

The Essential Non-Conceptuality of the Imagination

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[T]he power of imagination ... [is] a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no cognition whatsoever. (A78/B103)

The mere form of intuition, without substance, is in itself not an object, but merely the formal condition of one (as appearance), like pure space and pure time, which are to be sure something, as forms for intuiting, but are not in themselves objects that are intuited (*ens imaginarium*). (A291/B347)

1. Introduction

In what follows, I am going to argue for three claims about the imagination, both according to Kant and also according to the contemporary Kantian view I call *rational anthropology*:¹

(i) that *the cognitive faculty of imagination is a distinctive and irreducible proper sub-faculty of the faculty of sensibility*, insofar as the faculty of imagination is

both (ia) “quasi-intuitional” in the sense that its representations inherently express aspects of the pure forms of intuition, the representations of space and time, independently of existing objects, thereby inherently expressing “empty intuition without an object, *ens imaginarium*” (CPR A292/B348), and

also (ib) uniquely constituted by a set of innately specified, distinctive, and irreducible spontaneous cognitive powers for mental activity or operation,

(ii) that not only the mental activities and operations characteristic of the faculty of imagination, but also imaginal mental states, *do not require either the occurrent application of concepts or the possession of concepts* (aka “state non-conceptualism”), and

(iii) that the representational content of the imagination is *essentially different from conceptual content*, in that imaginal content is neither necessarily nor sufficiently determined by concepts or our conceptual capacities (aka “essentialist content non-conceptualism”).²

¹ See, e.g., (Hanna, 2017).

² Since the 1990s, many excellent studies of Kant’s theory of imagination have appeared—see, e.g., (Gibbons, 1994; Kneller, 2007; Thompson [ed.], 2013; Matherne, 2016; Horstmann, 2018). But none of them has acknowledged or defended the essential non-conceptuality of the imagination.

Otherwise put, by arguing for theses (i), (ii), and (iii), I am going to argue that the imagination is not only “quasi-intuitional” or “empty intuition without an object,” but also “blind” in *exactly the same sense that* “intuitions without concepts are blind” (A51/B75): namely, that the imagination and intuitions are both *essentially non-conceptual*. I will argue for that latter claim explicitly in section 4. But before I do that, I want to spell out my interpretation of Kant’s *model of the mind*, which I will do in section 2; and I also want to present my interpretation of Kant’s *theory of the imagination*, which I will do in section 3.

Table 1: Kant’s Transcendental Cognitive Psychology

Kant’s Cognitive Psychology: A Flow Chart
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- Faculties are innate spontaneous capacities.
- X is either a noumenal object (thing-in-itself) or a phenomenal object (empirical thing).
- “S is P” corresponds to a real fact in the empirical world.
- ⇔ mean ‘delivers information to’

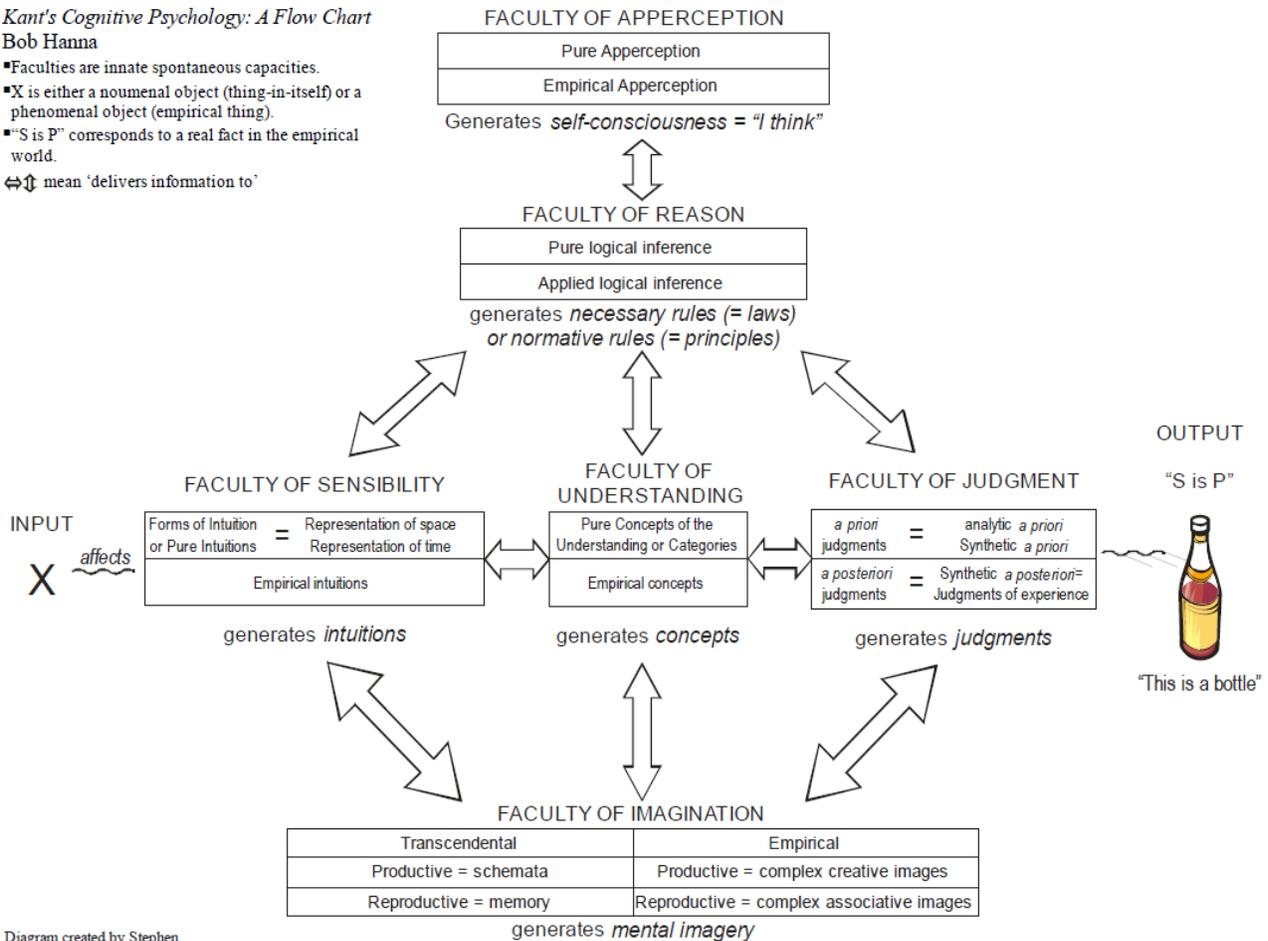


Diagram created by Stephen

2. Kant’s Model of the Mind

For almost thirty years I lectured yearly, and sometimes twice-yearly, on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*; and an essential part of that lecture course was the diagram I have included directly above, which pictorially expresses my interpretation of Kant’s theory of *human cognition*. Not only that, but also for ten or fifteen years, I used to lecture yearly or bi-yearly on Kant’s practical philosophy in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*; and an equally essential part of *that* lecture course was the following much simpler diagram, which pictorially expresses my interpretation of Kant’s theory of *human volition*:

