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Sellers's Master Argument for Conceptualism

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Abstract

This paper reconstructs what I call Sellers's 'master argument' for conceptualism regarding Kantian intuitions—a coherent argumentative thread that appears throughout his works beginning with *Science and Metaphysics*. In contrast to standard interpretations that focus primarily on the role of the categories, I demonstrate that Sellers defends a robust form of conceptualism in which empirical concepts also play a constitutive role in intuition. The master argument proceeds through three key moves: defining Kantian intuition as a (singular) 'representation of a manifold'; showing that such a representation is necessarily conceptual; and employing an Aristotelian reading of intuition as a 'this-such' or 'tode ti'. This reconstruction not only clarifies Sellers's distinctive position in the conceptualism/non-conceptualism debate but also provides resources for addressing some contemporary objections, particularly those concerning animal cognition and the content of intuitions.

KEYWORDS

conceptualism, intuition, Kant, Sellers, sensibility, understanding

1 | INTRODUCTION

The debate between conceptualists and non-conceptualists over Kantian intuitions has become the (longer) philosophical counterpart of the decade long siege of Troy. Just as neither side there could achieve a decisive victory, neither conceptualists nor non-conceptualists have managed to conclusively refute the other. Both sides rely on

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established strategies—standard arguments and counterarguments—refining them over time rather than delivering a final blow.¹ Occasionally, new attacks emerge that briefly give one side hope, but these, too, have proven inconclusive. A seasoned general in this battle is Wilfrid Sellars, frequently cited—whether with praise or critique—as a champion of conceptualism.² Yet the nuances of his position remain largely neglected, except by a few loyal soldiers still fighting on the fringes.³ It is a common practice to cite him as a defender of conceptualism regarding the content of intuition, but his arguments remain largely understudied.

My main aim in this paper is to reconstruct what I call Sellars's 'master argument' for conceptualism. This is a coherent argumentative thread that appears throughout his Kantian works, starting with *Science and Metaphysics* (SM 1968), but also present in his exegetical works of the late 1960s and 1970s.⁴ But it has not been explicitly formulated in this way, either by Sellars himself or by Sellars scholars. To do so, therefore, would show how his conceptualism differs from that of many of his followers, and may block at least some of the objections to conceptualism that have been developed since. This conceptualism is thus *robust* in that it assumes not only that the categories are constitutive of intuitions—as most Kantian conceptualists maintain—but also that empirical concepts play a constitutive role.

However, the philosophical landscape has evolved considerably since Sellars articulated his conceptualism more than half a century ago. Many of his arguments—such as his appeal to the so-called “same function” passage and appealing to the argument of the “Transcendental Deduction” to motivate conceptualism—have been repurposed by fellow conceptualists. Non-conceptualists have also developed strong counterattacks. These include offering new and at least *prima facie* plausible readings of the main passages used to motivate conceptualism, offering readings of the “Transcendental Deduction” that are allegedly consistent with non-conceptualism, appealing to Kant's account of animal cognition that is supposed to motivate non-conceptualism, and appealing to some passages, mostly undiscussed by Sellars, to motivate non-conceptualism. I demonstrate below that Sellars's conceptualism can be successfully defended against some of these counterattacks. Most importantly, probably, as I will show below, his master argument can block the appeal to animal cognition, which is among the most promising arguments offered by non-conceptualists.

Before moving to the details of Sellars's discussion, it is important to clarify what conceptualism means in the context of Kantian intuitions. Kant's philosophy features two fundamental dualities: between intuitions (*Anschauung*) and concepts (*Begriff*), and between sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*) and understanding (*Verstand*) as their respective faculties.⁵ Non-conceptualists typically map these dualities directly: Sensibility as the non-conceptual faculty producing non-conceptual intuitions and understanding as the conceptual faculty producing concepts. Conceptualists, however, argue that the understanding or categories also play a constitutive role in intuition. One of the complications of this debate, however, is that there are many versions of the positions, and part of my task in this paper is to delineate Sellars's position. However, one point needs to be made clear from the outset. An important question is the locus of the debate, namely, is it cognition (*Erkenntnis*), perception (*Wahrnehmung*), intuition, or sensation (*Empfindung*), which is supposed to be conceptual or non-conceptual. It seems clear that cognition, at least what Kant calls “cognition in the proper sense” (A78/B103), is conceptual.⁶ Perception, however, is a difficult matter, and I agree with Allais (2016) that it remains largely undetermined whether Kant is a conceptualist or a non-conceptualist with respect to perception. Sellars, however, focuses specifically on intuition. I show below that it is Sellars's conviction that intuition is conceptual. That is, he argues that there are concept terms (such as ‘man’ and ‘cube’) in the overt linguistic expression of their content.⁷

In this paper, I start by examining the dual meaning of intuition and formulating what I call Sellars's master argument for conceptualism (§2). The master argument has three major moves, and the three following sections will each be devoted to defending one of these premises. First, in (§3) I defend his claim that Kantian intuition *stricto sensu* is a ‘representation of a manifold’. In (§4) then I formulate his argument in favor of seeing these as conceptual, in the sense that the synthesis of the understanding, which is done by the categories, plays a necessary role in them. Finally, in (§5), I formulate his Aristotelian way of reading Kantian intuitions, which then allows him to see them as fully conceptual, namely in the form of a ‘this-such’, e.g., ‘this-cube’ or ‘this-man’. I end the paper (§6) with some concluding remarks.

