

BOLZANO AND KANT ON THE PLACE OF SUBJECTIVITY
IN A *WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE*

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Summary

Throughout his career, Bolzano presents his account of knowledge and science as an alternative to ‘the Critical philosophy’ of Kant and his followers. The aim of this essay is to evaluate the success of Bolzano’s own account—and especially, its heavy emphasis on the objectivity of cognitive *content*—in enabling him to escape what he takes to be the chief shortcomings of the ‘subjective idealist philosophy’. I argue that, because Bolzano’s own position can be seen to be beset by problems that are both recognizably similar to, and possibly even *worse* than, those that he takes to afflict Kant’s account of the elements of our knowledge, Bolzano’s attempt to fully overcome the alleged vices of Kant’s idealism by ‘extruding’ semantic content from the mind must be judged to be less than satisfactory.

§1. *Introduction: the mind and the ‘elements’ of science*

In the first *Critique*, Kant famously argues that the objects of which we can have genuine knowledge are objects that ‘conform’ to our capacities for knowledge (Bxvi).¹ Kant thinks that, as a consequence, any account of science must be grounded on an analysis of the nature and limits of our cognitive capacities. Kant himself attempts just such a grounding of the sciences of mathematics and physics over the course of the first *Critique*, the *Prolegomena*, and the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Because Kant thinks that all of our knowledge arises from two basic capacities (two ‘stems’, cf., B29)—on the one hand, our capacity for sensing (intuiting,

1. I will cite Kant’s first *Critique* according to the B-edition pagination, unless it is a text found only in the A-edition; I will cite Kant’s other works according to the Akademie Ausgabe (Kant 1902–) volume and page number. All decisions on translation are my own, though I have consulted (and usually followed, especially in the case of the first *Critique*) the Cambridge Edition of Kant’s works (Kant 1991–).

being given) objects, what Kant calls our ‘receptivity’ or ‘sensibility’, and on the other hand, our capacity for thinking, judging, and inferring about objects, what Kant calls our ‘understanding’ (B74)—these two capacities themselves must form the genuine ‘elements’ in any account of knowledge. The correspondingly elementary ‘doctrines’ for the account of science in general, therefore, will be the sciences of sensibility and understanding, or what Kant calls ‘aesthetic’ and ‘logic’, respectively (B76). Accordingly, it is this pair of sciences that comprises the ‘doctrine of the elements [Elementarlehre]’ in the analysis of our theoretical knowledge that Kant provides in the first *Critique* itself (B29).

As Bolzano makes clear in his 1837 masterwork, the *Wissenschaftslehre*,² Bolzano takes Kant’s fixation upon mental capacities and activity to have gotten philosophy off on the wrong track. By restricting its focus in this way, Bolzano thinks that Kant entirely neglects the primary locus of the *truth* we are seeking in science. This is because, like Frege after him, Bolzano thinks it is evident that what is true, the genuine bearer of truth, is not a mental act or capacity at all, but instead is the ‘matter [Stoff]’ that is contained in these acts (WL §291, II.108), what Bolzano calls ‘propositions [Sätze]’ (WL §24, I.108). Since knowledge (‘cognition [Erkenntnis]’) consists in the grasping of truths (WL §§36–37, I.163ff.), and since ‘science [Wissenschaft]’ more generally is a ‘collection [Inbegriff]’ of truths (WL §1, I.4), it is hopeless to think—as Kant seems to—that we could come to know what knowledge and science are without first looking to the nature of truth itself and the nature of bearers of the property of being true (propositions).

What the pursuit of such analysis will ultimately show, Bolzano thinks, is that the distinction between act and content must be drawn, not just for knowledge and science as a whole, but for each of its component parts as well. That is, even in the mere act of ‘representing [Vorstellen]’ objects, Bolzano thinks we find a separate content or ‘matter [Stoff]’ in addition to the act itself, and in addition to the object represented (WL §49, I.218). Similarly, we will see that all acts of ‘judgment [Urteil]’ are such as to ‘contain [enthalten]’ a ‘proposition [Satz]’, something likewise distinct from both the subjective act of judging and the object and property that the judging is about (WL §34, I.154; cf., WL §290, III.108). Even in acts of

2. I will cite the *Wissenschaftslehre* as ‘WL’, according to the volume number and pagination of the original edition (Bolzano 1837), inserting the section number for ease of reference. Translations throughout are my own, though I have consulted, and at times followed, the partial translation (and additional paraphrases) contained in (Bolzano 1972).

‘inference [Schluss]’ Bolzano thinks we will recognize that we must separate out the mental event from the ‘derivation [Ableitung]’ it contains, which itself ‘asserts a relation of genuine grounding or consequence [Abfolge] between given propositions’ (WL §46, I.213; cf., WL §223, II.392). Once the necessity of drawing these distinctions has been recognized, Bolzano thinks we will then see straightaway that, at the very least, the genuine *Elementarlehre* in the doctrine of science must *also* include an analysis of the contents of such activity and not just an account of the nature of the activity itself (WL §16, I.61f).

Bolzano, however, presses for an even more radical revision of Kant’s picture. This is because he is confident that once we think more carefully about the nature of these contents, we will come to see that such contents, their truth or falsity, and their ‘connection with each other as grounds and consequences’, are entirely ‘objective’, in the sense of being what they are ‘entirely *independently* of our cognition’ of them, and more generally, independent of the make-up of our mental capacities and activity (WL §16, I.61; my ital.). Hence, even though these contents can ultimately be grasped in mental acts—or, as Bolzano more frequently puts it, they can ‘*appear* [erscheinen] in the mind’ (cf., WL §21, I.84; my ital.)³—the properties that these contents have in virtue of their relation to mental acts cannot be their most fundamental properties or the properties that these contents possess ‘*in themselves* [an sich]’ (ibid.; my ital.). From this, Bolzano concludes that it is ‘the doctrine of representations, propositions, true propositions, and inferences *an sich*’, and this doctrine *alone*, that forms the proper subject-matter for the *truly* ‘elementary’ doctrine of science (WL §15, I.59).

The nature of Bolzano’s counter-thesis is summarized nicely in the conclusion to the 1850 *New Anti-Kant*,⁴ a work written out and published by one of Bolzano’s collaborators, Franz Prihonsky, just after Bolzano’s death, but which comprises the results of years of co-operative work together:

One shouldn’t first investigate and analyze the capacity for cognition [Erkenntnisvermögen] of humans or of thinking beings as such; it is necessary, rather,

3. Cf., WL §48, I.217, and WL §121, II.3. See also Bolzano’s correspondence with Franz Exner in (Bolzano 1935; ‘BW’), translated in (Bolzano 2004; ‘CE’); here, CE 142; BW 64. I have silently amended this translation throughout.

