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REFLECTIONS ON THE POSSIBILITY OF  
PERCEPTUALISM

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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The following is a paper presented for the Course *Rabner and Lonergan* at the University of Toronto (Winter, 2014), revised and edited Winter, 2018. Our purpose is to defend the possibility of “perceptualism,” that is to say, the position maintaining that the intelligible content of consciousness is given in perception and not posited by the activity of the subject. Assisted by the insights of Cornelio Fabro, this defense contrasts perceptualism with Bernard Lonergan’s “critical realism”. This paper focuses on the notion of experience, seemingly the basis of the opposition between perceptualism and critical realism.

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## INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THESE REFLECTIONS is to show that there is sufficient evidence and reason for perceptualism.<sup>1</sup> To be a “perceptualist” means to affirm that the intelligible content verified in consciousness is *given* in perception. “Perception”, in turn, is here understood as the intellectual knowledge of the concrete.<sup>2</sup>

The main strength of perceptualism is, I believe, its notion of experience, a notion differing from that found in critical realism. Perceptualism and critical realism face the same problem, that is, the heterogeneity of the intelligible content and the content of sense experience.<sup>3</sup> However, critical realism attributes

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1 Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 248.

2 The doctrine of perceptualism here exposed takes its inspiration from Cornelio Fabro’s *Percezione e Pensiero* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1962). The first edition of this work was in 1941, but Fabro is not mentioned in the index of “Insight.” Cf. Bernard Lonergan, “Insight: A Study of Human Understanding,” in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, vol. 3 (2013; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 813ff.

3 To be clear, the problem is that the content of intelligence is universal and necessary, whereas the content of sensibility is particular, and therefore they are two different genera of content (heterogeneity). This, in my view, is a

every intelligible unity and reality to the activity of the subject, whereas perceptualism recognizes both intelligible content and sensible content in the data, as belonging to whatever is perceived.

Now, in its solution to the problem of the heterogeneity of contents, critical realism departs from a different notion of experience: a notion maintaining the content of experience as a “perceptual mosaic”.<sup>4</sup> The radical difference between critical realism and perceptualism, at least in a sense, is precisely here. In our view, there is sufficient reason to sustain the perceptualist notion of experience (which implies, as we will see, the perception of unified objects), and not sufficient reason to sustain critical realism’s notion. Our focus on the notion of experience comes from that which appears to be the main reason for a cognitive theory in aprioristic terms: that is, because from experience we do not have anything but “raw materials” for understanding, whatever belongs to organization, structure, unity, intelligibility and reality needs to be added by the subject’s activity.

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reoccurrence of the problem of universals.

4 Cf. Lonergan, “Insight,” 298: experience supplies, “as it were, the raw materials”; “raw materials of one’s sensations” (Ibid., 97); “the hazy object of experience” (Ibid., 364); “Without this second level [of understanding] there is indeed a given but there is no possibility of saying what is given” (Ibid., 366); “Inquiry and insight, then, are related internally to materials about which one inquires and into which one gains insight” (Ibid., 367). Giovanni Sala, *Lonergan and Kant: Five Essays on Human Knowledge*, trans. by Joseph Spoerl, ed. by Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 20; John Dadosky, *Observations to Andrés Ayala’s Paper “An Inverse Insight”*, in *Thought of Lonergan* (Course at the University of Toronto, Fall 2013): “For BL experience refers to presentations. There is an organizing act of intelligence (insight) that orders and unifies otherwise disparate clues”; Bernard Lonergan, *The Lonergan Reader*, ed. by Mark Morelli and Elizabeth A. Morelli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 218-19: “The given is residual and, of itself, diffuse... it can be selected and indicated only through intellectual activities, of itself it is diffuse; the field of the given contains differences, but insofar as they simply lie in the field, the differences are unassigned”; *Ib.*, 194; Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 142; etc. Data of experience, for Lonergan, appear to be the matter of knowing, without any unity or formal content.

But if experience is shown to be something other than that, or at least, if it cannot be affirmed that the content of experience is a “perceptual mosaic,” critical realism’s cognitional theory loses ground.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we will try to show first the lack of sufficient reason for the presuppositions of Lonergan’s notion of experience. Then, we will give some arguments in favour of the perceptualist notion of experience.<sup>6</sup>

### I. EXPERIENCE AS “PERCEPTUAL MOSAIC”

Experience is never of disorganized elements.<sup>7</sup> There is huge evidence from modern psychology that the data of experience are never merely data, or parts to be organized, but that they come as wholes or *Gestalten*, where the parts are subordinate to the laws of the whole and not vice versa.<sup>8</sup> For example,<sup>9</sup> due to the sensible influence of the whole, two lines—which are actually of the same length—are perceived as being of differing lengths. In this drawing, horizontal line A is actually the same length as

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5 Cf. Fabro, *Percezione e pensiero*, 7.

