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Article:

Leech, J. (2014) Making Modal Distinctions: Kant on the possible, the actual, and the intuitive intellect. *Kantian Review*, 3 (19). pp. 339-365. ISSN: 1369-4154

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415414000156>

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Making Modal Distinctions:

Kant on the possible, the actual, and the intuitive understanding.

Abstract

One striking contrast that Kant draws between the kind of cognitive capacities that humans have, and alternative kinds of intellect, concerns modal concepts. Whilst, 'it is absolutely necessary for the human understanding to distinguish between the possibility and the actuality of things' (5:401), the very distinction between possibility and actuality would not arise for an intuitive understanding. The aim of this paper is to explore in more detail how the functioning of these cognitive capacities relates to modal concepts, and to provide a model of the intuitive understanding, in order to draw some general lessons for our ability to make modal judgements, and the function of such judgements.

1. Some intriguing remarks about possibility and actuality.

In section 76 of the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant makes some intriguing remarks about the distinction between possibility and actuality. He writes

It is absolutely necessary for the human understanding to distinguish between the possibility and the actuality of things. The reason for this lies in the subject and the nature of its cognitive faculties. For if two entirely heterogeneous elements were not required for the exercise of these faculties, then there would be no such distinction (between the possible and the actual). That is, if our understanding were intuitive, it would have no objects except what is actual. Concepts (which pertain merely to the possibility of an object) and sensible intuitions (which merely give us something,

without thereby allowing us to cognize it as an object) would both disappear. ...

Thus the distinction of possible from actual things is one that is merely subjectively valid for the human understanding... (Kant, 2000: 272; *CJ*, 5:401-2)¹

Here Kant claims that a distinction between the possible and the actual is (a) a requirement for beings with human-like cognitive capacities, and moreover (b) not made by beings with a different kind of cognitive make-up. The broad aims of this paper are to give an account of why Kant claims this, and whether we can learn anything from this that is applicable to continuing debates about the nature of modality.

First, I will sketch an initial explanation of why Kant makes such a claim, in order to focus the remainder of the paper. At the heart of the argument is a distinction between a human, discursive understanding and an alternative kind of understanding, intuitive understanding. As part of explaining why an intuitive understanding makes no distinction between *possible* and *actual*, I will present a model for how to think of such an understanding, and defend it against some potential objections drawn from Gram (1981) and Förster (2012). Finally, I will draw on my conclusions to suggest how a contribution might be made to a contemporary debate about the function of modal judgement.

2. A sketch of an answer

The basic shape of Kant's reasoning is as follows. The distinction between the merely possible and the actual rests on the human mind having two distinct cognitive capacities, sensibility and understanding. Sensibility is a capacity for sensible intuitions—immediate singular presentations, given through the senses. Understanding is a capacity for concepts and conceptual thought. These two distinct capacities leave room for a potential mismatch between our concepts and what is given to us in sensible intuition. This gives us the materials with which to understand mere possibility—we can have concepts to which no

intuition corresponds (and indeed intuitions for which we have no concept).

[T]he distinction of possible from actual things is one that is merely subjectively valid for the human understanding, since we can always have something in our thoughts although it does not exist, or represent something as given even though we do not have any concept of it. (Kant, 2000: 272; *CJ* 5:402)

By contrast, for an intuitive understanding, to think of some thing is immediately for that thing to exist. For the intuitive understanding, there is no mismatch between thinking and reality, so the notion of mere possibility would not make sense for such a being.

I cannot presuppose that in every [cognitive] being thinking and intuiting, hence the possibility and actuality of things, are two different conditions for the exercise of its cognitive faculties. For an understanding to which this distinction did not apply, all objects that I cognize would **be** (exist), and the possibility of some that did not exist, i.e., their contingency if they did exist, as well as the necessity that is to be distinguished from that, would not enter into the representation of such a being at all. (Kant, 2000: 273; *CJ* 5:402-3)

This sketch raises several questions about what we should make of the intuitive understanding. How does an intuitive understanding function? Why does its functioning leave no room for the merely possible, and by association, necessity? What are the relevant concepts of possibility and actuality that are at stake here? In order to address these questions I will first sketch out an account of Kant's modal concepts and the discursive understanding, before providing a model of the intuitive understanding.

3. Kant's modal concepts

Before I can assess how modal concepts relate (or not) to the discursive and intuitive understandings, it is important to clarify which modal concepts are at stake. Kant's philosophy draws on several modal notions, arising from (at least) two key distinctions.

First, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* we must distinguish between the modal functions of judgement and the modal categories. The modal functions of judgement (Kant, 1998: 209-10; *CPRA* 74-6/B99-101) are not modal concepts which can enter into the content of a judgement, but rather concern the logical relations between particular judgements (see Leech 2012). By contrast, the modal categories are (*a priori*) concepts concerning the modality of things, which can enter into the content of a judgement, i.e., we can make judgements about the possibility, actuality, and necessity of things. Note, however, that these do not count as determinations of objects. Rather, the modal categories concern the relation of a thing to our cognitive capacities.²

Another distinction occurring throughout Kant's works is that between logical possibility and real possibility.³ *Logical possibility* concerns the logical consistency of a concept. Something is logically possible if and only if there is no contradiction in the concept of it. *Real possibility* concerns whether there could be such a thing in the world. Something is really possible if and only if, in addition to logical consistency, the concept of it is compatible with conditions on being an object of experience. The modal categories concern this notion of real modality.

In his 'intriguing remarks', Kant is concerned with 'the possibility and actuality of *things*'. This means the relevant modal notions are the modal categories, and real rather than logical possibility. These modal concepts are fleshed out in more detail in the Postulates of Empirical Thought.

1. Whatever agrees with the formal conditions of experience (in accordance with

- intuition and concepts) is **possible**.
2. That which is connected with the material conditions of experience (of sensation) is **actual**.
 3. That whose connection with the actual is determined in accordance with general conditions of experience is (exists) **necessarily**. (Kant, 1998: 321; CPR A218/B265-6)

The formal conditions of experience arise from the *a priori* forms of sensibility (space and time) and the categories. So, for example, the concept of a blue swan is *prima facie* compatible with being in space and time and with the categories (it can have a location, duration, size, causal profile etc.), so a blue swan is possible. But the concept of a non-causal object is incompatible with principles arising from the categories of relation, and so is impossible. The blue swan would count as actual if such a thing is implicated in the material of experience, in the stuff presented to us in empirical intuition through sensation.