2 | THE MASTER ARGUMENT FOR CONCEPTUALISM

For Kant, intuitions are the only representations that have an immediate relation to objects (A68/B93).⁸ Sellars takes this as his starting point in the discussion of Kantian intuitions (SM I, §7). But he finds an ambiguity in Kant's use of the terms “intuition” and “immediate relation” that even escaped Kant himself (SM I, §§73–4; cf. SM I, §18; KPT §195–6). On the one hand, it denotes a causal relation in which intuition is the effect of external objects on our receptivity. On the other hand, it means the demonstrative by means of which intuitions refer to objects via a “this.” It is this latter, demonstrative sense which is, according to Sellars, the Kantian intuition *stricto sensu*.⁹

Taking intuition to involve a demonstrative ‘this’ might *prima facie* seem that it can, after all, be non-conceptual. It might be argued that a bare demonstrative such as ‘this’ is non-conceptual, as one might lack the concept for an object but nonetheless pick up that object by pointing it out and saying ‘this!’. This is a controversial issue, and some philosophers would argue that it is in principle impossible to have a bare, non-conceptual demonstrative. If true, this would only further support Sellars's position. But so assuming in the context of Kantian intuitions would be an easy win for Sellars. For the sake of argument, however, I assume that a non-conceptual, bare demonstrative ‘this’ is possible. If so, therefore, Sellars owes us an argument that Kantian intuitions in the strict sense of the term are conceptual. This is done by what I call Sellars's master argument for conceptualism.

While Sellars never explicitly formulates this argument in this way, I believe it can be shaped from various parts of his corpus. This extended argument appears throughout his work, starting from SM to the exegetical works of the late 1970s, and can only be fully understood by considering them all together. This scattered distribution probably explains why the argument has received limited attention in the existing literature. Here is the argument:

- a. Kantian intuition *stricto sensu* is a ‘representation of a manifold’. (definition)
- b. A representation of a manifold *as a manifold* is conceptual. (assumption)
- c. Kantian intuition *stricto sensu* is conceptual. (from (a) and (b))
- d. The best way to capture a conceptual demonstrative is via a ‘this-such’. (assumption)
- e. Kantian intuition is captured in the form of a ‘this-such’. (from (c) and (d))

As will be demonstrated in §4, Sellars argues that an intuition *stricto sensu* is not merely a representation of a manifold. Rather, it is always a representation of a manifold *as a manifold*. This eliminates any equivocation between the first two premises, making the argument logically valid. To establish the soundness of the argument, we must now assess the acceptability of the premises. I provide justification for these premises in the following sections.

3 | ‘REPRESENTATION OF A MANIFOLD’ VS. ‘MANIFOLD OF REPRESENTATION’

The first move in defending conceptualism regarding intuition is to define it as a ‘representation of a manifold’, as opposed to a ‘manifold of representations’. The major point of difference between them is *unity* and *singularity*. Whereas ‘representation of a manifold’ is a single representation that gives unity to different—or a manifold of—representations, a ‘manifold of representations’ lacks just this, namely, it is not singular and lacks unity. The first premise assumes that it is the former, the representation of a manifold which is singular and has unity, that is the Kantian intuition in the strict sense. One can argue in its favor in several ways. One initial motivation can be found in Kant's definition of intuition, which is defined by Kant as “immediately (*unmittelbar*) related to the object” (A320/B376–7; cf. A19/B31) and “singular (*einzel*)” (A32/B377).¹⁰ There is a long-standing debate about whether these two conditions coincide, and whether one can accept them both. But I take it to be plausible enough that a representation cannot be singular and lack unity. It seems implausible to assume that a representation which lacks unity and is just an aggregate of different representations could be singular. Therefore, it is at least plausible to assume that an

intuition, as the singular representation, should be a representation of a manifold rather than a manifold of representations.¹¹ However, this is only an initial motivation and needs to be justified.

Sellars (KPT 2002, §158) finds support for this point in a controversial passage in §21 of the “B-Deduction”:

The empirical consciousness of a given manifold of *Einer Anschauung* stands under a pure *a priori* self-consciousness, just as empirical intuitions stand under a pure sensible one, which likewise holds *a priori*. (B144; cf. B144n.)