6 We purposefully set aside the data of consciousness, belonging also in Lonergan’s view to the first level of experience (cf. *Insight*, 362; *Third Collection*, Paulist, 78; Darren Dias, *The Contributions of Bernard J.F. Lonergan to a Systematic Understanding of Religious Diversity*, Doctoral Dissertation at the University of St. Michael’s College, Toronto, 2008, <http://www.lonerganresource.com/dissertations.php> [accessed Nov 14, 2013] 120; etc.). In our view, they are necessarily secondary and the product of reflection. We cannot speak about consciousness without reflection or *at least* without supposing other acts of direct knowledge (if we want to speak of a consciousness which *accompanies* the act of direct knowledge of things). More should be said, but cf. *Third Collection*, Paulist, 117; *Sala* 7, 10; *Lonergan Reader*, 186; Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and Being: An introduction and Companion to Insight*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Morelli and Mark D. Morelli (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1980.) 17-18; *Percezione*, 380.

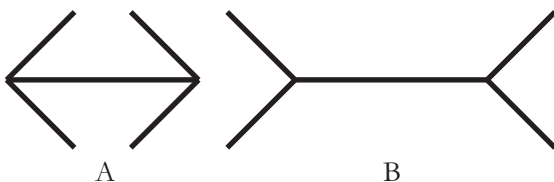
7 It is the thesis of Cornelio Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, Opere Complete, vol.5 (Segni: EDIVI, 2006). The first edition of this study is also from 1941.

8 An interesting observation by Lonergan: “the flow of sensations, as completed by memories and prolonged by imaginative acts of anticipation, becomes the flow of perceptions. It is of the latter, perceptual flow that we are conscious.” (Lonergan, “Insight,” 96).

9 Cf. Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 218.



horizontal line B:



In this way, Fabro shows many examples and other experiments, substantiated by fourteen pages of essential bibliography in his accurate *Fenomenologia della Percezione*. This means that data come to perception with a certain organization that is immanent to them. There is no experience of the parts, and the whole is not explained by the sum of the parts but, rather, the parts receive in perception the influence of the whole—they are “ruled” by the whole.<sup>10</sup>

These examples, by themselves, do not constitute the solution to the critical problem, but do help us to point the way.<sup>11</sup> If a certain unity is already recognized in the data, if the organization of the data is also given, and if it cannot be said that the data are prior to their organization, then the unity of the concrete object of perception needs not to be attributed to the subject, at least not completely. If sensible experience can be said of “wholes,” the door is open to consider experience as much more than a reception of disorganized data.<sup>12</sup>

It could be argued that the experience referred to (i.e., as of wholes) is not a “pure” experience, but has already been submit-

10 Cf. Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 16. The word ‘Gestalt’ is reported only once in the index of *Insight* (cf. pp. 54-55; see also *Loneragan Reader*, 495-6), but Lonergan shows awareness of the problem. Cf. *Loneragan Reader*, 448; *Id.*, 364.

11 Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 587.

12 A very interesting position in this line, and very similar to that of Fabro, is that of Dawes Hicks reported in Morelli, Mark D, “The Realist Response to Idealism in England and Lonergan’s Critical Realism” in *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, 21 (2003) 21. Morelli disagrees with this position.

ted to a subjective process of unification, etc.. But, where is that “pure” experience to be found? We cannot build up a cognitional theory on the grounds of an affirmation that has no evidence. If our only contact with the data is experience, and experience is never about “raw materials”, we cannot say that the data are disorganized.<sup>13</sup>

It could also be argued that the intelligible content is not part of the data, because the data present at the most a sensible unity, but the intelligible unity can never be given. Here the question turns out to be, “Why?” The heterogeneity of sense experience and intelligible content is not enough to affirm that the intelligible content cannot be given.

