

# Intuitive Understanding: Spinoza, Kant, Goethe

Symposium at the University of Aberdeen, 22 June 2018

Venue: Old Aberdeen Campus, New King's building, room NK14

There is a renewed interest in the notions of intuitive understanding and intellectual intuition, especially as conceived by Spinoza, Kant, and the German Idealists. This symposium explores the similarities and differences between Spinoza's, Kant's, and Goethe's articulations of these notions.

- 9.10            Welcome
- 9.15 – 10.35    **Beth Lord**  
*Spinoza on the "third kind of knowledge" (and Kant's likely critique)*
- 10.35 – 11.20   **Manja Kisner**  
*On the difference between Kant's intellectual intuition and intuitive understanding*
- Coffee break
- 11.35 – 12.55   **Dietmar Heidemann**  
*Conceiving the inconceivable: Kant on the possibility of the intuitive understanding*
- Lunch
- 14.00 – 15.20   **Jessica Leech**  
*Making modal distinctions and the intuitive understanding*
- Coffee break
- 15.35 – 16.55   **Gunnar Hindrichs**  
*Goethe and the Unity of Nature*
- 16.55 – 17.40   **Ulrich Stegmann**  
*A re-enactment approach to Goethe's scientific method*
- 17.40 – 18.30   General Discussion
- 19.00            Dinner

The support of the *Scots Philosophical Association* is gratefully acknowledged. Attendance is free. Please register your interest by 15 June with Ulrich Stegmann ([u.stegmann@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:u.stegmann@abdn.ac.uk)).

## Abstracts

### ***Conceiving the inconceivable: Kant on the possibility of the intuitive understanding***

Dietmar Heidemann, University of Luxemburg

According to Kant, the human understanding is discursive. 'Discursivity' means, among other things, that the content of our world directed thoughts must be given and that *what* we think cannot be generated by thought itself. For we can only think by means of concepts and concepts are general, abstract representations that do not allow for intellectual singular representations. Now in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant describes a kind of understanding that is not discursive but intuitive. And he does so by means of discursive representations, i.e. concepts. The paper explores the question what a non-discursive understanding essentially is and whether it is at all possible to give an account of such a non-discursive cognitive capacity by means of discursive concepts.

### ***Goethe and the Unity of Nature***

Gunnar Hindrichs, University of Basel

TBC

### ***On the difference between Kant's intellectual intuition and intuitive understanding***

Manja Kisner, LMU Munich

Although Kant uses the concepts of intellectual intuition and of intuitive understanding interchangeably on various occasions in his works, it is nonetheless far from clear if we can indeed identify them. In my presentation, I will focus on the differences which are, as I maintain, a result of Kant's distinction between the special character or constitution ('besondere Beschaffenheit') of our sensibility and of our discursive understanding in the first as well as in the third *Critique* (here especially in §§ 76,77). This distinction brings Kant to two different kinds of contingencies - the contingency of the particular and the lawfulness of the contingent – which are in my view crucial for explaining the difference between Kant's concept of intellectual intuition and of intuitive understanding.

### ***Making modal distinctions and the intuitive understanding***

Jessica Leech, King's College London

In section 76 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that a discursive understanding requires a capacity to make modal distinctions, whereas an intuitive understanding does not. I present an account of the intuitive understanding that allows us to understand Kant's argument, and to understand various other important features of the intuitive understanding, including the relation to intellectual intuition, and why the intuitive understanding is said to create its own objects. I conclude with some remarks on the success, or not, of Kant's argument, and what I take to be the important ideas underpinning why Kant takes the discursive understanding to require modal concepts.

### ***Spinoza on the “third kind of knowledge” (and Kant’s likely critique)***

Beth Lord, University of Aberdeen

For Spinoza, intuition is the “third kind of knowledge”. Whereas knowledge of the first and second kinds (imagination and reason) starts from particular sensations, properties, and things, and moves up to generalizations, universals, and commonalities, the third kind of knowledge starts with the essences of things, as they are known by God, and moves “down” to particulars. There are many uncertainties about intuition, including whether Spinoza thinks this way of knowing is possible during our lifetimes. In this paper I will introduce Spinoza’s concept of intuition and some of these problems. I will indicate Kant’s most likely critique of Spinoza’s concept: his critique of the notion that there could be a kind of human knowledge that deduces particular things from essences.

### ***A re-enactment approach to Goethe’s scientific method***

Ulrich Stegmann, University of Aberdeen

Goethe believed in his ability to implement both Kant’s intuitive understanding and Spinoza’s *scientia intuitiva* in his scientific work. Goethe’s scientific method is therefore often interpreted from the perspectives of Kant and Spinoza. I recommend a complementary approach: start by reconstructing Goethe’s method on the basis of his writings and only then compare the results to Kant and Spinoza. This approach deals with obscure and fragmentary passages in Goethe’s texts by re-enacting and introspecting the mental manipulations he claimed to have performed. The results are concrete working hypotheses about Goethe’s procedure. These hypotheses can then be considered in the light of philosophical notions such as the intuitive understanding.