4. Discursive understanding and modality

The next task is to say more about the two kinds of cognitive architecture at issue—discursive understanding and intuitive understanding—in order to help us see why one requires a distinction between possibility and actuality, and the other has no use for such a distinction. First, discursive understanding.

One of Kant's central claims about human cognition is that we have two distinct, heterogeneous, cognitive capacities, both of which must be employed if we are to have thoughts about the world (cognitions). Kant distinguishes between two ways of representing objects. They might be *given to us*, or they might be *thought about*.

Accordingly, he holds that there are two kinds of representations corresponding to these two ways of representing objects—intuitions and concepts—and two capacities, one for

each kind of representation.

Capacities

Sensibility: a capacity for sensible intuition.

Understanding: a capacity for conceptual thought.

Representations

Intuition: an intuition is 'that through which [a cognition] relates immediately to [objects]' (Kant, 1998: 155; CPR A19/B33).

Concept: a concept relates to an object mediately 'by means of a mark, which can be common to several things' (Kant, 1998: 399; CPR A320/B337).

Intuitions are singular and immediate. They pick out a single thing directly. They are sometimes likened to demonstratives, i.e. 'this' and 'that'. As well as this logical characterisation of intuitions as singular, they can also be characterized epistemologically as 'given', meaning that they are passively received by the mind.

By contrast to intuitions, concepts are (logically) characterized as general and mediate. They can pick out many different things. The mediacy of a concept means that it picks out an object by means of features of the object, marks or characteristics. For example, the concept *green* represents Kermit the frog not directly, but in virtue of Kermit having certain properties, i.e. his being green. Kant also refers to concepts as 'discursive cognitions', and our kind of understanding as 'discursive'. This is connected to the mediacy of concepts. 'Discursive' refers to the way that concepts pick out things generally, by their marks/characteristics, rather than directly (Kant, 1992a: 564, 589; JL 9:58, 9:91). Concepts also have a contrasting epistemological characterisation: the understanding is

spontaneous. Concepts and conceptual thoughts are not passively given to the mind, but the mind is active in generating these representations.

An important aspect of Kant's view of concepts is that they are *by nature* general. Even if a concept just so happens to only apply to one object, this cannot be guaranteed by the concept. Kant allows that one might use a concept to pick out an individual, but he stresses that this is only an aspect of the *use* of a concept, not the nature of the concept.⁴ We can see why concepts are general by revisiting Kant's account of the acquisition of empirical concepts.

The logical acts of the understanding by which concepts are generated as to their form are:

(1) *comparison*, i.e. the likening of presentations to one another in relation to the unity of consciousness;

(2) *reflection*, i.e. the going back over different presentations, how they can be comprehended in one consciousness; and finally

(3) *abstraction* or the segregation of everything else by which given presentations differ. (Kant, 1974: 100; *JL* 9:94)⁵

Of particular importance is reflection. The generality or discursivity of a concept is the mirror of the act of reflection which is part of the process of forming a concept – reflection is the ‘going back over different presentations, how they can be comprehended in one consciousness’.⁶

Putting the two sides together, concepts and intuitions co-operate to form cognitions. They need each other to produce a representation which is genuinely about an object.

Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.

(Kant, 1998: 193-4; CPR A51/B75)

A concept needs to be given something to apply to. An intuition needs to be conceptualized in order to form a representation of something as something.

How does this impact on a distinction between possibility and actuality? Recall: the *Postulates* state that actuality involves connection to the material conditions of experience, i.e. sensation. Sensation is the input which results in empirical intuition (Kant, 1998: 155; CPR A19-20/B34). It is a straightforward consequence of this that entertaining a concept will not guarantee that something falling under the concept actually exists. Actuality requires input from sensation. For a thought to be about something actual, it needs confirmation from sensation, i.e. from sensible intuition. However, the thing might still be possible, according to the postulate of possibility, if the concept of it is compatible with formal conditions on experience.

5. Intuitive understanding and intellectual intuition

Kant sometimes writes about a different kind of understanding – intuitive understanding – and a different kind of intuition – intellectual intuition. My suggestion is that the best way to understand these capacities is primarily as the product of collapsing our two distinct capacities for thought and intuition into one. If understanding is a capacity for thought, then *intuitive understanding* is a capacity for thought which can provide its own intuitions – a capacity for thoughts directly (immediately) about individuals. Likewise, if intuition is a capacity for immediate, singular presentation of individuals, then *intellectual intuition* is a capacity for such presentation of individuals through an intellectual capacity for thinking (not a capacity for sensing). As such, intuitive understanding and intellectual intuition are, I claim, two sides of the same coin for Kant. The useful philosophical stalking horse is the

idea of our two cognitive capacities collapsed into one. Depending on the focus of the discussion, this might be more helpfully described as intellectual intuition (if the focus is on how objects might be directly presented to thought) or intuitive understanding (if the focus is on our thinking). But the basic idea is the same.⁷ Note that this already helps us to make sense of Kant's comment that 'concepts ... and sensible intuitions ... would both disappear' (Kant, 2000: 272; *CJ*, 5:402). We no longer have concepts and intuitions as different kinds of representation, but one capacity for something encompassing both.

So what is the functioning of such a cognitive capacity like? There are two apparently contrary sets of features to be reconciled. First, the logical characterisations of singular, immediate presentations compared to general, mediate presentations. Second, the epistemological contrast between receptive, given presentations and spontaneous, active presentations.⁸ It seems that the core elements to be retained for an intuitive understanding must be that its presentations of objects are *intuitive*—immediate, non-general, non-discursive presentations—and *active*. It is a controversial issue how to understand what Kant means by 'spontaneous', but it seems at least to have some connection to the freedom of thought – we have freedom in our thinking in a way that we do not in our perceiving. For example, I might be free to direct my attention to different things, but what I perceive still seems to be determined by the direction of my gaze. So if the intuitive understanding is to count as *thinking*, it needs to count as spontaneous or active. Otherwise the mind would just be something like a passive mirror of the world, with no free 'spontaneity' at all. But nevertheless, if intuiting and thinking are to be combined into one, then this capacity must still be able to count as intuiting, i.e. as presenting individuals directly.