This is a notoriously difficult and controversial passage that leads to different debates in the literature. The difficulty that concerns me here is just the part of the passage that Sellars appeals to, namely the part that I quoted in the original German. Kant famously capitalizes the indefinite article ‘*Einer*’, where it normally should not be. Kemp Smith, from whose translation Sellars is citing, translate it as ‘a single intuition’ and Guyer and Wood, which I otherwise followed, translate it as ‘one intuition’. Sellars does not reference the original German text and appears to base his argument on Kemp Smith’s translation. His point, however, is that this passage makes sense only if we assume that the ‘one single intuition’ possesses unity. This he takes to support his interpretation of intuition *stricto sensu* as a single and unified ‘representation of a manifold’:

The key is ‘single intuition’ because that contrasts ... a manifold of intuition with a *single* intuition of a manifold. (KPT §158)

This is consistent with Henrich’s (1969, 645) argument that in German, the indefinite article “*ein*” (a/an) and the term “*Einheit*” (unity) share a root, allowing Kant to emphasize inner unity rather than singularity.¹² Henrich, however, wants to stress only the unity and not singularity, but I suggest that it makes more sense to accept both ‘*ein*’ and ‘*Einheit*’ as included in the meaning, which is what Sellars is getting at. Henrich’s reading, therefore, is overly restrictive: That Kant wants to stress on unity does not rule out the fact that he also wants to stress singularity, which, after all, he takes to be essential even in the definition of intuition cited above. This is what Sellars means by saying that intuitions are “representations of individuals” (SM I, §9). The first premise, therefore, argues that Kantian intuitions are *both* singular and unified, namely that they show both meanings Henrich has in mind—an intuition is both *eine Anschauung* and has *Einheit*.¹³

Sellars’s position effectively addresses one of the major objections that non-conceptualists raise against conceptualists: The inability to account for Kant’s views on animal sensibility. Non-conceptualists argue that Kant grants animals acquaintance with objects, even while denying them cognition. As Allais notes, while Kant “denies that the ox can see a gate as a gate, he clearly says that it sees the gate (Dfs, 2:59)” (Allais 2016, 8).¹⁴ Non-conceptualists claim that conceptualists must deny this capacity to animals. However, Sellars does not need to deny this. In his account, and as far as the first premise is concerned, intuition is a singular representation of a manifold, and there is nothing to prevent him from ascribing this to animals as well. What he needs to deny is that animals have a representation of a manifold *as a manifold*, which is what Allais also rejects. But that will be done in the next premise, and that’s where animal sensibility is differentiated from human sensibility. Though Sellars himself did not explicitly address this objection, his framework provides the resources to respond to it effectively.¹⁵

4 | THE ‘REPRESENTATION OF A MANIFOLD’ AS CONCEPTUAL

This brings us to premise (b). If the argument of the previous section is on the right track, Kantian intuition *stricto sensu* is a singular representation of a manifold. Now Sellars wants to show that this singular representation is also conceptual. That is, while the first premise shows that intuition is a ‘representation of a manifold’, this premise argues that it is a ‘representation of a manifold as a manifold’ (SM I, §19). Before proceeding to Sellars’s defense of

this position, one clarification regarding this expression is necessary. When Sellars uses the phrase 'as a manifold', it might initially suggest that the intuition represents something as scattered and unordered. This is clearly not what he intends. Rather, the crucial element is the 'as' structure itself, which indicates a conceptual dimension. What Sellars means is that with an intuition, we represent something as something—for example, we represent a manifold of representations as a man or as a cube, not merely as an aggregate of color patches and shapes. This 'as' structure is inherently conceptual, since representing something as Φ requires possessing the concept $\langle \Phi \rangle$.

Being conceptual, however, is still vague and needs to be fleshed out. One question is where this conceptuality will manifest itself, to which Sellars's answer would be in the content of intuition. Below (§5) we will see that the content of intuition is captured by its overt linguistic expression. This amounts to the claim that in the expression capturing the content of intuition there must be some concept terms, such as 'cube' and 'man'. This is done in premise (e), which brings in Sellars's Aristotelianism and concerns mostly empirical concepts. There is, however, another, non-empirical sense in which concepts are understood: namely, as what Kant calls the categories, or the pure concepts of the understanding. In this sense, although they contribute to the unity of the singular intuition and thus to the unity of the manifold in the content of intuition, they are not necessarily manifest in the content itself. In this sense, intuition is conceptual in the sense that it is the result of the synthesis brought about by the understanding and by the categories, and not in the sense of having conceptual terms in its overt linguistic expression.¹⁶

Sellars, like many conceptualists who follow him, interprets the "Deduction of the Categories" from the first *Critique* as showing that intuition cannot be non-conceptual. To support this, he explicitly appeals to two passages from this section of the book: one from the "Metaphysical Deduction," which is common to both editions, and another from the "Transcendental Deduction" of the second edition. As I understand it, the first passage establishes that categories operate in unifying intuition, while the latter suggests that synthesis of understanding is also involved, and hence suggests that empirical concepts might also contribute to this process. Sellars appeals to the so-called "same function" passage from the "Metaphysical Deduction" on several occasions (SM I, §10; KTI 1976 §10; KPT 11, §18):

