

Kantian Lessons about Mind, Meaning, and Rationality

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Kant revolutionized our thinking about what it is to have a mind. Some of what seem to me to be among the most important lessons he taught us are often not yet sufficiently appreciated, however. I think this is partly because they are often not themes that Kant himself explicitly emphasized. To appreciate these ideas, one must look primarily at what he *does*, rather than at what he *says* about what he is doing. For instance, the revolutionary conceptual transformation Kant focuses on is his “Copernican Revolution”: assignment of responsibility for some structural features of knowledge to the nature of the activities of knowing subjects rather than to the nature of the objects known. While this is, of course, an important aspect of his view, as I understand things it is a relatively late-coming move; it occurs significantly downstream from his most radical and important innovations, whose significance owes nothing to this subsequent, optional way of developing them. I want here to sketch in very broad terms some Kantian ideas that it seems most important to me for us to keep in mind in our own thinking about mind, meaning, and rationality. Some of these are very familiar, others less so. And the structural relations I perceive among them seem to me often not perceived.

I. FROM EPISTEMOLOGY TO SEMANTICS

Descartes gives philosophical thought about the mind an *epistemological* turn by using the character of our knowledge of them to distinguish minds from bodies.

Thoughts are understood as distinguished by their epistemic transparency and incorrigibility: their immunity respectively to ignorance and error. The rest of the world is that about which we can be ignorant or in error. Our thoughts can *misrepresent* their objects, or represent them incompletely. That is why our knowledge of the merely represented world is fallible and incomplete. But on pain of an infinite regress, those thoughts must themselves be understood as known *immediately*, by being *had* rather than by being *represented* in their turn—hence their privileged epistemic status. At the most basic level, however, Descartes takes it for granted that the world comes in two flavors: stuff that by nature represents and stuff that is by nature represented. The representing stuff is *intrinsically* “*tanquam rem*,” as if of things. The question he focuses on is what reason we have to think that things are in fact as we represent them to be. The fundamental Cartesian problematic is accordingly to explain the possibility of *knowledge*, that is, of beliefs about how things are outside the mind that are both *true* and *justified*. How can we show that things *really are* as they *appear* to us to be—that is, how can we *justify* that claim?

By contrast, Kant gives philosophical thought about the mind a *semantic* turn by shifting the center of attention from truth and justification to the nature of representation itself. He replaces concern with justifying claims to representational *success* by concern with understanding representational *purport*. His problem is not in the first instance showing that reality is often as it appears, but understanding what it is for things so much as to *appear* to be one way rather than another. Kant wants to know what it is for mental states to *be*, or to *appear to us* to be, to function for us as, *representings* of represented objects. This question is more basic than that addressed by his predecessors. Kant sees that the *epistemological* question has *semantic* presuppositions. The issue for him is not *knowledge*, but *intentionality*.

These projects can each be thought of as responding to the threat of *skepticism*. But the kinds of skepticism addressed are quite different. Descartes worries about responding to the threat of *epistemological* skepticism: things may not in fact be at all as we take them to be. Or at least, we can't *show* that they are. Kant worries about responding to the threat of a deeper and more radical *semantic* skepticism. This is the claim that the very idea of our mental states *purporting* to specify how things are is unintelligible. Kant's most basic transcendental question does not, as his own characterization of his project suggests, concern the condition of the possibility of synthetic knowledge *a priori*, but the conditions of the intelligibility of representational *objectivity*: of states or episodes that answer for their correctness to how it is with the objects they represent.

In asking this question, Kant moves to an issue that is clearly conceptually prior to the one that is central for Descartes. And this move is not of merely historical interest. The principal argument of Sellars's masterwork *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* is that the soft underbelly of both traditional and logical empiricism is their implicit semantics. Broadly Cartesian foundationalism depends on there being a *semantically autonomous* stratum of thought—what is 'given', *both* semantically *and* epistemologically. It is this *semantic* givenness that Sellars ulti-

mately takes issue with. So Sellars offers Kantian semantic arguments against the epistemological Myth of the Given. More specifically, Sellars argues that there cannot be an autonomous language game—one that can be played though no other is—that consists entirely of making non-inferential reports. Unless some claims (endorsements) can be made as the conclusions of *inferences*, none of them can count as *conceptually* contentful, in the sense required for them even potentially to offer *evidence* or *justification* for further conclusions. That is, nothing that cannot serve as the *conclusion* of inference can serve as the *premise* for one. We'll see further along that this, too, is a Kantian theme. But for now I'm not concerned to say why one might think Sellars is *right* on this point (though I think he is)—only that he is developing Kant's response to Descartes.

II. A SEMANTIC RESPONSE TO EPISTEMOLOGICAL SKEPTICISM

So far I've said that Kant points out that before one worries about whether and under what circumstances mental representation is and can be known to be generically *successful* one needs to think hard about what it is for something to be taken or treated as, to have the practical or functional significance of, a *representation* at all. In classical epistemological terms, one must understand what it is to *believe that* things are thus-and-so in order then to try to understand what it is for such a belief to be *true* or *justified*. But Kant in fact commits himself to something much stronger than this. He thinks that any adequate answer to the *semantic* skeptic will in fact be an adequate answer also to the *epistemological* skeptic. Specifying the conditions under which there can be representings at all will settle it that *some*, indeed, *many* of them must be *true*. This is the idea behind his "Refutation of Idealism": once one has seen what is presupposed by representational *purport*, one will see that it includes a substantial degree of representational *success*. Unless we are to a large extent *right* about how things are, we can't make sense even of our being *wrong* in special cases about how things are.