In sum, we can think of the intuitive understanding as retaining the logical characteristics of intuition, but the epistemological characteristics of thinking: spontaneous intuition.⁹ This goes the other way too, as a way to think of intellectual intuition: intuition

that is intellectual, i.e. performed by a faculty of thinking, which is a spontaneous faculty. Indeed, Kant almost (although not quite) defines intuitive understanding as spontaneous intuition.

[S]ince... a faculty of a **complete spontaneity of intuition** would be a cognitive faculty distinct and completely independent from sensibility, and thus an understanding in the most general sense of the term, one can thus also conceive of an **intuitive** understanding. (Kant, 2000: 275-6; CJ 5:406)

An intuitive understanding, or a capacity for intellectual intuition, has a cognitive architecture where capacities for intuition and thought are collapsed into one.

6. Intuitive Understanding, Creation and Modality

Thus understood, why does the intuitive understanding have no need of a distinction between possibility and actuality? By taking into account a central Kantian concern, we can make sense of Kant's claim that, for a being with such an understanding, all objects that it cognizes 'would **be** (exist)'.

That central Kantian concern is that we need an account of the possibility of representation and knowledge. This is one of the core ideas that motivate Kant's transcendental idealism.¹⁰

What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call 'representation' to the object? (Kant, 1992b: 133; 10:130)

How is it that our thoughts are able to latch onto the world, to be *about* the world? When considering the functioning of alternative kinds of mind, it makes sense to extend the

question. In other words, we should ask how intuitive understanding and intellectual intuition could achieve a genuine representational relation to the world, sufficient to provide knowledge.

Intellectual intuition is supposed to provide intuitive content to cognition for the intuitive understanding, i.e. to provide an object for cognition. It is an active faculty, which implies that such an understanding can generate its own intuitions. But why suppose that such an internally generated (intuitive) representation genuinely presents any real object? This kind of cognitive being has no senses, no capacity for sensible intuition, so they cannot look and see whether there is anything there. So they run the risk of forever employing empty representations, and thereby knowing *nothing* at all. Put another way, the role of intuition is to present the understanding with individuals as the objects of thought. The idea of an intuition which presents *nothing*, which fails to 'give' anything, is almost a contradiction in terms. But why think that any real object is genuinely given by thinking?

The intuitive understanding (intellectual intuition) appears to face a peculiarly Kantian dilemma: it can be dogmatic, and just assert with no grounds that its representations all have objects. Or it could accept the sceptical conclusion, that because it cannot be sure that they present anything, they can make no dependable contribution to knowledge. The only way out is if intuitive understanding is guaranteed an object. If the world cannot be relied upon to provide this object (e.g. by impinging on the senses), then it looks as though the only option left is for the subject itself to create the object. The only way that intuitive understanding could count as a way to come to represent and know real objects is if in the act of grasping its representations, an object corresponding to the idea is thereby guaranteed to exist.

Sometimes intellectual intuition is described as creating its own object. A less dramatic way to understand creation is simply as a guarantee of existence. Whether or not objects of thought exist independently can be left open. What is important is that an

intuitive understanding, in thinking of some thing, thereby guarantees its existence. If that thing already existed, then no problem. If not, it may thereby be created. But the important point here is the epistemic guarantee of an object for these kinds of thoughts.¹¹

Finally, then, if the representations of the intuitive understanding guarantee themselves an object, in order to be capable of providing genuine representation and knowledge at all, then there is no need for a concept of possibility, i.e. to accommodate a representation which does not have an actual object, but which could. The intuitive understanding might say, 'all objects that I cognize exist'. Any representation of an object is guaranteed an object in actuality, otherwise the intuitive understanding could never be assured of genuine representations, and therefore also knowledge. So the potential mismatch between thought and actuality which opened up for the discursive understanding, ushering in the concept of possibility, is not required here.

7. Alternative Interpretations

My claim is that we can understand intellectual intuition and intuitive understanding as two sides of the same coin, i.e. a collapse of capacities of intuition and thought into one. I think this gives us a fruitful working notion, which allows us to understand certain claims that Kant makes. A case in point is making sense of his claims about possibility and actuality. However, one might make several objections to this interpretation. First, Gram (1981) has argued that Kant means several different things by 'intellectual intuition', depending on his purposes. So there is no single clear notion to be defined and discussed. Second, Förster (2012) has argued that the notions of 'intellectual intuition' and 'intuitive understanding' are importantly different. Third, post-Kantian idealists developed the idea of intellectual intuition as something like a 'self-positing I', which might cast doubt on my interpretation. I shall address these three concerns in turn.

7.1 Gram and the piecemeal account of intellectual intuition

In an influential paper, Moltke Gram argues, amongst other things, that in Kant's work 'intellectual intuition' has three different meanings associated with different issues. Gram argues that they are not only distinct, but also logically independent. The three conceptions of intellectual intuition are:

1. Intuitions for an intellect that knows things-in-themselves independent of conditions of sensibility.¹²
2. Intuitions for an intellect which creates its own object of knowledge
3. Intuitions for an intellect that would intuit the sum-total of all phenomena.

Together, these constitute what I call the piecemeal account of intellectual intuition. There is not one single core notion, but a ragbag of different notions under one label.

These three characterizations are indeed logically independent. As Gram writes:

We may ask whether we can apply categories to objects which cannot be given to us under any forms of sensibility, but nothing is said about whether we can give an actual infinity of phenomena under our forms of sensibility. We may also ask whether cognitive acts can be identical with their objects without asking whether categories apply to objects not given in sensibility or whether the sum total of all phenomena can be given to any single form of sensibility. (Gram, 1981: 288)

I do not dispute that these are *logically* independent ideas. Certainly, one cannot derive through logic alone the notion of an intellect that creates its own object of knowledge from the notion of an intellect that knows things-in-themselves independent of conditions of sensibility, or *vice versa*. But I want to argue that there is a case to be made that they

nevertheless hang together as different aspects of one notion of intellectual intuition, once we take into account other claims and features of Kant's philosophy.¹³ In other words, starting with the idea of two capacities collapsed into one, plus some familiar Kantian considerations, the distinct notions of intellectual intuition turn out to be aspects of this one, collapsed, capacity.