The same function that gives unity to the different representations **in a judgment** also gives unity to the synthesis of different representations **in an intuition**, which, expressed generally, is called the pure concept of the understanding. (A79/B104-5; original emphasis)

This is a dense and controversial passage that has been widely quoted by defenders of conceptualism, largely under Sellars's influence (Haag 2007, 150; 2024; O'Shea 2024, 141; McDowell 2007; cf. Horstmann 2024; Ranaee 2024). The passage occurs in the context of Kant's attempt to derive the table of categories from the table of judgments. Kant presents twelve forms of judgment, grouped into four classes, and attempts to establish a one-to-one map with the twelve categories, also grouped into four classes. The details of these two tables are not important for my present purpose. What is important is that Kant justifies this derivation, and the one-to-one map, by arguing that it is the "same function" that gives unity to both judgments and intuitions. But what is this function? Kant continues:

The same understanding, therefore, and indeed by means of the very same actions through which it brings the logical form of a judgment into concepts by means of the analytical unity, also brings a transcendental content into its representations by means of the synthetic unity of the manifold in intuition in general, on account of which they are called pure concepts of the understanding that pertain to objects *a priori*. (A79/B105)

In both cases of a judgment and an intuition, it is the understanding, and in fact by means of *the same action*, which brings unity. This shows that the categories have a necessary role to play in intuitions, and hence intuitions are conceptual in this sense. This passage, therefore, supports the claim that the synthesis of the understanding, which is done by *means of the categories*, contributes to the unity of an intuition.

Non-conceptualists of course have developed strategies to respond to this line of argument. One prominent way is suggested by Allais: To argue that the point of this passage is not that the function in question is constitutive of unity of the intuition, but that “it conceptually unifies intuitions that [already] exist” (Allais 2016, n. 36). There are two problems with this way of argumentation, one exegetical and one systematic. Exegetically, Kant’s phrasing does not suggest this. He writes that the same function that gives unity “*in einem Urteile*” gives unity “*in einer Anschauung*”. Both of these are dative cases in German grammar, manifested both in the ending of the indefinite article ‘*einem*’ and ‘*einer*’, and also in the old-fashioned way of adding an ‘*e*’ at the end of ‘*Urteil*’. The dative here emphasizes the locus of the action, namely that the unity is given in judgment and intuition, not directed to an already existing judgment and an existing intuition. If Kant wanted to say what Allais wants him to say, he should have used the accusative, not the dative. This can easily be lost in the English translation, but it is obvious in the original German text. Furthermore, the passage shows a strong parity in Kant’s eyes between judgment and intuition in this regard, and although it *might* seem plausible to have an intuition and then adding some unity to it, that seems overly implausible in the case of a judgment. I fail to see how one can already have a judgment and then add unity to it, and by parity of cases it does not make sense to assume such in the case of intuition as well.¹⁷

Another point is systematic. We have seen above that Kantian intuitions are singular and unified, namely that in them both ‘*ein*’ and ‘*Einheit*’ are contained. I take this to be constitutive of Kantian intuitions, and to reject it would be to bite a huge bullet. But if so, then it seems most strange to assume that *Einer Anschauung* could already exist without the unity. Note that Allais agrees that the “same function” passage shows that the function in question unifies something. She only wants to reject that this unifying act, which is done by the categories, is constitutive of intuition. But if we accept that it is the category that unifies, then we cannot accept that we have *Eine Anschauung*. It is of course possible to reject that, but it’s high price to pay.¹⁸

Another passage to which Sellars appeals in support of the conceptuality of intuitions is the preceding sentence in the passage from §21 quoted above:

A manifold that is contained in an intuition that I call mine is represented as belonging to the necessary unity of self-consciousness through *the synthesis of the understanding*, and this takes place by means of the category. (B144; emphasis added)

This passage appears in the section in which Kant first gives a summary of what he takes to be proved in the first part of the “B-Deduction” (§§15–20) and then goes on to famously say that in “the above proposition ... *the beginning* of a **deduction** of the pure concepts of the understanding has been made” (ibid; *italics* added). This led to a long and complicated debate, starting with the above cited seminal paper by Henrich, that if this is already proved, what is the second part of the B-Deduction (§§22–26) supposed to prove? For my present purpose, however, I do not need to go into that debate. Enough to say that if we take this summary of the argument to that point seriously, Kant explicitly says that the unity of a singular intuition is brought about by a synthesis of the understanding, and that this is done by means of the categories (note that it is done *by means of* the categories and hence categories are not *identified* with the synthesis itself).¹⁹ Sellars comments on this passage as follows:

Kant’s point is that the single intuition of a manifold, and therefore, of a manifold *as* of a certain character, is due to the understanding and is affected through the productive imagination which he characterizes as the understanding working in consciousness. (KPT §158)

We have seen that in (a), Sellars defines Kantian intuitions *stricto sensu* as a ‘representation of a manifold’. In the present passage, however, he suggests that this must be more precisely understood as a ‘representation of a manifold *as a manifold*’.²⁰ We have seen above that the ‘*as a manifold*’ in this expression should be understood as ‘*as something*’ or ‘*as such and such*’ and not ‘*as an unordered aggregate*’. The point is that when we have a representation of something *as* something, e.g., a representation of a pink ice cube *as a pink ice cube*, one must have the concepts

<pink> and < ice cube>, otherwise one cannot have a representation with an 'as' part. This shows that Sellars's conceptualism is a strong one indeed, as usually the point is taken to be that only the categories play such a role. But when we bring empirical concepts into play, it makes it much stronger. This, of course, still assumes that categories are involved in intuition:

The intuition to which the predicate is applied in the judgment already involves the categorial content because being a chair is a way of being a substance. (KPT §191; cf. §194)

But Sellars would argue that since we normally do not have intuitions in the form of 'this substance'—though he would argue that there is no problem in having them—it is the empirical concept which is important here.

5 | ANSCHAUUNG QUA TODE TI

The two passages cited above in defense of premise (b) primarily demonstrate that categories contribute to unifying representations in an intuition. While the passage from §21 takes a broader view and discusses the synthesis of the understanding, it explicitly emphasizes the categories. Accordingly, the conceptualism debate centers on the potential categorial contributions to the content of intuitions, and Sellars is commonly interpreted in this way. This interpretation is valid but incomplete: Sellars indeed argues that categories necessarily contribute to the unity of the content of intuitions. This, however, fails to recognize the robustness of his conceptualism, namely that the content of intuition can contain not only pure, but also impure, empirical concepts. In doing so, he provides an answer to a crucial question that conceptualists face but rarely address explicitly, namely, how exactly concepts manifest themselves in the content of intuitions.²¹ Answering this question, Sellars offers a "model" (SM I, §8) for understanding intuition. His choice of words—'model' rather than 'interpretation'—shows that he is not offering a strict interpretation of Kant's text. Instead, he provides a framework through which we can understand, and according to Sellars improve, Kant's conceptualism by showing how concepts appear within the content of intuition.²²

His suggestion is to understand intuition on the model of a 'this-such', interpreted as an Aristotelian *tode ti*, which he variously translates as a 'this' (SM I, §11), a 'this-such' (KTI §10; KPT Ch. 6; cf. KTE 1967 §15ff), or 'essential this-ness' (CLN 2002b A32c), with 'this' serving as a demonstrative and 'such' as a concept term.²³ While this concept term could represent the pure concepts of the understanding like 'substance' or 'cause' (creating 'this-substance' or 'this-cause'), such formulations rarely occur outside philosophical contexts. Typical intuitions would instead be expressed as 'this-house' or 'this-triangle', where the concept term isn't a pure concept, but an impure concept picking up an individual qua member of a class of individuals, which is Sellars's understanding of Aristotle's *tode ti*.²⁴ Fortunately, understanding Sellars's model does not require an exegetical evaluation of his reconstruction of Aristotle's *tode ti*, but an understanding of the way he reads it.

In Sellars's reading, an Aristotelian this-such is neither a *primary substance* nor a *universal*, but rather a *secondary substance*.²⁵ We need a reconstruction of his use of these terms in order to understand his reading of this-suches. His reading of primary substances and universals is close enough to the philosophical common-sense. Roughly speaking, for Sellars, a 'primary substance' is an individual that (i) can have different and mutually exclusive properties at different times, and (ii) is first and foremost, though not necessarily and exclusively, referred to by a proper name. A 'universal', on the other hand, is what can be exemplified by different individuals, namely, it is the property the primary substance can have.²⁶ A 'secondary substance', however, is what Sellars calls a 'thing kind' (AMI 1966; SFA 1957), and can be referred to by Distributive Singular Terms (hereafter DST), common names, or common nouns (AMI §49ff).²⁷ DSTs are names that are grammatically singular but are applied to members of a class of things *qua* members of that class. They do not apply to the *class* of things, but to the members, *qua* being members of such a class. To clarify these terms, consider three examples, drawing on Sellars's own (e.g., in AE):

1. Leonard is tawny.
2. The lion is tawny.
3. Lionhood requires tawinness.

In (1), “Leonard” is a proper name referring to a particular individual lion that is tawny. In this sense, Leonard is a primary substance and can have the property of being tawny at t_1 and the property of being beige at t_2 . But ‘the lion’ in (2) is a DST. It is grammatically singular, but it is distributive in the sense that it refers to individual lions *qua* lions.²⁸ It is, therefore, semantically identical to “lions,” and (2) can be reformulated without any loss of meaning as:

4. Lions are tawny.²⁹

The lion, understood in this sense, is a secondary substance or a ‘thing kind’. It is therefore to be distinguished from ‘lionhood’ in (3), which is a universal and as such an abstract entity. In (3) we talk about the universal which can be exemplified by different individuals, but in (2) and (4) we talk about individuals as belonging to a certain class.

