceptual order is temporarily broken, motivating the mind to reflect on them in order to integrate them again. In drawing, the division between indistinct background and intelligible foreground is played out by graphical means. Each sketch is an attempt to re-understand an object by shifting the relationship between foreground and background. The unique characteristic of drawing is that the oscillation between foreground and background almost vanished completely, allowing the artist to move effortlessly from one domain to the other, from foreground to background, and from non-conceptual to conceptual, and *vice versa*.

Aided by the shifts between foreground and background, the key to re-understanding is a kind of prolonged attention to what emerges out of the background:

But prior to all reflection, to be attentively present in the domain of things tells us that this concept of the thing is inadequate to its thingliness, its self-sustaining and self-containing nature. From time to time one has the feeling that violence has long been done to the thingliness of the thing and that thinking has had something to do with it. (Heidegger, 2002:7)

In this text, Heidegger singles out the notion of *attention*. Careful attention and concentration are required to perceive or disclose properties that otherwise would remain hidden in the background. Accurately, Heidegger identifies the imposition of a rift or an act of purposive estrangement as a violent act. The demarcation by a line or the imposition of a structure on an existing object, effectuating its detachment from the ordinary network of usability, is a forceful event.

We find a similar observation in the work of the Czech literary theorist and author Jan Mukařovský, when he observes that foregrounding (i.e. isolating an object or event as literary technique is a disturbance of clichéd, automatic response:

Foregrounding is the opposite of automatization, that is, the deautomatization of an act; the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become. Objectively speaking: automatization schematizes an event; foregrounding means the violation of the scheme. (Mukařovský 2010:44)

Foregrounding, then, is a destabilization, a displacement of one object or event so that it does no longer submerge into the usual order of things. It stands out, ripped loose from a context or background into which it was embedded. Foregrounding makes an object or event visible or perceptible as such. It starts to distinguish itself from its environment in ways that distort both our perception of its properties and the environment in which it so seamlessly seemed to fit. Mukařovský contends that the difference between foreground and background creates tensions in what he calls the “system”, but we might equally well think about it as the sum total of tensions in a given object, or alternatively, the tensions that arise between an object and its surroundings. The destabilization that occurs between the “foregrounded” and

“unforegrounded” elements creates a new dynamic (Mukařovský, 2010:47). The foregrounded elements are so intensely present that they can’t help but stand out. Yet, the reverse is also true: the background elements retreat in relation to the foregrounded element. And it is their retreat that creates the sense of openness. This principle does not apply only to objects and their surroundings, but equally to object themselves.

Even when trying to focus and concentrate on an object, its depths continue to appear as being just out of reach. The acts of distinction or estrangement push a portion of the object back into the background, while pulling another part into the perceptual foreground. What is withdrawn is “given by that which removes it”; it is “no longer of the order of (intellectual) touch” (Nancy, 2005:2). In other words, we are unable to touch it by conceptual thinking. In Hegel’s famous *Preface to the Phenomenology*—which is otherwise *not* a defence of non-conceptual content: on the contrary—we find an earlier version of this thought:

But what is thus separated [in an idea] and non-actual is an essential moment; for it is only because the concrete does divide itself, and make itself into something non-actual, that it is self-moving. The activity of dissolution is the power and work of the Understanding, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power. (Hegel, 1977:18)

An object or idea is concrete for Hegel: it represents all the materials the senses must work with. However, that which is separated from it is “non-actual”. This non-actual part is a potential, something that is the negative mirror image of the concrete, or in other words: the openness of an object. There is an etymological connection to the concept of foregrounding here: Mukařovský uses the Czech word *aktualisace* to refer to it (Mukařovský, 2010:44). That which is foregrounded becomes more “actual than actual”, the remainder becomes non-actual, retreating in a twilight realm that cannot be surveyed completely.