Regarding conceptions 1 and 2, Gram argues that the notion of *creation* clashes with that of *givenness*. If we conceive of intellectual intuition as knowledge of things-in-themselves, the same things as underlie appearances, in a different way to human knowledge through sensibility, then the contrast between intellectual and sensible intuition is a contrast in how things-in-themselves are *given*. This conflicts with the conception of intellectual intuition as *creating* its objects.

Whenever we say of an object that it is an appearance, we presuppose that it is an appearance *of* something: things in themselves are unknowable but presupposed as productive of appearances. This shows that Kant's distinction between sensuous and intellectual intuition has nothing to do with the creation of the objects of intellectual intuition; Kant's point here is solely that things in themselves can be given in different ways. (Gram, 1981: 291)

Gram has in mind the idea that there could be a different way to come into contact with *the same things* as we do, without using sensible intuition.

If space and time are what Kant says they must be—formal properties of our mind's way of perceiving objects—then it is logically possible to conceive of an intellect that can be acquainted with the same things without those forms. Such an intellect would be a case of having intellectual intuition, for it might be able to be acquainted

with the very things which we ordinarily perceive under the forms of our perceptual conditions in the absence of those conditions. (Gram, 1981: 289)

The answer to this problem has already been provided above. I introduced the idea that, if we are to make sense of intellectual intuition in relation to Kant's philosophy, we need to consider how this might contribute to genuine representation and knowledge of real objects. I argued that we have to think of intellectual intuition as guaranteeing an object, which might amount to the creation of an object of thought, if it is to be capable of contributing to knowledge at all. Gram is correct to point out that a capacity to create one's own objects of thought is not logically equivalent to a capacity for non-sensible intuition. But, given further consideration, we can see that the only way that non-sensible intuition could make the contribution distinctive of intuition would be to guarantee the existence of its objects of thought.

This does not quite dispel the dissonance of something being both given and created, but recall, the very idea of intellectual intuition implied an active capacity rather than a receptive capacity. A capacity for thinking and intuiting in one is not passive, and as such, it does not quite make sense to think of its representations as being 'given'. But we do not therefore have to give up on the idea of intellectual intuition and sensible intuition being different ways of presenting the same things. It is just that the relation between intellectual intuition and things in themselves will be radically different. Intellectual intuition goes so far as to guarantee their existence, where sensible intuition can merely be affected by them.

Regarding conceptions 1 and 3, Gram argues that knowledge of *different kinds of things* is at stake, i.e. phenomena rather than things-in-themselves.

We now have that capacity for Kant if we could, *per impossible*, intuit in one

experience the totality of phenomena constituting the world. This does not involve the claim that an intellect can know any given object independently of conditions of sensibility, nor does it involve the claim that an intellect can create the object it knows by thinking it. (Gram, 1981: 293)

This kind of intellectual intuition concerns knowledge of (the totality of) *phenomena*, where the first was supposed to be knowledge of something different, i.e. things-in-themselves. Moreover, conception 2 is also in tension here: it is not clear why creation and intuition of a sum-total should be features of the same capacity.

First, Gram's claim is puzzling, given the textual evidence offered in support of it. Gram begins by citing the following *Reflexion*.

An Idea is the representation of the whole insofar as it necessarily precedes the determination of the parts. It can never be empirically represented because in experience one goes from the parts to the whole by successive synthesis. It [an Idea] is the archetype of things because certain objects are possible only through an Idea. Transcendental Ideas are those by which the parts in the aggregate or succession are determined by the absolutely universal whole. (Reflexion 1244)¹⁴

Already this passage suggests that, whatever a representation of a whole or totality is of, it is not something that is empirically represented in experience. Experience is a product of synthesis, in which the mind goes from parts to a synthesized whole – an experience of the empirical, phenomenal world. Therefore, by definition, a representation of a whole which precedes its parts cannot be of the phenomenal world. So why would Gram take it to be so?

The second passage offered by Gram in support of this point is from section 77 of

the *Critique of Judgement* (just after the remarks about possibility and actuality). Here Kant is discussing how we can reconcile our teleological explanations of nature, in terms of natural ends, with mechanistic causal explanations of nature. His answer is similar to his claims about the possibility/actuality distinction. Our need for teleological explanation arises from the constitution of our cognitive capacities. By contrasting discursive understanding with intuitive understanding we can see that, although we require teleological explanations to make sense of nature, a mind with insight into the supersensible might have access to underlying mechanistic explanations.

[C]ertain products of nature ... **must**, given the particular constitution of our understanding, **be considered by us** as intentional and generated as ends, ... without denying that another (higher) understanding than the human one might be able to find the ground of the possibility of such products of nature even in the mechanism of nature. (Kant, 2000: 275; CJ 5:405-6)

Such an alternative understanding is characterized as non-discursive. The discursive understanding subsumes particular things under its general (universal) concepts, however, from the general concept it cannot infer what particular things will fall under it. For example, the concept *dog* does not contain information about all the possible kinds of determinate dogs, it only concerns the relevant marks for that concept. By contrast, an intuitive understanding does not subsume the particular under the universal in this way.

[O]ne can thus also conceive of an **intuitive** understanding (negatively, namely merely as not discursive), which does not go from the universal to the particular and thus to the individual (through concepts), and for which that contingency of the

agreement of nature in its products ... is not encountered. (Kant, 2000: 276; CJ 4:406)

This thought is developed in the following passage, which is cited by Gram.

Our understanding, namely, has the property that in its cognition, e.g., of the cause of a product, it must go from the **analytical universal** (of concepts) to the particular (of the given empirical intuition) ... Now, however, we can also conceive of an understanding which, since it is not discursive like ours but is intuitive, goes from the **synthetically universal** (of the intuition of a whole as such) to the particular, i.e., from the whole to the parts... (Kant, 2000: 276; CJ 5:407)¹⁵

An intuitive understanding does not use discursive, general concepts, and so if it cognizes something, does not cognize it merely through marks. Rather, the whole thing will be presented to this understanding. It is suggested that such an understanding will then be able to recognize the determinations of the particular thing, i.e. go 'from the whole to the parts'. This allows for the possibility of a different kind of insight into explanations of the natural world, i.e. mechanistic explanations that are beyond the reach of human understanding. Indeed, Kant goes on to claim that

Since it is at least possible to consider the material world as a mere appearance, and to conceive of something as a thing in itself (which is not appearance) as substratum, and to correlate with this a corresponding intellectual intuition (even if it is not ours), there would then be a supersensible real ground for nature, although it is unknowable for us... (Kant, 2000: 278; CJ 5:409)

Intuitive understanding or intellectual intuition would be able to cognize not mere appearances, but things in themselves, a supersensible substratum grounding nature.

