The ‘I Think’ Must Be Able To Accompany All My Representations

Unconscious Representations and Self-consciousness in Kant

Dietmar H. Heidemann

Introduction

The proposition “The I think must be able to accompany all my representations” (*CPR* B 131) is one of the linchpins of Kant’s critical philosophy. It is pivotal for several reasons: First, and foremost, it stands for the core idea of the critical theory of apperception. Second, it plays a crucial role in the argument of the transcendental deduction of the categories, and, third, it mirrors Kant’s critical stance towards metaphysical conceptions of the thinking I. Commentators from different philosophical backgrounds have attacked the “I think”-proposition, not least because of its odd wording. The formulation “must be able”, they argue, illegitimately conflates ‘necessity’ and ‘possibility’, and thereby renders the whole sentence contradictory. In this respect one of the most striking criticisms is Schopenhauer’s interpretation according to which the proposition does not make sense since it is “a problematic-apodictic enunciation, or, in plain English, a proposition taking away with one hand what it gives with the other.”¹ In substance, Schopenhauer’s unease about the “I think”-proposition is unjustified for the oddity of its formulation is due to the ambitious epistemological goal Kant is aiming at. This goal is two-fold. It not only consists in an epistemological explanation of the possibility of consciousness of representations as elements of cognition. As a by-product the “I think”-proposition likewise explains by means of a theory

1 Cf. Schopenhauer (1977, 554) (“[...] eine problematisch-apodiktische Enuntiation; zu Deutsch, ein Satz, der mit der einen Hand nimmt, was er mit der anderen giebt.” Cf. Schopenhauer (1977, 54). For a similar criticism see Strawson (1966, 93).

of self-consciousness the possibility of unconscious representations, i.e., representations we have without being conscious of them.

The explanation of the possibility of unconscious representations on the basis of a theory of self-consciousness shouldn't be taken for granted since the connection between (self-)consciousness and unconscious representations seems to be paradoxical. As Kant himself puts it: "A contradiction appears to lie in the claim to have representations and still not be conscious of them; for how could we know that we have them if we are not conscious of them?"² According to Kant's own theory, we can in fact have representations and still not be conscious of them. For we have *obscure*, i.e., unconscious, as opposed to *clear* representations. Commentators usually agree that in Kant's theory unconscious representations are restricted to the field of *obscure* representations. As I argue, in the transcendental theory also the *clear* but *indistinct* representations must be considered as unconscious representations. Moreover, they are not unconscious as such but either indistinct conceptual or indistinct intuitional representations. It follows that for Kant there is a certain kind of conceptual or intuitional representations that are unconscious, or, to put it another way, there is mental content that is not accompanied by the "I think". From this it follows that although the "I think"-consciousness, or self-consciousness, is discursive since it forms an "analytical unity" (cf. *CPR* B 133), not all conceptual mental content is accompanied by the "I think". This is quite remarkable since this means that there would be unconscious conceptual or intuitional representations bearing phenomenality and intentionality. I argue that it is the "I think"-proposition that provides the explanatory ground for that very possibility.

The paper is divided into three sections: The first section presents an outline of the distinction between obscure and clear representations in Kant's philosophy on the backdrop of the Leibnizian-Wolffian theory. Section two moves on to a more detailed analysis of the relation Kant establishes between clear representations and transcendental apperception. Here it becomes evident how the transcendental apperception must be conceived of as regulating principle of conscious as well as of unconscious representations. The concluding section points to some important consequences unconscious representations have for the possibility of non-conceptual content. It develops the argument according to which there is

2 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 246), AA 7:135. If not otherwise mentioned all citations from Kant's works refer to the Akademie Ausgabe (AA) of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften* (1900ff).

non-conceptual content and that on the basis of the "I think"-proposition non-conceptual content must count as unconscious mental content. Thus the theory of unconscious representations explains the possibility of non-conceptual content.

1. Obscure and Clear Representations

In his own account of the unconscious Kant critically reinterprets the rationalist conception of the distinction between obscure and clear representations. Although Kant's discussion of that conception provides the ground for the transcendental distinction between sensibility and understanding, his account of the unconscious itself is independent of the distinction between the two sources of knowledge in transcendental philosophy. That is to say, his arguments against the rationalist distinction between obscure and clear representations do not at the same time justify the transcendental distinction between sensibility and understanding, or intuition and concept respectively. Whereas his criticism of the rationalists' distinction between obscure and clear representations points to an immanent misconception of their analysis of clear representations as confused and distinct ideas, his objections to the rationalist explanation of the difference between sensibility and understanding identify inconsistencies in their account of intuition and concept as kinds of representations. As we will see this turns out to be a crucial point.

1.1. Leibniz on Unconscious Ideas

Though his transcendental theory of consciousness is in many ways unique, Kant, in his explanation of the possibility of unconscious representations, to a certain extent relies on the rationalist antecedents. This goes especially for the terminology he makes use of.³ For that reason, in Kant's critical conception of representation, rationalist philosophers like Wolff, Baumgarten, and Meier loom large. These authors more or less directly rely on Leibniz who by and large shapes the modern discussion of the distinction between conscious and unconscious representations.

3 Since this fact has been widely acknowledged in the literature I will only point to those aspects of Kant's reception of rationalist accounts of the unconscious that are indispensable for my argument. For a somewhat broader discussion cf. La Rocca (2008b, 48–58), and especially La Rocca (2007, 65–76, 76–87).