This-suches are therefore secondary substances that refer to members of a class *as* members of that class. This qualification that a DST refers to members of a class *as* or *qua* such members also explains why Sellars’s considered translation of ‘*tode ti*’ is ‘this such’ and not a mere ‘this’—its occasional use notwithstanding. This comes most clearly in discussing the existential claims of the form ‘ Φ is’, where ‘is’ means ‘exists’. Sellars argues that when Aristotle uses such expressions, he is using them not in the sense of ‘this is’ (a bare demonstrative), but rather ‘this-man is’, where it captures “the whole being” of the man (AMI §41). Sellars’s “the whole being” here does not mean that ‘this-man’ is determined to its last detail—something akin to Leibniz’s complete concept. This-man still leaves it open whether or not the man in question is a poet or married. It simply means that it, or a judgment made based on it, constitutes a satisfactory answer to the question ‘what is this?’. In response to such a question, ‘this is a man’ is a good answer and leaves no room for further question. But none of the following are:

5. This is a blue.³⁰
6. This is a cause.
7. This is a Wilfrid.

In all three cases, it still makes sense to ask, ‘Ok, but what is *it* that is a blue/cause/Wilfrid?’. A ‘this-such’ is therefore a DST referring to a secondary substance, and not to a quality (universal), a category, or a proper name.³¹

Having this machinery at hand, we can see what Sellars means by equating Kantian intuitions with ‘this-suches’, and what it is that satisfies ‘ Φ ’ in the overt linguistic expression of an intuition in the form of this- Φ . It can also explain why it makes sense to have intuitions in the form of *this-cube* and *this-man*, but not in the form of *this-blue* or *this-Wilfrid*. In Sellars’s reconstruction, the ‘ Φ ’ in ‘this- Φ ’ as a reconstruction of Kantian intuitions is a DST referring to secondary substances, namely to individual members of a class *qua* members of that class and therefore captures “the whole being” of those individuals in the sense that it is a satisfactory response to the question ‘what is it?’. The ‘ Φ ’ is therefore an empirical concept, not a category, and hence it does not fall short of providing Sellars with what he wants.³² It also gives us a systematic measure to understand what empirical concept can (<man>, <cat>, <shoe>) and what empirical concept cannot (<blue>, <triangular>) be the ‘ Φ ’ in the overt linguistic expression of a Kantian intuition.

The suggestion is that Kantian intuitions *stricto sensu* are best understood in terms of an Aristotelian *tode ti* or *this-such*. Here, ‘this’ serves as the demonstrative element, while ‘such’ functions as a DST referring to a secondary substance, namely to Φ s *qua* Φ s. An intuition, or this-such, is thus a singular term that refers to an individual. However, it remains conceptual in two key respects: first, the categories contribute to its unity—as shown above in discussing premise (c). Second, it contains an empirical concept—namely, the secondary substance—within its content.³³

6 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have reconstructed what I call Sellars's 'master argument' for conceptualism regarding Kantian intuitions—an argument that spans his works from SM through his later exegetical writings. This reconstruction reveals a robust form of conceptualism that goes beyond merely claiming that categories are constitutive of intuitions; it demonstrates that empirical concepts also play a constitutive role in the content of intuition. The master argument proceeds through three key moves. First, Kantian intuition *stricto sensu* is defined as a 'representation of a manifold' rather than a 'manifold of representations', emphasizing its singular and unified nature. Second, this representation of a manifold is shown to be conceptual in that it represents the manifold as a unified manifold, requiring the synthesis of understanding through categories. Finally, drawing on Sellars's Aristotelian reading, intuitions are captured in the form of a 'this-such', where the 'such' is a DST referring to a secondary substance.

This reconstruction offers several advantages over standard interpretations of conceptualism. It provides a systematic account of how concepts are manifest in the content of intuitions through the 'this-such' structure. It also effectively addresses some non-conceptualist objections, particularly the appeal to animal cognition, by distinguishing between mere representation of a manifold (which animals can have) and representation of a manifold as a manifold (which requires concepts). Furthermore, Sellars's robust conceptualism explains why intuitions take the form of 'this-cube' or 'this-man' rather than 'this-blue' or 'this-Wilfrid', providing a principled account of which empirical concepts can appear in the content of intuition. By bringing together Sellars's scattered remarks on Kantian intuition into a coherent argumentative thread, this reconstruction not only illuminates his distinctive contribution to the conceptualism debate but also helps us to take a more informed position on this debate.³⁴

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ENDNOTES

¹ For overviews of some of these strategies, see (Allais 2016; McLearn 2014, 2025).