I do not have space here to do justice to Kant's discussion in section 77, but I hope I have laid out enough of the key points to show that, whilst there is reason to agree that Kant associates intellectual intuition with a capacity to intuit a whole or sum-total, independent of or prior to its parts, it is not plausible to interpret this as a sum-total of all phenomena. Indeed, the very purpose of introducing intellectual intuition here is to show how a different kind of cognitive being could have insight into the mechanism of nature as it is in itself, not as it appears in human experience.¹⁶ Therefore Gram's first worry is unfounded. Conceptions 1 and 3 are not about different kinds of things, for conception 3 does not involve intuition of a sum-total of *phenomena*. Putting together my arguments so far, we can also see why conceptions 2 and 3 come as a package. Starting with the idea of intuition and thought collapsing into one single cognitive capacity, the only way to account for the possibility of knowledge through such a capacity was to introduce creation.

7.2 Intellectual Intuition as a Self-Positing 'I'.

Post-Kantian idealists, such as Fichte and Schelling, developed the idea of intellectual intuition as a 'self-positing I'.¹⁷ This might seem reasonable, given that Kant often discusses intellectual intuition in the same breath as cognition of the self. One might therefore think that my proposed way to understand intellectual intuition is at best missing some crucial element, at worst not at all about intellectual intuition thus understood.

In response to this worry, I think it is clear that in the *Critique of Pure Reason* the idea of intellectual intuition of the self is sometimes raised when Kant is emphasizing that cognition of the self is just a special case of sensible intuition. The alternative would be intellectual intuition of the self, which we do not have. For example,

If I could combine a determination of my existence through **intellectual intuition** ... in the representation **I am**, which accompanies all my judgments and actions of my understanding, then no consciousness of a relation to something outside me would necessarily belong to this. ... but the inner intuition, in which alone my existence can be determined, is sensible, and is bound to a condition of time... (Kant, 1998: 121-2; CPR Bxl note)

Such intellectual intuition, given that it is in general creative of its object, in the case of the self would also create its object, and would in this case be a 'self-positing I': the representation 'I am' would determine the existence of the subject 'I'. In thinking of itself it would thereby create itself. This idea is therefore present, but only as a special case of intellectual intuition in general, and as a contrast case to also show that human cognition of the self is merely a special case of any other cognition of an object, involving sensible intuition. The idea may have been developed beyond this after Kant, but I am not concerned with that here.

7.3 Förster on intuitive understanding and intellectual intuition

In his fascinating philosophical and historical study, *The 25 Years of Philosophy*, Förster carefully charts the development of the notions of intellectual intuition and intuitive understanding from Kant through philosophers such as Schelling and Goethe to Hegel. The development of these notions is one thing, and they may well be drawn apart by different thinkers, but I want to argue that in Kant's work they amount to the same thing. In his discussion of Kant, however, Förster argues that these two notions are importantly different.

In fact, Förster recognizes two different notions of intellectual intuition and two different notions of intuitive understanding, resulting in *four* different notions overall. First,

let us consider why he thinks the two kinds, intuitive understanding and intellectual intuition, are distinct.

Now what I find most significant is the fact that Kant's considerations here bring not one but *two* alternative faculties of cognition into play, neither of which can be reduced to the other. First we have a non-sensible, i.e. *intellectual intuition* for which possibility (thinking) and actuality (being) coincide. And secondly an *intuitive understanding* which goes from the intuition of the whole to its parts and thus perceives no contingency in the way the parts are assembled into a whole. Previous Kant scholarship has failed to recognize that these are in fact two distinct faculties. (Förster, 2012: 145)

I offer the same response as I did to Gram. Even if different characterisations of a capacity, picking out different aspects, are conceptually distinct, this does not mean that additional considerations will not show them to in fact come as a package of different features of one and the same capacity.

More specifically, Förster contrasts intellectual intuition as a cognitive capacity for which thinking and being coincide, with intuitive understanding as a cognitive capacity which goes from the intuition of the whole to its parts. However, I have already argued that both of these capacities can be understood as following from one single notion of a collapse of intuition and thought into one. If this single capacity is to be capable of knowledge, then it must guarantee the existence of its objects. Given that this capacity has no discursive concepts, the determination of the particulars which fall under universal representations is not contingent, hostage to the fortune of a distinct capacity for intuition, but already present in the whole representation.

To clarify, my claim is not that these entailments work in the opposite direction. I do

not want to argue that any cognitive capacity to go from an intuition of a whole to its parts is a cognitive capacity for which thought and intuition are one. One of the aims of Förster's book is to argue that human minds are capable of intuitive understanding (as he characterizes it) in some cases, alongside separate capacities for sensible intuition and discursive thought. To take on such a claim is well beyond the scope of this paper. But this does not affect my point. Given my general characterisation of intuitive understanding/intellectual intuition, it follows that this is also a capacity for intuitive understanding as Förster understands it. This is just one of many interesting consequences of the core notion of thought and intuition collapsed into one.

The further distinctions—of two different kinds each of intuitive understanding and intellectual intuition—are made according to considerations on the one hand derived from pre-critical discussions in physico-theology about the nature of God, and on the other from a contrast with human cognitive capacities in the Critical philosophy.

Thus we find ... *two distinct* faculties of cognition that Kant takes to be conceivable, but humanly unrealizable, each of which in turn is susceptible to two distinct interpretations. In each case, the one interpretation harkens back the pre-critical context of physico-theology and the characterization of God, while the other originates in the critical characterization of human understanding and sensibility to which it forms a contrast. (Förster, 2012: 152)

So we end up with *four* notions as follows:

- A. Intuitive understanding as an original self-intuiting understanding.
- B. Intuitive understanding as intuiting the whole as prior to the parts.
- C. Intellectual intuition as productive of its object.

