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Intuition and Judgment:
How Not To Think about the Singularity of Intuition
(and the Generality of Concepts) in Kant

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I

Famously, Kant holds that intuitions and concepts – the representations, respectively, of sensibility and understanding – are two distinct, but equally necessary, elements of cognition: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. [...] Only from their unification can cognition arise” (KrV, A51/B76).¹ Yet, how this unification is to be effected is less clear. According to a widely-held view, it is done through the act of judgment. A judgment, on this view, is an act of combining an intuition and a concept; at least, this is so in the fundamental case of judgment. However, I shall argue that this view is mistaken. It ascribes to Kant a conception of judgment that he does not hold, and it foists on him a conception of intuition that is not supported by the text. As a result, the view misconstrues the role of intuition in Kant’s theory of cognition. And this, in turn, leads to a distorted understanding of the unification requirement; that is, of the claim that intuitions and concepts are two distinct, yet equally necessary elements of cognition. Since the unification requirement ranks among the critical Kant’s most deeply held commitments, a proper understanding of the nature of this requirement is crucial to a proper appreciation of Kant’s theory of cognition as a whole.

¹ References to Kant’s works will be given in the text, following the customary conventions. The English text of the *First Critique* is quoted from I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. P. Guyer and A. Wood, Cambridge 1998. The English text of the *Jäsche-Logik* is quoted from I. Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, transl. M. Young, Cambridge 1992. I have tacitly modified translations where needed.

I will refer to a view of this kind as Proto-Fregeanism. The central characteristic of a Proto-Fregean view is that it regards intuition as playing a role analogous to that of a singular term in a sentence. This treatment of intuition takes as its natural complement a conception of concepts as analogous to open sentences. A view that conceives of intuitions and concepts along these lines treats Kant as a forerunner to Frege, since such a conception is clearly informed by Frege's treatment of concepts as functions. In line with this treatment of intuitions and concepts, Proto-Fregeanism regards singular judgment as the fundamental case of judgment, in terms of which all other cases are to be understood. Thus, judgments of different quantity are to be accounted for in terms of operations on singular judgments.

Perhaps the clearest expression of the Proto-Fregean view of intuition is given by Robert Howell who explicitly says that "intuitions are analogues of singular terms."² But Howell is by no means the only adherent of this view. It is also held by such prominent commentators as Beck, Hintikka, Prauss, Sellars, and Strawson.³

There are at least two considerations that might be thought to recommend a Proto-Fregean view. The first derives from the characterizations Kant gives of intuitions and concepts, respectively, when he describes the way in which each of these two kinds of representations relates to its object. Concepts, he says, relate to objects mediately, while intuitions relate to objects immediately:

² R. Howell, "Intuition, Synthesis, and Individuation in the *Critique of Pure Reason*," *Nous* 7 (1973), 207-232, at 216.

³ See L. W. Beck, "Did the Sage of Königsberg Have No Dreams?," in *Akten des IV. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, Berlin 1975, vol. III, 26-43; J. Hintikka, "Kant on the Mathematical Method," in C. Posy (ed.), *Kant's Philosophy of Mathematics: Modern Essays*, Dordrecht 1992, and "On Kant's Notion of Intuition (Anschauung)," in T. Penelhum and J. J. MacIntosh (eds.), *The First Critique: Reflections on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Belmont 1969, 38-53; G. Prauss, *Erscheinung bei Kant*, Berlin 1971, 41-45 and 48-53; W. Sellars, "The Role of the Imagination in Kant's Theory of Experience," in H. Johnstone (ed.), *Categories: A Colloquium*, University Park, PA, 1978, 231-45, and "Sensibility and Understanding," in Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics*, Atascadero 1992, 1-30; P.F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*, London 1966, 74-85. See also R. Stuhlmann-Laeisz, *Kants Logik*, Berlin 1976, 77-81 and R. Hanna, *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford 2001, 12.

Since no representation relates to the object immediately except intuition, a concept is never immediately related to an object, but is always related to some other representation of it (whether it be an intuition or itself already a concept). (KrV, A68/B93)

If ‘mediate relation to objects’ means that a concept relates directly, not to an object, but to another representation of the object, which in turn relates to the object directly, then it seems that a concept must immediately relate to an intuition. Kant’s claim that concepts are “predicates of possible judgments” (A69/B94) may be taken to provide a specification of this relation: In a judgment, at least in the basic case, a concept is predicated of an intuition. Thus, the idea is that concepts relate to objects mediately because they relate to objects in virtue of being predicated of intuitions.