How open, unexpected, and weird objects really are can be clearly demonstrated with reference to the literary technique of defamiliarization or making-strange (*ostranenie*).⁹ In using this technique, an author disturbs the balance of the reader by introducing an object or event that is so radically out of place that anticipating it becomes impossible—a variation on the concept of foregrounding. One must suspend a determining judgment in order to deal with it. The tensions of which Mukařovský spoke are in defamiliarization used artificially to create an opening for reflection and re-interpretation. Excellent instances of purposive estrangement can be found in the literary school of Russian formalism and its heirs. Here is an example from Sigizmund Krzizhanovsky’s short story *Autobiography of a Corpse*:

It was then, while finishing up at the Institute of Oriental Studies, that I became completely absorbed in the painstaking work of my dissertation: The Letter ‘T’ in the Turkish Languages. I still feel deeply indebted to that little two-handed ‘T’ for the trouble it took and the help it gave me during that black lightless time.... That’s right, I smiled. But the companion of my leisure could be of greater comfort still. “You see, ‘I’ is just a letter”, the ‘T’ would say, “just like me. That’s all it is. Is it worth grieving over? Here and gone.” (Krzizhanovsky, 2013:8–9)

In this fictional and estranged world, letters become characters; and since characters have a life of their own, such ordinary objects are endowed with speech, habits, character traits and intentions. The strangeness appears the moment an object is foregrounded, wrenching it loose from its original meaning, and thereby opening up depths that were invisible up until that moment. However, the first contact which such object is estranging, and conceptual thinking does not suffice to grasp the situation. Merely intellectually comprehending a foregrounded or estranged object is the way *not* to plumb its hidden depths.

⁹ The literary technique was first explicitly described in Victor Shklovsky’s 1917 essay, “Art as Technique”.

Therefore, Heidegger's claim that "thinking," (in Kantian terms: using a concept in forming judgments and logical inferences) prevents us from grasping those properties of objects that elude us may also be read in a Kantian manner. To grasp objects merely intellectually is not enough to attain a full understanding: it is a mere determination without any reflection. A similar point is raised by Alva Noë, who argues against intellectualism, the philosophical position that ratiocination and theorizing are the primary sources of understanding.¹⁰ Although Noë defends a conceptualist account of cognition, his attack on intellectualism demonstrates how theories of human cognition are unduly reduced to mere theorizing and intellectualization. But—contra Noë—one can pursue a different philosophical option, namely one that integrates the conceptual and non-conceptual spheres of cognition.

To maintain that pure ratiocination equals comprehensive understanding ignores the entire non-conceptual dimension: notably, that of affect, without which objects appear as mere material conglomerates. Correspondingly, to hold that "understanding" (also in the broader sense that includes Hegel's use of the word Understanding and hermeneutic *Verstehen*) is an exclusively conceptual affair, or that comprehensive understanding is the sum total of true judgments about an object overlooks—or downplays—the essential and dialectical interaction between sensibility and intellect.

Speaking from a phenomenological perspective, Vilém Flusser called this dialectical interaction the "gesture of understanding", emphasizing the central role of embodied sensibility. Sensing extends into understanding, and understanding is constituted through sensing in conjunction with both conceptual thinking and non-conceptual cognizing, content, and affect. The senses pierce and penetrate any object under consideration in a series of apprehensive actions that Flusser describes as a "searching understanding" or "a searching conceptualizing" (*ein suchendes Begreifen*) (Flusser, 1994:60).¹¹ It is clear from this account that learning to understand is an experimental process in which intellect (theory) and experiment (practice) dialectically complement each other. This is the reason why he insisted that informing oneself about an object is an act of in-forming. The senses in-form the world at their disposal, piercing and probing it according to prior findings.

For a full understanding that extends beyond a mere intellectual or logical grip on objects, reflection and intellectual (or logical) determination must cooperate. Each reflection leads to new intellectual or logical determinations, but not every intellectual or logical determination is perfect or fully consistent or coherent. Consequently, further reflection is necessary, leading in turn to a second round of intellectual or logical determinations. Alternatively, we can say that the dialectic between reflecting judgment and determining judgment mirrors the corresponding dialectic between non-conceptual and conceptual contents in cognition. The intellect *does* play a role in conceptualizing new interpretations of a given object, but this capacity is always interacting with a non-conceptual counterpart. The realm of concepts never fully discloses or encloses the non-conceptual representational content. The non-conceptual expanse represents an inherent "openness" that refuses a complete closure.

The Hegelian/Heideggerian notion of "negativity" reflects this essential openness of objects. When pondering the meaning and position of a given object (say, a physical object like a tree or car, but equally a sketch, painting, or text, or a movie), different possibilities suggest themselves in the form of questions or doubts. They prevent the object from "closing" itself,

¹⁰ See (Noë 2004; Noë 2005).