There is an indication that may be useful: when we speak about experience and sensible data, we make judgments with our intelligence: “experience is...” or “sensible data are...”. This implies that our intelligence has a certain knowledge of the data *as data*. In Lonergan’s view, instead, intelligence unifies in its activity of understanding,<sup>14</sup> and so the data could never be understood *as sub.* Accordingly for Lonergan, the judgment, “Sensible data are disorganized.” must be grounded elsewhere—in principles, in analysis . . .<sup>15</sup> Which principles? Principles such as “intelligible content cannot be given,” “structure and organization can come

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13 Lonergan is aware of the difficulties of “intellectual conversion” (cf. *Lonergan Reader*, 221, 470; *Sala*, 30) and the easiness of a theory that makes knowing “taking a good look” (cf. *Third Collection*, London, 239-40, 247-48). But, because of his notion of experience, he is compelled to explain knowing as an a priori activity of organization.

14 Cf. *Insight Rev.*, 272; Bernard Lonergan, *The Redemption: A Supplement to De Verbo Incarnato* (excerpts), trans. by Michael G. Shields, SJ (Unpublished), art. 5, p. 2; art. 24, pp. 25-27; Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 104; *Third Collection*, Paulist, 126; John D. Dadosky, “Naming the Demon: The ‘Structure’ of Evil in Lonergan and Girard,” in *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 75 (4) 2010, pp. 361, 364, 367; Id., *Observations*.

15 Perhaps this is what he had in mind when he wrote: “Analysis may reveal that what actually is visible is a succession of different profiles; but experience reveals that what is perceived is the synthesis (*Gestalt*) of the profiles into a single object” (*Lonergan Reader*, 495).

only from the subject,” or “data are disorganized,” are the exact principles needing to be proven. Therefore, it seems that, if we make judgments about the data, it is because our intelligence has a certain *contact* with the data *as data*, that is to say, it perceives them intellectually, in some way.

In my view, this can be related to the issue of the “question,” and of the necessity for understanding to have something to question about.<sup>16</sup> The question “What is it?” presupposes an “it” which is necessarily in the realm of intelligence. This “it” is definite, not diffuse, because we know what we are questioning about, we point to it. Who points to it, if not the subject? How, if not intelligently? If we can point to it, it is already unified (what is questioned is definite, and is presupposed to the question itself). If it is in the realm of the intelligence, it is an intelligible unity. That intelligible unity is named “it” in the question, and it has the content of “something that is.”<sup>17</sup> It is this intellectual apprehension of *ens*, and not the question, which sets in motion the process of knowledge, questioning and science.<sup>18</sup> I think that

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16 For Lonergan’s approach to this problem, cf. *Insight*, 34, 367; *Lonergan Reader*, 167; Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and Being*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Morelli and Mark D. Morelli, rev. and aug. by Frederick E. Crowe with the collaboration of Elizabeth A. Morelli and alt., Collected Works, vol. 5 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990, reprinted 2013) 164.

17 The “is” is also in the question. Because we are focusing on the analysis of experience, we will not develop the intellectual apprehension of existence that may be argued from these premises (Cf. *Percezione*, 519, 524, 585-7, etc.). For the purposes of this paper, it seems to be enough to show in general that there may be an intellectual content in experience itself.

18 Cf. *Understanding*, CWL, 164, where for Lonergan it is the question that sets the process going. I would suggest that it is precisely the limitation of *ens* as participated unity that sets in motion the process of inquiry. Our questioning reveals that “this something” I know (intelligible unity), cannot be explained by what I “see”: the unity of the external features (participated, *per aliud*) makes me wonder about the substance (unity *per se*). Also, the limited realization of the species (form and matter) makes me wonder about the essence or nature. Further, the limited unity of essence and *esse* makes me wonder about the first cause. In all cases, it is always the *syntheticity* of the object which makes me wonder. This, however, does not take away a necessary “transcendental ordination”

this is the way to understand the Thomistic *primum cognitum*.<sup>19</sup> The explanation here outlined does not intend to make this initial “intelligible unity” into something impossible to be further developed by the process of psychological maturity and/or by questions of understanding.<sup>20</sup> But I propose an initial intelligible apprehension of everything concrete in experience as *ens*, as “something that is,” as a unified content (“something”) plus that content’s absolute position to the subject through the senses (“that is”).<sup>21</sup>

We have tried to show that there is not sufficient reason to affirm a notion of experience as “raw materials” for understanding to unify. It is a statement contrary to the data of psychology, and at least difficult to explain by turning to experience alone or to reasoning alone. The content of experience, therefore, appears to be a unified content. Moreover, if intelligence has a role in the explanation of experience, it seems necessary to affirm a contact between intelligence and sensible data, a contact that is not “creative” of the unity but “perceptive” of it.