4. I will cite this work according to the original pagination (Prihonsky 1850), which is included in the margins of both the recent reprint in (Prihonsky 2003) and the French translation in (Prihonsky 2006), and will also be included in a forthcoming English translation by Sandra and myself (to be published by Palgrave).

to sound out [ergründen] the nature of truths *an sich*—or, to speak more generally, the nature of propositions *an sich*, their constituents and kinds, their connection among one another and similar such relations. (NAK, 229-30)

This way of ordering things also helps to bring out the deeper ambition of Bolzano's project. By shifting the focus at the outset away from the 'subjective constitution of our mind', as Kant puts it (B38), and onto something that is decidedly more objective (truths, their components, and their interconnections), Bolzano ultimately hopes to undercut the entire motivation for Kant's 'Copernican' thesis concerning the nature of our knowledge. Whereas Kant took his bearings from the alleged insight into the limitations of our capacities that he thought was yielded by the 'analytic' of our sensibility and understanding, Bolzano thinks we should begin instead with the insights we already possess into truth itself, insights like: the truth is what it is, independently of our cognition of it; and: we know that we know at least some truths. By emphasizing the fact that we are already in possession of at least some truths, and then zeroing in on the nature of the property of being-true and the bearers of this property, Bolzano hopes to light the way to an escape from what he took to be the skeptical, ultimately anti-scientific conclusions of the 'subjective idealist philosophy' (WL Preface, I.vii).

Now, while Bolzano's unflinching commitment of what has come to be called 'semantic objectivism' has been seen by many of his readers to provide a much-needed antidote to Kant's apparent psychologizing of the conditions for science in general,⁵ those who are impressed by Kant's humility about the scope of our knowledge will surely wonder whether Bolzano has gone too far in the opposite direction. Indeed, from the point of view of Kant's philosophy, the combination of (a) such a bold confidence in the appearance of our possession of truth, with (b) an eschewing of the need for any investigation into the conditions for the possibility of this apparent knowledge, will surely seem to return us to pre-'Critical', dogmatic philosophy.

Since the full comparative assessment of the two positions would require much more space than I have here, my main goal in what follows will be a more modest one. I will try to assess whether Bolzano's new semantical objectivist thesis is, in fact, successful in overcoming the pitfalls he takes to beset the theory of knowledge contained in Kant's 'subjective' idealism. To this end, I will try to confront Bolzano's position with certain replies

5. For a discussion of the significance of this phrase, see (Benoist 2006).

and counter-challenges that would seem natural from the point of view of Kant's philosophy.

I begin in §2 by presenting Bolzano's basic arguments for the existence of representational content *an sich*, emphasizing the extent to which Bolzano breaks from Kant by taking such content to be radically independent of mental activity, even while acknowledging that it makes its 'appearance' in such activity. I will then turn to several difficulties that Bolzano's proposed objectivism would seem to face, when viewed from the Kantian point of view. I turn in §3 to the challenges that Bolzano's position runs up against precisely because of Bolzano's acceptance of an appearance/*an sich* distinction. More specifically, I will turn to difficulties facing Bolzano's thesis that it is possible to have knowledge of such content as it is 'in itself', in light of the worry that the features Bolzano takes to belong to the content in itself are *merely* features that belong to its appearance. This will lead us in §4 to point up the parallels between the predicament in which the Bolzanian finds herself and that faced by Kant when pressed to say something more about *Dinge an sich*. I will then turn in §5 to the further question of whether or not Bolzano is able to avoid introducing a *Restriktionslehre*—or perhaps even two—of his own, once we couple the difficulties faced by the idea of knowledge of content 'an sich' with Bolzano's additional thesis that all of our knowledge of *objects* takes the form of an apprehension of *contents* (propositions) that represent them.

My conclusion will be that, even if Bolzano is right to insist on the recognition of what might be called a 'semantical *an sich*', until Bolzano can explain how it is possible for us to have *knowledge* of such contents *as* they are 'in themselves', Bolzano's position threatens to leave us in an *even more* precarious position than Kant does, with respect to our claims to knowledge of a mind-independent reality. This is because Bolzano's account threatens to limit our knowledge, now not just to an appearance of an object (as does Kant), but instead to an appearance of *a representation of* an object. For in the Bolzanian model, not only would we be unable to know how the objects of our representations are 'an sich', we do not even seem able to know how our representations are, in *themselves*, representing these objects *as* being.

§2. *The extrusion⁶ of representations from the mind: content ‘in itself’*

Let me begin by looking more closely at the nature of Bolzano’s thesis concerning the removal of subjectivity from the elementary doctrine of science. Bolzano takes this to follow from a more careful analysis of the ‘content’ (‘matter’) of our knowledge. Bolzano accepts that this content is itself something that is representational in nature, in the sense that it possesses intentionality: it ‘has’ or ‘is related to [sich bezieht auf]’ an object (WL §49, I.218-19)—or at least purports to ‘have’ one, since it might ultimately be ‘objectless [gegenstandslos]’ (WL §67, I.304f). Crucially, though, Bolzano thinks that one and the same object can be represented in different manners by distinct representations. For example, Bolzano thinks that the two concepts, $\langle 2^4 \rangle$ and $\langle 4^2 \rangle$, each pick out the same number, though they do so in different ways (cf., WL §96, I.445f.).⁷ Bolzano takes this fact to show that, in addition to the mental acts of representing and their objects, we must keep track of this further feature of representations, and it is this feature that Bolzano calls the ‘matter [Stoff]’ of an act of representing (cf., WL §§48–49, I.217f. and §271, II.9). Insofar as mental acts are said to ‘contain [enthalten]’ the things that function as their ‘matter [Stoff]’ (cf., WL §34, I.154), I will refer to this matter as the *content* of the mental acts.⁸

6. I take this way of putting Bolzano’s counter-thesis from (Dummett 1993, 22f. and 131).

7. I will use angle-brackets to refer to the content (i.e., to what (as we will see below) Bolzano calls the ‘objective’ representation (proposition), representation (proposition) ‘in itself’) expressed by the expression within the brackets.

8. It should be noted that this is not how Bolzano himself means to use the term ‘content [Inhalt]’, and moreover that he expressly distinguishes what he means to pick out by ‘content’ from what he here calls ‘matter [Stoff]’ (cf., WL §271 Anm, II.9f.). In Bolzano’s hands, ‘content’ is used instead to pick out the elements (‘parts’) of a composite ‘matter’: the ‘sum of composite parts out of which an [objective] representation consists’ (cf., WL §56, I.244 and, for the particular case of the content of a proposition as ‘the sum of all its ... parts’, §123, II.5; see also CE 93; BW 10). For Bolzano, then, it is only the matter of mental acts that has a ‘content’ in this strict sense of the term. For our purposes, however, what we need to keep track of is only the generic notion of something (whether simple or composite) being ‘contained in’ a mental act, and not what this matter itself contains, and so it is to the matter that I will refer to by the ‘content’ of a mental act. (In fact, this use of ‘content [Inhalt]’ is one that Bolzano himself concedes (to Exner) makes a certain degree of ‘good sense’, provided that we recognize the need to nevertheless keep track of the difference between (the whole of) what is contained in a mental act and what this content itself ‘contains’, as parts (cf. CE 95; BW 11). (Thanks to Sandra Lapointe for emphasizing to me the need to head off possible misunderstandings based on terminological imprecision here.)

Bolzano takes the need for a content/object distinction to be further confirmed, first, by the fact that the content and its object bear obviously distinct properties and, secondly, by the fact that there can be contents that ‘are’ something themselves, and yet that ultimately ‘have’ no object. As an example of the former, Bolzano refers us to the representation <Greek philosopher>, something which, as a content, is a single unified thing, even though it has many objects. As an example of the latter, Bolzano refers us to the representation <nothing>, which, as a thinkable content, is itself something (and even has component parts: it is composed out of <not> and <something>), but which has no object and is hence *gegenstandslos* (cf., WL §49, I.219f.).