Human Will or Faculty of Desire (*Begehrungsvermögen*)

higher part = faculty of practical reason or will proper (*Wille*)

higher part = pure or non-instrumental reason

lower part = impure or instrumental reason

lower part = power of choice (*Willkür*)

For the purposes of this essay, I will not go into all, or even most, of the details of my overall interpretation of Kant's model of the mind, including both human cognition and human volition, but will instead concentrate in this section on Kant's doctrine of *innately specified spontaneous mental capacities*, aka *transcendental capacities*, aka *cognitive or volitional faculties or powers*.

According to my interpretation of Kant's model of the mind, then, there are *seven* basic cognitive or volitional faculties or powers, as follows.

1. *Sensibility (Sinnlichkeit)* is the cognitive faculty or power for sensory awareness in the broad sense, including intuition (*Anschauung*) and the production of *intuitions (Anschauungen)*, sense-perception (*Wahrnehmung, perceptio*) and imagination, and also for feeling (*Empfindung, Gefühl*) in the broad sense, including pleasure and pain, emotion, and desire (*Begierde*).

2. The *Faculty of Desire (Begehrungsvermögen)*, or the human will, is a necessary proper sub-faculty of sensibility, that consists in our innate spontaneous capacity for mobilizing and organizing our desires in order to motivate or move ourselves to choosing or doing, and in human persons the will is a rational human agent's power of wanting, intending, deliberating, deciding, and trying. In turn, the faculty of desire or human will has two levels: (2i) the lower or executive faculty of effective first-order desires, namely, first-order volitions, *the power of choice (Willkür)*, and (2ii) the higher or legislative faculty of second-order volitions, the will (*Wille*) proper, *or the faculty of practical reason*. So just as the faculty of desire is a necessary proper sub-faculty of human sensibility, so too practical reason is a necessary proper sub-faculty of the human will or faculty of desire. More precisely, the faculty of practical reason is *the actualizing and teleological (hence Aristotelian) form of the human will*, in two senses: **first**, the faculty of practical reason is *the inherent or immanent structure of the human will*, and also *the action-guiding core of the human will*, and **second**, the faculty of practical reason also *encapsulates the primary aim or end of the human will, which is to be a self-realizing rational human animal*—that is, to be a creature that is principled and happy in a way that entails its moral worthiness to be happy, at least to some salient degree and extent.

3. *The Understanding (Verstand)* is the cognitive faculty for intellectual awareness or thought (conceptualization, describing).

4. *The Power of judgment (Urteilkraft)* is the cognitive faculty for making judgments (framing propositions, framing beliefs).

5. *Reason (Vernunft)* is either (5i) the cognitive faculty or power for logical inference (in particular syllogistic inference) and the systematic organization of thought (theoretical reason), including the production of theoretical Ideas of reason, or (5ii) the innate faculty for decision-making and forming volitional intentions on the basis of desires, including the production of practical Ideas of reason (practical reason). Otherwise put, reason is the faculty for recognizing and following necessary normative *principles*. Since “discursive” means “concerned with or involving concepts”, and since both the faculties of judgment and reason presuppose and use concepts, then the understanding, judgment, and reason jointly constitute the three *discursive faculties* of human cognition.

6. *Imagination* is a cognitive faculty that has both generic and specific aspects. When taken generically, the imagination is the primitive spontaneous source or engine of *all* sorts of synthesis, or mental processing: I will call this “the all-purpose imagination”. But when taken specifically as a “dedicated,” or specific-task-sensitive, cognitive faculty, the imagination also generates (6i) our spatial and temporal *forms of intuition*, the representations of space and time, (6ii) *mental images (Bilder)*, (6iii) *memories*, (6iv) *schemata*, which are supplementary rules for interpreting general conceptual rules in terms of more specific figural (spatiotemporal) forms and sensory images, and (6v) *aesthetic Ideas of the imagination*.

7. And finally, *Apperception* is the cognitive faculty for self-consciousness or judgment-based self-representation, i.e., second-order thought, or belief about one’s own first-order consciousness.

I have just said that according to my interpretation of Kant’s model of the mind, there are seven basic cognitive or volitional faculties. *Nevertheless*, in sharp contrast to both Rationalists and Empiricists, who hold that the human mind has only one fundamental cognitive faculty—reason or sense perception, respectively—Kant is a *cognitive-faculty dualist* who holds that the human mind has *two fundamental cognitive faculties* that ground the seven basic faculties: (i) the *understanding*, i.e., the cognitive faculty of concepts, thought, and discursivity, and (ii) the *sensibility*, i.e., the cognitive faculty of intuitions/non-conceptual cognitions, sense perception, and mental imagery (A51/B75). Kant is also a *cognitive-content dualist*, who holds that concepts and intuitions are essentially distinct from one another. Kant’s cognitive faculty dualism and cognitive content dualism alike are expressed in this very famous text, partially quoted above, which also equally famously asserts the cognitive *togetherness* of concepts and intuitions for the purpose of making judgments of experience:

Our cognition arises from two fundamental sources in the mind, the first of which is the reception of representations (the receptivity of impressions), the second the faculty for cognizing an object by means of these representations (spontaneity of concepts); through the former, an object is **given** to us, through latter it is **thought** in relation to that representation (as a mere determination of the mind). Intuition and concepts therefore constitute the elements of all our cognition, so that neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition. Both are either pure or empirical. **Empirical**, if sensation (which presupposes the actual presence of the object) is contained therein; but **pure** if no sensation is mixed into the representation. One can call latter the matter of sensible cognition. Thus pure intuition contains merely the form under which something is intuited, and pure concept only the form of thinking of an object in general. Only pure intuitions or concepts alone are possible *a priori*, empirical ones only *a posteriori*. If we will call the receptivity of our mind to receive representations insofar as it is affected in some way **sensibility**, then on the contrary the faculty for bringing forth representations itself, or the **spontaneity** of cognition, is the **understanding**. It comes along with our nature that **intuition** can never be other than **sensible**, i.e., it contains only the way in which we are affected by objects. The faculty for thinking of objects of sensible intuition, on the contrary, is the **understanding**. Neither of these properties is to be preferred to the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.... Further, these two faculties or capacities cannot exchange their functions. The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything, and the senses are not capable of thinking anything. Only from their unification can cognition arise. But on this account one must not mix up their roles, rather one has greater cause to separate them carefully from each other and distinguish them. (A50-52/B74-76)

The essential difference between the cognitive faculties of understanding and sensibility, and correspondingly the essential difference between concepts and intuitions (A50-52/B74-76), as distinct kinds of cognition and distinct kinds of representational content, is a core commitment of Kant's model of the mind.