## II. EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTION OF THE CONCRETE

Before considering the perceptualist notion of experience, some clarification regarding terminology as well as a general presentation of perception may be useful.

Were we to make the following definitions:

- Content: that which is found in consciousness as in a
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of the intelligence to *ens*, as of a potency to its act. But why should it be considered an “active” ordination, as adding and positing what is not in the data?

19 Cf. Pablo Rossi, *Presentazione della Tesi di Dottorato: “La fondazione teorica del valore della conoscenza nel realismo tomista di Cornelio Fabro.”* (Rome: 2013, unpublished) 2; *Percezione*, 524, 606.

20 Cf. *Percezione*, 631, where Fabro says that at the beginning the contents presented to sensitivity and intelligence are confused.

21 At this initial stage of perception, the “is” of *ens* is just the existence or *esse in actu*, *esse* as a fact. In this theory, judgment is based on this perception of existence. Cf. Pablo Rossi, *Percepción del Ente* (electronic correspondence with Andrés Ayala, 2013, Unpublished); *Percezione*, 545.

“space.”

- Object: a unified content
- Data: a content as given, (or the part of the content that is given)

We could say that the “content” of experience are “data” and that the “data” of experience are “objects”.<sup>22</sup>

What is perception?<sup>23</sup> Perception is the intellectual knowledge of the concrete, as distinct from pure thinking. The word “perception” implies “grasp” but in the sense of “reception,” in such a way that the concrete itself is, in a strong sense, a *datum*.<sup>24</sup> It implies sometimes the objectivation of past experience, but always dependent upon the *data*. It implies spontaneity in intentional reception, but not activity as addition of content or as position of the object.

Perception implies the actuation of all levels of faculties: senses (external and internal) and intelligence. The data of perception are qualified, quantified and unified, and they include a content and the absolute position of the content: they are perceived as “something that is.” The perception of the concrete is the contact of the intelligence with the real (concrete) through the senses, and never without them. It is a “lived thinking”<sup>25</sup> as opposed to “pure or abstract thinking.”

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22 We do not mean to say that the distinction subject-object is a primordial data of experience; I thank Prof. Michael Vertin for this suggestion, at his course *Rabner and Lonergan* (University of Toronto, Fall 2013). Later (footnote #37) we will explain our position regarding this issue.

23 Cf. Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 7-17.

24 The doctrine of perception, as understood by Fr. Fabro, implies *also* that *actual* perception is completed and “corrected” by past experience, in such a way that we can speak of an objectivation of schemes (phantasms as solidification of the experience by the work of the cogitative). This objectivation depends on the data of actual experience (these data “wake up” the scheme, cf. *Percezione*, 487-488), and the work of comparison and selection of the cogitative is always depending on the intrinsic laws of the data. For similar observations of Lonergan, Cf. *Insight*, 96. See also *Lonergan Reader*, 115, 366.

25 My best translation for “pensiero vissuto,” cf. Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 14.

Is perception experience? Fabro prefers to say that perception is “thinking that incorporates experience.”<sup>26</sup> Experience is referred to the sensible knowledge of the concrete. Now, the abstract is immanent in the concrete: we consider “tree” not a pure concept but the essential part of a concrete reality.<sup>27</sup> The abstract cannot be reduced to sensible data (it is not explained by the sum of them: principle of *emergence*) nor reduced to an a priori function (because it is essentially connected with the concrete as it is given in consciousness: principle of *complementarity*<sup>28</sup>); so the intelligence perceives the abstract in the concrete.

Let us unpack some of these points. Because our notion of intellectual perception refers to data, and in Lonergan’s cognitive theory data are only referred to experience (sensible or conscious), perception in our account of knowledge will take the place of experience *as* receptive of data, but *not as* knowing of the merely particular. Furthermore, because the unity of consciousness in the subject is fundamentally intellectual (we talk about experience through judgment) it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate experience from the other levels of knowing.<sup>29</sup> For these reasons, our account of experience in perceptualism will focus on an account of perception. This, in the end, is because the only experience we are conscious of is not an experience of diffuse data, but an experience of concrete realities, in which the intelligence is present from the beginning.