Yet as important as the distinction between content and *object* is for Bolzano, he takes it to be equally important—and especially crucial for his criticism of Kant—that all contents, save that of intuitions, represent what they do in a way that can be common to, or identically present in, many different individual *acts* of representing.⁹ For example, you and I can both judge that two and two makes four—that is, we can both be said to judge the *same* thing—despite there being a *different* mental event that transpires in each case, one in your mind and one in mine. For this reason, Bolzano insists that this single identical content itself (here, the proposition <two and two makes four>) must be distinguished from any one of the multiplicity of mental events in which it is, has been, will be, or even *may* be present. While the number of mental events can be ‘multiplied’ indefinitely, the content remains one and the same (WL §48, I.217f.).

Though Bolzano thinks that the failure to draw the content/object distinction is something that will ‘entangle us in the grossest absurdities’ (WL §19, I.79), Bolzano takes the failure to separate the mental act or event from its content—to separate, that is, what he also calls the ‘subjective’ representation, or representation in its ‘subjective’ sense, from the ‘objective representation’, or representation in an ‘objective’ sense, or simply

9. Bolzano’s doctrine of intuition is complex. Bolzano is quite clear that he takes both the content/object distinction and the act/content distinction to apply even of the content of demonstrative and indexical representations, such as intuitions; cf., WL §72, I.326f. Bolzano also admits, however, that ‘we are not able to bring about [hervorzubringen] an individual intuition that we have had once for a second time in ourselves’, and also that, because of this, ‘it is even less possible to make *another person* have a subjective intuition which has the same corresponding objective representation as an intuition present *in us*’, which implies that ‘if by *communication* [Mitteilung] we mean the eliciting of a subjective representation in another to which belongs the same objective representation as belongs to our own, then we must assert that it is not possible to communicate intuitions’ (WL §75, I.334f.).

the ‘representation in itself [an sich]’ (WL §48, I.217)—to be even more pernicious.¹⁰ In fact, Bolzano thinks that the failure to ‘distinguish sharply enough [scharf genug unterscheiden]’ between subjective representations (i.e., ‘representations as *thought* [gedachte]’) and representations *an sich* is ‘the source of most of the current errors in logic’—Kant’s included (WL §12, I.47).

Yet Bolzano does not think that it is enough to simply *distinguish* such objective content from the subjective acts in which it is contained. Rather, Bolzano takes the above reflections to show that such content is in *no way dependent* upon the acts themselves, not even conceptually. Bolzano thinks, first, that such content is not dependent on our activity for its coming into being, since it is in no way the effect of our mental activity. This is made especially clear in Bolzano’s correspondence with Franz Exner, a professor of philosophy in Prague:

By *representation*, when I take the word in its objective meaning, I by no means understand a certain *appearance* [Erscheinung] in the mind of a thinking being, nor an *activity* [Tätigkeit] of this being, nor something *produced* [etwas Erzeugtes] in this being through this activity. (CE 142; BW 64)

This independence follows from the fact that, on Bolzano’s account, this content, considered strictly as it is ‘in itself’, cannot be ascribed *any* ‘existence [Dasein] (*Existenz* or actuality [Wirklichkeit])’ *at all* (WL §19, I.78). In Bolzano’s words, it is ‘not something existing [etwas Seyendes]’ and is ‘not to be found in the realm of the actual’ (WL §48, I.217).¹¹

Bolzano reaches this conclusion from several routes. On the one hand, Bolzano takes it for granted that everything existing or actual is singular, whereas (as we noted above) multiple different subjects can ‘grasp [auf-fassen]’ the very same content in multiple acts at multiple times, without the content itself being ‘multiplied’ (ibid.). The identity of the content across real multiplicity shows the content itself to be ideal. On the other hand, Bolzano thinks that there could be contents that are never actually

10. As Dummett has noted in (Dummett 1993), there is a considerable degree of parallel between Bolzano’s language and several of Frege’s remarks in his 1884 *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*. For the insistence on keeping psychology and logic ‘sharply separated’, see especially the end of Frege’s introductory remarks; for Frege’s own use of the terms ‘subjective’ and ‘objective representation’, see a footnote to *Grundlagen* §27.

11. Even so, Bolzano thinks that (like objective representations) propositions are objects (WL §25, I.115), and that the proposition expressed by ‘there are [es gibt] propositions and truths’ is true (WL §30, I.144). As we will see in a moment, he is also willing to say that they ‘obtain or subsist [bestehen]’.

be thought of or grasped by anyone at all—save, perhaps, by God. Even so, he also thinks that each of those contents would still represent whatever it does nonetheless (cf. WL §48, I.217f.). For both of these reasons, Bolzano concludes that these contents do not ‘presuppose a living being as the subject in which they proceed [vorgehen]’ and ‘do not require a subject to whom they represent’; instead, such contents simply ‘obtain or subsist [bestehen]’ (WL §48, I.217).

All of this contrasts with what is true of ‘subjective’ representations, which Bolzano *does* take to be ‘something *actual*, which has an actual existence in a determinate time’ (ibid.). More specifically, as he tells Exner, Bolzano takes these to be ‘appearances or products *in* the mind of a thinking being’ and also to require a certain ‘act’ on the part of the mind in order to come into being in the first place (CE 142; BW 64). In fact, with respect to both sensible and intellectual subjective representations, Bolzano’s views are quite close to Kant’s. Like Kant (cf., B33f.), Bolzano thinks that, for us to *intuit* an object, ‘it is necessary that the object enter [treten] into an entirely special relationship with us, through which a simple [einfache] representation that refers only to one single object is produced [erzeugt] in our consciousness’ (WL §74, I.332). Because of this, Bolzano agrees with Kant that:

we can infer from the possession of a subjective intuition to the existence of an object corresponding to it that has brought about [hervorgebracht] the intuition through its effecting [Einwirkung] our capacity for representation [Vorstellungsvermögen]. (WL §77, I.347)

Bolzano also agrees with Kant (cf., B129f) that an additional ‘act’ is required for us to go on to *judge* about an object, or indeed to have any ‘composite [zusammengesetzte]’ representation whatsoever. As he tells Exner, ‘the combining [Verbinden] of representations is an act [Act] separate from the bringing about [Hervorbringen] of them’ (CE 115; BW 32). Bolzano elaborates on this in the *Wissenschaftslehre* as follows:

To explain the arising [Entstehung] of a composite representation, it is not enough ... to suppose merely that the several simple representations that are its parts become active in us simultaneously. Rather, we must presume a peculiar activity [Tätigkeit] in our soul through which it transpires that the several representations become connected into a whole of the sort that constitutes a new representation. We call this *the forming* [Bilden] *of representations through connection* [Verknüpfung] *or synthesis*. (WL §285, III.85)

In the following section, Bolzano is even more straightforward on the generality of this point: ‘*each* of our composite representations *only* becomes composed [zusammengesetzt] through the activity of our own self [durch die selbsteigene Tätigkeit]’ (WL §286, III.87; my ital.). For this reason, Bolzano claims that ‘the most proximate cause [Ursache] of the arising of a composite [subjective] representation in our mind’ is ‘a mental activity [Geistestätigkeit]’ (WL §77, I.347). And because Bolzano takes judgment itself to be a composite representation, judgment, too, will require such an act. As the ‘appearance of a proposition’, a judgment consists in a ‘whole’ that is ‘composed [zusammengesetzt] out of parts’, each of which is a subjective representation (WL §291, III.109).¹²