What, more precisely, *are* concepts and intuitions? Concepts are conscious object-directed mental representations that are: (i) general representations having the logical form of universality (Logik, 9:91), (ii) discursive representations expressing pure logical forms and falling under pure logical laws (A68-70/B92-94, A239/B298), (iii) complex intensions ranging over "comprehensions" (*Umfangen*) that contain all actual and possible objects falling under those intensions, as well as other narrower comprehensions (Logik, 9:95-96), (iv) mediate or indirect (i.e., attributive or descriptive) representations of individual objects (A320/B376-377), (v) rules for classifying and organizing perceptions of objects (*CPR* A106), and (vi) "reflected" representations expressing the higher-order unity of rational self-consciousness, aka "apperception" (B133 and 133n.). Intuitions, just like concepts, are conscious object-directed representations; but, by a diametrical contrast with concepts, intuitions are: (i) singular (A320/B377) (Logik, 9:91), (ii) sense-related (A19/B33, A51/B75), (iii) object-dependent (B72) (*Prol*, 4:281), (iv) immediate, or directly referential (A90-91/B122-123, B132, B145), and, above all, (v) essentially non-conceptual (A284/B340) (Logik, 9:99).³

Now Kant's faculty-dualist, content-dualist model of the mind, according to my interpretation, is an *innatist* model, yet not a classical Rationalist *content-innatist* model of the mind, but instead a *capacity-innatist* model, and, more specifically, what is uniquely original to Kant, an *epigenetic model* of the human mind. Let me briefly explain what I mean by that.

Essential to Kant's epigenetic model of the human mind is an explanation of how objective mental representations (*Vorstellungen*) arise in our minds. Kant speaks of "the act (*Actus*) itself, that is . . . the generation (*Erzeugung*)⁴ of the representation" (*CPR* A103–104); and says that the representation in turn is the "output" (*Wirkung*) of the generative act. In other words, for Kant the human mind is essentially active: *it spontaneously generates its own representations, given sensory inputs.*

Now what is spontaneity? For Kant and also according to rational anthropology, *X* is spontaneous if and only if *X* is a conscious mental event that expresses some acts or operations of a creature, and *X* is (i) causal-dynamically *unprecedented*, in the two-part sense that (ia) conscious mental events of those specific sorts have never actually happened before, and (ib) the settled empirical facts about the past together with the general causal laws of nature do not provide nomologically sufficient conditions for the existence or specific character of those conscious mental events, (ii) *underdetermined* by external sensory informational inputs, and also by prior desires, even though it may have been triggered by those very inputs or motivated by those very desires, (iii) *creative* in the sense of being recursively constructive, or able to generate infinitely complex outputs from finite resources, and also (iv) *self-guiding*. (*CPR* A51/B75, B130, B132, B152, A445-447/B473-475). Moreover, there are two further pairs of basic distinctions we need to make with respect to notion of spontaneity.

³ See (Hanna, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2015:ch. 2, and 2016a).

⁴ In this context, to say that a mental representation is "generated" is to say that it is spontaneously yielded by the mind when triggered by sensory inputs, by following a set of determinate formal rules for operating on those inputs. Kant's notion of *Erzeugung*, or representational generativity, is later adopted in essentially this sense by Wilhelm Humboldt in the nineteenth century in his *On Language* (Humboldt, 1988), and then again by Noam Chomsky in the twentieth century in his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Chomsky, 1965:9).

First, there is the distinction between (i) “higher-level” or *intellectual* spontaneity, generated by the faculties of understanding, reason, and apperception, and (ii) “lower-level” or *sensible* spontaneity, generated by the faculty of sensibility, especially including the faculty of imagination and the faculty of desire. And **second**, there is the distinction between (i) *relative* spontaneity, which requires inputs to the rational conscious mind, and (ii) *absolute* spontaneity, which allows the rational conscious mind to generate its own outputs without any triggering inputs. For example, rational human a priori cognition is only relatively spontaneous, because it requires sensory inputs via empirical intuition, whereas an “intellectual intuition,” if it existed, would be absolutely spontaneous, because it could cause the objects of its thoughts to exist just by thinking them (A19-22/B33-36, B71-72).

Granting that general account of spontaneity, then Kant’s theory of the transcendental source of cognition starts with these fundamental claims:

Although all our cognition begins *in* experience it does not follow that it all arises *out* of experience. For it may well be that even our empirical cognition is made up of what we receive through impressions and of what our own faculty of cognition (sensible impressions serving merely as the occasion) supplies from itself. (B1)

That is, although necessarily every cognition is triggered or occasioned by sensory experiences, and although as meaningful every cognition must apply in some way or another to actual or possible objects of experience, nevertheless *not* every element in its representational content is determined by or derived from sensory experience. Rather, at least part of cognitive content—its underlying structure—is strictly underdetermined by experience, because it is derived from a formal non-empirical source in the mind.

For Kant, the source of the underlying structure of cognitive content is a set of inherent capacities for synthesizing or processing sensory information, that is, for organizing and transforming sensory data or inputs in accordance with certain “dedicated,” or innately specified, protocols. These innately specified protocols fall into three basic types: (i) *pure forms of intuition* (the representations of space and time as structural wholes), (ii) *pure concepts of the understanding* (second-order concepts, or categories), and (iii) *the transcendental schema of the imagination* (the pure formal representation of time considered as a source of partial interpretations or partial models for the pure concepts of the understanding).

The several distinct basic sub-faculties within this over all dedicated information processing capacity ultimately make up a well-ordered, well-coordinated cognitive unity or cognitive corporation, by virtue of an executive capacity for the unification of those elements of synthesis ingredient in the cognition of determinate objects—namely, the “original synthetic unity of apperception” (B131–136). The basic function of the original synthetic unity of apperception is to be the a priori ground of self-consciousness, or the innate faculty for producing the representation “I think...,” which functions as an implicit prefix for every possible cognition.