This is an exceptionally bold claim. Once again, it is echoed and developed in our own time. Davidson argues that his interpretivist methodology underwrites a principle of charity, which in turn has the consequence that in order properly to understand creatures as meaning or believing anything at all—as having a mind, or being rational—we must take it that most of their beliefs are *true*. Again, the lesson that Putnam draws from his analysis of the 'thoughts' of brains-in-vats is that *semantic* externalism has the *epistemological* consequence of ruling out radical skepticism: for the brains-in-vats to have thoughts *representing* an external world at all, they must be sufficiently in contact with it to have many *true* beliefs about it.

Looking back from the vantage point these arguments have secured for us, it seems to me that we can see that semantic arguments for this sort of epistemological conclusion must proceed in two stages. First, one must argue that for any conceptual

contents of the sort that represent things as being one way or another to be *entertained*, some others must be *endorsed*. Considering how some things *might* be (as it were, merely *representing* them as being thus-and-so) is not intelligible in total independence of taking other things *actually* to be one way or another. Such a Quinean thought contradicts methodologies (for instance, those of Dretske and Fodor) that depend on a layer-cake picture, according to which *first* one tells an autonomous semantic story about the possession of representational content by certain episodes, and only *then* adds on a story about what it is for some of those representations to play the functional role of being “in the belief box,” that is, to be taken to be *correct* or *successful* representations: to be *endorsed*, and not merely *entertained*. Frege notoriously treats merely entertaining a proposition as a speech-or-thought act wholly derivative from and dependent upon actually endorsing one (taking it to be true) in judgment or assertion. For him, merely entertaining a proposition is just endorsing various conditionals in which it appears as antecedent or conditional—and thereby exploring the circumstances under which it would be true, and the consequences that would ensue were it true.

It is not my purpose here to argue for one or the other of these ways of construing things. It *is* my purpose to point out that where the tradition Descartes inaugurated took it for granted that one could make autonomous sense of a mind as merely *entertaining* various fully contentful ideas or representations, and only then consider the “act of the will” that is plumping for or endorsing some of them (what in the contemporary context shows up as “putting representations in the belief box”), Kant’s idea of the understanding as in the first instance a function of *judgment*—concepts as intelligible only in terms of their contribution to the activity of judging—offers a radically different approach.

The second step in a semantic argument against epistemological skepticism would then have to be a justification of the claim that we cannot make sense of a whole constellation of representations, some of which are merely entertained and others of which are endorsed, unless we take it that many, perhaps most of the representations endorsed are correct or successful. Thus Davidson claims that local error is intelligibly attributable only against the background of an attribution of a good global grip on how things really are. And Putnam claims in effect that securing reference to natural kinds and individuals requires many true collateral beliefs about them.

An argument along these lines may or may not work. But Kant’s idea that one could show on *semantic* grounds that we have sufficient grounds to reject global *epistemological* skepticism about the truth and justification of our beliefs in general is a deep and radically original one. On top of Kant’s semantic *transformation* of philosophic problematics, from epistemological to semantic, he builds a semantic explanatory *aspiration*: that resolving the semantic problematic would resolve the epistemological one. At the end of this essay, I say something about how this general aspiration is worked out and applied to the epistemological predicament Kant saw Hume as leaving us in with respect to modal and normative concepts.

III. FORCE AND CONTENT

In making the point about how one might take responses to *semantic* skepticism to bear on *epistemological* skepticism, I invoked a distinction between two sorts of things one could *do* with representations: merely *entertain* them, or further, *endorse* them. But I don't think that in the end this is the most helpful way to consider the thought that underlies Kant's views in this vicinity. I think he sees the importance of distinguishing rather between what Frege calls 'force' and 'content'. This is the distinction between what one is *doing* in endorsing a claim—taking it to be true, whether internally by judging or externally by asserting—on the one hand, and what one thereby endorses, on the other. That is, Kant's practice depends on distinguishing between the two sides of what Sellars called "the notorious 'ing'/ed' ambiguity": between judgment as the act of *judging* and as the content *judged*. (A distinction of cardinal importance, for instance, in sorting out Berkeley's confusions, conflation, and equivocations regarding 'experience' in the sense of *experiencings* and what is *experienced*.) The Kant-Frege claim is that to think of merely entertaining a representation as something one can *do* is to fail to appreciate the distinction between judging and what is judged (between force and content).

The tradition Kant inherited understood judging as *predicating*: classifying something particular as being of some general kind, applying a universal concept to a particular one. Although Kant continues to use the traditional language (thereby distracting attention from the radical break he is making from that tradition on this point), he sees that this will not do. His table of the forms of judgments includes *conditional*, *disjunctive*, *negative* and *modal* judgments, none of which kinds is happily assimilated to the predicational-classificatory model. The underlying thought is not made fully explicit until Frege. In the traditional theory, the notion of *predication* is being asked to do two incompatible jobs. On the one hand, it serves as a structural way of building up new judgeable contents. On the other hand, it is thought of as a kind of doing that has the significance of endorsing such contents. The collision between these two senses in which predication is an 'operation' is clearest when one thinks about judgeable contents appearing as unasserted (unendorsed) components of more complex sentences (judgments). The conditional is a paradigm. When I assert "If *Pa* then *Pb*," I have *not* asserted *Pa*. Have I predicated *P* of *a*? If so, then predication does not amount to endorsement: predicating is not judging. If not, then it looks as though there is an equivocation when I detach from the conditional, reasoning:

If *Pa* then *Pb*
Pa
So: *Pb*

For the second premise *is* a predication, and the antecedent of the first premise *is not* a predication.