By contrast, Bolzano thinks that a connection to mental activity is *not* included in the very definition of representational content *an sich*. As we have already seen, Bolzano thinks that such content is what it is independently of its relation to any actual activity on the part of subjects—indeed, independently of the existence of subjects at all. The extent of this commitment is made evident by the fact that Bolzano even rejects that such dependence obtains (or would obtain) in the case of God. To be sure, Bolzano accepts that if God does exist, then all representations are actually thought, all propositions are actually judged, all truths are actually known (WL §19, I.78; WL §25, I.113). For this reason, Bolzano is ready to accept that ‘thinkability [Denkbarkeit]’ might very well be a ‘*property* [Beschaffenheit]’ that, in fact, ‘belongs to each proposition’ (WL §23, I.92), and also that ‘cognizability [Erkennbarkeit]’ might very well be a property that, in fact, applies to each truth (WL §26, I.116). Bolzano insists, however, that this universal validity of such concepts does not require that either the concept of thinkability or the concept of cognizability be contained analytically in the very concept of a proposition or the very concept of a truth, as a ‘*component* [Bestandteil]’ of their contents (cf. WL §23, I.92, and §26, I.117). Rather, Bolzano takes it to be evident, for example, that ‘we can think of the concept of a proposition *an sich*

12. What the precise nature of this act is, Bolzano admits he cannot say exactly, noting only that the relevant act of ‘combination’ or ‘connection’ is itself of an ‘entirely peculiar’ sort, while at the same time confessing that he is unable ‘to determine which property this effort [Einwirken] must have in order to produce [erzeugen] a judgment’, rather than something else (WL §291, III.109f.). Bolzano is willing to say that its source is our ‘capacity [Vermögen]’ or ‘power [Kraft]’ to judge (WL §290, III.108), though he does not think that this adds much by way of explanation. In any case, the key point for us here is simply that there can be no judgment without some sort of mental activity; its connection to such activity is included in its very definition.

without recalling [erinnern] to ourselves its property of being something that can be thought by some understanding [Verstand]' (WL §23, I.92). A similar sort of conceptual disjointedness shows itself, thinks Bolzano, in our ability to think the *concept* of truth without thinking about its *objects* (the truths themselves) as being things that bear the property of being cognizable (WL §26, I.117).¹³

The upshot is that while Bolzano accepts that every representation or proposition is, in fact, thinkable, what he means by this is *only* that every representation or proposition *an sich*, now considered qua object in its own right, bears the property of being thinkable. But Bolzano does *not* think that the representation of a representation *an sich*—i.e., the concept <representation *an sich*>, and with it the concept <proposition *an sich*>—is *itself* unthinkable without including within itself, as one of the components of *its* content, a representation (the concept) <being thinkable>. Nor does Bolzano think that such an implication-relation obtains between the concept <truth> and the concept <being cognizable>, even if *all* the objects that fall under the former concept also fall under the latter and so also bear the property it represents—i.e, even if they are ‘reciprocal concepts [Wechselbegriffe]’ in this sense (WL §25, I.114).¹⁴

13. Here Bolzano is drawing upon one of his most fundamental distinctions, one that is rightly celebrated as directly anticipating contemporary discussions concerning the intensionality of meaning—namely, the distinction between (a) the *properties* of the *object* of a representation and (b) the *components* of the *content* of a representation of an object, or what is contained ‘in’ the representation *an sich* itself; cf., WL §25, I.113; see also WL §§63–64; NAK 12ff; and (Bolzano 2003, §3 #5). For example, though Shakespeare has the property of being the author of *Macbeth*, and hence can be represented through the concept <the author of *Macbeth*>, Shakespeare can also be represented through concepts like <the author of *Hamlet*>, and so on. Though the object of each of these concepts has the very same properties, the concepts themselves must be distinguished because they have different component parts.

14. For helpful discussion of this point (and others), see (Sebestik 1992, 115–33). These features of Bolzano’s view speak against Joelle Proust’s claim in (Proust 1989) that though representations *an sich* are ‘de jure independent from our knowledge’, they are not thereby ‘removed from human understanding’, because they are the ‘origin’ of knowledge (52; my ital.). It is surely right that they do provide the origin of knowledge, yet it is also true that, unlike Leibniz, Bolzano thinks that the concept of these contents does not in any way require that we think of them as available to, let alone inhabiting, any understanding at all. In this way, ‘in themselves’ they *are* ‘removed’ from understanding altogether.

§3. Kantian questions about the ‘appearance’ of content

Recognition of just how absolute a separation Bolzano means to effect between representational content (representations *an sich* and propositions), on the one hand, and mental acts, on the other, helps to bring out the depth of the gulf that he means to place between himself and Kant. It helps also to bring into even sharper relief the precise reasons why Bolzano takes Kant’s approach to the elements of science to be so fundamentally misguided. Importantly, Bolzano does not think that Kant’s approach is vitiated by the fact that, in a discussion of science, Kant talks about the mental activity of subject. As we have already seen, Bolzano himself admits that such ‘appearances’ (representations in the ‘subjective’ sense) can constitute their own object of inquiry. What is more, Bolzano himself actually *insists* that a complete doctrine of science must eventually incorporate the findings of such analyses of our capacities, as is shown from the fact that Parts III and IV of Bolzano’s own *Wissenschaftslehre* are devoted to just such analyses, providing both a ‘theory of knowledge [Erkenntnislehre]’ as well as an ‘art of discovery [Erfindungskunst]’.¹⁵

Rather, what ruins Kant’s approach is that when Kant talks about the kinds of representations that are peculiar to understanding and so of interest in logic—namely, ‘concepts, judgments, and inferences’—Kant wrongly treats such representations *only* as ‘acts of thinking’ and ‘ways of thinking’, and so ‘treats them *only* as (actual or possible) appearances in the mind of a thinking being’ (WL §16, I.60–61; my ital.). Bolzano thinks Kant thereby fails to recognize that the true roots of this sort of analysis must lie deeper still, in the doctrine of the contents of such acts. That is, even if Kant is right to think that certain portions of the doctrine of science depend on considerations of mental capacities—such that, for example, ‘the rules of the art of discovery’ are such as to ‘depend [abhängen] on the laws to which the cognizability [Erkennbarkeit] of truth for us humans is bound [gebunden]’—Bolzano thinks that ‘there is no doubt’ that all of *these* sorts of rules ‘depend *much more* on those properties which pertain

15. Bolzano even goes so far as to claim that the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole is, for this reason, ‘dependent’ on psychology (cf., WL §13, I.54). Of course, neither this claim, nor the fact that Bolzano thinks it is necessary to include inquiries into the nature of human mental capacities within the discipline that merits the title ‘logic’, need imply that Bolzano thereby ‘commits the sin of psychologism’, as Rolf George notes in (George 1997, 235). This is because Bolzano never claims that the truly *elementary* doctrine of logic (*Elementarlehre*) is itself dependent on psychology. Rather, as we have seen, these elements of Bolzano’s logic are in no way dependent upon psychology at all.

to propositions and truths *an sich* themselves' (WL §15, I.58; my ital.). For this reason, despite it being true that Bolzano himself eventually moves on to discuss the nature of subjective representations in his own *Wissenschaftslehre*, the fact that Bolzano devotes his own *Elementarlehre* to 'undertaking the discussion of representations, propositions, and truths *an sich*' is something that is meant to mark a 'very essential [wesentliche] difference' between his position and the Critical philosophy (WL §16, I.61).