² See, for example, (Hanna 2005, 2008, 2011; Allais 2009, 2015, 2016; Schulting 2016).

³ See, for example, (deVries 2006; Haag 2007, 2024; O'Shea 2024).

⁴ I use the standard abbreviations for Sellars's works, which are also listed in the bibliography. References include standard paragraph numbers or, for longer works, chapter/section and paragraph numbers. References to Kant follow the standard practice of citing A/B page numbers for the first *Critique* and volume and page numbers in the *Akademie Ausgabe* (Kant 1900) for other works. All translations are from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Kant 1992).

⁵ Kant further complicates this framework by distinguishing between intuitions and sensations, the latter being, in Sellars's interpretation, a necessary non-conceptual element within intuition. This distinction, however, extends beyond the scope of the present paper.

⁶ Cf. (Watkins and Willaschek 2017a).

⁷ His conceptualism is therefore a 'content-conceptualism', and should be distinguished from a new version of conceptualism, defended by Conant (2016, 2020) and McDowell (n.d.), which argues that the faculty of sensibility (and not the content of intuition) is dependent on the activity of the faculty of understanding.

⁸ Kant begins the "Transcendental Aesthetic" by stating that intuition is the means by which cognition relates directly to objects (A19/B33). He clarifies this in the "Metaphysical Deduction": "no representation pertains to the object immediately except intuition alone" (A68/B93). Thus, the first passage should be understood as indicating that it is intuition itself, not cognition more broadly, that stands in immediate relation to objects.

- ⁹ The causal sense, according to Sellars, constitutes the non-conceptual element in intuition. This aspect, however, falls beyond the scope of the present paper. In what follows, I use ‘intuition’ exclusively in the demonstrative sense unless explicitly indicated otherwise.
- ¹⁰ See the *Stufenleiter* where Kant similarly defines intuition as that which “is immediately related to the object and is singular” (A320/B377). This characterization is widely acknowledged in the literature as identifying the essential properties of intuition, e.g., (Smit 2000, 236).
- ¹¹ Hintikka (1969) takes the immediacy to follow from singularity, where he reads the latter as being analogous to a singular term. Parsons (1969), on the other hand, although he agrees with Hintikka that the singularity is captured by having a singular term as its overt linguistic expression, does not see immediacy as a corollary of singularity and in fact denies that they obviously amount to the same thing. Though I do not think it implausible to see the two as at least co-extensive, I do not have the space to enter that debate here. What is important for my purpose here is only that it would be weird to the extreme that a singular representation lack unity.
- ¹² Henrich criticizes Kemp Smith for allegedly interpreting ‘*Einer Anschauung*’ as referring to one particular intuition rather than intuition generally. While I agree with Henrich that ‘*Einer*’ functions as an indefinite article (‘an intuition’) rather than a *Zahlwort* or numeral (‘one intuition’), I contend that Sellars correctly reads Kemp Smith’s translation as indicating that every intuition possesses singularity and unity. Henrich’s critique of Kemp Smith may stem from reading ‘*Einer*’ as a numeral on Kemp Smith’s part, which would indeed suggest a particular intuition rather than intuition generally. My interpretation aligns with Sellars while acknowledging Henrich’s valid linguistic point about the indefinite article.
- ¹³ Sellars would agree with both Hintikka and Parsons (see note 11 above) that intuition is captured by a singular term in language. I get back to this point below (§5).
- ¹⁴ Cf. (McLear 2011, 2016).
- ¹⁵ See (O’Shea 2024, sec. 6.4), who also discusses animal cognition in relation to Sellars’s conceptualism. Note, however, that in none of the passages cited by O’Shea does Kant ascribe ‘intuition’ (*Anschauung*) to animals; it’s always ‘representation’ (*Vorstellung*).
- ¹⁶ This paper, therefore, focuses exclusively on Sellars’s argument for the conclusion that intuitions are conceptual in nature. The analysis of how they are conceptual—through a discussion of his reconstruction of the power of imagination—remains a task for another occasion.
- ¹⁷ Kant’s official definition of synthesis seems to strengthen his point: “By synthesis in the most general sense ... I understand the action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition” (A77/B103). If synthesis is at work in an intuition, then it does not make sense to assume that we have a unified intuition without any synthesis.
- ¹⁸ Another non-conceptualist move is to argue that there are two kinds of unity in Kant, and argue that whereas intuition has one form of unity, it does not need to have another one. This is a difficult topic and I don’t have the space here to go into its details. For discussion, see (McLear 2015).
- ¹⁹ This points towards a possible tension in Kant or at least in the reading non-conceptualists have of him, namely that he ascribes the very same unity of the intuition to animals as well. This, however, goes beyond to the scope of this paper. Enough to say that non-conceptualists such as McLear and Allais (and Sellars, if we accept the point I made on his behalf in the previous section) fall prey of what has come to be known in the literature as the “layer-cake” (Conant 2017) or “additive” (Boyle 2016; Conant 2020) conception of human mindedness. Some non-conceptualists might of course be ready to bite the bullet (McLear 2023), but I think that’s a high price to pay, both systematically and exegetically. Cf. (Schafer 2021).
- ²⁰ Recall that, as mentioned above in §2, it is this idea that prevents equivocation in premises (a) and (b).
- ²¹ This is a question that only content conceptualists face, not faculty conceptualists like Conant and later McDowell, who argue not that it is the content of intuition that is conceptual, but that the faculty of understanding contributes to the activity of the faculty of sensibility.
- ²² Hence my formulation of (d) in terms of “the best way to understand” rather than anything stronger. Note also that although Sellars generally belongs to what has been called and criticized in the literature as the “proto-Fregean” conception of intuitions (Land 2013)—a view that emphasizes the singularity of intuition as one of its defining characteristics, as defended by scholars like Parsons (1969), Hintikka (1969), and Howell (1973)—he does not directly ascribe this model to Kant, but suggests it as a framework for understanding him. How much of this interpretation can be preserved given Kant’s logical theory is another matter entirely. Cf. (Bader 2024).
- ²³ For the sake of consistency, and to avoid conflating ‘*tode ti*’ with a bare ‘this’, I will use ‘this-such’ as its translation throughout this paper.