¹¹ Note that the German phrase '*suchendes begreifen*' could also be translated as 'exploring grasping' or alternatively 'exploring touching'. To understand something is to grasp something (as in the English language: "I grasp the core idea"). The German phrase, however, brings out that grasping is a verb, and therefore that it is an active, explorative and continuous process.

encouraging one to keep attempting reflectively to position or re-position the object. We can discern three ways in which negativity manifests itself, as follows.

First, in its *non-conceptual variation*, the negative manifests itself as non-conceptual content, in the form of a hunch, affect, aesthetic experience, gut feeling, or everyday intuition (in the ordinary sense of the word) for which no clear-cut concepts, words, or phrases are available. It manifests itself not conceptually, but in a non-conceptual format. To come to grips with the negative requires Kantian reflection, since a concept must be generated to come to grips with the pressing openness of the negative. This does not imply that a conceptual structure has to be applied to a mass of amorphous non-conceptual content.¹² Instead, reflection works out the possible ways in which non-conceptual and conceptual content can interact.

In Aristotle, we find the interplay between non-conceptualized and conceptualized content under the heading of *dynamis*.¹³ Every object is as it were a play of forces or interacting components. In a more contemporary, object-oriented context, Harman as well as Bryant have made claims to the same effect. The idea is that each object is a network of properties that interact with different stimuli (see fig. 2 directly below this paragraph). Their hidden properties are as it were activated by the proper stimulus. Concepts may interact with some properties of a given object, but not all of them. The surplus of properties that concepts cannot interact with are non-conceptual, and may be experienced in a different manner, for instance emotively or affectively.

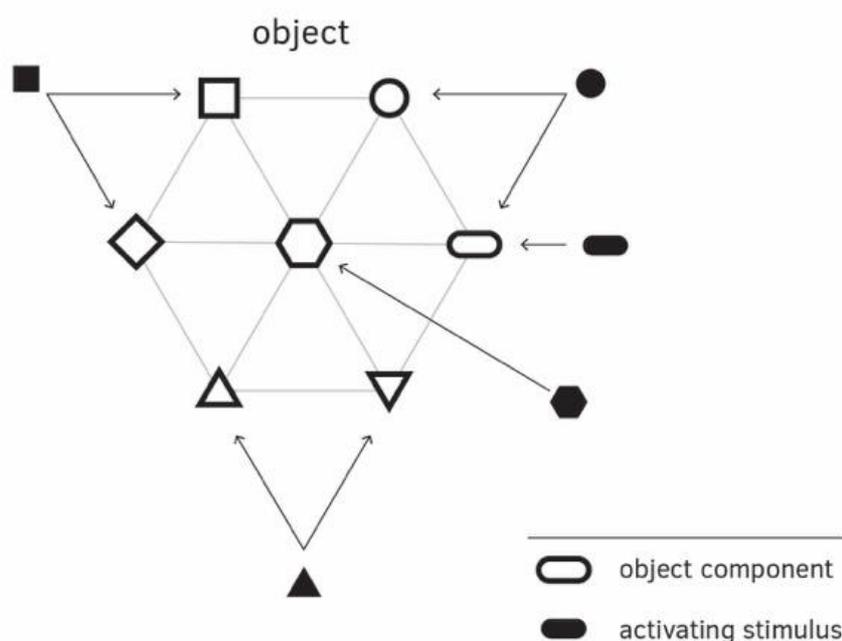


Figure 2: The object as network of properties (represented by the shapes and grey relationship indications). Each stimulus (black corresponding shape) activates a given property. Some stimuli may interact with more than one property; some with none.

Second, in its *differentiating variation*, the negative manifests itself as the awareness that a given object-constitution *could* be different (Hubig, 2013). In Aristotle, we find the tacit presence of alternatives conceptualized under the heading of *potentia*. Each object has the potential to be *understood* differently or to be *constituted* differently. The implicit presence of alternatives eats away at every decision to understand objects in a given manner – the presence

¹² This is the so-called “Myth of the Given,” as per Wilfrid Sellars and John McDowell.

¹³ See (Mersch, 2011) for an extended discussion.

of otherness undercuts and subverts any closure of the object. The non-actual which Hegel spoke about is present as a driving force that prevents closure.