Yet even as the foregoing has helped to bring out such 'essential' doctrinal differences between Bolzano and Kant, it has also brought to light a striking overlap of a different sort. For, as it is impossible for any reader of Kant not to notice when reading Bolzano, the very terms that Bolzano uses to convey the two sides of the fundamental distinction he has in mind are none other than the terms that Kant uses to pick out a distinction that stands at the heart of Kant's own philosophy—namely, the distinction between the *appearance* of something and the way that something is *in itself*.

To be sure, Bolzano transposes this distinction from the more ontologically-directed context in which Kant's thought most frequently operates, into a new intensional-semantic register. That is, whereas for Kant, it is a *Ding*, something real, that both appears but also has a way of being *an sich*, for Bolzano, what 'appears' is instead an 'unreal' or ideal content, rather than that content's object (though this might *also* appear).¹⁶

Even so, several of the key features that Bolzano takes to distinguish appearances from the content 'an sich' find their straightforward parallels in features that Kant takes to distinguish appearances from the 'Dinge an sich'. This is already evident from our discussion in the previous section of Bolzano's account of subjective representations. Like Kant, Bolzano takes the appearances at issue to be things that are mind-dependent both for their existence (they exist 'in the mind', they presuppose a thinking subject in which they exist) and for their generation (they require an act upon, or by, the mind to be 'produced'). Also like Kant, Bolzano places the mind in a passive relationship with respect to what it is that is appearing by way of the appearance: just as, for Kant, the mind does not produce or make up the affecting thing, so too, for Bolzano, the mind does not 'make up' the content that 'appears' in its subjective representations; rather, the mind is only able to 'apprehend or grasp [auffassen]' it (cf., WL §122, II.4).

16. For the insistence on the difference between the uses of this distinction, see (Jakob 1902, 33); compare as well (Proust 1989, 51f) and (Sebestik 1992, 21).

But then, precisely because Bolzano places an appearance/*an sich* distinction at the heart of his own account of the elements of science, those approaching Bolzano's position from the perspective of Kant's philosophy will now be curious to hear more about how Bolzano means to construe the appearing-relation that is involved in this new semantical dimension, and will like to know, more generally, why Bolzano is confident that we are able to *know* such contents *as* they are *an sich*.

Concerning the first topic, it is clear that Bolzano cannot assign to his contents the role that Kant assigns to *Dinge*—namely, that of 'causing' or 'bringing about' their own appearance through something like affection. This would require that contents possess some degree of actuality or reality, a sufficient *Wirklichkeit*. As we saw above, however, Bolzano insists that contents *an sich* are not something 'existing' or 'actual [wirklich]' in any sense of the term. In fact, as we have also seen, on Bolzano's official account of the 'arising' of appearances in the mind, their true 'cause' is either the *object's* entering into a 'special' relationship with our minds, or the exercise of powers and capacities of our own *mind* itself. How 'effects' by these sorts of 'real' causes should somehow consist in the 'appearance' of some third, 'unreal' thing—that is, how this causal interaction enables us to 'grasp' contents—is never sufficiently addressed.¹⁷

To his credit, Bolzano himself is quite open about this gap in his account. This emerges from one of his exchanges with Exner, in which Exner poses the following series of questions about our cognitive relation to truths *an sich*: 'How can the non-existing be grasped [aufgefasst] by something existing? What can grasping mean here? [...] What is this objective truth? How do you know [wissen] about it? How do you come by it?' (CE 152–53; BW 74–75). In reply, Bolzano actually admits that he cannot 'define' what he means by 'grasp' in these contexts. Bolzano himself, however, does not think this is worrisome, since, as he tells Exner, he ultimately only means to use 'the word "grasping [Auffassen]" as "a figurative [bildliche] expression", in the service of an "attempt at making intelligible [Verständigung]" what he means by "objective representation" (CE 162; BW 84–85).

Yet however admirable such honesty surely is, Bolzano's reply is nonetheless not very satisfying. Its insufficiency becomes even more pointed

17. Here again there are obvious parallels to Frege and his difficulties in accounting for what he, too, calls the 'grasping [Erfassen]' of the objective contents that he calls 'thoughts [Gedanke]', a 'mental process [seelische Vorgang]' that he finds to be 'the most mysterious of all', since it transpires right on the border of the realm of the subjective and actual (i.e., what is psychological), and the realm of the objective and non-actual (i.e., what is logical) (cf., Frege 1969, 157).

when viewed against the backdrop of the issues concerning of knowledge and givenness that are at the core of Kant's own analysis of appearances. This is because a gap at such a crucial moment in Bolzano's story threatens to undercut Bolzano's confidence *in general* that he is able to say anything at all about how such contents are 'in themselves', rather than simply restricting himself to claims about how they appear to him, or perhaps to everyone with minds like ours. For it is entirely unclear how an appeal to an indefinable transaction between ourselves and contents *an sich* is supposed to be sufficient to get Bolzano off the hook of a predicament parallel to the one that Kant takes us to be in with respect to '*Dinge an sich*'. This becomes an especially pressing issue because at the end of the day, Bolzano agrees with Kant that the only things that are 'actually' present 'in' any of our minds are *appearances*, and not what appears (for Bolzano, the content) as it is 'in itself'. Why, then, doesn't Bolzano, too, think he has to admit that, as Kant puts things, whether or not 'we believe ourselves to cognize things in themselves'—or now, *contents* in themselves—the truth of the matter is that 'we have to do with nothing except appearances anywhere (in the world of sense), even in the deepest researches into its objects'? That even in the semantical context, 'the transcendental object remains unknown to us' (cf., B62–63)?¹⁸

Now, as we have seen, Bolzano clearly thinks he can say a good deal about contents *an sich*. In particular, he thinks that we can know that certain straightforward correlations obtain between such contents and their appearances. For one thing, Bolzano thinks that there is a distinct *kind* of content for each of the basic distinct kinds of mental acts of representation (representing, judging, knowing, inferring). For another, Bolzano thinks that every *individual* subjective representation must contain an objective representation as its content, such that every representing contains an objective representation (cf., WL §271, III.9), every judging contains a proposition (cf., WL §291, III.108), every cognizing contains a true proposition (cf., WL §36, I.163), and so on. What is more, Bolzano thinks that the mental acts 'have' the very same *object* as the one that is represented by the objective representational content that is contained in the act (WL §271, III.9).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in the case of composite representations, Bolzano thinks that the subjective representations have the

18. A similar worry is raised by Melchior Palagyi in §7 of (Palagyi 1902, 34).

same number of ‘parts’ as the objective representation that they contain,¹⁹ which also stand in the same kind of structure or organization as the objective representation as well. With respect to judgment, for example, Bolzano claims, first of all, that ‘a judgment must contain just as many corresponding [entsprechende] subjective representations as there are objective representations that can be distinguished within the proposition that is the matter of the judgment’ (WL §291, III.109). Yet Bolzano recognizes that such correspondence of parts is not sufficient, since ‘different judgments can arise through different combinations [Verbindungen] of the same parts’ (ibid.). Hence, Bolzano also insists that the *way* in which the parts are combined in judgment must likewise ‘correspond’ to the combination that is present in the proposition that appears (ibid.).