The second reason why intuitions may be thought to be analogues of singular terms rests on Kant’s characterization of intuition as the singular representation of an object, along with the corresponding characterization of concepts as general. Consider the following passage from the *Jäsche-Logik*:

An intuition is a *singular* representation (*repraesentatio singularis*), a concept is a *general* (*repraesentatio per notas communes*) or *reflected* representation (*repraesentatio discursiva*). (AA IX: 91)

Kant’s point, I take it, is that an intuition represents a single object, while a concept represents indefinitely many objects. Now, as Kant makes clear in the *Critique*, concepts can only be used in judgment. As he puts it, “of [...] concepts the understanding can make no other use than to judge by means of them” (KrV, A68/B93). It follows that concepts relate to objects only insofar as they enter into judgments. However, as we just saw, a concept does not relate to objects immediately but by way, ultimately, of intuitions. In light of the fact that intuitions are singular it seems natural to see judgment as the place where intuitions and concepts, as it were, make contact: That is, a concept relates to objects by way of intuition because a concept is a general representation that is predicated of a singular representation, which in turn relates immediately to

an object. And predication is clearly tied to judgment. In sum, since intuition is singular and immediate, it seems tailor-made to function in just the way a singular term does in a sentence.

These two considerations, then, appear to support the view I am calling Proto-Fregeanism. According to this view, the logical form of an atomic judgment for Kant is ‘*Fa*’, where ‘*F*’ stands for a concept and ‘*a*’ for an intuition. An intuition thus appears to be the analogue of a singular term.

II

In what follows, I want to raise two objections to the Proto-Fregean view, beginning with some direct textual evidence. In a number of places Kant speaks of judgment as a relation between concepts, and this is clearly incompatible with the Proto-Fregean account. Thus, consider two of the comments Kant appends to his presentation of the Table of Judgments in the *First Critique*. The first comment pertains to the forms of quantity and Kant’s claim that under this heading one must distinguish the three forms of universal, particular, and singular judgment. He says:

Logicians are justified in saying that, in the employment of judgments in inferences of reason, singular judgments can be treated like universal ones. For, since they have no extension at all, their predicate cannot relate only to some of what is contained under the *subject-concept*, and be excluded from the rest. The predicate is thus valid of *that concept* without exception, just as if it was a general concept having an extension, to the whole of which the predicate applied. (KrV, A71/B96, my emphases)

What is notable here is that Kant is talking specifically about singular judgment and saying *of it* that it contains a concept in the subject-position. For the Proto-Fregean view singular judgment is the basic case, in terms of which other forms of judgment must be understood. Evidence suggesting that the Proto-Fregean analysis does not apply specifically to this case is thus particularly salient.

The second comment regards the forms of relation, the third class on Kant's table, which comprises the forms of categorical, hypothetical, and disjunctive judgment. Kant's characterization of the categorical form as concerning the relation of the predicate to the subject makes it clear that he thinks of both of these components as concepts:

All relations of thought in judgments are those of (a) predicate to subject, (b) ground to consequence, and (c) the divided cognition and the members of the division, taken jointly, to one another. In the first kind of judgment there are only *two concepts* [...]. (KrV, A73/B98, my emphasis)

This passage too indicates that Kant thinks of a categorical judgment as containing two terms, the subject and the predicate, and that both of these are concepts. There is no suggestion that he is open to the Proto-Fregean idea that, at least in the basic case, the subject of a judgment is an intuition.

Given the historical context in which Kant is writing, this should not come as a surprise. The logic Kant inherits is essentially the traditional Aristotelian logic of terms. The conception of judgment on which this logic is based is fundamentally at odds with the Fregean analysis of judgment (more precisely, of what Frege would call 'thoughts') in terms of function and argument, which many Proto-Fregeans think is anticipated by Kant's distinction between concepts and intuitions. Let me elaborate.⁴

The traditional conception of judgment, call it the Two Term Model, has its home in a theory of syllogistic inference and is characterized by three tenets, each of which serves to mark the gulf that separates it from a Fregean conception of judgment.⁵ It might be helpful to begin with an example. Consider the syllogism 'All men are mortal,' 'Socrates is a man,' 'Therefore,

⁴ A clear and concise account of the issue, to which my presentation is indebted, can be found in P.T. Geach, "History of the Corruptions of Logic," in his *Logic Matters*, Berkeley 1972, 44-61. For helpful discussion see also E. Cassirer, *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff: Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen der Erkenntniskritik*, Darmstadt 1994, 3-34.