Geach picks up this Kant-Frege point, using it in his masterful gem-like essay “Ascriptivism” to argue against emotivist semantic analyses of terms of moral evaluation. His target is theories that understand the normative significance of terms such as ‘good’ not as part of the *content* of what is said about an act, not as specifying a characteristic that is being attributed, but rather as marking the *force* of the speech act. Calling something good is thought of as *doing* something distinctive: commending. Geach first asks what the limits of this ploy are. He points to the archaic English verb “to macarize,” meaning to characterize someone as happy. Does the possibility of understanding calling someone happy as macarizing her mean that happiness is not a property being invoked in specifying the content of the claim that someone is happy, because in saying that we are really *doing* something else, performing the special speech act of macarizing? He then suggests the embedding test: look to see if an expression can be used to construct a judgeable content that is *not* directly used to perform a speech act, paradigmatically in the antecedent of a conditional. Because imperatival force *is* grammatically marked, we cannot say:

“If shut the door, then”

But we *can* say things like “If he is happy, then I am glad,” and “If that is a good thing to do, then you have reason to do it.” In the first of these, I have *not* macarized anyone, and in the second, I have not commended any action. So the terms ‘good’ and ‘happy’ contribute to the specification of content and are not to be understood as mere force indicators.

Worrying about compound forms of judgment containing unendorsed judgeable contents as components required Kant to distinguish the operations by which such contents are constructed from the activity of endorsing the results of those operations.

IV. NORMATIVITY AND FORCE

For this reason, Kant could not take over the traditional classificatory theory of consciousness, which depends on understanding judging as predicating. But what can go in its place? Here is perhaps Kant’s deepest and most original idea, the axis around which I see all of his thought as revolving. What distinguishes judging and intentional doing from the activities of non-sapient creatures is not that they involve some special sort of mental processes, but that they are things knowers and agents are in a distinctive way *responsible* for. Judging and acting involve *commitments*. They are *endorsements*, exercises of *authority*. *Responsibility*, *commitment*, *endorsement*, *authority*—these are all *normative* notions. Judgments and actions make knowers and agents liable to characteristic kinds of *normative* assessment. Kant’s most basic idea is that minded creatures are to be distinguished from un-minded ones not by a

matter-of-fact ontological distinction (the presence of mind-stuff), but by a normative *deontological* one. This is his *normative characterization* of the mental.

Drawing on a jurisprudential tradition that includes Grotius, Pufendorf, and Crusius, Kant talks about norms in the form of *rules*. Judging and acting, endorsing claims and maxims, committing ourselves as to what is or shall be true, is binding ourselves by norms—making ourselves subject to assessment according to rules that articulate the *contents* of those commitments. Those norms, those rules, he calls ‘concepts’. In a strict sense, all a Kantian subject can do *is* apply concepts, either theoretically, in judging, or practically, in acting. Discursive, that is to say, concept-mongering creatures, are normative creatures—creatures who live, and move, and have their being in a normative space.

It follows that the most urgent philosophical task is to understand the nature of this normativity, the bindingness or validity (*Verbindlichkeit*, *Gültigkeit*) of conceptual norms. For Descartes, the question was how to think about our grip on our concepts, thoughts, or ideas (Is it clear? Is it distinct?). For Kant the question is rather how to understand their grip on us: the conditions of the intelligibility of our being bound by conceptual norms.

V. PRAGMATISM ABOUT THE RELATIONS BETWEEN FORCE AND CONTENT

This master idea has some of Kant’s most characteristic innovations as relatively immediate consequences. The logical tradition that understood judging as predicating did so as part of an order of semantic explanation that starts with concepts or terms, particular and general, advances on that basis to an understanding of judgments (judgeables) as applications of general to particular terms, and builds on that basis an account of inferences or consequences, construed syllogistically in terms of the sort of predication or classification exhibited by the judgments that appear as premises and conclusions. In a radical break with this tradition, Kant takes the whole judgment to be the conceptually and explanatorily basic unit at once of meaning, cognition, awareness, and experience. Concepts and their contents are to be understood only in terms of the contribution they make to judgments: concepts are functions of judgment. Kant adopts this semantic order of explanation because judgments are the minimal units of *responsibility*—the smallest semantic items that can express *commitments*. The semantic primacy of the propositional is a consequence of the central role he accords to the *normative* significance of our conceptually articulated doings. In Frege this thought shows up as the claim that judgeable contents are the smallest units to which pragmatic force—paradigmatically, assertional force—can attach. In the later Wittgenstein, it shows up as the claim that sentences are the smallest linguistic units with which one can make a move in the language game.

In conditioning the semantic account of content on the pragmatic account of force—the way the story about what is endorsed is shaped by the story about what endorsing is—Kant exhibits a kind of methodological *pragmatism*. In this sense, it consists not in the explanatory privileging of *practical* discursive activity over *theoretical* discursive activity, but in the explanatory privileging of *force over content*, within *both* the theoretical and the practical domains. Kant's idea is that his *normative characterization* of mental *activity*—understanding judging and acting as *endorsing*, taking responsibility for, committing oneself to some content—is the place to start in understanding and explaining the nature of the representational, object-presenting judgeable *contents* of those judgments. This explanatory strategy is Kant's *pragmatic turn*.

It is this order of explanation that is responsible for the most general features of Kant's account of the form of judgment. The subjective form of judgment is the “I think” that can accompany all our judgments, and so, in its pure formality, is the emptiest of all representations. Thought of in terms of the normative pragmatics of judgment, it is the mark of *who* is responsible for the judgment. (A corresponding point applies to the endorsement of practical maxims.) The transcendental unity of apperception is ‘transcendental’ because the sorting of endorsements into co-responsibility classes is a basic condition of the normative significance of commitments. Committing myself to the animal being a fox, or to driving you to the airport tomorrow morning, normatively preclude *me* from committing myself to its being a rabbit, or to *my* sleeping in tomorrow, but they do not in the same way constrain the commitments others might undertake.