In the *Meno*, Socrates emphasizes the second (or differentiating) activity of the negative when he says that someone's opinion "can be stirred up just like in a dream".¹⁴ In the famous passage in which the slave boy, directed by Socrates, works out a number of geometrical relations, the idea is to investigate where knowledge comes from, or how it is activated. Through directed questioning, Socrates enables the slave boy to work out a number of relations in a given object for himself. The technique that Socrates uses is that each question he asks takes over the role of the "negative". Each question points to a lacuna in the understanding of the slave boy, who consequently has to attend to the specifics of the question. In doing so, he works out the geometric relations in an object for himself, re-understanding how surface area and circumference are related. Admittedly, the example in the dialogue is quite simple, but the underlying account is compelling.

Socrates uses the demonstration to argue that our opinions pre-exist, and that we recollect them when someone activates us in doing so. While his argument is aimed at proving that the soul exists before the body, his line of thinking opens up two further thoughts. First, that knowledge and its ordering (or recollecting) are intricately connected. Second, that instead of accepting the Socratic argument for the memory of the soul, we can re-interpret this idea by thinking how the content that we use to think is generated.

Third, in its *estranging variation*, negativity manifests itself in by "setting the truth to work" (Heidegger 2002:16). It makes otherwise ordinary objects appear in all their fullness. Yet, they point beyond themselves to a larger world to which they may belong. The openness of an object is made tangible by "bringing it to stand" or "foregrounding" it. If we rephrase this Heideggerian term, it amounts to making it appear as something so strange and devoid of context that it opens itself up to new interpretations. Heidegger attempts to grasp the rift that opens up in the painting of the peasant's shoes by Van Gogh:

There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes to which and within which they could belong; only an undefined space. Not even clods of earth from the field or from the country path stick to them, which could at least point toward their use. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet. (Heidegger, 2002:14)

The appearance of the peasant's shoes as objects entirely devoid of context, yet still infinitely rich presents a non-conceptual surplus that concepts simply fail to encapsulate or grasp, which Heidegger captures in the closing words of this text, "[a]nd yet," that clearly demonstrate the difficulty. Language and concepts run into their limits and cannot express the estrangement one encounters when the openness of an object comes to the fore.

If we turn this thought around, then we see that through their estranging effect, objects make formerly invisible, undisclosed properties and phenomena visible because they are artificially isolated. Heidegger demonstrates this feature by discussing the estranging, yet also disclosing, character of a Greek temple:

Standing there, the building holds its place against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm visible in its violence. The gleam and lustre of the stone, though apparently there only by the grace of the sun, in fact first brings forth the light of day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of the air. (Heidegger, 2002:21)

¹⁴ See (Cooper and Hutchison 1997:886). The corresponding Plato text is at *Meno* 85d.

The foregrounded, estranged object becomes itself a background for its surrounding. Like an eye of the storm, it remains static. In its massive presence, it makes the forces surrounding it visible. A similar process happens occurs in the Van Gogh painting. A static image conjures up an entire new world, although it only alludes to its presence. By disentangling a pair of peasant's boots from their context, it is paradoxically the context itself that becomes tangible. It opens up as a new possibility, a potential background of which the boots were at some point a part.

All three variations described here put the imagination to work in a continuous dialectic of opening and closure. This is a cycle that we can best describe as a process of *creative oscillation*.

4. Creative Oscillation

Kant usefully distinguished between the productive and reproductive imagination. Simply put, the productive imagination might come up with a new conglomerate of images, but these images are recollected from memory and freely combined or applied to a new situation. I might encounter a new object and think: "this object X looks like a Y", or "this object X somewhat resembles a P". Alternatively, when I combine images, I can imagine an object C that looks like a combination of an object A and an object B. The statement "this object X looks like a Y" is already a determination of sorts. It ranks object X in a conceptual order, determining its place, and making a mental mark, so that it can be recognized next time. Relations of resemblance or combinations of images contain a reflective component: one has to see X as kind of Y or imagine C as an A/B combination.