⁵ For ease of exposition I will ignore, in the following, the difference between a judgment and its linguistic expression. I will thus speak of a term as if it was the component of a judgment, rather than its linguistic expression. But nothing depends on this.

Socrates is mortal.’ According to the Two Term Model, this inference is valid because the conclusion makes explicit a connection between two terms, which is already implicit in the premises. But in the premises this connection is mediated by what is called the middle term. Using the letters ‘M’ for the middle term, ‘S’ for the subject of the conclusion, and ‘P’ for the predicate of the conclusion, we can give the following schematic rendering of the inference: ‘All M are P,’ ‘S is an M,’ ‘Therefore, S is P.’ The schematic rendering makes visible the fact that if the inference is interpreted as depending on the relation that each of S and P bear to M, M must occur in the subject-position of one premise, and in the predicate-position of the other premise.

On this conception of syllogistic inference, then, it is essential that the terms making up the component judgments are indifferent to their positions in a judgment. The same term must be able to occupy the subject position of one judgment, and the predicate position of another.⁶ This is the first of the three characteristics of the Two Term Model of judgment.

It directly implies the second characteristic, which is that no term of a judgment is essentially predicative. A term may *function* as the predicate of a judgment, but this is not constitutive of it as the term it is. If this is so, then no term of a judgment is essentially such that its only function is to be predicated of something else. No term of a judgment, therefore, can be conceived as being essentially what Frege would call unsaturated.

This leads us to the third characteristic. On the Two Term Model predication is understood as the attachment, by means of the copula, of one term to another, both of which belong to the same logical category. There is no logical space here for a function-argument analysis along Fregean lines, according to which the copula has no logically significant role to play. On the contrary, because the Two Term Model does not permit essentially predicative

⁶ Geach calls this “Aristotle’s thesis of interchangeability” (“History of the Corruptions of Logic,” 47).

terms, it must appeal to some third element whose logical function is precisely to connect one term to the other and thus to generate the unity of a judgment. This, of course, is the copula.

With regard to these three characteristics, contrast a Fregean conception of judgment. First, on such a conception, the validity of syllogistic inference depends on truth-functions and quantification theory. It is not seen as in any way dependent on the position of the terms in a judgment. Second, every atomic judgment is composed of one element that is essentially predicative – what Frege calls a concept – and at least one element that is essentially non-predicative – what Frege calls an object and whose linguistic expression is a name. This, of course, is a manifestation of Frege’s construal of concepts in terms of function and argument.⁷ Third, predication does not require some third item, such as the copula, whose function is to connect the predicate with what it is predicated of. Rather, the components of a judgment are conceived as being logically heterogeneous, with one component being essentially unsaturated, the other being essentially saturated. The details of this conception are well-known.

This comparison of the Fregean conception of judgment with the Two Term Model shows that if Kant does in fact hold a version of the Two Term Model, it is not at all surprising that the Proto-Fregean view of intuitions is false. The reason is that the Proto-Fregean view of intuitions is premised on the Fregean conception of judgment, some version of which the Proto-Fregean is committed to ascribing to Kant. But the Fregean conception of judgment is incompatible with the Two Term Model. Thus, if Kant is committed to the Two Term Model of judgment, Proto-Fregeanism about intuitions cannot possibly be true.

At this point the Proto-Fregean is likely to protest that there are strong indications in Kant that he does *not* hold the Two Term Model, but rather some precursor version of the Fregean

⁷ Cf. G. Frege, “Funktion und Begriff,” in Frege, *Funktion, Begriff, Bedeutung*, ed. G. Patzig, 7th ed., Göttingen 1994, 17-39.

conception, admittedly only dimly grasped and not fully articulated. Thus, as we saw above, Kant famously speaks of concepts as predicates of possible judgments (cf. A69/B94), and this seems to suggest that for him, like Frege, concepts are essentially predicative. My response to this objection is that this reading of the passage is not at all compulsory. I will offer an alternative reading in a moment. For now, let me point out that the apparent plausibility of this reading stems, I think, from an antecedent commitment to a Fregean conception of judgment on the part of many commentators. However, once we are open to the possibility that Kant's conception of judgment is different, it becomes apparent that this remark cannot carry the kind of burden that advocates of Proto-Fregeanism place on it. It certainly does not favor Proto-Fregeanism over the Two Term Model of judgment.