Leibniz' theory is particularly helpful to grasp the main differences between the rationalist and the Kantian account of the unconscious. In this respect the essay *Meditationes de Cognitione, veritate et Ideis* (1684) is most revealing. There, as a critique of Descartes, Leibniz sets out to determine the difference between true and false ideas. He writes:

Est ergo cognitio vel obscura vel *clara*, et clara rursus vel confusa vel *distincta*, et distincta vel inadaequata vel adaequata, item vel symbolica vel *intuitiva*: et quidem si simul adaequata et intuitiva sit, perfectissima est.⁴

At the top level Leibniz distinguishes between obscure and clear cognition. The latter can either be confused or distinct, and distinct cognition can be inadequate, adequate, symbolic or intuitive. If cognition is both, adequate and intuitive, it is most complete. With respect to the problem of the unconscious the distinction 'obscure-clear' cognition on the one hand, and 'confused-distinct' cognition on the other, is the most significant one. Leibniz doesn't speak of 'obscure cognition' but of 'obscure notion' ("notio") as a kind of representation, obviously because in his eyes cognition as such cannot be obscure.⁵ Accordingly, obscure, i.e., unconscious notions are those ideas that are not sufficient for recognizing something actually represented. If I am, for example, remembering a flower that I have seen before, without being able to recognize it, i.e., to distinguish it from similar things, then the notion I have of that flower is obscure. Whereas in this case Leibniz refers to perception and memory images, the same goes for concepts. Hence, those concepts that I cannot adequately define are obscure concepts.⁶ The opposite of what Leibniz calls 'obscure notion' is 'clear cognition' which in turn he describes according to the possibility of recognition of that cognition. Thus the criterion of distinguishing between obscure and clear cognition is recognition.

Leibniz differentiates two kinds of clear cognition. Clear cognition is confused if I cannot list enough features or marks pertaining to a thing that nevertheless really has them. For instance, in sensation we are able to sufficiently distinguish between colors, tastes, smells etc. However, we are unable to sufficiently discriminate sensations by means of concep-

4 Leibniz (1684, 422).

5 In the *Nouveaux Essays* (cf. Leibniz (1704, 236 ff.; I. xxix, §§ 2 ff.)) Leibniz basically makes the same distinction like in the *Meditationes*. The term he uses there is "idée". This indicates that "notio" in the *Meditationes* should be translated as 'idea' or 'representation', not as 'notion' or 'concept' in the narrow sense of the word.

6 Cf. Leibniz (1684, 422).

tual descriptions. Clear but distinct notions, on the other hand, are those that enable us to distinguish one thing from another similar thing with the help of a sufficiently great and precise number of marks, e.g., if someone clearly distinguishes between different kinds of metal. The adequate list of such marks is what makes up the nominal definition of distinct concepts like 'number', 'size' or 'shape'. Although non-composite concepts cannot be defined, Leibniz is not willing to give up the possibility of distinct cognition of *simple* concepts.

The *Nouveaux Essais* (1704) are more explicit about the last point. Contrary to what his interlocutor, Philalethes, the representative of Locke, claims with respect to simple ideas, which he just takes to be clear ("Nos Idées simples et claires [...]"), Theophilus, the representative of Leibniz, maintains that what already has been exposed in the *Meditationes* is equally true of clear ideas no matter whether they are simple or composite ("[...] j'ay donné une définition des *Idées claires*, commune aux simples et aux composées [...]").⁷ With respect to the distinction between obscure and clear ideas the *Nouveaux Essais* basically proceed like the *Meditationes*. Leibniz yet points out that Philalethes's characterization of distinct ideas in terms of the possibility to clearly distinguish ideas from one another with the help of differentiating marks is unsatisfactory since in this case clear ideas couldn't be distinguished from distinct ideas. However, they must since confused ideas form the second subspecies of clear ideas. Leibniz' insistence on confused and distinct ideas as the two subspecies of clear ideas is of utmost importance for his conception of unconscious representations since for Leibniz not only obscure but also confused ideas count as unconscious ideas. According to the *Nouveaux Essais*, obscure ideas are those ideas we have that are insufficient for distinguishing one thing from another. Leibniz believes that ideas we receive from sensible objects ("choses sensibles") are obscure, since even if sensible objects appear to be identical they nevertheless can reveal differences that we were not aware of, that is to say differences that in fact existed but that we were unconscious of in our perception of the object. Clear ideas, on the other hand, enable us to unambiguously discriminate things.⁸ Now confused ideas are those clear ideas that cannot be defined, and that we can only know from examples ("par des exemples") like a particular taste or smell.⁹ Like distinct ideas they enable us to distinguish

7 Leibniz (1704, 236; I. xxix, § 2).

8 Leibniz (1704, 236 f.; I. xxix, § 2).

9 Leibniz (1704, 237; I. xxix, § 4).

between things, nevertheless only the distinct ones enable us to discriminate things and give definitions of their ideas. Confused ideas don't, for they are deficient simply in that they lack conceptual clearness.

Now in order to further elucidate his conception of unconscious ideas, in the *Nouveaux Essais* Leibniz illustrates their significance and function with the help of several examples. The idea of a heap of stones, for instance, is confused as long as one doesn't recognize the number of the stones and other properties that can be ascribed to the heap. Suppose the heap is composed of thirty six stones. If someone perceives the heap without recognizing the exact number of stones, that person wouldn't be aware of the fact that the stones could form a square of a certain size (6^2). The same goes for a thousand-sided figure. Unless we know the exact number of sides we only have a confused idea of that figure. In fact, Philalethes considers the case where someone might think of a thousand-sided figure thereby having an obscure idea of the figure and a distinct idea of the number of the sides. For one cannot have, he maintains, an exact idea of a thousand-sided figure such that one would be able to distinguish it from a figure that only has 999 sides. Leibniz objects to this that it is perfectly possible to have both, a distinct idea of the figure as well as of the number one thousand for Philalethes just mixes up the idea of a thousand-sided figure with its image: "je n'ay qu'une idée confuse et de la figure et de son nombre, jusqu'à ce que je distingue le nombre en comptant. Mais l'ayant trouvé, je connois très bien la nature et les propriétés de polygone proposé [...]"¹⁰ Hence, someone who is able to determine the exact number of sides a figure has just by sight, or someone who is able to determine the exact weight of a body just by carrying it, does not have a clear but only a confused idea of that figure, or weight respectively since this idea does not convey any information about the figure's or weight's nature.¹¹