With this, then, Bolzano has gone all the way to identifying certain features as common to both the appearance of the content and the way that it is in itself. But at this point we must echo Exner and ask: what are Bolzano’s *grounds* for any of these correlational claims? How can he claim to know *any* of the features that belong to the appearance of content *also* belong to the content *an sich*, when he has not yet explained how it is possible for content *an sich* to be given for inspection by us in the first place? Absent a more substantial story about either the ‘grasping’ or the ‘appearing’ relation, there is surely room to doubt even the more restricted claim that there is, in the content as it is in itself, something or other that ‘corresponds’ to any given feature of its appearance. For how can Bolzano rule out, for example, the possibility that in every case of our engagement with composite subjective representations—say, in a judgment—that in such cases, the compositeness or combination that is present in the appearance of some further content is *only* present in its appearance, and not in the content as it is *an sich*?

Questions surrounding the nature of judgment have a special bite, since by Bolzano’s own lights, what is responsible in general for there being combination in the appearance of contents is *not*, in the first instance, anything about the *content* itself ‘an sich’. Rather, the combination present in my subjective representations, and in my judgments in particular, is something brought about by that mental *activity* that we saw Bolzano himself taking to be ‘the proximate cause’ responsible for the ‘arising’ of such composite appearances in the first place (cf., above, §2). But if

19. This should not be confused with the claim that either the appearance of the content or the content itself has the same number of parts as the *object* of the content—a claim that Bolzano denies (cf., WL §§63–64).

the arising of the appearance swings free of the relevant content in this way—or at least, until its link to the content is more fully explained—isn't it possible that whatever content there may be to judgments (and more generally, of any composite appearances) is not composite 'in itself' at all, but instead that all such compositeness is present only in the realm of appearances?

For his part, Kant would surely pursue exactly this line even further and claim that, if we can know a priori that features like compositeness will be present in certain appearances, then the genuine explanation for this must lie, not at all in an appeal to the way that any *content* is 'in itself', but instead in further reflection on just the *activity* that Bolzano himself takes to be its cause. As Kant himself would have it, all the 'combination [Verbindung]' or synthesis that is 'in' our representations can be *completely* accounted for by *our* 'having combined [verbunden]' our representations in just this way (cf., B129-30). This places the reason for combination's presence in appearances ultimately in a fact about our own intellectual powers—namely, that our capacity for thinking and judging is 'discursive' rather than 'intuitive', and so 'requires that [any] manifold must first be run through, taken up, and combined [verbunden], in order to make [machen] a cognition out of it' (B102, my ital.).

How, then, would Bolzano hope to rule out a more thorough-going subject- or mind-dependence of the constitution of the relevant appearances? For this sort of account to be blocked, and for any of these worries to be addressed decisively, Bolzano himself would have to demonstrate to us that he has some sort of access to the content as it is 'in itself'—e.g., access to whatever proposition it is that is allegedly making its appearance in a series of numerically distinct judgments, i.e., in subjective representations. The problem here is that, on Bolzano's own telling, the constitution of what is really 'in' our mind in any of actually thinking or judging such contents is something that has been 'brought about' by our own mental acts of combination. What Bolzano needs, however, is access to the contents through a means *other than* through these very judgments themselves, so as to be able to compare the objective and subjective representations.

§4. *Content as an 'Etwas = X'*

We saw earlier that Bolzano himself is officially reticent to try to say more on topics in this neighborhood. Is there anything more to say on

his behalf? Here we might revisit the strategy that Bolzano uses to try to bring the idea of such content before our eyes in the first place. Bolzano asks us to think only about what is ‘common’ to multiple mental acts that appear to have one and the same content. From this angle, the access or grasping of contents *an sich* would seem to come about through a kind of generalization.

Those seeing the matter from Kant’s point of view, however, would argue that such generalization will only move us to the consideration of a concrete relation that is *internal*, as it were, to the world of *appearances* of content. Crucially, this would not yet bring in any special entity that is both responsible for there being such a relation, and yet lies behind each of the members in the relation taken singly or collectively. Nor would it bring into view something that has a way of being ‘in itself’, in complete independence, not just from any actual acts, but even from any *possible* mental acts, not just from its actual appearances but even from its *possible* appearances.

Yet even if the Kantian were to grant that it is necessary to recognize *some* such utterly appearance-independent entity on the basis of such generalization, the challenge then posed is that of saying how else we could refer to something of this sort otherwise than by means of the completely indeterminate concepts expressed in phrases like the ones Kant himself makes use of when referring to a *Ding an sich*, such as ‘the something = X’ (cf., A250). Perhaps, then, we could say things like: ‘the something = X that is common to this set of appearances: my judgment, here, now, that two and two makes four, my judgment, there, then ..., your judgment ..., S’s judgment ... (etc.)’.²⁰ But even this way of thinking about ‘the content’ is obviously not a way of thinking about it *as* it is ‘in itself’, but rather as it is *in relation to* a set of appearances. The trick, it would seem, is to reach a state of mind where we can let go altogether of any such relational determination of our target of thought, where we don’t have to ‘recall’ to ourselves that this content can (and does) appear. But how?

Besides the appeal to identity across difference, the second main strategy that Bolzano has for trying to bring us to a position to know what he means by terms like ‘representation *an sich*’ is the *via negativa*. That is, Bolzano hopes that by getting us to *exclude* certain features common to subjective representations (features like: existence, actuality, needing to be borne by

20. We have ourselves sought to represent such a proposition by ‘<two and two makes four>’, but we might ask whether this expression is ultimately anything more than an abbreviation of the one above.

a subject, needing to be brought about by a subject) from our thoughts about the objective contents, we will be able to make the transition to the objective content itself. This itself quite fits well with Bolzano's own official explanation of the meaning of the phrase 'in itself [an sich]' in the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself: this addition to a word 'has the goal of *preventing* us from adding at will something in thought that should not be thought of in relation to the word, according to the proper determination of this word' (I.247; my ital.).

The problem that we run up against here, however, is that it is unclear what exactly *remains* to be thought, in relation to the words like 'proposition' and so on, once *all* connections and relations to concepts associated with mental activity have been pushed out of view. What is it that is left to be grasped by a term like 'content' in complete isolation from the concept of that which 'contains' this content (i.e., in isolation from the concept <subjective representation>)?

In any case, Bolzano himself is again quite upfront that any hopes for a more straightforward positive non-relational definition here will be disappointed. This follows from the striking (at this point, almost maddening) admission by Bolzano to Exner that, just as he is unable to define or explain what he means by 'grasping', so too is he ultimately *unable* to provide anything like a genuine 'definition [Erklärung]' of the terms he uses to pick out contents either—i.e., of 'representation *an sich*', 'proposition', 'truth', etc. (CE 99; BW 16). Rather, all Bolzano thinks he is able to offer with respect to these terms as well are 'attempts to make intelligible [Verständigungen]' such concepts (ibid. cf., WL §23, I.91; WL §52, I.228).