III

To complete my case against Proto-Fregeanism, I will now revisit the two considerations I offered in support of Proto-Fregeanism at the outset and evaluate them in light of what I have said about Kant's commitment to the Two Term Model of judgment.

The first consideration was based on Kant's characterization of intuition as bearing an immediate relation to objects and the corresponding characterization of concepts as relating to objects mediately, along with the thesis that concepts are predicates of possible judgments. Let me begin with the latter thesis. The first thing to notice about this thesis is what it does *not* say: Kant does not simply say that concepts are predicates of judgments. Rather, he says that concepts are predicates of *possible* judgments. If he had said the former, Proto-Fregeans would have a stronger case. As it is, however, Kant's claim is fully compatible with – indeed, may be taken to suggest – the Two Term Model. The reason is that the reference to *possible* judgments opens up

the space for including in the extension of the thesis concepts that function as the subject of a judgment. On the Two Term Model, a concept that functions as the subject of one judgment may be the predicate of another. In other words, the subject-term of an actual judgment may be the predicate-term of a possible – that is, not now actual – judgment. Indeed, we saw that this possibility is essential to the traditional understanding of syllogistic inference. What is more, the point gives expression to Kant’s (anti-Leibnizian) view that concepts are essentially general representations. A representation is general only if it can function as the predicate of a judgment. For, to say of some concept F that it is general is to say that there are other representations that fall under F . And this relation of subordination is expressed by a judgment in which F is the predicate. By itself, however, this condition does not exclude the possibility that such a representation may also function as the subject of a judgment. But once we have a conception of judgment that admits concepts in the subject-position, it becomes a requirement on a representation’s being general that it can occur not *only* in the subject-position of a judgment, but *also* in the predicate-position – but again, this does not amount to saying that a concept can *never* occupy the subject-position.

I introduced the thesis that concepts are predicates of possible judgments in connection with Kant’s claim that concepts relate to objects mediately, whereas intuitions relate to objects immediately. We are now in a position to see that this claim does not provide independent support for Proto-Fregeanism about intuitions. That is, it does not privilege this view over its competitors unless one is antecedently committed to foisting on Kant a Fregean conception of judgment. For, to begin with, what Kant actually says in the passage in which he makes this claim is the following:

Since no representation relates to the object immediately except intuition, a concept is never immediately related to an object, but is always related to some other representation of it (whether that be an intuition or itself already a concept). (KrV, A68/B93)

Kant explicitly says here that a concept may be related to another concept. Since the immediate context of the passage is one in which judgment is at issue, it is plausible to think that to relate one concept to another concept is to make a judgment. And while it is true that the passage also speaks of relating a concept to an intuition, which, by parity of reasoning, *may* be taken (although it need not) to indicate that Kant recognizes judgments that do have an intuition in the subject-position,⁸ the Proto-Fregean cannot draw much comfort from this. For it is an important part of the Proto-Fregean position that singular judgment is the fundamental case of judgment, not simply one case among others. More importantly, the Proto-Fregean view can make no sense of the possibility of a judgment that has a concept in the subject-position. Frege's discussion of "the concept *horse*" clearly demonstrates this.⁹ It follows that neither Kant's characterization of intuitions as immediate (and concepts as mediate) nor the thesis that concepts are predicates of possible judgments provide independent support for the Proto-Fregean position.

The second consideration that appeared to count in favor of Proto-Fregeanism concerns the characterization of intuition as the singular representation of an object and the corresponding characterization of concepts as general. One apparently natural way of construing the singularity of intuition is to think of it as playing a role analogous to that of a singular term. However, just by itself the characterization of intuition as singular does not decide the issue, since it is open to alternative interpretations. For instance, Kant may think of intuitions as perceptions, whose content can be articulated in judgments, but which are not themselves components of judgment. Since perceptions are of individual objects it would still be apt to characterize this kind of representation as singular.¹⁰ Absent a more detailed account of the role of intuition in Kant's

⁸ See, however, the discussion of the singular use of a concept, below.

⁹ See G. Frege, "Über Begriff und Gegenstand," in Frege, *Funktion, Begriff, Bedeutung*, op. cit., 66-80.

¹⁰ Taking 'object' in a wide sense, in which it may also refer to states of affairs. For the purposes of this discussion we do not need to decide whether this is Kant's preferred sense of 'object'.

epistemology, therefore, the thesis that intuition is singular does not favor Proto-Fregeanism about intuitions over its competitors. Whatever support this characterization appears to give to the Proto-Fregean view stems from an antecedent commitment to reading the Fregean conception of judgment into Kant.