So Leibniz basically distinguishes between two kinds of unconscious ideas. First, unconscious ideas are obscure ideas. They are a kind of perception, as he says in the *Monadologie* (1714), "[...] dont on ne s'aperçoit pas" though they are different from sense-perception and consciousness.¹² Unconscious ideas of this kind are "petites perceptions, où il y a rien de distingué". In cases where our mental state is predominated by

10 Cf. Leibniz (1704, 242 f; I.xxix, § 13).

11 Cf. Leibniz (1704, 242 f; I.xxix, § 13).

12 Cf. Leibniz, *Monadologie*, (1714, 608 f; § 14).

them, we literally lose consciousness or fall unconscious.¹³ Secondly, unconscious ideas are confused ideas, i.e., clear ideas that allow for differentiation, however, not in a distinct way which requires knowledge of the nature of something. Consequently, obscure and confused ideas are distinguished in that obscure ideas do not provide any basis for the differentiation between things whereas confused ideas do, however, without telling us more than a particular thing being different from another thing.

The Leibnizian account of unconscious ideas, to be more precise, of the distinction between obscure and clear, or confused and distinct cognition is highly ambiguous. One problem among others is that in his descriptions he obviously does not determine the nature or essence of obscure and clear, or confused and distinct cognition respectively, i.e., he does not define what these kinds of ideas are. Leibniz rather lays out criteria by means of which we can identify ideas of that sort. Another problem is that within the field of obscure ideas there seem to be different degrees of obscurity which range from completely unconscious, unnoticed ideas to less unconscious ideas like ideas of unnoticed parts of consciously perceived objects. One would expect Leibniz to explain when and how an unconscious idea passes the threshold of consciousness, and in turn when and how a confused idea passes the threshold to the unconscious. Since he believes that all ideas we receive from external objects are obscure or at least confused, one might ask oneself why there couldn't be cases in which sense-perception is clear and distinct.

1.2. Kant's Critique of the Leibnizian Account of Unconscious Ideas

It was not before Kant that Leibniz' theory of ideas was fundamentally questioned although in his own account of the unconscious Kant in some respects still relies on Leibniz. Yet there are two fundamental differences between Leibniz' and Kant's account of unconscious ideas which make both conceptions incompatible. First, for reasons to be explained, for Kant the opposition 'distinct-confused' is mistaken. Clear ideas are rather distinct or indistinct; confused ideas form a subset of indistinct ideas. Second, unlike unconscious ideas conscious ideas are rule governed due to the spontaneous activity of the "I think" which must be able to accompany all my representations. The logical function of the "I think" explains why, unlike in Leibniz, also ideas derived from sense-perception can be clear and distinct. In the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point*

13 Cf. Leibniz, *Monadologie*, (1714, 610 f; § 21).

of view Kant agrees with Leibniz and his followers that there are obscure as opposed to clear ideas or representations (“Vorstellungen”). Obscure representations are representations that we have without knowing that we have them, i.e., without being directly conscious of them. Clear representations are those representations we are directly conscious of, and, as Kant specifies, “[...] when their clarity also extends to the partial representations that make up a whole together with their connection, they are then called distinct representations, whether of thought or intuition.”¹⁴ The specification according to which distinct representations can be equally of thought or intuition, already indicates the major difference between Kant’s and Leibniz’ theory of representation. Whereas for Leibniz sensible ideas cannot be distinct, for Kant they can. On the other hand, Kant concurs with Leibniz that in sense-perception there can be obscure representations, for instance, “[w]hen I am conscious of seeing a human being far from me in a meadow, even though I am not conscious of seeing his eyes, nose, mouth, etc. [...]”¹⁵ From my conscious perception of the human being I can conclude that I have obscure representations of what I cannot actually see or discriminate from the distance.¹⁶ In this sense we indirectly know that we have unconscious representations. Like Leibniz Kant maintains that the elucidation of sense-perception with the help of technical means like the “telescope” or “microscope” proves that in the aftermath sense-perception contains much more than we normally are aware of in ordinary perception. This holds true for all of our senses, and this is why “[...] the field of obscure representations is the largest in the human being.”¹⁷

Only until this point Kant, to a greater or lesser extent, agrees with Leibniz; however, concerning the differentiation of ‘clear representations’ their theories fundamentally diverge. Accordingly, “clarity” is “[c]onsciousness of one’s representations that suffices for the distinction of one object from another”. “But that consciousness by means of which the composition of representations also becomes clear is called distinctness.” ‘Distinctness’ is what makes representations knowledge. It includes

14 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 246), AA 7:135.

15 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 246), AA 7:135.

16 Similarly in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant says that in the perception of the pyramids in Egypt from too far away “the parts that are apprehended (the stones piled on top of one another) are represented only obscurely”. Cf. Kant (2000, 136), AA 5:252.

17 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 247), AA 7:136.

“order”, “unity of consciousness” and a “rule for the combination”.¹⁸ As we know from the first *Critique* the “I think” or transcendental apperception is the source of all synthetic, rule-governed cognitive structure. Now the point Kant makes is that, unlike Leibniz does, one cannot contrast distinct representation with confused representation since the opposite of “distinct” is “indistinct”. The argument is an indirect one. Every confused idea must be composite since confusion means lack of order and order implies composition of elements. By definition simple ideas are non-composite. Hence, they cannot exhibit (order or) confusion. Although Kant doesn’t give an example he nonetheless maintains that simple ideas can be (distinct or) indistinct such that we are (conscious or) unconscious of them. Here he seems to directly refer to Leibniz who argues that distinct ideas are composite since we can define them in nominal definitions. On the other hand, he is well aware of the difficulty that in this case simple ideas, since they are not composite and hence indefinable, couldn’t be distinct. However, this seems to be implausible for why shouldn’t simple ideas be distinct by the same token. For the sake of the generic distinction ‘confused-distinct’ Leibniz nevertheless holds onto the view that simple ideas, though not composite and indefinable, can be distinct which is inconsistent with his overall theory.¹⁹

For Kant this inconsistency results from the mistaken analysis of clear ideas. In order to explain the possibility of conscious or unconscious simple ideas, clear ideas must be analyzed in terms of their distinctness or indistinctness, not as Leibniz does in terms of distinctness and confusion. This is in line with the standard example of a simple representation Kant gives in other contexts, i.e., “the simple representation of the I” (*CPR* B 68).²⁰ In self-consciousness I can explicitly refer to myself as “I”, i.e., as the subject of thought. However, I can equally direct the focus of my consciousness on an activity I am performing, e.g., playing chess, and thereby not being constantly aware of the thought that it’s me who is performing though I am so to speak in the background of my mental activity. In the first case, I have a distinct idea or representation of myself. In the second, the representation I have of myself is indistinct but not confused since “I” is a simple representation. Order and con-

18 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 248 f), AA 7:137 f).