- ²⁴ Some of Sellars's examples are more fine-grained than mere *tode tis*, such as “this house over there facing me left-edge-of-front-wise” (KTI §45). While the *tode ti* model explains intuitions captured by terms like ‘this-cube’ and ‘this-house’ and excludes improper concepts like <red> and <triangular> from intuitions, it cannot account for the highly specific contents like ‘this coffee cup beside me handle-facing-rightward-wise’. A complete explanation would require examining Sellars's discussion of productive imagination, which remains beyond the scope of this paper. For his development of this issue, see IKTE (1978).
- ²⁵ Note that when I use this-such without quotation marks I mean the individual itself or the represented in Sellars's terms, and when in single quotes (‘this-such’) I'm talking about the overt linguistic expression that captures it. Hence, this-cube is the individual itself and ‘this-cube’ the overt linguistic expression of the intuition of it.
- ²⁶ For the present purposes we can remain neutral with regard to their exact nature.
- ²⁷ DSTs are part of the conceptual framework that Sellars devised to support his nominalism about abstract entities, but they appear in various forms throughout his system. Here I can only give a brief introduction to the subject. For Sellars's own treatment of the subject, see GE (1960), AE (1963a), NS (1962), and EAE (1963b). For further elaboration, see (deVries 2005, chap. 4; O'Shea 2007, chap. 3; Brandom 2015, chap. 7).
- ²⁸ There is a complication here that Sellars treats DSTs sometimes as covertly metalinguistic the discussion of which goes beyond the scope of this paper. Note also that the qualification ‘*qua* lions’ is important here, because one can refer to members of a class as different things. In this case, a lion can be referred to *qua* lion, *qua* male, *qua* animal, *qua* tawny, etc. In DSTs it is important that the members of the class are referred to *qua* members of that class, and not *qua* something else.
- ²⁹ If one still has reservations about calling DSTs singular, one can distinguish between two senses of singularity. Syntactically singular terms are those that are treated grammatically as singular terms, while semantically singular terms are those that have a singular referent. In this sense, DSTs are syntactically singular but not semantically singular. The whole overt linguistic expression of intuition, however, is singular both syntactically and semantically.
- ³⁰ Sellars of course allows that we can build DSTs from terms referring to qualities, for example ‘a patch of blue’ and ‘a triangular shape’.
- ³¹ Here it also makes it clear why Sellars, despite the semantical identity of ‘the lion’ and ‘lions’, defines a DST as a singular term, since in capturing secondary substances, and hence the ‘such’ part of the overt linguistic expression of an intuition, needs a singular term that ranges over not one individual but all the members of the class as members of that class.
- ³² Recall that in response to ‘what is this?’, when one says ‘this is a cause’ or ‘this is a reality’, one could still ask ‘what is it that is a cause?’ and ‘what is it that is a reality?’.
- ³³ Non-conceptualists sometimes argue that since intuition provides us with acquaintance with individuals that we should see them as non-conceptual (Allais 2016, 15–16). Interestingly, Sellars is arguing for the same thing while keeping a conceptualist position.
- ³⁴ I would like to thank Ralf Bader, Steffi Dach, Bill deVries, Cord Friebe, Michael Hicks, David Landy, Luz Christopher Seiberth, and Max Zachrau as well as the audiences in the colloquiums of Cord Friebe and Ralf Bader and the International Sellars Colloquium, for valuable comments on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for the *European Journal of Philosophy* and for an earlier submission elsewhere, whose feedback helped improve this paper.

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