It needs to be stressed how very different Kant’s notion of a unified nonsensory source of cognition is from the classical Rationalist (in a broad sense that includes not only Descartes’s, Spinoza’s, Leibniz’s, and Wolff’s, but also Plato’s and Crusius’s) conception of innate ideas—which, just to distinguish it terminologically from Kant’s special brand of innatism, I will call “INNATISM.” As early as his Inaugural Dissertation of 1770, “On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World,” Kant distinguishes sharply between two types of a priori mental inherence: (i) that according to which complete representations are originally inscribed in the mind at creation or birth, in order to be self-consciously grasped later under appropriate retrieval

conditions, and (ii) that according to which only a law or rule or procedure of mental processing is originally inherent in some faculty of the mind—a procedure whose application to raw content is triggered on the occasion of experience (*De mundi*, 2:395). In other words, the classical Rationalist INNATIST theory of innateness is a doctrine of *content innateness*, whereas by sharp contrast, Kant’s theory of innateness is a doctrine of *capacity innateness*, by which I mean that what is innate is *not* a mental representation but instead only a mental faculty or power for generating representations according to rules (see also *Entdeckung*, 8:221–222). So, whereas the classical Rationalist INNATIST theory, the theory of content-innateness, is based on a picture of the mind as a passive recipient or container of divinely caused ideas, by sharp contrast, *Kant’s* innatist theory, the theory of faculty-innateness, is that the mind is essentially a set of innate spontaneous capacities, or faculties, each of which contains some determinate formal procedures for the generation of representations. In the Critical period, this contrast becomes the equally sharp distinction between what Kant calls the “*preformation system* of pure reason” (associated most closely with the metaphysical and epistemological doctrines of Descartes, Leibniz, Wolff, and Crusius), and his own “*system of the epigenesis of pure reason*” (B167).

In the seminal 1772 letter to Herz, Kant observes that

Crusius believed in . . . ready-made concepts that God implanted in the human soul just as they had to be in order to harmonize with things. . . . But the *deus ex machina* is the greatest absurdity one could hit upon in the determination of the origin and validity of our cognition. (*Briefe*, 10:131)

In other words, it is absurd to think that every cognition in our repertoire could be originally embedded in the human mind prior to sensory experience. Only an arbitrarily introduced transcendent Creator—e.g., a Supreme Monad—could account for this cognitive plenitude. Not only is the preformation doctrine grounded on ad hoc metaphysical hypotheses, however. Such a view also requires a human cognitive storage capacity immeasurably larger than any empirical evidence indicates. And it further implies a highly implausible account of content acquisition whereby we cognitively anticipate all later experiences and then merely actualize those preformed representations under suitable empirical conditions. But “on such a hypothesis we can set no limit to the assumption of predetermined dispositions to future judgements”; and each one of those dispositions would express at most a contingent subjective fact about us, not some necessary connection between us and what we cognize (B167). Hence, paradoxically, a fully empiricist account of content acquisition would explain exactly as much as the innatist or preformation doctrine.

By contrast, Kant’s *epigenetic model of the mind* contains an explanation for cognitive content that appeals only to the idea of faculties containing rules for synthesizing externally supplied sensory information. In its original biological context, “epigenesis” is the doctrine that living beings develop from simple seeds or embryos plus external influences or accretions. But what is essential to epigenesis is that each simple seed contains “its own specific vital force,” which guarantees that its development consists in a procedurally preprogrammed yet *materially and empirically interactive* process. As the historian of science Stephen F. Mason observes,

the idea that an organism was ideally preformed by virtue of its own specific vital force implied that a real physical development, a material differentiation, should be observed empirically in the embryological growth of the organism. (Mason, 1962:365)⁵

The theory of biological epigenesis is directly opposed to the biological preformationist theory—favoured by rationalistic and mechanistic philosophers—according to which living beings are genetically complete from the start and develop only by mechanically adding bulk. Transferred to a cognitive context, then, mental epigenesis is the doctrine that representations are the outputs of the active or vital operations of our innate capacities for implementing protocols of synthesis when triggered and fed by external inputs. Abstracting away from its contrast with preformationism now, we can see that the core idea of Kant’s epigenetic theory of the mind lies in his thesis that the sensory input to the mind *strictly underdetermines* the representational content of the manifest output of the mind. Hence the cognitive faculties must inherently contain a multiplicity of non-empirical or a priori formal rules sufficient for the generation of the manifest output. The neo-Kantian linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt in the 19th century, and the psycholinguist Noam Chomsky in the mid-20th, both make the extremely important point that sensory and behavioural inputs to our minds are far too limited and unstructured to explain our “linguistic productivity” or “creativity”—the surprising fact that all competent speakers and even very small children can generate an infinitely large number of novel grammatically correct sentences.⁶ This point is sometimes called “the poverty of the stimulus”. Given the poverty of the stimulus, according to Humboldt and Chomsky, any strictly empiricist explanation of our grammatical knowledge automatically fails.⁷ The alternative explanation offered by Humboldt and Chomsky is that our minds innately contain a finite set of grammatical rules that we repeatedly and recursively apply to inputs: an innate universal grammar. So from finite means we produce infinite outputs.

Kant’s core idea is very similar to this, but even more radical. The contingent, sensory and more generally empirical inputs to our minds are utterly insufficient to explain how we are able to cognize a whole range of *categorial* features of our world, including the notions of unity, plurality, totality, reality, negation, limitation, substance, causality, strict reciprocity, possibility, existence, and (especially) necessity. And the same according to Kant is true of our ability to cognize *formal spatiotemporal* features of our world by means of pure sensible intuition. These representations radically exceed sensory or empirical inputs, particularly as regards their inherent strong modality or necessity. So those inputs alone obviously fail to explain the manifest facts of categorial productivity and pure intuitional productivity. Kant’s system of the epigenesis of pure reason is then offered as the all-around best explanation of these transcendental sources of productivity:

There are only two ways in which we can account for a *necessary* agreement of experience with the concepts of its objects: either experience makes these concepts possible or these concepts make experience possible. The former supposition does not hold in respect of the categories (nor of pure

⁵ (Mason, 1962:365). The theory of embryological epigenesis was first published in 1759 by Caspar Friedrich Wolff, a professor at the University of Halle.

⁶ See n. 4 above. See also (Chomsky, 1975).