D. Intellectual intuition as the non-sensible intuition of things-in-themselves.

(See Förster, 2012: 152.) Capacity D corresponds with Gram's concept 1, capacity C with Gram's conception 2, and capacity B with Gram's conception 3. I have already argued why I think these come as a package, in response to Gram. Capacity A corresponds with the self-positing 'I', already discussed in section 7.2.

8. A general problem for all categories.

One final objection that might be raised to my account of the interaction between the notion of an intuitive understanding and a distinction between possibility and actuality goes as follows. It is a general feature of categories that they have no significance applied beyond the bounds of experience, i.e. when not in application to sensible intuition. So there is a simple, general explanation to be given of Kant's intriguing remarks. An intuitive understanding would have no use for *any* of the categories, and *a fortiori* no use for the modal categories.

For if I wanted to think of an understanding that itself intuited (as, say, a divine understanding, which would not represent given objects, but through whose representation the objects would themselves at the same time be given, or produced), then the categories would have no significance at all with regard to such a cognition. (Kant, 1998: 253; CPR B145)

What is striking is that Kant gives a particular argument for why the intuitive understanding could make no sense of a distinction between possibility and actuality, in terms of the fact that the discursive understanding has two heterogeneous cognitive capacities. In contrast, the passages where Kant discusses application of the categories

beyond sensible intuition do not leave us with a clear cut argument. In many places Kant appears to claim that the categories *do* extend beyond sensible intuition. It is just that *we*, with our particular cognitive capacities, and our need for sensible intuition to give content to our representations, should not apply these categories beyond the bounds of sense. If we do, we should not expect there to be any object of our representations, they would not be about anything.

[If] I leave out all intuition, then there still remains the form of thinking, i.e., the way of determining an object for the manifold of a possible intuition. Hence to this extent the categories extend further than sensible intuition, since they think objects in general without seeing to the particular manner (of sensibility) in which they might be given. But they do not thereby determine a greater sphere of objects. (Kant, 1998: 350; *CPR* A253-4/B309)

(See also Kant, 1998: 253-4; *CPR* B145-6.) Insofar as the categories constitute the concept of an object in general, they can in principle extend further than sensible intuition. However, insofar as *we* always need sensible intuition to have knowledge, we should not be seduced into thinking that there are more objects, existing beyond the empirical world.

To properly consider Kant's views about the extent of the categories would be beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is interesting that Kant provides a different (additional) kind of argument when it comes to the modal categories: differently structured minds have different capacities for using modal concepts. In general, we need to consider the role of categories beyond the bounds of sensibility. But the argument concerning modal concepts is precisely not one about the relation between them as categories and sensibility, but a more general point about the structure of the kind of cognitive architecture which has the resources to draw modal distinctions.

9. The Function of Modal Judgement

Making a distinction between possibility and actuality is required for beings like us with two separate cognitive capacities for intuition and thought. By contrast, we have seen how in a being where those two capacities are collapsed into one there is no need for such a distinction. In the final sections of this paper I wish to put forward a potential application of this idea to contemporary work on modality. Specifically, I want to suggest that this aspect of Kant's view provides a fresh account of the function of modal judgement. Moreover, given the nature of this function, we may be able to learn something about the ontological status of modal claims.

There is currently emerging interest in a particular approach to philosophy of modality – determine first what the purpose of modal judgement and modal discourse is, before you try to make claims about the truth-conditions or truth-aptness of modal statements.¹⁸ This approach to modality has been particularly endorsed and developed by John Divers. He asks us the general question

Which aspects of our practical or intellectual conduct are facilitated by our modalizing, and how so? (Divers, 2010: 190-1)

He presents us with a functional constraint, a methodological principle to guide our investigations into modality.

Divers's Functional Constraint

One ought to accept no more substantial a theory than is required in order to account for the body of (functionally) de jure modal assertion. The body of de jure modal assertion comprises the kinds of modal assertion that we (in some sense)

need to make in order to serve whatever are the legitimate and identifiable purposes of our modalizing. (Divers, 2010: 205)

The recommended methodology might be described as economy prescribed by practice. In order to give a theory of a particular body of assertions, one should first identify the legitimate purposes of making those assertions. What are they for? Once we have an answer to that question, we should then only need a theory to account for those purposes. From another perspective, suppose that as a matter of fact one can use modal assertions for a particular purpose, but it is not a legitimate purpose (perhaps to baffle quiz contestants). Should our theory of modal assertions, their truth-aptness and/or truth-conditions take this into account? Presumably not. What we are interested in is what modal assertions purport to add to our practices, and what we need to explain to account for this.

One account that has been offered of the purpose of modalizing is that our practice of reasoning from suppositions depends on it.¹⁹ McFetridge (1990) argues that a belief that a mode of inference is logically necessarily truth-preserving is to be equated with preparedness to employ that mode of inference in reasoning from any supposition whatsoever. In addition, our practice of reasoning from suppositions requires that we take some modes of inference as employable in reasoning from any supposition whatsoever, and hence this practice requires us to have such beliefs about logical necessity.

I conclude then, that on the present view of what it is to regard a rule of inference as logically necessarily truth-preserving, we are constrained to believe that there are such rules. For if we abandoned that belief, we would be unable to reason from suppositions at all. (McFetridge 1990: 154)

Kant's account of the distinction between possible and actual suggests an alternative (or complementary) account of the function of modalizing: we need the concepts of possibility and actuality to cope with our divided cognitive architecture. There is something about the way we are able to cognize objects, come into epistemic contact with them, and think about them, that leaves a gap between our thoughts of things and the existence of those things. If we are to assure ourselves of genuine representation of real objects, and the possibility of knowledge of them, then we need a way to distinguish the actual cases from the merely possible. We at least need to be able to *conceptualize* this difference to make sense of sceptical worries, and to formulate strategies for avoiding error (e.g. seek out some direct experience of a purported possible thing – a consistent concept is not sufficient for existence).

Divers considers a more specific question, which is also relevant here.