The objective form of judgment is “the object = X” to which judgments always, by their very form as judgments, make implicit reference. Thought of in terms of the normative pragmatics of judgment, it is the mark of what one has made oneself responsible *to* by making a judgment. It expresses the objectivity of judgments, in the sense of their having intentional objects: what they purport to represent. The understanding of intentional directedness of judgments—the fact that they are *about* something—is normative. What the judgment is about is the object that determines the *correctness* of the commitment one has undertaken by endorsing it. (On the practical side, it is normative assessments of the *success* of an action for which the object to which one has made oneself responsible by endorsing a maxim must be addressed.) In endorsing a judgment one has made oneself liable to distinctive kinds of normative assessment. What one is thinking and talking *about* is what plays a special role, exercises a special sort of *authority* in such assessments. Representing something, talking *about* or thinking *of* it, is acknowledging its semantic *authority* over the correctness of the commitments one is making in judging. Representational purport is a normative phenomenon. Representational content is to be understood in terms of it.

VI. REASONS AND CONTENT

Intentionality—semantic contentfulness—comes in two flavors: ‘of’-intentionality and ‘that’-intentionality. The first, or *representational* dimension, is semantic directness at objects: what one is thinking *of* or talking *about*. The second, or *expressive* dimension, concerns the *content* of our thought and talk: what one is thinking or saying (about what one is thinking or talking about). So one can think *of* or *about* foxes, *that* they are nocturnal omnivores. What falls within the scope of the ‘of’ in such a specification is a term, while what follows the ‘that’ in such phrases as “I think (or John thinks) *that* foxes are nocturnal omnivores,” is a declarative sentence. The pre-Kantian early modern philosophical tradition took it for granted that one ought first to offer an independent account of representational, ‘of’-intentionality, of what it is to represent something, and only then, on that basis to explain expressive, ‘that’-intentionality, what it is to judge or claim *that* things are thus-and-so. It is part and parcel of Kant’s semantic revolution to reverse that order of explanation.

That is to say that just as he needs a new and different idea about what one is doing in judging, on the pragmatic side of force, so he needs a new and different idea about what that force attaches to or is invested in, on the semantic side of content. His thought that judging is taking responsibility, committing oneself, requires a corresponding characterization of what one thereby becomes responsible *for*, commits oneself *to*. The contents of judgments are articulated by *concepts*. The conceptual faculty, the understanding, is the faculty of judgment. Concepts articulate the contents of judgments by determining what one would make oneself responsible *for*, what one would be committing oneself *to*, were one to endorse those contents.

I think that at this point Kant wheels in a Leibnizian idea: concepts are in the first instance rules that express what is a *reason* for what. The concepts being applied determine what *follows* from a given claim(able), hence what (else) one would have committed oneself to or made oneself responsible for by endorsing it. They determine what counts as rational *evidence for* or *justification of* a claim(able) content, hence would count as a *reason for* endorsing it. An essential element of what one is responsible for in endorsing a claim or a maxim is having *reasons* for doing so. That is part of the responsibility that goes with investing one’s authority in the claim or maxim. Norms must have content, and the concepts that articulate those contents are rules specifying what is a reason for what. As *normative* creatures, we are *rational* creatures—not in the sense that we always or even generally do what we ought or have good reasons for doing what we do, but in the sense that we are always liable to normative assessment concerning our reasons for doing what we do, or thinking as we do. However *sensitive* we are in fact to the normative force of reasons (that peculiar force that so fascinated and puzzled the ancient Greek philosophers) on any particular occasion, we are the kind of creatures we are—knowers and agents, creatures whose world is structured by the commitments we undertake—only

because we are always liable to normative assessments of our *reasons*. *Discursive* creatures are those bound by *conceptual*, that is to say, *inferentially* articulated norms. It is at this level that Kant applies the lessons he learned from his *rationalist* predecessors.

To complete the semantic story, at this point an account is needed of the relation between the two kinds of intentionality: representational and expressive. That is, Kant must explain the contribution that the objects we become responsible *to* in judgment make to what we thereby become responsible *for*. This is the task to which he devotes the bulk of his efforts in the *Transcendental Analytic* and the *Transcendental Aesthetic*. It is in the service of this project that he introduces the faculty of sensuous intuition, the faculty by which particular objects are understood to be empirically given to us. His story about how to understand sensuous receptivity in terms of its role in or contribution to the contents of the concepts applied in empirical judgment (and hence, experience) is intricate, instructive, and fascinating. I'm not going to say anything about it here, for two reasons. First, a fundamental structural element of his story depends on lining up as essential dimensions of the intuition/concept distinction what I take to be three quite different (indeed, orthogonal) distinctions—that between receptivity and spontaneity, that between singular terms and predicates, and that between unrepeatability and repeatability (tokens and types). (It is startling to see the thinker who marked so carefully the distinction between representations of relations and relations of representations run together representations of particularity and particularity of representations.) In order to extract the important insights that are in play in his discussion, I think one must divide through by this mistaken assimilation. And that is no easy or straightforward task. More generally, however, my concern in this essay is to emphasize the radical and revolutionary conceptual shifts that Kant makes as part of the stage-setting for his assault on the problem he puts in the foreground of his text—elements that are in danger of remaining unnoticed in the background, but which may in fact constitute his best claim to contemporary philosophical attention and admiration.

Be that as it may, it is at this subsidiary explanatory level that I see Kant applying—for better or for worse¹—the lessons he learned from his *empiricist* predecessors. The semantic explanatory strategy of understanding and explaining representational 'of'-intentional content in terms of expressive 'that'-intentional content is Kant's *propositional* turn in semantics. I see it as a consequence of his normative and pragmatic turns. In terms of later developments, we can see it as a question of the relative explanatory priority of the notions of the sense *expressed* by a claim and the object *represented* by a singular term. With the wisdom of hindsight vouchsafed us by Frege's analysis (still opaque to Russell), we can see that two issues still remain to be disentangled here: the distinction between the content associated with declarative sentences and that associated with singular terms, and the distinction between sense and reference. Still, in this area Kant has once again not only made a crucial distinction, but on principled grounds endorsed a bold, unprecedented, and promising order of explanation.