19 Cf. Leibniz (1684, 422 f).

20 Cf. *CPR* B 135: “For through the I, as a simple representation, nothing manifold is given; [...]”. Translations from the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*CPR*, first edition A, second edition B) are taken from Kant (1998).

fusion, as Kant argues, are factors that only seem suitable to explain how in *some* representations distinctness and indistinctness comes about. “Confusion is”, he says, “the cause of indistinctness, not the definition of it” whereas order is the cause of distinctness.²¹ Therefore each “confused cognition” is indistinct, however, not every indistinct cognition is confused.²² As mentioned earlier, according to Kant non-composite, simple cognition neither exhibits order nor confusion. Consequently, simple representations that never become distinct are unconscious (indistinct) not because they are confused but because they are non-composite. Correspondingly, the indistinctness of composite representations, i.e., representations that do contain a manifold of marks, does not arise from confusion but from consciousness itself. For I can be conscious of the order of the manifold of a representation while the degree of consciousness diminishes.²³ So distinctness and indistinctness of representations cannot in each case be traced back to order and confusion, no matter whether they are simple or composite. Hence, those distinct representations that are caused by order of their elements only constitute a subset of distinct representations. In parallel, those indistinct representations that originate in the confusion of their elements only constitute a subset of indistinct representations.

This account of distinct and indistinct representations has far-reaching consequences for the distinction between sensibility and understanding, or intuition and concept respectively. Although Kant concedes to the rationalists that sensibility can contain unconscious representations, he disagrees with them that sensibility must be conceived in terms of indistinct (confused) representations. For the distinction ‘distinct-indistinct’ is “formal” rather than “real”. However, the difference between sensibility and understanding is not merely a formal or logical one; it also concerns “the content of thought”: It

was a great error of the Leibniz-Wolffian school [...] to posit sensibility in a lack (of clarity in our partial ideas), and consequently in indistinctness, and to posit the character of ideas of understanding in distinctness.²⁴

21 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 249), AA 7:138, and *Lectures on Logic* (Jäsche), Kant (1992, 545), AA IX:34.

22 Cf. *Lectures on Logic* (Jäsche), Kant (1992, 545), AA IX:34.

23 Cf. *Lectures on Logic* (Jäsche), Kant (1992, 546), AA IX:35. What Kant says here is similar to what he explicates in the “Anticipation of Perception” of the first *Critique* (A 165/B 207ff) with respect to objects of sensation.

24 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 251), AA 7:140 n.

Intuitive (sensitivity) and conceptual (understanding) representations rather are distinct in that cognition is a composite of two independent elements that are epistemic factors on their own. They are not just two sides of the same coin, i.e. the distinct and indistinct sides of representations. Kant lays the foundation of this new, i.e., critical account of sensitivity and understanding in his semi-critical period, in his short essay *Concerning the Ultimate Foundation of the Distinction of the Directions in Space* (1768). There he argues against Leibniz that the directions of space cannot fully be grasped merely by conceptual descriptions since spatial directions are represented through intuition, and intuitional representation cannot be reduced to conceptual representation:

Our considerations make it plain that the determinations of space are not consequences of the positions of the parts of matter relative to each other. On the contrary, the latter are the consequences of the former.²⁵

It follows that intuition and concept are independent elements of cognition. Two years later in his Inaugural Dissertation *On the form and principles of the sensible and the intelligible world* Kant formulates this insight in the following way:

[...] one can see that the sensitive is poorly defined as that which is more confusedly cognised, and that which belongs to the understanding as that of which there is a distinct cognition. For these are only logical distinctions which do not touch at all the things given, which underlie every logical comparison. Thus, sensitive representations can be very distinct and representations which belong to the understanding can be extremely confused.²⁶

The *Critique of Pure Reason* still presents the same line of argument. In the Transcendental Aesthetics Kant declares once again that it is a “falsification of the concept of sensitivity” to maintain that “our entire sensitivity is nothing but the confused representation of things, which contains solely that which pertains to them in themselves but only under a heap of marks and partial representations that we can never consciously separate from one another”. This explanation is mistaken since the opposition ‘indistinct-distinct’ is “merely logical, and does not concern the content.”

25 *Concerning the Ultimate Foundation*, Kant (2003, 371), AA 2:383.

26 Cf. *On the form and principles*, Kant (2003, 387), AA 2:394. See also *Prolegomena*, Kant (2002, 85), AA 4:290; *What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff*, Kant (2002, 368 f; 372–375), AA 20:278, 281–285; *Lectures on Metaphysics*, Kant (1997, 47, 248 f) AA 28:227; 29:879).