How would a creature think, and at what disadvantage would it be, if it were capable of thinking, but not of thinking modally? (Divers, 2010: 199)

Divers discusses whether *thought as such* requires modality. Note, however, that this is not quite the Kantian point. It is that *objective thought for a cognitive architecture that is split into two distinct capacities, for thought and intuition*, requires modality. Hence, Divers's first worry, that 'it is implausible that we can make nothing of a non-modal way of thought' (Divers 2010: 199) does not stick. Moreover, in this paper I have precisely tried to make something of a non-modal way of thought, that of the intuitive understanding, as a contrast case to show how modality is required for human thought.

Divers's second objection to the claim that modal judgement is required for thought exploits a contrast with other candidates for essential elements of thinking. For example, we can make sense of an instrumental function for thinking spatially and temporally.

If we didn't make spatial judgments, then we would fall down and bump into things.
If we didn't make temporal judgments, then we wouldn't be able to coordinate various kinds of cooperative action, etc. (Divers 2010: 200)

By contrast, he can see no similarly obvious instrumental answer for thinking modally.

Even among the candidates for the essential categories of thinking, modal judgment still stands out as exceptional in lacking, thus far, a compelling instrumental account of its function. (Divers 2010: 200)

The Kantian suggestion offers an answer here. If we are to achieve objective thought (cognition) given our split cognitive capacities, then we need a distinction between the possible and the actual.

Once a legitimate purpose for modalizing has been identified, we are also invited to consider whether modalizing is the only way to achieve that purpose. Even if we agree that there is a requirement to conceptualize the mismatch between thought and intuition for human understanding, is a distinction between possible and actual the only way to do it?

In face of a hypothesis that a certain kind of modal judgment is necessary for the (efficient) discharge of the function in question, we are at liberty to test the hypothesis by asking, first, whether a less substantially committing modal attitude will do the job and, secondly, whether a non-modal attitude will do. (Divers 2010: 201)

This raises two important questions for the Kantian view.

First, if the purpose of distinguishing between possible and actual is to make room for knowledge of the world, does that mean that the resulting modal notions are in fact *epistemic* notions in disguise? Is it just that we don't *know* if our concepts are satisfied? Is our concept of possibility what allows us to cope with uncertainty? Second, is this even a concept of *possibility*? Isn't the distinction just between *actual* and *non-actual*?

The answers to these questions are, unfortunately, not brief and simple. To give a full answer I think we need to return to the modal categories and the *Postulates* to answer directly the question that Divers raises. What do we need modal categories for? This is a remarkably Kantian question. Throughout the *Analytic of Principles* in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we can read Kant as answering that kind of question for the other categories. E.g. we need the concepts of cause and effect if we are to distinguish between subjective and objective succession in time (Kant, 1998: 304-16; CPR A189-211/B232-56). The purpose of the modal categories – why they are transcendental conditions – is under-explored, but I will have to save a thorough examination of this for elsewhere.

The short answer is to remind oneself that the purpose of the distinction between actual and non-actual thoughts is to make room for the possibility of knowledge. Given that there is a potential mismatch between our thoughts and reality, we need to be able to conceptualize that before we can take it into account in our epistemic inquiries. If that is so, then distinguishing further between possible yet non-actual cases and non-actual but impossible cases can only further aid this purpose. It is only worth seeking out empirical confirmation of thoughts that could be actual---i.e. possibilities. If the concept of something is already impossible, if it is contradictory or incompatible with conditions on possible experience---then it is not going to be actual.

In answer to the worry that the resulting distinction may be purely epistemic, this is a red herring. It may well be true that in some cases we do not know whether a certain concept is satisfied. But that there could be such a situation is premised on the very fact

that human understanding can have unsatisfied concepts at all—that mismatch between thought and intuition. It is this fact which is at the heart of the matter. Some of our concepts are not satisfied, but nevertheless applicable to experience, and we need to conceptualize that. Even if we *know* that a concept is not satisfied, e.g., we know that there happen to be no blue swans, this does not dissolve the distinction, as one might expect if it were purely epistemic. The distinction between actual and possible is not a distinction between what concepts are known to be satisfied, and concepts about which we are in the dark. Because we can know that a concept is not satisfied and still regard it as possible.

I have suggested that Kant's views may fruitfully be applied in the contemporary debate surrounding the function of modalizing. But isn't such a suggestion of interest only to those philosophers who are sympathetic to Kant's philosophy in general? And aren't they few and far between when it comes to contemporary philosophers of modality? Not so. The core suggestion is that a distinction between possibility and actuality arises out of our having two distinct cognitive capacities, one for general (discursive) conceptual thought, one for direct and immediate representation of objects. So long as such a distinction can be made plausible, this account of the function of modal judgement can be of relevance. I suspect the prospects are good for drawing out such a distinction in traditionally non-Kantian areas of philosophy. For example, one might think that something of this distinction can be recognized in Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.²⁰ One might also think that the core idea of an intuition as a simple, singular, immediate presentation is preserved in direct reference theories of names. For example, Barcan Marcus (1961) describes names as 'identifying tags' with no meaning: they serve only to directly pick out an object, they do not work through marks or characteristics (Barcan Marcus 1961: 309-10).²¹

9. No use or no sense

One final question remains if we are to have a rounded understanding of the status of the distinction between the possible and the actual for the intuitive understanding. It has been argued that such a distinction would not apply to or be valid for an intuitive understanding. But how strong is the conclusion? Is the point that modal concepts can only be *acquired* or *understood* by minds with a split architecture? Or is it that such a mind could understand these concepts, but would never have occasion for their use? Is the claim: (a) intuitive understanding cannot even acquire these modal concepts; or (b) intuitive understanding never has any application of modal concepts in its experience?

The textual evidence one might appeal to pulls both ways, so rather than waste pages reproducing unhelpful passages, I will offer a more general argument drawing on the functional methodology introduced above. The functional argument for no sense goes as follows. There is no obvious positive reason to think that an intuitive understanding would acquire these modal concepts, because there is no analogous function to be fulfilled to that required by a discursive understanding. We have seen that, for the intuitive understanding, there is no identifiable purpose to modalizing, that such a mind has no need of modal assertion. As such, it would be gratuitous to include in our theory of modality modal concepts or modal judgements for an intuitive understanding.