Here, however, we reach an impasse, since, as we ourselves have seen, most, if not all, of Bolzano's attempts to make intelligible the concepts associated with content *an sich* do so by nothing other than *linking them to mental activities*. More specifically, they seem to take two forms: the first involves the appeal to the mental activity of grasping or appearing, even while Bolzano admits that this is only a 'figurative' way of describing what actually takes place. The second takes the form of pointing to the pervasive function that the objects of these concepts (the contents themselves) have within our mental (and linguistic) lives, and then asking us to abstract away from this function, so as to still 'think' such concepts yet without 'recalling' these connections to mental activity. The worry here is that there simply might not *be* anything left to think after such an abstraction, or that, even if there is something, our grasp of it as it is 'an sich' will be very thin indeed.

Now, even if this is right, this would not *force* Bolzano to deny that there ‘is’ such content—any more than Kant’s attempt at a similarly ‘negative’ exposition of what *he* means by ‘thing in itself’ requires him to deny that there are such things. Rather, what this line of questioning is intended to point up is, first, the real possibility of severe limitations on the knowledge that Bolzano is able to claim about such contents themselves, and hence the threat of a substantial restriction on what can be contained in Bolzano’s alternative *Elementarlehre* for the theory of science. Here the parallel with Kant is again instructive, since Kant, too, could (and, in effect, does) claim that the embrace of the distinction between *Dinge an sich* and things as they appear is the beginning of all philosophical wisdom and that the task of winning through to this distinction must itself set the stage for any true ‘doctrine of elements’. Yet, in Kant’s hands, the concept of what lies on the other side of the appearances is something that functions within the doctrine of science itself only as a ‘boundary concept [Grenzbegriff]’ (B311), and his attempts at forcing the recognition of this distinction would seem to be officially intended only to serve a ‘critical’ function: to prepare the way for a later presentation of the elements of the doctrine of science.²¹

Of course, allotting this sort of role for a notion of the *an sich* is considerably different from claiming, as Bolzano does, that the doctrine of what falls under such a ‘boundary concept’—i.e., the positive doctrine of how *things* are ‘in themselves’—could *itself* function as the necessary *Elementarlehre*. And even if Bolzano were to revise his conception of the status and informativeness of the doctrine of content *an sich* along the lines suggested by Kant’s treatment of the concept of the *Ding an sich*, it would be a significant further step indeed for Bolzano to then go on to model his claims about the *appearances* of such contents in a manner *also* parallel to Kant’s distinctively *transcendental* idealism. This is because conceding the poverty of our knowledge of the semantical ‘in itself’ need not go hand in hand with any contention that we can know anything at all *apriori* about the world of the appearances of such contents—what Kant would call their universal and necessary *form* (whether the logical forms of judging or the mathematical forms of intuiting).

It is worth noting at this point that Bolzano is actually quite critical of Kant’s appeal to *apriori* knowledge, himself attributing instead all of the

21. In fact, this is how Kant characterizes the whole first *Critique* in its entirety: ‘it is a treatise on the method, not a system of science itself’ (Bxxii).

‘certainty’ that we have, concerning things like logical and mathematical laws, to the fact that these laws are ‘easily able to be repeatedly tested’ and are ‘always proved correct’—i.e., because they are confirmed in experience—rather than due to any alleged apriori insight (cf., WL §315, III.244f). Yet despite such anti-apriorist leanings, Bolzano is willing to say a good bit about the mind’s role in the conditions for the possibility of the appearances of content—especially concerning judgments—and this might provide the groundwork for an attempt to sort out more clearly what it is that our minds contribute, rather than what is present in them due to some other factor, e.g., the objects affecting us. This would require an exercise close to what Kant might call ‘transcendental reflection’ (cf., B317).

§5. *The appearance of objects through the appearance of contents*

In the previous sections we wrestled with Bolzano’s distinction between representational content considered ‘in itself’ and its ‘appearance’ in subjective representations, in order to tease out the obstacles that a Kantian would take to lie in way of Bolzano’s alternative *Elementarlehre*, due to the obscurity of the possibility of knowledge of such content as it is ‘an sich’. With this we were occupied with a problem inspired by Kant, but which arises due to the new distinctions introduced by the Bolzanian framework itself. In this final section, I want to turn our attention instead to the question of whether Bolzano’s framework puts him in a better position to address a concern that is already manifest within the framework of the Critical philosophy itself. This is the question of what to say, on Bolzano’s behalf, now not about the possibility of knowledge of the semantical ‘in itself’, but rather about the possibility of knowledge of the *ontological* ‘in itself’—i.e., the question of the extent of our knowledge of *things*, *real* objects, as *they* are in themselves.

Kant famously limits our knowledge of things to knowledge of the appearances of things. Aside, perhaps, from the *existence* of such things, Kant thinks that all that we are presented with in our perceptions and experiences is how these things appear to us in our acts of intuition; as Kant puts the point concerning outer intuition in the *Prolegomena*, ‘all the properties that make up the intuition of a body belong merely to its appearance’ (4:289; my ital.). The same is true of ‘inner’ intuition as well (B67). In other words, each of the properties that we are presented with

in our intuitions ‘is not to be encountered in the object [of our intuition] *in itself* at all, but is always to be encountered in its *relation* to the subject and is inseparable from the *representation* of the object’ (B70n; my ital.). But since the only things I can *know* are things which can be ‘present [gegenwärtig] and given to me’ (cf., *Prolegomena* §9, 4:282), and since it is only the appearances of objects, rather than the objects as they are in themselves, that can be immediately ‘present’ to me in this way (i.e., in my intuitions), it follows, thinks Kant, that the only knowledge I can have concerning real things is knowledge of their appearances.

Since the basis for Kant’s claims lies in his analysis of our mental capacities, rather than in an analysis of the concept of the *content* of knowledge (truth) itself, Bolzano thinks that Kant’s account of the limits of our knowledge cannot be correct. As we have seen, Bolzano accepts that *every* truth is, in fact, knowable, even if he admits that not every truth is knowable by some human currently alive (cf., WL §314, III.232f). Bolzano actually goes further, claiming that we ‘must avoid naming a limit [for human cognition], because there is none *present* [vorhanden]’, and hence claims also that ‘the sum of human knowledge [Wissen] is capable of increasing ad infinitum’ (WL §314 Anm, III.238). What is more, Bolzano takes the very concept of an object about which *nothing* can be known to be a self-contradictory or ‘absurd [ungereimt]’ concept (cf., WL §314, III.235). For these reasons, Bolzano holds an ‘opinion’ directly contrary to Kant’s: ‘it is hardly possible to give a determination of the limit of our capacity for cognition’ (WL §314 Anm, III.238).

Of course, we are now in possession of grounds for doubting Bolzano’s confidence in our ability to know (‘grasp’) truths as they are *an sich*, insofar as he agrees with Kant that what is actually present in the mind is always only a truth *as thought* or *as judged*—in short, always only the *appearance* of the truth. Worries about our knowledge are compounded once we recall the fact that Bolzano takes *all* of our knowledge or cognition in general, and hence all of our knowledge of *objects*, to consist in the appearance or grasping (i.e., judging) of true propositions about them: ‘the cognizability of an object is the possibility of making a judgment that is true about it’ (WL §26, I.117; cf., WL §36, I.163).²² In other words,

22. Bolzano’s student Prihonsky emphasizes just this point in the conclusion to *Neuer Anti-Kant*: ‘[I]t should not be forgotten that the object of knowing [Kennen] is first of all *only truths* and not actual, existing objects. The latter are knowable [erkennbar] for us *only by means of* [mittels] *the truths* that we know. For if one of our representations pertained to an actual object or not, and to how this object is otherwise constituted, we could only ascertain [entnehmen]

all of our knowing of objects is mediated by the grasping of propositions about them.