(*CPR* A 43/B 60 f) Kant shows why with the help of the following example:

Without doubt the concept of right that is used by the healthy understanding contains the very same things that the most subtle speculation can evolve out of it, only in common and practical use one is not conscious of these manifold representations in these thoughts. Thus one cannot say that the common concept is sensible and contains a mere appearance, for right cannot appear at all; rather its concept lies in the understanding and represents a constitution (the moral constitution) of actions that pertains to them in themselves. [...] The Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy has therefore directed all investigations of the nature and origin of our cognitions to an entirely unjust point of view in considering the distinction between sensibility and the intellectual as merely logical [...]. (*CPR* A 43 f/B 61).²⁷

The *Logic* has even a more differentiated take on this crucial point. Accordingly, it is perfectly possible to have both, indistinct intuitional and conceptual representations as well as distinct intuitional and conceptual representations: (1) As we know already, Kant like Leibniz allows for indistinct representations in sensibility since in our perception of, e.g., a country house from the distance we may not see, i.e., be conscious of all parts of the house like windows, doors, etc. These unconscious intuitional representations are indistinct. The same goes for concepts. We may have a clear concept of beauty although we might not be in a position to list all the marks pertaining to that concept like being sensuous, pleasing universally etc. In this case the concept we have is indistinct. (2) Likewise intuitions and concepts can be distinct. In ordinary perception we see the Milky Way as an unstructured manifold of heavenly appearances. By means of a telescope it is, however, possible to make our perception distinct in that now the perception of individual stars and structures becomes possible. Again, the same goes for concepts. Concepts can be distinct in that we can analyze them, i.e., become conscious of the marks they contain. The concept of virtue, for instance, can be analyzed such that we become conscious of its marks like freedom, duty, overcoming of inclinations etc. There is thus no doubt that sensible intuitions can be not only indistinct but also distinct as concepts can be not only distinct but also indistinct.²⁸

The conclusion to be drawn from Kant's critique of the Leibnizian-Wolffian distinction between (indistinct) sensibility and (distinct) understanding is that sensibility is capable of distinct representations as well

27 Cf. *CPR* A 269 ff/325 ff.

28 Cf. *Lectures on Logic* (Jäsche), Kant (1992, 546), AA 9:35.

as the understanding is capable of indistinct representations. Consequently the Leibnizian-Wolffian distinction does not hold. Recalling Kant's objection to the Leibnizian-Wolffian distinction between distinct and confused ideas according to which the accurate distinction is between distinct and indistinct ideas, the whole argument appears rather embarrassing. For Kant objects to the Leibnizian-Wolffian distinction between sensibility and understanding in terms of the distinction 'distinct-indistinct' that this distinction is inaccurate since it is purely logical. To be sure, this is not a contradiction since in the first case the critique exclusively refers to the question of how to correctly analyze clear as conscious and unconscious representations. Although there is a systematic relation to the problem of the difference between sensibility and understanding, the response Kant gives to this question only applies to the problem of the unconscious. With respect to the second case it does not provide an explanation since the difference between sensibility and understanding as such does not affect the problem of the unconscious.²⁹ This is why Kant can claim that clear representations are either distinct or indistinct, although the distinction between sensibility and understanding cannot be explained in terms of distinctness-indistinctness. However, for the purpose of my argument both cases must be considered.³⁰ It turns out that there are two main classes of unconscious representations, namely obscure and indistinct representations whereby indistinct representations can be intuitional as well as conceptual. This is an important detail of his theory of the unconscious since for Kant there obviously are two different kinds of unconscious representations. Now the difficulty arises of how in particular we must conceive of clear as unconscious or indistinct representations. For clear representations are accompanied by the "I think" which, according to the "I think"-proposition, ensures their being objects of clear consciousness. If this is so, how then can clear but indistinct ideas be unconscious?

29 Cf. La Rocca (2008b, 56).

30 What I am not going to consider in this paper is the question of whether or not Kant's criticism does justice to Leibniz' theory. Such an examination would involve a much too broad discussion and comparison of both theories. It is, however, obvious that in his metaphysics, i.e., in his monadology, Leibniz starts from premises that are very different from the Kantian fundamentals, especially since he conceives of representing monads as the ontological basis of reality. Kant's theory of representation is independent of ontological assumptions of this kind. I think La Rocca (2008b, 50) is right in pointing this out.

2. Unconscious Representations and Transcendental Apperception

As we have seen above, on the top-level Kant distinguishes between obscure and clear representations. Unfortunately, in his work he frequently uses ‘obscure’ in the broadest sense of ‘unconscious’. Thus he even refers to clear but indistinct representations as obscure representations. In order to avoid confusion, in what follows, let me call all top-level obscure representations ‘unconscious *simpliciter*’. For Kant conceives of them as representations that we have without being conscious of them. By contrast, clear but indistinct representations are unconscious but not unconscious *simpliciter*. Let me call them ‘unconscious by degrees’. Analogously, clear and distinct representations are conscious *simpliciter* whereas clear but indistinct representations are conscious by degrees. Hence indistinct representations are neither unconscious *simpliciter* nor conscious *simpliciter*, they are both unconscious by degrees and conscious by degrees.

It is somewhat striking that Kant is not particularly interested in representations that are unconscious *simpliciter*. The *Anthropology* only informs us that obscure representations are contained in sense-perception (“and thus also in animals”) such as in sight or in the “sensations of hearing, when a musician plays a fantasy on the organ with ten fingers and both feet and also speaks with someone standing next to him.”³¹ Here Kant envisages complex practical or intellectual activities that involve multitasking of a certain kind which only allows for consciously focusing on one activity while, like the musician, having other representations unconsciously in the mind. Another example Kant gives of obscure, i.e., representations that are unconscious *simpliciter* is “sexual love”.³² In fact obscure representations not only appear as the mere feeling or content of sensation but also as higher cognitive ideas like the “feeling” of “supersensible determination”³³, reason of law³⁴, or as the idea of metaphysics.³⁵ Even the understanding itself can operate obscurely, or unconsciously *simpliciter*.³⁶

31 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 247), AA 7:136.

32 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 247), AA 7:136.