⁷ Chomsky repeatedly makes the correct and crucially important critical point that when empiricists appeal to “general learning mechanisms”—e.g. Hume’s appeal to perception, memory, and imagination—to explain the acquisition of grammatical knowledge, they are *de facto* innatists. See, e.g., (Chomsky, 1971).

sensible intuition); for, since they are a priori concepts, and therefore independent of experience, the ascription to them of an empirical origin would be a sort of *generatio aequivoca*. There remains, therefore, only the second supposition—a system, as it were, of the *epigenesis* of pure reason—namely, that the categories contain, on the side of the understanding, the grounds of the possibility of all experience in general. (B166–167)

More generally, according to Kant’s epigenetic model of the mind, the full meaning content and objective reference of *any* mental representation is satisfactorily explained only by appealing to our innate total human capacity for acquiring cognition of the world, where this capacity is an innate, spontaneously active, multifaculty, rule-governed, self-guided a priori psychological information-processing system triggered and funded by sensory inputs. Kant calls this total epigenetic faculty for cognizing the “faculty of cognition” or *Erkenntnisvermögen* (B1). All the information-processing operations of our *Erkenntnisvermögen* are *syntheses*; and the ultimate source of synthesis—the mind’s generative and productive engine—is the power of imagination (A78/B103):

By *synthesis* in the most general sense, however, I understand the act of putting different representations together with each other and grasping their manifoldness (*Mannigfaltigkeit*) in one cognition. (A77/B102)

Synthesis of a manifold, however (be it given empirically or a priori) is what first brings forth a cognition. This cognition may, indeed, at first, be raw and confused, and therefore in need of analysis. Yet the synthesis itself is what properly collects the elements for cognition, and unifies them into a certain content. It is to synthesis, therefore, that we must first direct our attention, if we would determine the first origin of our cognition. (A77–8/B103)

Synthesis in general . . . is the mere output of the power of imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no cognition whatsoever To bring this synthesis *to concepts* is a function that belongs to the understanding, and it is through this function of the understanding that we first obtain cognition in the proper sense (*in eigentlicher Bedeutung*). (A78/B103)

Otherwise put, synthesis for Kant and for rational anthropology is the imagination-driven collection of diverse elements of information and their transformation into a single cognition by means of organizing them into a novel structured unity of representational content, whether this representational content is intuitional or conceptual. Correspondingly, the spontaneous synthesizing power of the imagination occurs at two different cognitive “levels,” namely (i) the “lower-level” receptive or *aesthetic* power of sensibility, and (ii) the “higher-level” discursive or *intellectual* power of understanding, judgment, and reason:

Our cognition arises from two fundamental sources in the mind, the first of which is the capacity of receiving representations (the receptivity for impressions (*Eindrücke*), the second the power of cognizing an object through these representations (spontaneity of concepts). Through the first an object is *given* to us, through the second an object is *thought* in relation to that [given] representation (as a mere determination of the mind). (A50/B74)

In these texts, Kant’s fundamental distinction between the spontaneous conceptual, intellectual functions of the understanding and the receptive aesthetic functions of sensibility has one quite misleading apparent implication, however. For it seems to suggest that the faculty of

sensibility is wholly passive or non-generative and nonproductive. But sensory receptivity is in no way a representational *inertness*, and this is because it is essentially connected with the imagination:

Psychologists have hitherto failed to realize that imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself. . . . It has been believed that the senses not only supply impressions but also connect them so as to yield mental images (*Bilder*) of objects. For that purpose something more is undoubtedly required—namely, a function for the synthesis of them. (A121 n.)

To regard sensibility as wholly passive would be mistakenly to identify it with Locke’s model of sense perception—the mind as a sort of conscious black box with a peephole to let in the light, and an impressionable blank tablet on the inside; a mental *camera obscura*. By sharp contrast, for Kant and also for rational anthropology, the faculties of sensibility and the understanding *alike* are generative and productive sources: each is an innate spontaneous “capacity” (*Fähigkeit*) and thereby also a “faculty” (*Vermögen*) or “power” (*Kraft*) for either (i) spontaneously simplifying and interpreting—i.e., informing and transforming—sensory inputs, or (ii) spontaneously self-generating non-empirical formal representations of various kinds. Otherwise put, for Kant and rational anthropology, sensibility is *spontaneously responsive*, not inertly passive.

3. What is the Imagination?

Up and down the series of syntheses, as I have already pointed out, the generative and productive engine of the mind is the faculty or power of imagination:

Synthesis in general . . . is the mere output of the power of imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no cognition whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely even conscious. (A78/B103)

More generally, the imagination is essentially spontaneous, goal-oriented, epigenetic, and organicist or vital (Hanna, 2019)—in a way that not only comprehends but also extends well beyond what Chomsky meant by it in a strictly psycholinguistic sense, *creative*. We are “scarcely even conscious” of its activities or operations, *not* because it is *unconscious* and ontologically distinct from or epistemically inaccessible to consciousness, but instead because, as the engine of synthesis, it is also the very seat or ground of all self-consciousness or reflective consciousness, and hence properly speaking it is indeed conscious in a first-order way, but *non-self-consciously* conscious or *pre-reflectively* conscious.

This raises a crucial capital-C Critical point about the faculty of imagination—in the sense that it is also about *the inherent limits of all actual and possible human cognition*, aka “the bounds of sense and reason”. Although all syntheses and all conscious and self-conscious mental activities have their starting points in the faculty of imagination, and although its spontaneity (whether relative or absolute) is a primitive and irreducible property of the mind, it would nevertheless be a *huge mistake* to view the imagination as some sort of noumenal psychological “fundamental power” (*Grundkraft*) of the human mind (A649/B677). This would be illegitimately to *hypostatize* or *reify* the faculty of imagination—just as it is philosophically illegitimate to hypostatize or reify the faculty for self-consciousness or apperception by inferring the existence of an immortal soul (CPR A341–366, A381–405/B399–432). For Kant and for rational anthropology, there is no valid direct inference from a *basic faculty* of the human mind to a *noumenal metaphysical substrate* of the human mind. At best, one can permissibly use the theoretical rational *Idea* of a fundamental

mental power as a mere logical fiction for unifying philosophical or empirical psychological investigations.

Although, as we have just seen, Kant assigns the fundamental operation of synthesis and even the origins of consciousness and self-consciousness themselves directly to the functional capacity for imagination, he also treats the imagination more narrowly. Indeed, he carefully distinguishes the imagination from the powers of intuition and understanding, and assigns the imagination its own specialized representational faculty and cognitive function. As I mentioned above, I call this *the dedicated imagination*, in contradistinction to the imagination construed as the mind's generative/productive engine, the source of all synthesis, which I call *the all-purpose imagination*.