VII. FREEDOM

Against the background of this set of ideas about normativity and rationality—which is to say his new ways of understanding pragmatic force and semantic content, and their relations to one another—Kant introduces a radically novel conception of *freedom*. Before Kant, freedom had traditionally been understood in *negative* terms: as freedom *from* some kind of constraint. He revolutionized our thought by introducing the idea of *positive* freedom: freedom *to* do something. Positive freedom is a kind of ability or practical capacity. Even if I am not tied up, threatened, or otherwise restrained from playing the Minute Waltz, and hence am in the negative sense entirely free to do so, I am nonetheless not free to play it in the positive sense if I don't have a piano available, or do not know how to play the one that is available.

Kant's specific conception of positive freedom is normative. Being free is being able to adopt normative statuses, paradigmatically, to commit oneself, to undertake responsibilities. It is the capacity to bind oneself by conceptual norms, in judgment and action. This is exercising a certain kind of inferentially articulated authority—a kind that comes with a correlative rational responsibility to have reasons for one's endorsements. To use an example suggested by Kant's metaphor in "What is Enlightenment?" consider what happens when young people achieve their legal majority. Suddenly they can enter into contracts, and so legally bind themselves. Hence they can do things such as borrow money, start businesses, and take out mortgages. This change of normative status involves a huge increase in positive freedom. The difference between discursive creatures and non-discursive ones is likewise to be understood in terms of the sort of normative positive *freedom* exhibited by the concept-users. On this account, being free is not only *compatible* with constraint by norms, it *consists* in constraint by norms. Since the norms are *conceptual* norms, their content is articulated by *reasons*. Positive normative freedom is the capacity to act for reasons, not in a causal sense, but in the normative sense of the ability to bind oneself by norms that make one liable to assessment as to one's reasons.

This constellation of ideas about normativity, reason, and freedom is, I think, what Heidegger means when he talks about "the dignity and spiritual greatness of German Idealism."

VIII. AUTONOMY AND NORMATIVITY

One of the permanent intellectual achievements and great philosophical legacies of the Enlightenment was the development of secular conceptions of legal, political, and moral normativity. In the place of traditional appeals to authority derived from divine commands, thought of as ontologically based upon the status of the heavenly Lord as creator of those he commands, Enlightenment philosophers conceived of kinds of responsibility and authority (commitment and entitlement) that derived

from the practical attitudes of human beings. Thus for instance in social contract theories of political obligation, normative statuses are thought of as instituted by the intent of individuals to bind themselves, on the model of promising or entering into a contract. Political authority is understood as ultimately derived from its (perhaps only implicit) *acknowledgment* by those over whom it is exercised. Following Rousseau, Kant radicalizes this line of thought, developing on its basis a new criterion of demarcation for the normative, in terms of *autonomy*. This is the idea that we are genuinely normatively constrained only by rules we constrain *ourselves* by, that we adopt and acknowledge *as* binding on us. The difference between non-normative *compulsion* and normative *authority* is that we are genuinely normatively responsible only to what we acknowledge as authoritative. In the end, we can only bind ourselves, in the sense that we are only bound by the results of exercises of our freedom: self-bindings, commitments we have undertaken.

The acknowledgment of authority may be merely implicit, as when Kant argues that in acknowledging others as concept-users we are implicitly also acknowledging a commitment not to treat their concept-using activities as mere means to our own ends. That is, there can be background commitments that are part of the implicit structure of rationality and normativity as such. But even in these cases, the source of our normative *statuses* is understood to lie in our normative *attitudes*. Merely natural creatures are bound only by rules in the form of laws whose bindingness is not at all conditioned by their acknowledgment of those rules as binding on them. Normatively free, rational creatures are also bound by norms, which is to say by rules that are binding only insofar as they are acknowledged as binding by those creatures. As Kant says, we are bound not just by rules, but by *conceptions* of rules.

IX. THE FORCE AND CONTENT OF CONCEPTUAL NORMS

It is important to notice that this picture requires the strict conceptual separation of the *content* of norms from their normative *force*. The Kant-Rousseau autonomy understanding of the nature of the force or bindingness of norms is that it is always self-binding. Only we ourselves can *normatively* bind ourselves. It is in the end up to us what we are committed to and responsible for (though acknowledging *any* conceptual commitments may involve further implicit rationality- and intentionality-structural commitments). If not only the normative force, but also the contents of those commitments are *also* up to us, then, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, “whatever seems right to me is right” and talk of what is right or wrong can get no intelligible grip: no norm has been brought to bear, no commitment undertaken. Put another way, autonomy, binding oneself by a norm, rule, or law, has two components, corresponding to ‘autos’ and ‘nomos’. One must bind *oneself*, but one must also *bind* oneself. If not only *that* one is bound by a certain norm, but also *what* that norm involves—what is correct or incorrect according to it—is up to the one

endorsing it, the notion that one is *bound*, that a distinction has been put in place between what is correct and incorrect according to that norm goes missing. The attitude-dependence of normative *force*, which is what the autonomy thesis asserts, is intelligible only in a context in which the boundaries of the *content*—what I acknowledge as constraining me and by that constraint *make* into a normative constraint on me in the sense of opening myself up to normative assessments according to it—are *not* in the same way attitude dependent. That is a condition of making the notion of normative *constraint* intelligible.