33 Cf. *CJ*, Kant (2000, 172), AA 5:292 (translation modified).

34 Cf. *Metaphysics of Morals*, AA 6:345.

35 Cf. *Metaphysics of Morals*, AA 6:216, 376.

36 For details see La Rocca (2008a). Cf. *CJ*, Kant (2000, 122), AA 5:238.

Although it might be difficult to draw the exact line between obscure and indistinct representations the general idea is that representations that are unconscious *simpliciter* do not exhibit logical order or unity whereas representations that are unconscious by degrees do to a certain extent. They do since we do have cognitive access to them. In Kant's theory of representation having cognitive access means to be able to accompany representations with the "I think"; this implies bringing about logical structure among representations, i.e., logical unity in judgment. Hence obscure representations, although they might have an impact on our psychological life, are cognitively inaccessible to us for they are unconscious *simpliciter* such that we do not even know that we have them. On the other hand, representations that are unconscious by degrees are cognitively accessible according to the epistemological function Kant attributes to the "I think"-proposition. This function is to be understood in terms of the central argument of § 16 (*CPR* B 131–136) that has the "I think"-proposition as its first premise:

The I think must be able to accompany all my representations [...].
That representation that can be given prior to all thinking is called intuition.
Thus all manifold of intuition has a necessary relation to the 'I think' [...] (*CPR* B 131 f).³⁷

Though the conclusion tells us that the "manifold of intuition" has "a necessary relation to the 'I think'", the argument is not that the "I think" necessarily accompanies intuition. Kant rather claims that since intuition is representation it is necessarily related to the "I think" according to its possibility. From this it obviously follows that, given premise one, there can be representations that are not per se thought by the "I think" although as such they must be able to be accompanied by the "I think". Hence, representations actually accompanied by the "I think" are conscious representations, i.e., representations I am *explicitly* aware of. Kant illustrates this by considering what it would mean if the "I think" wouldn't be able to accompany representations. In this case "something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all". There are two possibilities of unthinkable representations: representations that would be (i) "impossible", or (ii) "nothing for me" (*CPR* B 131 f). In either case the "I think" is unable to accompany representations, however, for different reasons. In the first case it is unable to accompany representations contentswise. Here representations are "impossible" if they

³⁷ See also Cramer (1987, 167).

are contradictory or illogical like the idea of a ‘round circle’, the mathematical equation ‘ $5+7=13$ ’, or the thought that the reader of this article does not exist. I might be able to somehow mentally generate such contradictory ideas yet I am not able to make them intelligible, i.e., to accompany them with the “I think” since they are logically “impossible” ideas. In the second case the “I think” is unable to accompany representations for cognitive reasons. Here Kant alludes to unconscious representations, to be more precise, representations that are unconscious *simpliciter*. For representations that are unconscious *simpliciter* are “nothing for me” not because of what they represent or for logical reasons but because I do not know that I have them.

It not only seems natural to classify representations that are “nothing for me” as obscure representations but also to call those representations that are able to be accompanied by the “I think” clear representations. Representations that are *actually* accompanied by the “I think” would then be conscious *simpliciter*, i.e., clear and distinct. But what about representations that are unconscious as well as conscious by degrees, i.e., clear and indistinct? According to the argument of § 16, all representations that can be accompanied by the “I think”, henceforth also representations that are unconscious as well as conscious by degrees, are governed by the principle of transcendental self-consciousness. For transcendental self-consciousness is “original apperception” and “produces the representation I think” (CPR B 132). The “transcendental unity of self-consciousness” thus explains why representations are “my representations”. They are mine because they belong to my self-consciousness as the unity of my thinking such that I am able to refer to them as content of my consciousness. Kant’s crucial point is that representations that are my representations nonetheless do not need to be representations I am conscious of, i.e., do not need to be conscious *simpliciter*. Kant emphasizes that “even if I am not conscious of them as such” (CPR B 132) representations can be my representations as long as they stand under the “transcendental unity of self-consciousness”, that is to say as long as the “I think” is able to accompany them. Thus representations that I am not conscious of as such, although they are not unconscious *simpliciter* but unconscious by degrees, must be classified as clear and indistinct. The fact that I can cognitively access them explains why they are unconscious as well as conscious by degrees. According to the “I think”-proposition cognitive access to them is possible since the “I think” is able to actualize its accompanying function. In the *Logic* (AA 9:33 f) Kant explains this by means of the following example: A “savage” who perceives a house from the distance

without being familiar with its function, i.e., that it is a habitation for humans etc., sees the same physical object as someone who is familiar with its function. Whereas this person has clear cognition of the house according to its intuition and concept, the "savage" only has an intuition of an object of some sort. In this case the representation is obscure. The argument obviously is that the representation of the *house* is unconscious *simpliciter* because the "savage" does not know that the object she is representing is a house; and representations we have without knowing that we have them are by definition unconscious *simpliciter*.³⁸ Kant now varies the case, arguing that if we perceive a house from far away while being aware that the perceived object in fact is a house, we would necessarily co-represent its windows, doors and other parts it has, although we cannot actually identify them as such in perception. In this case the representation of the house is indistinct since we are not conscious of the manifold of its parts. The fundamental difference between the two cases is that in the first case the representation is unconscious *simpliciter* because the representing person, the savage, does not have available conceptual knowledge of what a house is. In the second case such knowledge is available; however, there are cognitive reasons (perception from the distance) why the representation is nevertheless indistinct. It is indistinct because the house is perceived from the distance so that the parts of the house cannot be clearly distinguished.