Why is this problematic? Let us assume, for the moment, that true propositions are transparent with respect to their objects—i.e., that in (successfully? or adequately?) grasping a *true* proposition as it is *an sich*, we thereby come into possession of knowledge of *objects* as they ‘actually’ are. Now, as we have just emphasized, because, in the Bolzanian framework, the proposition itself, as the content of judgment, is something that is an additional ‘thing’ that has a way of being ‘in itself’, it is itself something for which the question can arise as to how we could know whether or not we are grasping it as *it* ‘actually’ is *in itself*, rather than simply as it ‘appears’ in its relation to our minds. As we have seen, this sort of question is one for which Bolzano has no straightforward answer. To the contrary, if the considerations from the previous section are on the right track, then all Bolzano can claim to know of propositions comes by way of abstract representations of them through the form: <something = X that is common to such and such set of judgments>. Yet even this is itself a representation of the proposition via its relation to mental activity, rather than a representation of it as it is ‘an sich’. But then, on the reasonable assumption that it is the true proposition *as it is an sich*, rather than how it appears, that is the conveyor of genuine knowledge about how its object ‘actually’ is, such genuine knowledge threatens to lie one step beyond our reach.

Things get even worse if we now question the assumption introduced above about the transparency of true propositions with respect to the objects they represent. For how does Bolzano hope to justify the claim that true propositions can represent their objects *as the objects are ‘in themselves’*? More generally, what could it even mean for the *objects* of propositions to be grasped as *they* (the objects) are ‘in themselves’, and yet *in* propositions? Is it somehow in the intrinsic nature of objects to appear ‘in’ propositions? And if not, then wouldn’t the way an object is given in a proposition differ from the way it (the object) is in itself?

What is striking is that just such a distinction would seem to be implied by Bolzano’s own analysis of the representationality of the content of propositions. This is due to the fact that he takes the core semantical element of the proposition itself—the copula—to be *without any correlate* in the realm of objects themselves.²³ This puts significant pressure on the

this *through certain truths alone* that assert something about it’ (NAK, 230; my ital.).

23. Bolzano thinks that all propositions have the form: <A has b> (WL §126-27, II.9), and thinks that, in any true proposition, both the <A> and the will have objective correlates (an

idea that there can, in principle, be a coincidence between content of the sort embodied by true propositions and the way its objects ‘actually’ are, since whenever objects ‘appear’ in propositions, they appear in a form that *cannot* be their own (e.g., *as* ‘having’ properties, *as* ‘being’ a certain way).²⁴ But then, until *this* gap is closed, even the (as of yet still mysterious) ability to grasp true propositions (contents) as *they* are in themselves would not yet be sufficient secure knowledge of the sort that goes beyond the way *objects* appear in such contents to the way they are ‘an sich’.

If, however, the worries of the foregoing sections are well-founded, the previous analysis is correct, and we do *not* possess even the latter ability, but only can grasp true propositions as they appear, then the presence of this gap in Bolzano’s account would now place us at *two* steps remove from the way objects or things are ‘in themselves’—which is to say, Bolzano’s account would introduce one *more* intermediary step from our representations to objects than is present in Kant’s ‘idealist’ philosophy itself. But then this would suggest that, rather than avoiding Kant’s conclusions concerning the limits of our knowledge, Bolzano’s position would seem to require an *even more* restricted conception of the ‘objects’ of possible knowledge, with the end result being that an *even more* modest conclusion needs to be drawn by the Bolzanian concerning the scope of our knowledge than was drawn by Kant himself. This is because, at least from the Kantian point of view, on Bolzano’s picture, it looks like we cannot even have knowledge of appearances of objects; instead, we only have knowledge of the appearances *of the appearances* of objects (i.e., the subjective representation of the objective representation of objects in propositions).

None of this, of course, would show Bolzano’s views to be false. Perhaps Bolzano is exactly right to insist on the threefold distinction between act, content, and object. Perhaps, furthermore, Bolzano is also right to insist that we need not ultimately lose our grip on the concept of this content even if we peel away all of the natural associations the concept surely has with the concepts of mental activity and of a thinking subject—that something meaningful, something ‘in itself’ will still remain.

What we have shown, though, is that the thesis of such radical separation between the contents of acts and the acts themselves—between the

object and a property, respectively; WL §196, II.328f). The <has>, by contrast, does not ‘have’ any object whatsoever (WL §78, I.360).

24. For more on this, see my discussion of Bolzano in §3 of (Tolley forthcoming). See as well (Benoist 2006, 27f), for a related discussion concerning Bolzano’s lack of any concept of distinctly propositional referents (such as a state of affairs or fact).

concepts <truth>, <proposition>, and so on, and concepts like <mind>, <subjectivity>, and others—threatens to plunge Bolzano toward the same epistemic predicament that beset Kant’s allegedly more ‘subjectivist’ construal of the elements of our knowledge.

What this suggests, minimally, is that, however much is gained by taking on board Bolzano’s more ‘objectivist’ construal of the content of cognition, care must be taken not to confer on this content such a radical conceptual autonomy from the concepts of our mental activity and its capacities. Whether this should lead to a full-scale ‘return to Kant’, or should simply encourage the exploration of positions that occupy the middle-ground between Bolzano and Kant, is of course another matter.²⁵

It does seem, however, that the considerations advanced in the preceding give encouragement to those, often taking their cue from Kant’s works, who think that there is very little, and perhaps nothing at all, to say about the concepts of representational content, propositions, and truth, *outside* of reflection on their role in contexts that include ‘minded’ subjects like us—that truth is nothing if not the goal of inquiry, belief, and assertion, that even if the reason why certain things are true is objective (i.e., the facts), the concept of something’s being true bears an internal link to possible knowledge and hence to the life of the mind, that the idea of representational content becomes an entirely empty shell once the idea of its being *for* a possible consciousness has been removed, and so on.²⁶ Perhaps embracing this sentiment is, as Bolzano seemed to think, the first step down a slippery slope that runs toward the embrace of a ‘subjective idealist’ philosophy. What I hope to have shown in the foregoing, however, is that it is less clear that its rejection will put us on any firmer footing.²⁷

25. This, in effect, is Husserl’s strategy in his *Logical Investigations*. It is also and more explicitly the strategy proposed by the Neo-Kantian Emil Lask: ‘Bolzano’s position is characterized by the fact that what is theoretical is spun out of what is objective, even if it still remains in pre-Copernican blindness. Kant has Copernicanism, but not Objectivism. One must unify [vereinigen] Objectivism and Copernicanism’ (Lask 1911, Anhang §6, 277). For some discussion, see (Benoist 2006, 13f).

26. Palagyi is led to draw out criticisms of Bolzano along lines quite close to these through his sustained comparison with Kant’s views (cf. Palagyi 1902, 36ff).

27. I would like to thank Sandra Lapointe, Charles Larmore, Samantha Matherne, and Timothy Rosenkoetter for discussion of this material and for comments on previous drafts.

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