The oscillation between determination and reflection can be understood as a way to give a dynamic definition of the characteristics of an object (see fig. 3 directly below)—

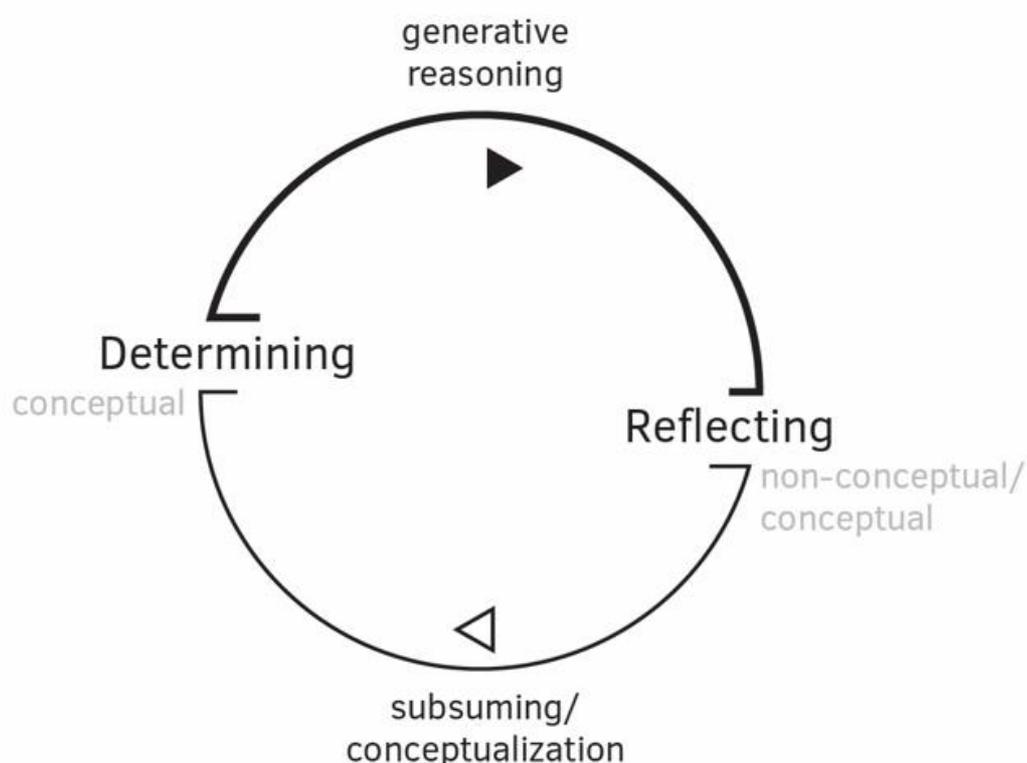


Figure 3: Creative oscillation as a dialectic between reflection and determination, and simultaneously between non-conceptual and conceptual contents as well as foreground and background

Many creative processes restlessly oscillate between moments of determination (subsumption/conceptualization) and reflection (creation/generation). For example, the architect who gradually works out a building construction reflects on his own drawings and ideas. He identifies and retains what he deems useful and further reflects on what he does not like or what he would like to adapt. In a next iteration of designing, the existing properties that make a design proposal successful must be re-integrated with a series of new ones. The design proposal as a whole deepens, as the connections between its parts are gradually worked out and uncovered.

The cycle of creative oscillation can be read in relation to the notions of foreground and background. The openness of a given object invites reflection, thereby pulling certain features into focus. New features emerge out of a largely indistinct background. These features – when closely attended to – jointly form a foreground. In a subsequent step, this foreground can be subjected to determining judgments. It is important to note that non-conceptual features of a given object might be experienced in a variety of forms, but that they elude expression in discursive terms. To put them in such terms requires a conceptual structure in which they are embedded.

In this process of “searching understanding”, each sketch or draft can be understood as a conglomerate composed of determined properties and flexible proto-properties. Some properties are fixed and determined, while proto-properties are potentials that demand further reflection and speculation. The fixed properties are often the object of decisions that involved concepts or at least discursive content. The proto-properties are often non-conceptual, atmospheric, or affective. They can often be expressed with some effort in conceptual terms, but this process is somewhat non-linear or *appositional* (Cross, 2007:37–38). This means that creative oscillation needs a conglomerate of appositions. Each object is as it were constituted by unresolved tensions, foreground and background, contradictions, and unexpected juxtapositions. Each cycle of creative oscillation utilizes the openness of reasonably crystallized properties as a background out of which new combinations, features, or contradictions emerge. In architectural practice, this feature has been called “open notation”, the idea being that the signs that one works with are open-ended.¹⁵ They are elements that can morph at any time into something new and unexpected. In turn, the open character of such representational content is extremely layered: one can look at it again and again, and different features will emerge.¹⁶

Therefore, the oscillation between determination and reflection can be understood as a bridge between the conceptual and non-conceptual domains. An early architectural sketch consists often of a few lines or scribbles, but these marks do not cohere into something fully conceptual. They can be interpreted in many ways, but it is not possible to make a cognitive judgment about them, apart from the fact that they are lines or strokes. In other words, the content they represent cannot be neatly subsumed under a determinate concept.