Let me add to this a comment on Kant's remark, in the *Jäsche-Logik*, that there are no singular concepts (which may also be thought to provide support for Proto-Fregeanism). He says:

It is a mere tautology to talk about universal [general], or common concepts – a mistake, which rests on the incorrect division of concepts into *universal*, *particular* and *singular* ones. Not the concepts themselves – only *their use* can be divided up in this way. (*Log*, §1, note 2, AA IX: 91)

Notice that Kant is careful to point out that while there are no singular concepts, there is such a thing as the singular *use* of a concept. By their nature, concepts are general. But they can be used with different quantitative determinations. In accordance with the three quantitative forms of judgment, Kant speaks of the universal, particular, and singular use of concepts. This implies that the fact that there are no singular concepts for Kant does not force us to account for the singularity of a judgment by thinking of its subject-term as a non-conceptual representation. Whatever it is that accounts for the quantity in the use of a concept, it seems that if universal and particular judgments have a concept in the subject-position, then we should expect singular judgments to follow the same pattern. The point of Kant's remark is that differences in quantity among judgments are not accounted for by the generality, or lack thereof, of the representations that compose them, that is, the subject- and predicate-terms.

This point is supported by the best account of singular judgment in Kant that I know of, which is the one given by Tobias Rosefeldt.¹¹ In a nutshell, Rosefeldt suggests that for Kant there are two ways in which a concept may be given a singular use. First, a concept may be treated by

¹¹ See T. Rosefeldt, *Das logische Ich: Kant über den Gehalt des Begriffes von sich selbst*, Berlin/Wien 2000, 108-119. For another useful discussion of the issue, equally supportive of my point, see M. Thompson, "Singular Terms and Intuitions in Kant's Epistemology," *Review of Metaphysics* 26 (1972), 314-343.

convention as if it were a singular representation and thus uniquely picked out an individual object, even though strictly speaking it is not. Second, a concept may be connected to an occurrent intuition, that is, to a perceptual context. The thinker thus refers to an individual object by conceiving of it as ‘the F that I am currently intuiting,’ where ‘F’ stands for the concept that is being given a singular use.

IV

I have argued that a wide-spread view among Kant-commentators, according to which an intuition is the analogue of a singular term, should be rejected. It should be rejected because it rests on a mistaken view of Kant’s conception of judgment. To think of an intuition as having the function of a singular term is plausible only against the background of a conception of judgment that is, in its essentials, Fregean. I have argued that there is overwhelming evidence for thinking that Kant does not hold such a conception. Rather, Kant follows a long tradition in conceiving of a judgment as a compound of concepts. Such a view of judgment has no essential role for anything like a singular term, and this implies that a conception of intuition as analogous to a singular term is incompatible with this conception of judgment. Both the Proto-Fregean view of intuitions and the Proto-Fregean view of judgment, therefore, are untenable as interpretations of Kant’s position, as it is developed in the *First Critique*.

Why does this matter? At the outset of this paper I referred to Kant’s fundamental commitment that cognition requires a unification of intuitions and concepts. If what I have argued here is right, then one popular view of the form that this unification takes is false. It is not the case that intuitions and concepts are so many *components* of judgment, so that judgment functions as the act of unifying the two elements of cognition. This has an important

consequence. A corollary of the thesis that cognition requires both intuitions and concepts is the claim, central to Kant's argument in the *Transcendental Analytic*, that an intuition is a representation of an object only if it is subject to an act of synthesis. Synthesis is an act of spontaneity, and it is widely believed that this entails that the act of synthesis is an act of judgment. But if, as I have suggested, intuition ought not to be understood as a component of judgment, then there is reason to think that this identification of synthesis and judgment is a mistake. More argument is needed to support this claim, and this would go beyond the scope of this paper.¹² But I take the philosophical significance of my argument concerning Proto-Fregeanism to lie precisely in the fact that it serves to put pressure on the view that the synthesis which accounts for the unity of an intuition is identical to an act of judgment.¹³

¹² I provide such support, and develop an alternative view of synthesis, in my *Kant's Theory of Synthesis*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2010.

¹³ For helpful comments on previous versions of this paper I thank James Conant, Michael Kremer, Daniel Sutherland, and Clinton Tolley.