Kant secures this necessary division of labor by appeal to *concepts*, as rules that determine both what is a reason for what and what falls under them. His picture of empirical activity as consisting in the application of concepts—of judging and acting as consisting in the endorsement of propositions and maxims—strictly separates the contents endorsed from the acts of endorsing them. The latter is our responsibility, the former is not. This does not require that the constitution of conceptual contents be wholly independent of our activity. Kant in fact sees “judgments of reflection” as playing a crucial role in it. It requires only that each empirical (“determinate”) judgment be made in a context in which already determinately contentful concepts are available as candidates for application. The judging or acting empirical consciousness always already has available a stable of completely determinate concepts. Its function is to choose among them, picking which ones to invest its authority in by applying to objects, hence which conceptually articulated responsibility to assume, which discursive commitments to undertake. Judging that what I see ahead is a *dog*—applying that concept in perceptual judgment—may initially be successfully integratable into my transcendental unity of apperception, in that it does not contradict any of my other commitments. But subsequent empirical experience may normatively require me to withdraw that characterization and to apply instead the concept *fox*. That is my activity and my responsibility. But what other judgments are compatible with somethings being a dog or a fox is *not* at that point up to me. It is settled by the contents of those concepts, by the particular rules I can choose to apply.

In taking this line, Kant is adopting a characteristic rationalist order of explanation. It starts with the idea that empirical experience presupposes the availability of determinate concepts. For apperception—awareness in the sense required for sapience, awareness that can have *cognitive* significance—is judgment: the application of concepts. Even classification of something particular as of some general kind counts as *awareness* only if the general kind one applies is a *concept*: something whose application can both serve as and stand in need of *reasons* constituted by the application of *other* concepts. When an iron pipe rusts in the rain, it is in some sense classifying its environment as being of a certain general kind, but is in no interesting sense *aware* of it. So one must already have concepts in order to be aware of anything at all.

Kant, of course, understands *apperception*—what the transcendental unity of apperception is a unity of—which is to say judgment, in normative terms of commitments, responsibility, and endorsement. The transcendental *unity* of apperception is a normative unity: judges as such are obliged to relinquish commitment to

contents that are *incompatible* with their other commitments, or which have such commitments as their consequences. For if two commitments are incompatible, each serves as a reason to give up the other. That normative unity is *transcendental* because reference to *objects*—the representational ‘of’-intentionality that Kant is concerned to show is a necessary sub-structure of inferential ‘that’-intentionality—is secured in part precisely by ‘repelling’ incompatible commitments. The judgment that A is a dog is not incompatible with the judgment that B is a fox. The judgment that A is a dog is incompatible with the judgment that A is a fox. Taking a dog-judgment to be incompatible with a fox-judgment is taking them to refer to or represent the *same* object. Taking it that A is a dog does not entail that B is a mammal, but taking it that A is a dog does entail that A is a mammal. Drawing the inference is taking it that the two judgments refer to the same object. This, in a nutshell, is how the normative demand for a *rational* unity of apperception (judgments) makes intelligible representational purport: what it is to take or treat judgments as representing or being about objects. For concepts to perform their function in articulating the transcendental unity of apperception, the inferential and incompatibility relations they stand in to one another must be settled independently of and antecedently to our particular applications of them in judgment.

X. HEGEL AND THE SOCIAL DIVISION OF LABOR

Of course, this is just the point at which the pre-Kantian rationalists notoriously faced the problem of where determinate concepts come from. If they are presupposed by experiential awareness, then it seems that they cannot be thought of as derived from it, for instance by abstraction. Once the normative apperceptive enterprise is up-and-running, further concepts may be produced or refined by various kinds of judgments (for instance, reflective ones), but concepts must always already be available for judgment, and hence apperception, to take place at all. Empirical activity, paradigmatically apperception in the form of judgment, presupposes transcendental activity, which is the rational criticism and rectification of one’s commitments, making them into a normatively coherent, unified system. Defining that normative unity requires the availability of concepts with already determinate contents (roles in reasoning). Leibniz’s appeal to innateness is not an attractive response to the resulting explanatory demand. And it would not be much improvement to punt the central issue of the institution of conceptual norms from the empirical into the noumenal realm. It is a nice question just how Kant’s account deals with this issue.

As I read him, Hegel criticizes Kant on just this point. He sees Kant as having been uncharacteristically and culpably uncritical about the origin and nature of the determinate contentfulness of empirical concepts. Hegel’s principal innovation is his idea that in order to follow through on Kant’s fundamental insight into the

essentially *normative* character of mind, meaning, and rationality, we need to recognize that *normative* statuses such as authority and responsibility are at base *social* statuses. The Enlightenment tradition was right to see normative statuses as instituted by normative attitudes. There was no such thing as commitments and entitlements, responsibility and authority, before we started practically *taking* or *treating* each other *as* committed and entitled, responsible and authoritative.

Think in this connection about the example appealed to earlier, of the young one who achieves legal majority upon reaching the age of twenty-one. The transformation in positive freedom is vast. But it is not the consequence of some magical *inner* transformation of the youth. It is *wholly* a shift in social status. *All* that changes is that others now *take* the individual to be able to commit himself, *hold* him responsible for what he does, *acknowledge* his authority so to bind himself. A Laplacian demon omniscient not only about physical occurrences, but also about Cartesian mental episodes, need not be able to discern any difference between what is going on when the subject scratches a signature on a document one day before and one day after his twenty-first birthday, so long as it confines its attention to what is going on under his skin and between his ears. There is indeed a difference of immense significance—but it takes place *outside* the individual. (Of course this social practice gains its point from the thought that older individuals are in general more likely to know what they are doing, what commitments and responsibilities they are undertaking, what they are authorizing, than younger ones are. But no sensible person thinks that every twenty-two-year-old understands these things better than any twenty-year-old.)

On this Hegelian social line, there is something importantly right about the Kant-Rousseau demarcation of the normative in terms of autonomy. We should think of each of us as bound only by the commitments we ourselves have undertaken (explicitly or implicitly). But that autonomy claim about normative *force*—that one is genuinely normatively bound only by what one has bound oneself by, commitments one has oneself endorsed—is intelligible in principle only against the background of a *social* division of labor concerning the relation between normative *force* and conceptual *content*. Here Kant's methodological individualism critically impoverishes his explanatory resources. It is an absolutely essential part of Hegel's story that we hold *each other* responsible, acknowledge *each other's* authority. Self-regarding practical normative attitudes cannot by themselves underwrite conceptual contents that swing sufficiently free of a knower's or agent's attitudes to count as genuinely normatively *constraining* her—as articulating determinate commitments and responsibilities.