Through careful reflection and speculation, the initial scribbles are worked out in relation to one another, and in relation to a body of known concepts. Each new round of development invites new questions, so that the cycle of determination/reflection closely corresponds to the oscillation between conceptual and non-conceptual contents. Every time that a part of a design idea is defined, new non-conceptual contents emerge through negativity. After all, almost any given design could be made in a variety of ways, and the implicit presence of alternatives reminds one of the inherent openness of objects.

¹⁵ See (Lynn, 2010; Paans and Pasel, 2018).

¹⁶ See (Hasenhütl, 2009) for an extended discussion of this theme in relation to freehand drawing.

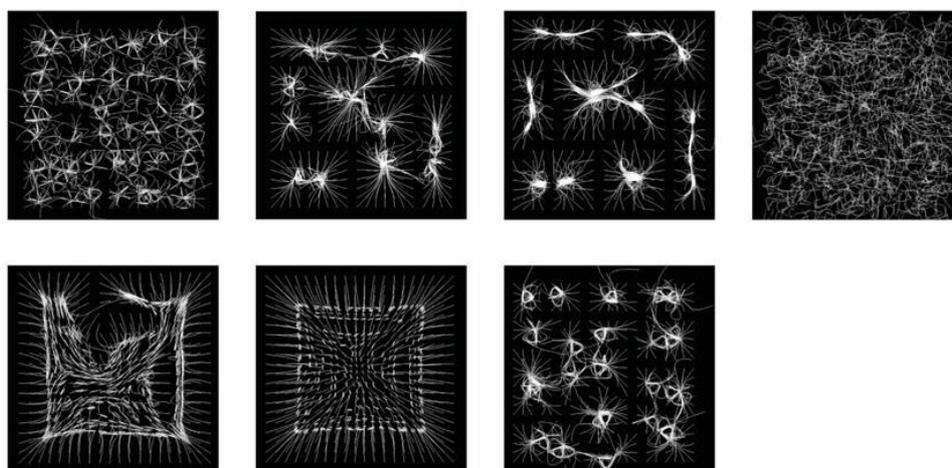


Figure 4: Example of “open notation” in stills from the abstract animation film, “Parametricism,” by Patrik Schumacher and Rosey Chan, shown at the Harlem Film Festival, 2013. The shapes are parametrically defined and can transform infinitely. Each visual representation gives rise to a new foreground/background relationship in the perceived object, causing an oscillation between determination and reflection. Video available online at URL = https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVJPeo_Vc5c.

The moments during which one realizes the presence of this openness may be very productive, as they prime and spur on the creative process. The openness of the object begs to be filled in—it is as it were a promise or a seduction. However, as our conceptual capacities fall short for completing this task, the openness remains, exerting its stimulating influence (see fig. 4, directly above this paragraph). Thus, creative oscillation between determining and reflecting judgments underlies many creative processes in the applied and fine arts, especially including design. More broadly, it underlies the object-constitution and determination found in such practices.

5. Two Objections

This section deals with two objections to the argument I presented in sections 2-4. The first objection concerns the idea of an oscillating relation between reflecting and determining judgments. And the second objection concerns the idea of perceiving an absence or making strange, i.e., becoming aware of the openness of a given object.

First, if reflecting judgment creates a new concept for a particular (say, an architectural object) and a determining judgment is an act of identification or subsumption, then once the creation of a concept for a given particular has occurred, further reflection is not necessary. This is because as from this point on, the particular can be recognized via a determining judgment. It can simply be subsumed under the newly created concept. Therefore, the objection goes, oscillation between reflective and determining judgments is not necessary at all. Once an object has been accorded a concept, it will always be identified using a determining judgment. Indeed, this problem has been raised in relation to modernist architecture that utilized templates. The template or blueprint contained all the properties of a given architectural object, so that each time the blueprint was realized, it instantiated a pre-existing concept instead of an original piece of architecture (Parsons 2016:13–18).