What precisely does the dedicated imagination do? As Kant all-too-terse puts it:

Imagination is the faculty of representing an object even *without its presence* in intuition. Now since all our intuition is sensible, the imagination, owing to the subjective condition under which alone it can give to the concepts of the understanding a corresponding intuition, belongs to *sensibility*. (B151)

The cognitive powers belonging to *sensibility* (the power of intuitive representations) are divided into *the senses (den Sinn)* and *imagination*. Sense is the power of intuiting when the object is present; imagination, that of intuiting even when the object is *not* present. (Anth, 7:153)

In view of the second text I just quoted, it is sometimes held by Kantians and Kant-commentators that the dedicated imagination is strictly a function of intuition. But if by “intuition” we mean *human sensory intuition*, as Kant normally does (for example, throughout the *Transcendental Aesthetic*), then the dedicated imagination is most accurately described as being *quasi-intuitional*. That is: insofar as it is sensible in character, the dedicated imagination must be able to operate in conjunction with sensory intuition, and indeed the dedicated imagination not only *presupposes* the operations of sensory intuition (B278) but also *inherently expresses* aspects of the pure forms of intuition, our representations of space and time (A291/B347); but, whereas sensory intuition always depends upon the actual existence or presence of the object, the dedicated imagination does not require the actual existence or presence of its objects, hence it is “empty intuition without an object” (A292/B348), and can refer either to *non-existing sensory objects* or to sensory objects *in their absence*—so the dedicated imagination is to that extent *non-intuitional*.

Above and beyond its quasi-intuitional character, the dedicated imagination has two different *modes* or *sides*, namely, its *productive* mode or side, and its *reproductive* mode or side:

Imagination (*facultas imaginandi*), as a power of intuiting even without the presence of the object, is either *productive* or *reproductive*—that is, either a power of exhibiting an object originally and so prior to experience (*exhibitio originaria*), or a power of exhibiting it in a derivative way, by bringing back an empirical intuition we previously had (*exhibitio derivata*). (Anth, 7:167)

By virtue of this productive/reproductive duality, the dedicated imagination is able to mediate between, or fuse, the distinct faculties of conceptual understanding and sensory intuition, *without* being reducible to either:

The more universal the understanding is in its rules, the more perfect it is, but if it wants to consider things *in concreto* then it absolutely cannot do without imagination. (Log-DW, 27:710)

Experience as such necessarily presupposes the reproducibility of appearances. (A101–102)

Generalizing now, we can say that the basic function of the dedicated imagination is to supply representations that mediate between, or fuse, the two fundamentally different and original domains of representational information—sensory intuitional information on the one hand, and discursive or conceptual information on the other hand, without being reducible to either. The *reproductive* dedicated imagination synthesizes, on the one hand, by streamlining the massive and relatively disorganized concrete informational intake of the senses into simpler formats that store and reproduce only the most salient elements of the sensory data. And, on the other hand, the *productive* dedicated imagination synthesizes by partially interpreting or partially modelling general concepts and abstract rules of the understanding in terms of original sensible models or schemata (A137–142/B176–181). Otherwise put, the reproductive dedicated imagination brings concrete sensory information *up to* concepts, and the productive dedicated imagination brings abstract conceptual information *down to* intuitions. So, by virtue of this dual-mode dedicated imagination, the *Erkenntnisvermögen* is simultaneously a *bottom-up* and *top-down* information-processing capacity, hence a coherently organized, multifaceted and multifunctional information-processing capacity. This dual-mode functionality of the dedicated imagination is nicely summarized in one of the *Reflexionen*:

The act of [productive (RH)] imagination, whereby a concept is given an intuition, is *exhibitio*; the act of [reproductive (RH)] imagination, whereby a concept is made out of an empirical intuition, *comprehensio*. (Refl, 5661, 18:320)

Moreover, this dual-mode functionality of the dedicated imagination cannot, in the end, be fully separated from the faculty or power of judgment (*Vermögen zu urteilen, Urteilskraft*). Judgment brings together understanding and sensibility, hence also brings together concepts and intuitions. So to judge is to invoke both the productive and reproductive modes of the dedicated imagination.

This brings us up to the stupefying passages in the B version of the Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding, in which Kant discusses the “transcendental synthesis of the imagination” (A102, A119, B151–152), the “pure (productive) synthesis of imagination” (A118), which carries out and the “transcendental function of imagination” (A123), which is the same as the operation of “figurative synthesis” or *synthesis speciosa* (B151), whose precise cognitive function is to produce *representations of static or dynamic spatiotemporal forms, patterns, or shapes*. Here is the crucial, and *especially* stupefying, text in §24:

This **synthesis** of the manifold of sensible intuition, which is possible and necessary *a priori*, can be called **figurative** (*synthesis speciosa*), as distinct from that which would be thought in the mere category in regard to the manifold of an intuition in general, and which is called combination of the understanding (*synthesis intellectualis*); both are **transcendental**, not merely because they themselves proceed *apriori* but also because they ground the possibility of other cognition *a priori*. Yet the figurative synthesis, if it pertains merely to the original synthetic unity of apperception, i.e., this transcendental unity, which is thought in the categories, must be called, as distinct from the merely intellectual combination, **the transcendental synthesis of the imagination**. *Imagination* is the faculty for representing an object even without its presence in intuition. Now since all of our intuition is sensible, the imagination, on account of the subjective condition under which alone it can give a corresponding intuition to the concepts of understanding, belongs to sensibility; but insofar as its synthesis is still an exercise of spontaneity, which is determining and not, like sense, merely determinable, and can thus determine the form sense *a priori* in accordance with the unity

of apperception, the imagination is to this extent a faculty for determining the sensibility *a priori*, and its synthesis of intuitions, **in accordance with the categories**, must be the transcendental synthesis of the **imagination**, which is an effect of the understanding on sensibility and its first application (and at the same time the ground of others) to objects of the intuition that is possible for us. As figurative, it is distinct from the intellectual synthesis without any imagination merely through the understanding. Now insofar as the imagination is spontaneity, I also occasionally call it the **productive** imagination, and thereby distinguish it from the **reproductive** imagination, whose synthesis is subject solely to empirical laws, namely those of association, and that therefore contributes nothing to the explanation of the possibility of cognition *a priori*, and on that account not belongs not in transcendental philosophy but in psychology. (B151-152, boldfacing in the original, underlining added)

Without wading too far into the much-contested, deep waters of interpreting these passages, for our purposes here, I think that this text is best understood as describing the special *a priori* schematizing function of the pure or transcendental productive dedicated imagination that is required to establish the objective validity and applicability of the categories (A145–146/B185–186), within the overarching framework of our capacity for judgment. But also for our purposes here, the most problematic part of that text is this:

the transcendental synthesis of the **imagination** ... is an effect of the understanding on sensibility (B152, boldfacing in the original),

which seems to assert explicitly and unequivocally that the transcendental synthesis of the imagination is *caused* by the understanding, and therefore not only *presupposes* the understanding but also is specifically *determined by* the understanding. Yet this reading of that text is in direct conflict with these equally apparently explicit and unequivocal texts that assert *the logical independence* of the transcendental synthesis of the imagination from the understanding:

[S]ince all of our intuition is sensible, the imagination, on account of the subjective condition under which alone it can give a corresponding intuition to the concepts of understanding, belongs to **sensibility**. (B151, boldfacing in the original)

As figurative, [the transcendental synthesis of the imagination] is distinct from the intellectual synthesis without any imagination merely through the understanding. (B152)

So here we are faced with a momentous interpretive philosophical choice between two mutually exclusive options: (i) should we go with the first text, which clearly entails *conceptualism* and also guarantees the *soundness* of the B Deduction?, or (ii) should we go with the second pair of texts, which clearly entail *non-conceptualism*, and also guarantee the *unsoundness* of the B Deduction? More explicitly, the unsoundness of the B Deduction follows directly from (ii), in view of the fact that if the transcendental synthesis of the imagination is logically independent of the understanding, then it is really possible for there to be what I call “rogue objects,” directly accessed by empirical intuitions, that inherently fall beyond the scope of the categories, which directly falsifies the stated aim of the B Deduction, which is to prove that, necessarily, “all sensible intuitions stand under the categories” (B143), hence that there is a necessary “application of the categories to [all] objects of the senses in general” (B150). Since 2001, I have been arguing for the fairly controversial and unorthodox Kantian thesis of the inherent non-descriptivity, direct

referentiality, and essential non-conceptuality of *intuition*.⁸ And since 2010 or 2011, I have also been arguing for the truly shocking Kantian thesis that *not only* is the B Deduction unsound, but also that as Kantian philosophers *we should be fully prepared to affirm this unsoundness and all of its consequences, for rationally compelling Kantian reasons*.⁹ In this context, I am not going to argue explicitly for the “truly shocking” thesis again; but in the next and final section, I will present my case for the (equally) fairly controversial and unorthodox thesis of the essential non-conceptuality of *the imagination*.

4. The Essential Non-Conceptuality of the Imagination: Four Arguments

Now, finally, I am in a position to argue directly for the two theses I announced in the Introduction: (ii) that not only the mental activities and operations characteristic of the imagination, but also imaginal mental states, *do not require either the occurrent application or possession of concepts* (aka “state non-conceptualism”), and (iii) that the representational content of the imagination is *essentially different from conceptual content*, in that that imaginal content is neither necessarily nor sufficiently determined by concepts or our conceptual capacities (aka “essentialist content non-conceptualism”).

In view of section 3, it is crucial to remember that I am construing the faculty of sensibility as *inherently actively receptive*, in a *responsive* way, by virtue of the power of sensibility to carry out a “lower-level” kind of spontaneous synthesis, or mental processing, hence *not* as receptive in any way that is inert or passive, as, for example, in Locke’s account of sensibility. Again, this lower-level kind of spontaneous synthesis is what I have called *the all-purpose imagination*, and it is delivered in two distinct basic stages or moments, according to what I have called *the dedicated imagination*: (i) a “synopsis of the manifold a priori through sense” or a “synthesis of apprehension,” which is *the pure or transcendental productive synthesis of the imagination*, that yields *the forms of intuition*, our representations of space and time, and *transcendental schemata*, and is also presupposed by *the empirical productive synthesis of the imagination*, that yields, among other things, *empirical schemata*, and (ii) a “synthesis of this manifold through the imagination” or “synthesis of reproduction in imagination” (A94, A98–102), which comprehends both *the pure or transcendental reproductive synthesis of the imagination* (aka memory) and also *the empirical reproductive synthesis of the imagination* (aka associative imagination).

In the B edition of the first *Critique*, as I have also already pointed out, these two basic stages of mental processing are also said to have a single shared innate spontaneous psychological ground in the pure transcendental or productive imagination, which carries out the operation of “figurative synthesis” or *synthesis speciosa* (B151), whose precise cognitive function is to produce *representations of static or dynamic spatiotemporal forms, patterns, or shapes*. Kant’s general thought here can be expressed as the thesis that “imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself” (A120 n.).

Synoptically speaking, Kant’s sensibility vs. understanding distinction captures the difference between the *sub-rational* or “lower-level” spontaneous cognitive powers of the human or otherwise animal mind, and the *rational* or “higher-level” spontaneous cognitive powers of the human or otherwise animal mind. On this Kantian picture of our cognitive capacities, it is not to be assumed that rational animals do not *also* have the sub-rational or lower-level cognitive powers; on the contrary, for Kant all rational animals *also* have the sub-rational or

⁸ See note 3 above.

⁹ See, e.g., (Hanna, 2011b, 2016b).

lower-level cognitive powers that they share with non-rational animals, whether human or non-human. In this connection, two hundred years after Kant, Fred Dretske very relevantly remarks in *Seeing and Knowing* that:

[v]isual differentiation, as I am employing this phrase, is a preintellectual, pre-discursive sort of capacity which a wide variety of beings possess [and it] is an endowment which is largely immune to the caprices of our intellectual life. (Dretske, 1969:29)

The crucial point grasped by Kant and Dretske alike, is that essentially non-conceptual cognitive capacities are “sub-rational” or “non-rational” capacities *only* in the sense that they are necessary but not sufficient for our rational cognitive capacities, and *not* in the sense that they are *irrational* or *arational*. So essentially non-conceptual content does not exclude rationality: on the contrary, on the Kant-Dretske picture, essentially non-conceptual cognition and its content constitute the *proto-rationality* of all minded human or non-human animals.

With that crucial point in place, here is an explicit, conclusive argument for the essential non-conceptuality of the imagination, that I will call **The Master Argument**:

1. Non-human animals and pre-linguistic human infants are *both* capable of imagining, hence *both* possess a faculty of imagination, yet neither are capable of conceptualizing, and therefore *neither* non-human animals *nor* pre-linguistic human infants possess a faculty for conceptualization, aka the understanding.
2. But we share *the very same proto-rational faculty of imagination* with non-human animals and pre-linguistic human infants, even if we *also* possess further faculties for conceptualization—namely, the understanding—reason, and apperception.
3. Therefore, conceptualization, concepts, and the understanding are *not necessary* for the cognitive activities or operations of the faculty of imagination.
4. Since we can intuitionally tell the difference between *incongruent counterparts* like our right and left hands, even if by hypothesis they are *conceptually identical*, it follows that that concepts and conceptualization, and correspondingly, the understanding, are *insufficient* for sense-perceptual cognition.¹⁰
5. If we can *intuitionally* tell the difference between incongruent counterparts like our right and left hands, then we can also *imagine* the difference between incongruent counterparts like our right and left hands—e.g., by means of our egocentrically-centered *body-image*—even if by hypothesis they are conceptually identical.
6. Furthermore, well-supported empirical data in recent and contemporary cognitive neuroscience about the mental rotation of abstract shapes in imagined orientable spaces, including, e.g., mirror-reflected spherical triangles that share the same base, also

¹⁰ See, e.g., (Hanna, 2008, 2011a, 2015:ch. 2, 2016a).

empirically demonstrate that we can therefore imagine the difference between incongruent counterparts like our right and left hands.¹¹

7. So concepts and conceptualization, and correspondingly, the understanding, are *insufficient* for imagining and the imagination.