Hegel's term for the normatively articulated realm of discursive activity (Kant's "realm of freedom") is 'Geist': spirit. At its core is *language*: "Language is the Dasein of Geist," Hegel says. That is where concepts (which for Hegel, as for Kant, is to say, norms) have their actual, public existence. (Cf. Sellars: "Grasp of a concept is mastery of the use of a word.") Here is how I think the social division of conceptual labor works on his picture. It is up to me which counter in the game I play, which

move I make. But is *not* then up to me what the significance of that counter is—what other moves it precludes or makes necessary. It is up to me what concept I apply in a particular judgment—whether I claim that the coin is made of copper or silver, for instance. But if I claim that it is copper, it is *not* then up to me what move I have made, what else I have committed myself to by using that term. So, for instance, I have thereby committed myself to the coin melting at 1084° C, but not at 1083° C, and to its having a density of 8920 kg/m³, in the sense that if those claims aren't true, neither is the one I made. And I have made a claim that is incompatible with saying that the coin is an electrical insulator. I can bind myself by these determinate conceptual norms because they are always already there in the always already up-and-running communal linguistic practices into which I enter as a young one. An essential part of what maintains them is the attitudes of others—in this case, of the metallurgical experts who would hold me responsible for those commitments on the basis of my performance, if the issue arose. Of course in this way the issue of the ultimate origins of concepts is only displaced, from the individual mind to the whole linguistic community—from the relatively recent to the relatively distant past. I think in fact there is a convincing story to be told about what it is for the normative “light to dawn slowly over the whole” among our hominid ancestors, but I'm not going to follow out this particular argumentative thread any further here.

XI. THE LINGUISTIC MODEL OF POSITIVE FREEDOM AS CONSTRAINT BY CONCEPTUAL NORMS

Instead, I want to say something about how Hegel's social, linguistic development of Kant's fundamental insight into the essentially normative character of our mindedness provides a model of positive freedom. One of the central issues of classical political philosophy is how to reconcile individual freedom with constraint by social, communal, or political norms. Kant's vision of us as rational creatures opens up space for an understanding of a kind of freedom that consists in being able to constrain ourselves by norms—indeed, by norms that are rational, in the sense that they are conceptual norms: norms articulating what is a reason for what. The normative conception of positive freedom makes possible a distinctive kind of answer to the question of how the loss of individual negative freedom—freedom from constraint—inevitably involved in being subject to institutional norms could be *rationaly justified*. Even if it can be justified from the point of view of the collective—which cannot exist without such constraints on individual behavior—it is important that it can also be understood as rationally justifiable from the point of view of the individual herself. In the Kantian context, such a justification could in principle consist in the corresponding increase in positive freedom.

The positive expressive freedom, the freedom *to* do something, that is obtainable only by constraining oneself by the conceptual norms implicit in *discursive*

social practices, speaking a public language, is a central case where such a justification evidently is available. Speaking a particular language requires complying with a daunting variety of norms, rules, and standards. The result of failure to comply with enough of them is unintelligibility. This fact can fade so far into the background as to be well-nigh invisible for our home languages, but it is an obtrusive, unpleasant, and unavoidable feature of working in a language in which one is *not* at home. The same phenomenon is manifest in texts that intentionally violate even a relatively small number of central grammatical and semantic norms, such as Gertrude Stein's prose. But the kind of positive freedom one gets in return for constraining oneself in these multifarious ways is distinctive and remarkable.

The astonishing empirical observation with which Chomsky inaugurated contemporary linguistic theory is that almost every sentence uttered by an adult native speaker is radically *novel*. That is, not only has that speaker never heard or uttered just that sequence of words before, but neither has anyone else—ever. “Have a nice day” may get a lot of play, but any tolerably complex sentence is almost bound to be new.

Quotation aside, it is for instance exceptionally unlikely that anyone else has ever used a sentence chosen at random from the story I've been telling. And this is not a special property of professor-speak. Surveys of large corpora of actual utterances (collected and collated by indefatigable graduate students) have repeatedly confirmed this empirically. And it can be demonstrated on more fundamental grounds by looking at the number of sentences of, say, thirty words or less that a relatively simple grammar can construct using the extremely minimal 5,000-word vocabulary of Basic English. There hasn't been time in human history for us to have used a substantial proportion of those sentences, even if every human there had ever been always spoke English and did nothing but chatter incessantly. Yet I have no trouble producing, and you have no trouble understanding, a sentence that (in spite of its ordinariness) it is quite unlikely anyone has happened to use before, such as:

We shouldn't leave for the picnic until we're sure that we've packed my old wool blanket, the thermos, and all the sandwiches we made this morning.

This capacity for *radical semantic novelty* fundamentally distinguishes sapient creatures from those who do not engage in linguistic practices. Because of it we can (and do, all the time) make claims, formulate desires, and entertain goals that no one in the history of the world has ever before so much as considered. This massive positive expressive freedom transforms the lives of sentient creatures who become sapient by constraining themselves with linguistic—which is to say conceptual—norms.

So in the conceptual normativity implicit in linguistic practice we have a model of a kind of constraint—loss of negative freedom—that is repaid many times over in a bonanza of positive freedom. Anyone who was in a position to consider the trade-off rationally would consider it a once-in-a-lifetime bargain. Of course, one need

not be a creature like us. As Sellars says, one always could simply *not speak*—but only at the price of having nothing to say. And non-sapient sentients are hardly in a position to weigh the pros and cons involved. But the fact remains that there *is* an argument that shows that at least *this* sort of normative constraint is rational—that it pays off by opening up a dimension of positive expressive freedom that is a pearl without price, available in no other way. Hegel’s idea is that this case provides the model that every other social or political institution that proposes to constrain our negative freedom should be compared to and measured against. The question always is: what new kind of expressive freedom, what new kinds of life possibilities, what new kinds of commitment, responsibility, and authority are made possible by the institution? The strategy is to use an understanding of the basic metaphysical structure of mind, meaning, and rationality as the basis for normative assessment of lives and institutions.