One might respond that an intuitive understanding might be able to learn about *us*, and hence develop an idea of a being with human cognitive capacities, with our cognitive architecture, and our *a priori* concepts. Then they could surely work out what our modal concepts do and mean. The intuitive understanding could surely sit back and know all of this about us, without ever themselves having need to directly apply modal concepts to their own experience. Such a being might rightly think 'A bright blue rabbit is not actual for these discursive beings, but it is possible for them' without ever needing, or even being able, to think direct modal thoughts such as 'a discursive being is possible'. One might think that this gives an analogue of modal judgement some function for the intuitive

understanding: because we exist, modal concepts can be defined in terms of our cognitive capacities, and the intuitive understanding could be able to have knowledge about us and how we function. The intuitive understanding could understand what the content of our modal judgements is, without ever making, or being able to make, modal judgements about their own experience.

However, this just shows us that it is *possible* for an intuitive understanding to understand the content of our modal judgements. If we take the functional methodology seriously, it does not tell us whether being able to do so would serve any purpose for the intuitive understanding. Just because we *can* do something, does not imply that there is a 'legitimate and identifiable' purpose to that practice. And if there is not, then it should be left out of our theorizing. A functional methodological approach not only shows us how Kant's views on modality can be applicable to contemporary debates, but it also gives us a way to resolve this final question.²²

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¹ Abbreviations of Kant's works will be as follows: the *Critique of Judgement* will be

indicated by 'CJ'; the *Critique of Pure Reason* by 'CPR'; the *Jäsche Logik* by 'JL', *Lectures in Metaphysics* by 'LM'. Unless otherwise indicated, Cambridge edition translations have been used.

² 'The categories of modality have this peculiarity: as a determination of the object they do not augment the concept to which they are ascribed in the least, but rather express only the relation to the faculty of cognition.' (Kant, 1998: 322; CPR A219/B266)

³ See (Kant, 1998: 115; CPR Bxxvi, footnote). As well as in the key text, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this distinction is brought out nicely in Kant's *Lectures on Metaphysics*, for example: 'Logical possibility, actuality, and necessity are cognized according to the principle of contradiction [. . .] Real possibility is the agreement with the conditions of a possible experience. (Kant, 1997: 322-3; LM 28:557)

⁴ 'It is a mere tautology to speak of general [*allgemeinen*] or common concepts – a mistake that is grounded in an incorrect division of concepts into *general* [*allgemeine*], *particular* and *singular*. Concepts themselves cannot be so divided, but only *their use*.' (Kant, 1992a: 589; JL 9:91, translation amended to 'general' rather than 'universal'.)

⁵ Translation taken from R. S. Hartman and W. Schwarz (Dover: 1974), which seems more faithful to the German than the Cambridge edition.

⁶ Kant explicitly describes discursive concepts as reflected: 'the concept is a *general* ... or *reflected* representation.' (Kant, 1974: 96; JL 9:91, translation from Hartman and Schwarz).

⁷ See also Westphal (2000): 'In Kant's view, intuition and concept are not eliminated, instead they are *identical* for an intuitive intellect.' (Westphal, 2000: 284)

⁸ Kant actually describes this second characterisation as metaphysical, rather than epistemological (Kant, 1992a: 546; JL 9:36). But I here take the advice of an anonymous referee that it makes more sense to present them as epistemological features.

⁹ Thank you to an anonymous referee for making this view salient to me.

¹⁰ See also Gardner (1999: 33-4).

¹¹ See Leech (2010) for an elaboration of and different application of this idea of creation as a guarantee of existence.

¹² The qualification 'independent of conditions of sensibility' is of how the intellect can intuit or cognize things in themselves. Such an intellect, given that it has no senses, intuits things in themselves without sensibility, and therefore without any of the associated conditions of sensibility (such as the forms of space and time). By contrast, the human understanding can only cognize things as they appear, through sensibility, and so the objects of their condition are subject to any conditions of sensibility, such as the forms of space and time.

¹³ One might say that, although they are not interderivable through logic alone, and are thus logically independent, once we add in additional considerations as additional premises, we can infer from one to another after all.

¹⁴ As cited in Gram (1981: 292-3).

¹⁵ Here I have used the Cambridge translation, rather than Gram's own: 'Our understanding has the characteristic that it must go in its knowledge (e.g., in the cause of an effect) from the analytically universal (from concepts) to the particular (the given empirical intuition). . . . But we can, however, conceive of an intellect that, unlike ours, is not discursive but intuitive because it goes from the synthetically universal (the intuition of a whole as such) to the parts.' (Gram 1981: 293)

¹⁶ Westphal (2000) makes a similar point: 'Gram overstated the case, however. In fact, Kant's discussion of the third account (KdU s77) does not mention "phenomena" (or "noumena"); it only discusses nature as a totality and the "synthetically universal...intuition of a whole as a whole.'" (Westphal, 2000: 283, fn4) However, although Kant does not mention noumena, he does mention 'thing in itself' and 'supersensible'.

¹⁷ I am here trusting summaries in the secondary literature. See Förster (2000: 181, 238-9)

for intellectual intuition of the I in Fichte and Schelling. Gram (1981) also discusses intellectual intuition in the work of Fichte and Shelling. There is also much further literature on the development of the notion of intellectual intuition in the work of thinkers such as Goethe and Hegel, e.g. Kreines (2007), Westphal (2000) and Mensch (2011).

¹⁸ Such an approach is related to quasi-realist approaches to moral philosophy. See in particular Blackburn (1993).

¹⁹ See McFetridge (1990), Hale (1999), Rumfitt (2010), Divers and Elstein (2012).

²⁰ For example: 'We shall say that we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware' (Russell 1912: 25) compared to a mediated knowledge of things through descriptions.

²¹ See also Kripke (1980).

²² Versions of this paper were presented at the *ChiPhi* centre for the History of Philosophy Workshop in German Idealism, in Sheffield, at a work in progress meeting in Sheffield, and at the 2013 BSHP Annual Conference on the Possible and the Actual in York. Thank you to those audiences for helpful feedback. Thank you also to Thomas Land, Katharina Kraus, and John Divers for offering feedback on various stages of the paper. Final thanks to two anonymous referees for this journal whose comments lead to significant changes in the paper.