How, then, is human perception? I look through my window, and “I see a tree.”<sup>30</sup> This simple perceptive fact, simple as an act, is not so simple as an object. It involves three “objectual”<sup>31</sup> levels,

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26 Ibid., 14. However, he also maintains a close relationship between sensibility and intelligence in the exercise of their functions, cf. *Id.*, 630.

27 Cf. Ibid., 611, the universal as “nature,” and not name or concept.

28 On the principles of complementarity and emergence, cf. Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 369-386.

29 Cf. Ibid., 630.

30 Cf. Ibid., 7-17.

31 The neologism “objectual” is used in the sense of “relative to the object”, less confusing than objective.

three levels of data we may say, and first of all its unity as a certain thing: a tree, in this case, and not a house nor a dog. Perception is the apprehension of a *unified object*. We perceive a unity with a certain content, or a content unified: we see a tree.<sup>32</sup>

The second objectual level is the level of configuration, in the sense of mathematical “figure,” like the distribution of the “matter” in the “space.” The tree and each part of the tree (leaves, branches) have a certain configuration proper to them and to the particular species to which this tree belongs. Perception is the apprehension of a configured complex. The object of perception has always a certain characteristic *configuration*.

The third objectual level is the level of *qualification*. We could never perceive the configuration of the tree nor its parts, were they not qualified, were they not (in this case) of a certain colour or chromatic variation. My eyes in fact can see only colours, or coloured figures at the most, but never “pure figures”, and least “pure objects.” Perception is the apprehension of a qualified object.

Let us analyze this inderivable heterogeneity of contents in the same object of perception. If we admit the objectual levels, is there still place for the unity of the object? This heterogeneity of contents does not mean a real foreignity or incompatibility. “On the contrary, in perception they are given always together for the constitution of a unique object of immediate apprehension: every body is perceived according to a certain figure and it is not possible that a figure appears without colour [...].<sup>33</sup> And what is most surprising is that I am aware of grasping ‘immediately and simultaneously’ all three objectual levels. They appear not as disparate or foreign from one another, but in an undeniable character of objectual unification. This unification supposes,

32 This first objectual level refers both to intelligence and the phantasm of the cogitative. Intelligence sees the universal in the concrete as presented by the cogitative.

33 We could add: we are never aware of perceiving colours without figures or extension, and we never perceive a coloured figure which does not appear as a certain unity or concrete thing, for instance “this” or “that” circle.

and this is evident in its very presentation, as it were a real *belonging* of multiple contents to a unique object.”<sup>34</sup> The unity of the objectual levels is therefore not a unity of simplicity but of multiplicity, a synthetic unity. The object of perception is therefore given in a synthetic unity. The different objectual levels are heterogeneous but interdependent.

Every content of perception is a content of consciousness, but this does not mean that we need to consider the content of consciousness as a modification of the subject. It may well be that consciousness can refer to objects distinct from itself (intentionality).<sup>35</sup> Knowledge, as the event of knowing something, appears as an irreducible duality of knower and known, where the known cannot be the knower precisely because it is known by the knower, and because knowing is originally knowing something, before the knower can itself be known. Actually, a content of consciousness, in the case of everyday perceptions, appears not only as unified, but also as distinct, “other” than the knower. When I see a tree, I am conscious of not being a tree, I am conscious that the tree is before me, in front of me. So, if we are to be faithful to the content of consciousness, we should not select only a part of it, leaving the rest aside.<sup>36</sup> A certain alterity of the object of perception, or more precisely, its “objectivity” (from *ob-jactum*, “being-thrown-before-me”) or “givenness” appears as

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34 Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 12. Cf. *Id.*, 631.

35 To speak about “within consciousness” may lead us to think about consciousness as a physical space, to think in terms of an “in and out” that would do violence to human consciousness. If there is “within,” it is because we suppose an “out there.” In consciousness some contents appear in a definite character of alterity. Is it not that alterity *within* consciousness? What is consciousness? We have worked on the notion of intentionality in “The ‘Crucial Step’: A Critique to Heidegger’s Point of Departure and an Alternative Notion of Intentionality” in *The Incarnate Word*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, May 2017, 162-190. Cf. also *Third Collection*, Paulist, 91; *Morelli*, 20-21.