The reason why indistinct representations are not unconscious *simpliciter* but by degrees is thus that they fall within the scope of the "I think". However, the "I think" is not in any case responsible for the fact that there are indistinct representations for there might be external circumstances like lack of information, or conditions of perception that account for their being unconscious. Transcendental self-consciousness is to be conceived as the principle that governs the cognitive access to representations we have. If, Kant argues, our consciousness not only "suffices for the distinction of one object from another" but also makes "the composition of our representations [...] clear", it is distinct. Hence distinctness is what makes up "knowledge", "in which order is thought in this manifold, because every conscious combination presupposes unity of consciousness,

38 The question is not whether or not the "savage" has a clear and distinct representation of a physical object. Of course she has since she knows that there is a physical object in her visual field. However, her representation of the same object as house is unconscious *simpliciter*.

and consequently a rule for the combination.”³⁹ As is well-known from the transcendental deduction “unity”, “order”, and “rule” originate in the transcendental apperception or the “I think” for “we can represent nothing as combined in the object without having previously combined it ourselves” (*CPR* B 130). This is why Kant says that logical rules which govern cognition can only be applied to clear representations.⁴⁰ For the rule-governed combination of a manifold of representations through which an idea becomes clear and distinct is a necessary condition of cognition. It is only in the case where the manifold of a clear idea is not conscious that the representation is indistinct. Combination of representations according to logical rules takes place in judgments like in the proposition “All bodies are extended” (*CPR* B 11). This judgment is clear and distinct in so far as it contains the logical combination of a manifold of representations, i.e., the synthesis of subject term and predicate term such that the predicate term elucidates the subject term. It is by means of “the analysis of the concept in regard to the manifold” (Kant (1992, 546); “Zergliederung des Begriffs in Ansehung des Mannigfaltigen”, AA 9:35) that we know through which predicates an indistinct concept becomes distinct. By contrast, the judgment ‘All bachelors are unmarried.’ would count as indistinct since here the logical combination of the manifold of representations is incomplete since the proposition does not consider the predicates ‘young’ and ‘male’ that necessarily belong to the clear and distinct representation of ‘bachelor’. Again the analysis of the concept demonstrates through which predicates the concept becomes distinct.⁴¹ The analysis of concepts is analogous to the clarification of intuition which makes an indistinct perception distinct, for instance by approaching a perceived object in order to see its parts in more detail which then allows for adequate perceptual judgments. Like

39 Cf. *Anthropology*, Kant (2007, 248 f), AA 7:139 f.

40 Cf. *Lectures on Logic* (Jäsche), Kant (1992, 545), AA 9:34.

41 It should be noted, however, that Kant conceives the definition of concepts in terms of the completeness of the predicates they contain as impossible: “For I can never be certain that the distinct representation of a (still confused [i.e. indistinct, D.H.]) given concept has been exhaustively developed unless I know that it is adequate to the object. But since the concept of the latter, as it is given, can contain many obscure [i.e. unconscious, D.H.] representations, which we pass by in our analysis though we always use them in application, the exhaustiveness of the analysis of my concept is always doubtful, and by many appropriate examples can only be made probably but never apodictically certain.” (*CPR* A 728 f/B 756 f).

in the case of intuition the analysis and combination of concepts is carried out by the "I think". More specifically it is the "analytical unity of apperception" which, on the basis of the "synthetic unity of apperception", makes possible that indistinct representations become distinct since cognition as clear and distinct representation involves conceptual capacities as they are active in judging. Kant therefore writes:

The analytical unity of consciousness pertains to all common concepts as such, e.g., if I think of red in general, I thereby represent to myself a feature that (as mark) can be encountered in anything, or that can be combined with other representations; [...] A representation that is to be thought of as common to several must be regarded as belonging to those that in addition to it also have something different in themselves (*CPR* B 133 f, fn.).

In this way the "analytical unity of consciousness" makes a manifold of representations into a concept (*conceptus communis*), which is itself an analytical unity of predicates. The concept is indistinct as long as we are not aware of the manifold of predicates it contains. Once we have found out about that manifold with the help of conceptual analysis the concept is clear and distinct. The making distinct of an indistinct concept takes place in judgment and presupposes the synthetic activity of transcendental apperception like in the judgment "All bodies are extended." This is particularly clear with respect to the analytic judgment which Kant explicitly defines on the basis of the distinction 'indistinct'/'confused'-'distinct': "Judgments are analytic [...] if their predicate merely presents clearly (explicite) what was thought, albeit obscurely (implicite), in the concept of the subject".⁴² To give another example: "Analytic judgments say nothing in the predicate except what was actually thought already in the concept of the subject, though not so clearly nor with the same consciousness."⁴³ By "not so clearly" Kant means "confusedly" (*CPR* B 11) or "obscurely" (B 17). Again, what is thought "confusedly" or "obscurely", that is to say indistinctly, in a concept can be brought to consciousness by way of logical order in judgment. Since "a judgment is nothing other than the way to bring given cognitions to the objective unity of apperception" (*CPR* B 141), the "I think" finally proves to be the regulating principle not only of distinct representations that make up cognition as such but also of indistinct representations, i.e., representations that are unconscious and conscious by degrees.

42 *What real progress has metaphysics made in Germany?*, Kant (2002, 404), AA 20:322.

43 Cf. *Prolegomena*, Kant (2002, 61, 64), AA 4:266; see also 4:269.

Thus the “I think”-proposition seems to be fundamental for conscious as well as unconscious representations which for Kant play a major role in our cognitive household. This is quite remarkable since at first sight unconscious representations do not seem to contribute a great deal to cognition. What should be clear by now is that indistinct representations, i. e., representations that are unconscious by degrees, in fact do fulfill a crucial epistemological function. On the basis of the “I think”-proposition they explain how a certain class of unconscious representations enters our cognitive processes and contributes to knowledge formation. It should be noted that Kant’s conception of the unconscious is not restricted to indistinct concepts that become distinct in analytic judgments. The theory likewise explains how indistinct representations are contained in ordinary sense-perception and can be made distinct in perceptual judgments. This seems to be rather controversial. In the concluding section I will therefore point to some consequences the Kantian account of unconscious representations has for the possibility of non-conceptual content.