XII. MODALITY AND LAWFULNESS

I want to close by mentioning a topic that initially no doubt seems far-removed indeed from issues of personal autonomy and political freedom: alethic modality. Kant read Hume’s practical and theoretical philosophies as raising variants of a single question. On the side of practical reasoning, he asks what our warrant is for moving from descriptions of how things are to prescriptions of how they ought to be. How can we rationally justify the move from ‘is’ to ‘ought’? On the side of theoretical reasoning, he asks what our warrant is for moving from descriptions of what in fact happens to characterizations of what must happen, and what could not happen. How can we rationally justify the move from statements of matter-of-factual regularities to formulations of necessary laws? In Kant’s terminology, these are both species of ‘necessity’: moral and natural necessity, respectively. For him, ‘necessary’ (notwendig) just means “according to a *rule*.” Hume’s predicament is that he finds that even his best understanding of *facts* doesn’t yield an understanding of *rules* governing those facts, underwriting assessments of which of the things that actually happen (something we can experience) *ought* to happen (are morally necessary), or *must* happen (are naturally necessary).

Kant’s response is that Hume’s predicament is not a real one, but the product of a confusion. One cannot in fact fully understand the empirical employment of ordinary determinate concepts such as ‘cat’ without at least implicitly understanding also what is made explicit by the modal concepts that articulate laws. Hume thinks he can understand what it is to say that the cat is on the mat without understanding what it means to say that it is *possible* for the cat to be elsewhere, but *necessary* that it not be larger than the Earth. Kant’s claim, put in contemporary terms, is that part of what one is committed to in applying any determinate concept in empirical circumstances is a distinction between counterfactual differences in circumstances that *would* and *would not* affect the truth of the judgment one is mak-

ing. It would still be true that the cat is on the mat if the lighting were subtly different, but it would not be true that the cat is on the mat if the force of gravity were two orders of magnitude stronger than it in fact is. The cat could still be on the mat if the mat had twice the area it does, but not if the floor under it were not rigid—that is, not disposed to resist possible deformations of its shape.

Hume frames his question as an epistemological one, concerning the justification of our claims to know what must happen or what ought to happen based on our experience of how things in fact are. Once again, Kant offers both a semantic diagnosis of the origins of the epistemological predicament that makes this question seem urgent and difficult. And once again, he offers a semantic response that, if successful, defuses the epistemological worry.

Sellars summarizes this Kantian thought in the title of one of his essays: “Concepts as Involving Laws, and Inconceivable Without Them.” This slogan is a good place to start in thinking about Kant’s point, but in fact Sellars’s own view is subtly but importantly different from Kant’s. For Sellars, the laws determining the truth of counterfactuals involving the application of a concept are part of the content of the concept. For Kant, modal concepts make explicit not something implicit in the *content* of determinate concepts, but something implicit in their *empirical use*, in *applying* them to make empirical *judgments*. That is why the pure concepts of the understanding—what he calls ‘categories’, such as *possibility* and *necessity*—are both to be understood in terms of the forms of judgment (the table of categories derives from the table of judgments) and express synthetic, rather than analytic necessities. From Kant’s point of view, a better slogan than Sellars’s would be “The *Use of Concepts in Empirical Judgments as Involving Laws and Inconceivable without Them.*”

A corresponding line of thought is to be mounted on the side of moral or practical necessity. Moral concepts make explicit commitments that are implicit in practical agency, in the exercise of intentional action, itself. Intentional agency is a thoroughly normative phenomenon because it, too, consists in the application of concepts, and applying concepts is undertaking commitments and responsibilities whose *content* is articulated by those concepts. Normative vocabulary makes explicit what is implicit in the practical use of concepts to endorse maxims, ends, and plans.

My point is that Kant’s response to Hume’s predicament—his account of the nature and expressive role of modal and normative “pure” concepts—is not in fact as removed from his discussion of the nature of freedom as might at first have appeared. Both are rooted in and developments of his normative turn: his fundamental reconstrual of mind, meaning, and rationality in normative terms.

XIII. CONCLUSION

My aim in this essay has been to convey what in my title I call “some Kantian lessons” about what it is to have a mind, to grasp and apply meanings, to be rational.

What I've been doing is not really Kant exegesis. I haven't been concerned to interpret particular bits of his text, so as to catch him expressing the views I've been attributing to him. That is an important and necessary task, and in its absence I can at most claim to have been expounding "Kantian" lessons, not Kant's own theory. My characterization of Kant's largest ideas and their relations to one another deserves to be controversial and is arguably tendentious. But in thinking about Kant's grandest philosophical contributions there is a standing danger of losing sight of the forest by focusing on the trees. The cost of succumbing to that danger is to fail to appreciate why Kant is so important: the conceptual sea-change he ushers in, the radically new constellation of philosophical ideas he puts in play. I think we have only really just begun the process of digesting those ideas. Though the thought sometimes tempts me, I will not in fact claim that Kant tells us nearly everything we need to know about minds, concepts, and their use and contents. But what he does tell us is so deep and significant, and ramifies into and reverberates in so many neighboring theoretical domains, that I think it does deserve to be thought of as the most important distinctively *philosophical* contribution to the multidisciplinary study of mind, meaning, and rationality. I have tried to say something here about why I think Kant is and remains for philosophers what the sea was for Swinburne: the great, gray mother of us all.

NOTE

1. John McDowell insists on the former, while I am inclined to the latter assessment.