36 Cf. Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 380; also on different aspects of consciousness as the point of departure, Joseph Maréchal, SJ, *A Maréchal Reader*, ed. and trans. by Joseph Donceel, SJ (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 84; Dadosky, *Structure*, 54; *Lonergan Reader*, 41.



immediate as its formal content.<sup>37</sup> The same could be said of its absolute position to the subject (existence). The “mode” of the content is also part of the “data.” If there is a difficulty here, it is explaining the fact that the object of perception is at every level synthetic, a complex of contents subordinated to one another, irreducible contents but at the same time unified. But on which basis could we deny this fact, or posit another point of departure?

We are ready to affirm the necessity of a constructive process, as a synthesis in consciousness of the different objectual levels, that is to say, the subordination of some contents to others in a unique apprehension. In fact, the different objectual levels imply different faculties. The unity of consciousness implies a subjective synthesis, in the sense of an organizing faculty directing the process of integration of the contents (intelligence). But our point of departure, the notion of experience just established, does not allow us to consider this process of construction as a foreign addition to the data.<sup>38</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Based on the research of the *Gestalttheorie*, and on the analysis of everyday experience, it appears that experience is always the apprehension of a unity, of a whole or *Gestalt*. This unity is not a unity of simplicity, but a synthetic unity.<sup>39</sup> This syntheticity of the object of perception makes unnecessary an activity on behalf of the subject characterized by unifying or adding intellectual

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37 Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 474. It could be said that alterity implies certain reflection (as knowledge of oneself). In fact, alterity is a relationship, and the *relata* (knower and data) must be known before the relationship itself. In this sense, we agree with Prof. Vertin that the subject-object distinction is not the mere original datum. But once we speak about data, or “given”, for the same reason we need to speak of alterity. “Given”, in fact, means given *to someone*. Therefore, if I am conscious of data *as such*, I am also conscious of their alterity.

38 Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 12-14; 631.

39 This syntheticity takes place at every level of the cognitional process. Cf. Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 632-633.

content. Unity and intelligibility are found in the original data of perception.

In my view, critical realism separates that which is united in reality. The Thomistic universal nature is not separate from the sensible: it subsists in the concrete and is abstracted by our intelligence from the concrete.<sup>40</sup> And, even in the abstracted mode of being which they have in our mind, the universals always preserve a certain contact with sensitivity. They cannot even be understood without this reference. Intelligence is truly an *intus legere*, a “reading-into”, because we read in the concrete that which we understand, we read the nature into the concrete, and never without the concrete. The concrete is not what we understand, but what we “read into” as, when reading a book or a word, we understand that which is said, rather than understanding the book or the word *in its materiality*.

The doctrine of abstraction and *conversio ad phantasmata* is just

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40 I am supposing a distinction which is often ignored in Thomism between two meanings of “universal”, as nature and as the abstracted mode of being of that nature, as “what is understood” (and subsists in the thing itself, distinct from the particular determinations but not separate from them) and as the “concept by which” it is understood (which subsists in intelligence but has as its content the nature understood). The distinction is clear, for example, in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 85, a. 2 ad 2; a. 3 ad 1 et ad 4) and I have studied it to some length in *The Agent Intellect in Aquinas: A Metaphysical Condition of Possibility of Human Understanding as Receptive of Objective Content*, Doctoral Dissertation at the University of St. Michael’s College (Toronto, 2018) especially chapter 2. When it is said that a universal cannot subsist in reality because reality is particular, it is because the universal is considered together with its abstracted mode of being. Of course, a concept is a spiritual reality which cannot be found in the material reality. But if we distinguish what is known (the universal nature, the specific perfection of material things) from the mode of being which that nature has in our mind, the problem disappears. As St. Thomas says (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, 84, 1, c.), it is not necessary that the known be in the knower with the same mode of being the known has in itself. The content must be the same, but not necessarily the mode of being: I know the white of the sugar without the sweetness of the sugar, even if in the sugar itself white and sweetness are not separate. I do know the white, but not with the mode of being the white has in the sugar (together with sweetness). How all this happens is certainly a problem, but a different problem.

the expression of our conviction that the tree we know, the real one, is the concrete. The essence of a tree will never be a *pure idea*, but rather the *nature of* something concrete, its intelligibility, or its intelligible unity. To postulate, instead, an addition of the intelligible content will always be to do violence to the data of consciousness. When we say what something is, we mean to say what belongs to it, we don't mean to add something to it.

The subjective construction in human perception, the metaphysical questions associated with this construction and with the very syntheticity of the object are further problems that exceed our present reflections. However, we believe that the considerations presented in this paper are of fundamental importance, thus providing a point of departure for further reflections.

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