8. Therefore, since concepts and conceptualization, and correspondingly, the understanding, are neither necessary nor sufficient for imagining and the imagination, it follows *that the imagination and its imaginal content are essentially non-conceptual*.

The Master Argument, as its name suggests, in-and-of-itself explicitly and conclusively demonstrates what I want to demonstrate in this essay; but just in case you need further convincing, here are three (to me, anyhow) quite interesting supplementary arguments.

The first supplementary argument also directly entails the essential non-conceptuality of the imagination, that is, *essentialist content non-conceptualism* with respect to the imagination; and the other two arguments each entail, at the very least, *state non-conceptualism* with respect to the imagination. In this connection, it should be especially noted that although, in and of itself, state non-conceptualism does *not* entail essentialist content non-conceptualism, nevertheless essentialist content non-conceptualism *does* entail state non-conceptualism: hence the state non-conceptuality of the imagination that follows from the latter two arguments is *perfectly consistent* with the imagination's *also* being essentially non-conceptual.

The First Supplementary Argument: From the Second Analogy of Experience

1. In the Second Analogy of Experience in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant carefully distinguishes between

(li) the inherently natural-law-governed and deterministic “objective sequence” of sense-perceptions—for example, of a boat traveling downstream—which necessarily *does* fall under empirical concepts and the categories, and

(lii) the inherently “arbitrary” (*ganz beliebig*) and freely-chosen “subjective sequence” of sense-perceptions—for example, of my gaze absent-mindedly flitting over a house—which necessarily *does not* fall under empirical concepts and the categories:

In the ... example of a house my perceptions could have begun at its rooftop and ended at the ground, but could also have begun below and ended above; likewise, I could have apprehended the manifold of empirical intuition from the right or the left. In the series of these perceptions there was therefore no determinate order that made it necessary when I had to begin in the apprehension in order to combine the manifold empirically....[T]he **subjective sequence** of

¹¹ See, e.g., (Johnson-Laird, 1983; Kosslyn, 1980, 1994; Shepard et al., 1982; Shepard, 1978; Shepard and Metzler, 1971; Shepard and Chipman, 1970).

apprehension.... proves nothing about the connection of the manifold in the object [of experience], because it is entirely arbitrary (*ganz beliebig*).
(A193/B238)

2. So the inherently arbitrary and freely-chosen subjective series of sense-perceptions is *essentially non-conceptual*.
3. But, self-evidently, via phenomenological introspection, we know that it is really possible for us to use our empirical reproductive or productive imagination—for example, in dreaming during sleep, or in freely-associative waking fantasy or reverie (aka “spacing out”)—*to imagine a subjective sequence of sensory images*.
4. Therefore, imagining and the imagination are essentially non-conceptual.

The Second Supplementary Argument: From Our Aesthetic Experience of the Beautiful

1. For Kant, feelings are subjective sensations that necessarily involve either pleasure or pain (although they need not be exhausted by their pleasure/pain component).
2. Pleasure and pain in turn are modes of “the feeling of life” (KU, 5:204), which is an immediate subjective experience of dynamic natural vitality that expresses our existence as living organisms and embodied minds: “the mind (*Gemüt*) for itself is entirely life (the principle of life itself)” (KU, 5:278).
3. In aesthetic experience of the beautiful, according to Kant, we feel a “disinterested pleasure” that expresses the harmonious and life-enhancing interaction between our various cognitive faculties—and in particular between *the understanding* and *the imagination*—as they jointly operate in order to represent the phenomenal form of the beautiful object (KU, 5:217–219).
4. On the basis of this disinterested pleasure, we non-inferentially judge that the object—say, this rose—is beautiful.
5. But at the same time,

the judgment of taste . . . determines the object, independently of concepts, with regard to satisfaction and the predicate of beauty. (KU, 5 219, underlining added)
6. In other words, even though the object falls under some concept or another (we not only see the rose but also see it as a rose), this conceptual fact is wholly irrelevant to its being beautiful, since its being beautiful consists merely in the relation between its phenomenal form and the pleasure we experience in the harmonious interplay of our cognitive faculties.
7. So, even despite the fact that the judgment of taste includes concepts, and even despite the further fact that, as it happens, those concepts correctly apply to that object (i.e., this is indeed a rose), nevertheless even if the concepts were false of the object (say, I judged

that this tulip is beautiful), or even if my concepts underdiscriminated that object (suppose that I cannot actually tell roses apart from tulips), or even if I lacked the specific concept ROSE, or even if the putative rose did not actually exist as such (suppose it is a hallucination of a rose), *still* the aesthetic judgment of taste has a direct object and remains valid.

8. Therefore, *state non-conceptualism about the imagination* holds for our aesthetic experience of the beautiful:

I do not need [a concept] in order to find beauty in something. (KU 5: 207)

The Third Supplementary Argument: From Aesthetic Ideas of the Imagination

1. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant says that there are “aesthetic idea[s],” by which he means,

[a] representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., **concept**, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible..., [and] [o]ne readily sees that it is the counterpart (pendant) of an **idea of reason**, which is, conversely, a concept to which no intuition (representation of the imagination) can be adequate. (KU, 5:314, boldfacing in the original, underlining added)

2. In other words, an aesthetic idea is a non-empirical, metaphysical representation, like an “idea of reason,” but also *non-discursive* and *non-conceptual*, hence linguistically *inexpressible* by means of concepts, propositions, or judgments, precisely to the extent that it is generated by the pure productive imagination.

3. Therefore, *state non-conceptualism about the imagination* holds for aesthetic ideas.

5. Conclusion

In view of **The Master Argument** and the three (to me) quite interesting supplementary arguments, I hereby rest my case for the essential non-conceptuality of the imagination, according to Kant and rational anthropology alike.¹²

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¹² I’m grateful to the participants in the workshop, “JORNADA IMAGINAÇÃO, GÊNIO E ENGENHO EM KANT,” at UFMG, Belo Horizonte BR, in June 2019—especially Patricia Kauark-Leite, Giorgia Cecchinato, Virginia Figueiredo, and Fernando Silva—for providing the opportunity to present an earlier version of this essay and for their insightful comments and questions.

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