3. Conclusion: Unconscious Representations and Non-conceptual Content

If my argument is correct then there are, according to Kant, unconscious representations. Unconscious representations are not just there without us knowing that we have them. They rather bear cognitive relevance to the human mind since the “I think”-proposition certifies that it is possible to access them, for instance by way of analysis of the subject term in an analytic judgment such that the predicates, pertaining to the subject, become clear. This conceptual clarification is made possible through the “I think” since judgments are governed by transcendental apperception. As demonstrated, indistinct representations must count as cognitively accessible in this sense since they are unconscious by degrees. Obscure representations are not for they are unconscious *simpliciter*.⁴⁴

This finding seems to be of some explanatory value with respect to the question of whether or not there is non-conceptual mental content and how this would be possible. In contemporary epistemology and phi-

44 Although we do not know that we have them, there even might be obscure representations that can come to mind, e. g., in psychological therapy or with the help of memory. However, in actual cognition they do not count as relevant epistemological elements.

osophy of mind the problem of non-conceptual mental content is one of the most controversial issues. The central claim non-conceptualism raises is that there are cognitive capacities that are not determined by conceptual capacities such that there can be, for instance in sense-perception, non-conceptual mental content, content that is not determined by concepts.⁴⁵ The issue is important especially since the existence of non-conceptual mental content proves that there are aspects of human cognition that cannot be grasped in a purely rational or conceptual way such that its justificatory function is fundamentally different from that of concepts. Kant's account of the unconscious seems to provide good evidence in favor of non-conceptualism since indistinct representations, to be more precise, indistinct intuitional representations, must count as representations that are non-conceptual. As Kant's aforementioned example of the house illustrates a person can perceive a house from far away without seeing its windows, door, chimney etc. There can be no doubt that the parts of the house are contained within the person's perception of the house, however, according to the Kantian account of clear representations, not in a distinct way. Hence, the person's perception of the parts is indistinct, i.e., the perception of the parts is unconscious by degrees. But on the basis of the "I think"-proposition the person is able to bring these parts to mind, e.g., by focusing on them while approaching the house and thereby accompanying the relevant representations with the "I think". Another example is phenomenal consciousness. A person perceiving a rainbow might not be distinctly aware of a certain color; but by means of the "I think" she can bring to her mind or become self-conscious that she herself sees this particular color shade although she might not be able to conceptualize what it is like to see it. The phenomenal consciousness of that color shade was in her phenomenal consciousness before the person brought it to her mind, however, that consciousness was indistinct such that she was 'unconsciously conscious' of it. To be unconsciously conscious is by no means contradictory if we take it to mean 'unconscious by degrees'. By contrast, the Kantian taxonomy of clear as distinct and indistinct representations allows for a strong explanation of how it is possible to have representations and still not be conscious of them. Consequently, if there were no place for indistinct representations in our cogni-

45 For a broader discussion of non-conceptualism cf. Grüne (2009) and Hanna (2008). For the counter position, conceptualism, cf. Ginsborg (2008). See also *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19/3 (2011): Special Issue "Kant and Nonconceptual Content".

tive household there likewise were no place for non-conceptual content. Since the existence of non-conceptual content seems undeniable, the idea of indistinct representations provides a straightforward justification of its possibility. This is why the Kantian conception of the unconscious is nothing circumstantial but plays a systematic role in theory of knowledge.⁴⁶

References

- Cramer, Konrad (1987): Über Kants Satz: Das: Ich denke, muß alle meine Vorstellungen begleiten können, in: *Theorie der Subjektivität*, ed. K. Cramer et al., Frankfurt Frankfurt am Main, 167–202.
- Ginsborg, Hannah (2008): Was Kant a Nonconceptualist?, in: *Philosophical Studies* 137, 65–77.
- Grüne Stefanie (2009): *Blinde Anschauung. Die Rolle von Begriffen in Kants Theorie sinnlicher Synthesis*, Frankfurt am Main.
- Hanna, Robert (2008): Kantian Non-conceptualism, in: *Philosophical Studies* 137, 41–64.
- International Journal of Philosophical Studies 19/3 (2011): Special Issue “Kant and Nonconceptual Content”.
- Kant, Immanuel (1900 ff.): *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. königlich preußische (später deutsche) Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin.
- Kant, Immanuel (2007): *Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. G. Zöllner and R. B. Louden, Cambridge.
- Kant, Immanuel (2003): *Immanuel Kant: Theoretical Philosophy 1755–1770*, ed. D. Walford, Cambridge.
- Kant, Immanuel (2002): *Immanuel Kant: Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, ed. H. Allison and P. Heath, Cambridge.
- Kant, Immanuel (2000): *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. and trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews, Cambridge.
- Kant, Immanuel (1998): *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood, Cambridge.
- Kant, Immanuel (1997): *Immanuel Kant: Lectures on Metaphysics*, ed. and transl. K. Ameriks and S. Naragon, Cambridge.
- Kant, Immanuel (1992): *Immanuel Kant: Lectures on Logic*, ed. and transl. J. M. Young, Cambridge.
- La Rocca, Claudio (2008a): Der dunkle Verstand. Unbewusste Vorstellungen und Selbstbewusstsein bei Kant, in: *Recht und Frieden in der Philosophie Kants. Akten des X. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, vol. 2, ed. V. Rohden, R. R. Terra, and G. A. de Almeida, Berlin, New York, 447–458.
- La Rocca, Claudio (2008b): Unbewußtes und Bewußtsein bei Kant, in: *Kant-Lektionen. Zur Philosophie Kants und zu Aspekten ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*, ed. M. Kugelstadt, Würzburg, 47–68.

46 Thanks to Bob Hanna for helpful advice.

- La Rocca, Claudio (2007): L'intelletto oscuro. Inconscio e autocoscienza in Kant, in: *Leggere Kant. Dimensioni della filosofia critica*, ed. C. La Rocca, Pisa, 63–116.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (1684): *Meditationes de Cognitione, veritate et Ideis*, in: *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, vol. 4, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, Berlin 1880.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (1704): *Nouveaux Essais sur l'Entendement Humain*, in: *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, vol. 5, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, Bd. 5, Berlin 1882.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (1714): *Les Principes de la Philosophie ou la Monadologie*, in: *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, vol. 6, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, Berlin 1858.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur (1969): *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, transl. E. F. J. Payne, New York.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur (1977): *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, vol. I/2, Zürich.
- Strawson, Peter F. (1966): *The Bounds of Sense. An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Abingdon, New York.