As against this objection, I can reply that Kant himself opened the door for thinking about creative oscillation when he stated that synthesized manifolds stand sometimes in need of a moment of further reflection on their properties and their representation. In scientific and

artistic practice, this type of thinking is elevated to the status of an investigative strategy. Each object is tentatively treated as a “raw and confused” representation that must be taken apart and re-understood. The hard-and-fast distinction between a one-off reflection to link a concept to a conglomerate of representations can certainly be questioned given our contemporary knowledge of design processes. Although reflective and determining judgments can be clearly identified as different *types* of judgment, they must also be understood as different *moments* in a larger cognitive process.¹⁷

Closer and repeated investigation of manifolds leads to a gradual, oscillating reconceptualization and re-understanding of them. If we return to the example from the *Meno*, we can see why. Although all geometrical elements and terms (square, surface, diagonal) of the figure were known once they had been introduced, the slave boy could go on inferring new relationships between them. By treating the overall geometry as new, it is posited as an object with a foreground and a background, allowing the negative its free play. Of course, the example in the *Meno* is very straightforward, and architectural objects and scientific objects are more complex by many orders of magnitude. This is why drawing or more broadly representing an object in different media, on different scales and with different projections is such a liberating exercise. It enables one to approach a relatively well-known object in a new manner, picking up on details and relations that were formerly hidden and undisclosed. In turn, these insights allow one to work out new relations within the object.¹⁸ Because of the “richness of reality” it is always possible to identify new properties of any given object.

The second objection is directed at the claim about openness. Why should we sense the “openness” of objects? The argument was that a perceived “lack” or “negativity” functions as a driver of object constitution. And while the philosophical accounts of Hegel, Heidegger, or Object-Oriented Ontology provide new approaches for thinking about the openness of objects, they do not constitute a definite proof of this characteristic. However, for this argument to work, one must ask the more fundamental question: why it is that we sense “absence” in some form or the other? If anything, absence as such cannot be sensed, unless it is in the form of a missing puzzle piece or as an experience that we may describe as aesthetic. However, the objects discussed here are not constituted like complete puzzles from which a single piece is missing; a piece moreover, that would nicely fit the conspicuously empty slot. Again, the answer can be formulated with reference to Kantian terminology: prior to the cycle of reflecting and determining judgments, one must perform a prior reflective judgment that grounds the entire cycle *as a whole*. This reflective judgment creates an “antecedent concept”—just as Kant says that we need to generate an Idea of “Nature” as a unified whole in order to position all findings in that domain in an overall scheme, the prior reflective judgment “every object is constitutively open-ended” is required to position all the things we find out about a given object into an overall frame. The statement itself cannot be proven but provides a regulative notion that is worked out in the investigative procedures themselves.

¹⁷ Hegel uses similar terminology when he states that the Notion passes through a succession of moments to fully actualize itself. However, for Hegel, this process is entirely conceptual: the Notion is an embryonic entity that develops through a sequence of historical stages, but also can always be reduced to the interaction of concepts. In contradistinction to Hegel’s account, creative oscillation bridges the conceptual and non-conceptual domains in one integrated process.

¹⁸ Although anecdotes are not decisive evidence, they are often useful as clarifications. Some of my mentors in the Academy of Visual Arts utilized quite creative ways of encouraging their students to regard familiar objects in different ways, aimed at literally re-presenting an object to oneself. Here are some of their remarks: “turn the drawing 180 degrees around”; “magnify this pocket-size drawing to poster size”; “use only paint to make this drawing, throw the pencils out”; “this is a nice model, but now make it 1:1 scale”; “have you tried to sit on that sculpture?”; “these lines are whispering – make them scream!”

To conclude, the cycle of creative oscillation between non-conceptual reflection and conceptual determination actively creates the conditions for its own existence. The openness of objects is grounded in the fact that at least a part of our representational contents fall outside the reach of the conceptual domain. Yet, the affective or otherwise sensible experience of the non-conceptual forms a background out of which new contents emerge that are inherently open to conceptualization but that also simultaneously open up towards the non-conceptual.

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