KANT AND BOLZANO ON THE SINGULARITY OF INTUITIONS

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Summary
Kant and Bolzano agree that intuitions are non-accidentally singular, but each offers more than one explanation of why this is the case. One model, exemplified by Bolzano’s explication of intuitions as “this”-representations, posits a type of representation which is such that it can only have one object. A very different explanation, prominent in Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic, has recourse to the fact that certain classes of objects (spaces and times) can have only one instance, and argues on this basis that some representations with those contents are singular. This paper surveys various versions of these two explanations and uses each philosopher’s answers to shed light on the other’s.

1. Introduction

Famously, one of the signal differences between Kant and his most influential predecessors lies in his insistence that there are two categorically different species of representations, concepts and intuitions. The well-known Stufenleiter passage, which contains definitions of each, provides two differentia in order to classify “cognitions” or “objective perceptions” into these species.\(^1\)\(^2\) Intuitions are immediate and singular. Concepts are mediate and general. It isn’t clear how Kant understands these differentia,

1. All boldfacing in quotes has been added; italics are in the original. Outside of quotations italics are used systemically when introducing the name of a position.
2. *KrV* A320. The highest genus is representation, which is divided into those “with consciousness” (perceptions) and those without. “A perception that relates [bezieht] solely to the subject, as the modification of its condition, is sensation (*sensatio*), an objective perception is cognition (*cognitio*)” (Kant’s merely didactic italicization elided). I take an objective perception to be one which is such as to refer to an object, though it may not actually do so. Accordingly, I understand sensations to be conscious representations without referential purport, mere modifications of the subject’s conscious state.
just that he believes that intuitions and concepts are the only two species of
cognitive representations. There are not, then, any cognitions that are both
immediate and general or cognitions that are both mediate and singular,
taken in whatever sense these terms are meant to be taken.

Locating intuitions and concepts within Bolzano’s taxonomy of represen-
tations is more complicated, since singularity and simplicity, the two
defining features of intuitions for Bolzano, do not always travel together,
as immediacy and singularity do for Kant. Intuitions are definitionally
prior to concepts. The first genus relevant for isolating intuitions is the
class of actually referring, or “objectual”, representations (gegenständliche
Vorstellungen),3 which is divided into general and singular representations.
In contrast, all representations whatsoever, not merely objectual representa-
tions, can be compared with respect to the simplicity or complexity of
their content. Simple representations—easily communicated examples are
<something>, <not>, <has>, <actuality>, and <ought>4—are those that
have no proper parts. Complex representations arise from the combination
of simple ones, as <nothing> can be formed by combining <something>
and <not>. Bolzano selects one of the four ‘boxes’ yielded by these two
orthogonal divisions and calls them “intuitions”. Intuitions are singular
representations that are also simple. Concepts are then defined as repre-
sentations that do not contain any intuitions. “Mixed representations”
are complex representations that contain at least one intuition.5 Both
concepts and mixed representations can be either general, singular, or
non-referring.

Thus, Kant and Bolzano agree that intuitions are singular representa-
tions. Moreover, they agree that intuitions are, in a sense that remains to
be worked out, essentially singular rather than merely accidentally so. Here
is Bolzano noting this additional proviso:

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3. Objectual representations do not include accidentally non-referring representations,
inconsistent representations, and representations such as <has> whose nature is not to refer.
Note that Kant, in contrast, divides conscious representations with referential purport, rather
than their proper subset of the successfully referring, into concepts and intuitions.

4. I will use offset lines (|||) to mention intuitions and angle brackets (<F>) to mention
concepts and mixed representations.

5. As a matter of taxonomy, complex representations, all of whose parts are intuitions, are
mixed representations (WL §73), though later in WL Bolzano argues that there are no such
complexes, since a concept such as <and> is required for the synthesis of two more intuitions
into a single representation (§278, III:22).