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Kant on the Spontaneous Power of the Mind

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Abstract: It is well known that at the heart of Kant's Critical philosophy is the claim that the mind possesses an essentially spontaneous power or capacity [*Vermögen*]. It is also sometimes maintained that Kant's appeals to this spontaneous power are intimately tied to his recognition of there being a fundamental and irreducible normative dimension to judgment. However, I attempt to complicate this picture by way of appeal to some less appreciated influences upon the development of Kant's epistemology. A different conception of the role of spontaneity in judgment has clear precedents, I claim, in the works of Cudworth and Rousseau. There the imagined role for the active power of the mind is not to identify criteria that might serve as norms for epistemically responsible judgment. Rather the spontaneous power of the mind is cited as the source of representational contents that secure the truth conditions of our everyday claims to empirical knowledge.

Keywords: Kant, power, spontaneity, Cudworth, Rousseau

1. Introduction

It is well known that at the heart of Kant's Critical philosophy is a move to re-describe traditional metaphysics in terms of what can be grasped by different cognitive powers or capacities. Kant discusses a range of epistemic achievements in terms of such cognitive powers: besides the various sensory modalities, memory, etc., human beings possess a capacity for *sensible intuition*, *imagination*, *understanding*, *reason* and *judgment*. Distinguishing

the functional role of these capacities is no easy task. One might think though that the details of the division of labour between these powers is less important than a more abstract distinction that Kant draws regarding the powers of the mind. This claim is that the human mind is essentially characterized by the cooperation of two broad *types* of power, one *receptive* and the other *spontaneous* (A51/B75).¹ Preceding models of knowledge, it is claimed, had wrongly prioritized one or the other aspect of human cognition.² Kant holds that genuine cognition can only arise when representations from both powers are deployed in combination (A51/B75).³ In human beings the receptive power of the human mind is manifested in sensible intuition, i.e., a power of spatiotemporal representation within which the presence of particular objects is registered. The spontaneous power of the human mind is manifested in the understanding, i.e., a power of discursive representation with which those particular objects are seen as falling under concepts.

Such abstract characterizations seem to have the philosophical benefit of not being beholden to any particular psychological claim regarding the operation of this or that cognitive capacity. Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear how even to understand this abstract distinction.⁴ Aligning the distinction with *passive* and *active* powers respectively requires some elaboration, since a power seems to be at the very least an ability of the human mind to *do* something, and as such a ‘power to receive’ itself carries some minimal connotation of activity. More recently though some philosophers have stressed a different aspect to Kant’s thought that might perhaps illuminate the distinction. This aspect concerns the idea that Kant foresaw what later became recognized as the *normative*

¹ References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* will be given using the standard A/B system. All quotations follow the Guyer and Wood (1998) translation.

² For a recent discussion of the relevance of the distinction for German idealism more generally, see (Haag 2015).

³ For Kant’s so called ‘Discursivity Thesis’ see (Allison 2004b, 12–16)

⁴ Engstrom provides an extended reading that exploits Kant’s appeal to hylomorphism – see (Engstrom 2006).

dimension of cognition and judgment.⁵ Nailing down the meaning of ‘normative’ here is not straightforward, but an initial pass at explicating the term might involve the notion that the epistemic activity of a subject is understood in terms of that subject’s capacity to take *responsibility* for their judgment. Henry Allison, for example, sees normativity as pervading Kant’s account of judgment in general, in that the definition of spontaneity is in fact driven by the demand to account for normativity. According to Allison, ‘spontaneity functions in the technical Kantian sense as an idea in light of which the act of thinking must be conceived in order to retain its normative status’.⁶ The details of the account are of course complex, but at the heart of the theory is that the capacity to judge and to employ concepts in general is attached to Kant’s theory of apperception, and in particular to the claim that a capacity for self-conscious reference to one’s judgments is a necessary condition of the capacity of judgment itself. The very ability to use concepts on the one hand and ‘to take myself to be acting on the basis of reasons and a reflective evaluation of my situation rather than merely responding to stimuli’ on the other presented as being incredibly close.⁷ On such a picture, taking something as a reason for judging is so ingrained into the power of judgment that one cannot forsake the power of spontaneity without forsaking rationality *per se*.

In appealing to the idea of an ineliminable capacity to take oneself to be judging things to be thus and so, Allison explicitly refers to Kant’s discussion of ‘acting under the idea of freedom’ in the *Groundwork*.⁸ Here too Christine Korsgaard also sees a fundamental normative character to this aspect of Kant’s thought. We human beings are

⁵ The thought that the normative, spontaneous and conceptual domains are all co-extensive, if not identical, is notably defended in (McDowell 1994). The Kantian lineage of similar thoughts is defended in claimed in (Allison 1996; Allison 2004a; Brandom 2002; Pippin 1997) and others. The literature on the meaning and role of spontaneity is predictably large, though a range of the pertinent issues are covered in (Allison 1996; Brook 1994; Kern 2006; Kitcher 1990; Kitcher 2011; Land 2006; Merritt 2009; Valaris 2013).

⁶ (Allison 1996, 64).

⁷ (Allison 1996, 135).

⁸ (Kant 2014, 4: 448).

just those creatures who can ‘back up’ from the causally impinging data of experience and to take a view as to whether or not we ought to endorse the content that experience is presenting to consciousness. We are the creatures who can ask ourselves the question: ‘Is this perception really a reason to believe?’⁹ For both Allison and Korsgaard the very capacity for self-consciousness – manifested for Kant by the ‘I think’ that can precede all my possible judgments – is intimately tied to the capacity to take responsibility for those judgments. What experience presents is one thing, what we deem ought to be judged by that experience is another. Perceptual evidence may provide a range of interpretations as to what is the case, and theoretical judgment is required to differentiate the true from the false reading. Similarly, desires may recommend various courses of action, and practical judgment is required to determine which recommendation ought to be endorsed with the formation of intentions to act. Spontaneity then appears to be the capacity to take a view as to how to respond to evidence towards which we might otherwise be indifferent; it is the capacity to make up one’s mind about what the evidence presents.

My aim here is not to deny that there might be a normative dimension to Kant’s notion of a spontaneous power. Instead I hope only to complicate the picture by consideration of the role of spontaneity in one aspect of its historical context. As a starting point, one might consider Early Modern theories of freedom. As Lisa Sarasohn has noted, Pierre Gassendi – to name but one – distinguished between ‘spontaneity’ and ‘freedom’. The former indicates a *non-voluntary* active contribution of the mind to received stimuli that nevertheless goes beyond what is just received by those stimuli. Freedom, by contrast, is characterized by the so-called ‘liberty of indifference’, by the active and *voluntary* choosing between options that cannot force a response from us by themselves.¹⁰

Taking a cue from this distinction, my claim will be that ‘spontaneity’ in the Kantian

⁹ (Korsgaard 1996, 110:92–3). The passage is quoted by Boyle in the context of discussion of Kantian approaches to normativity and judgment (Boyle 2011, 2).

¹⁰ (Sarasohn 1996, 127ff.) Similar distinctions between types of activity were common in the Early Modern period – for some discussion see (Pink 2011).

system has in the first instance stronger connotations with Gassendi's sense of the term, rather than as being an exercise of a capacity marked by the liberty of indifference. Spontaneity, I will claim, does not seem to be solely related for Kant to the question of taking a stand on how others ought to judge something; it primarily relates to how particular representational content enter into our experiential cognition in the first place. Kant characterizes 'spontaneity' as a capacity to bring forth contents from itself, not as a capacity to choose between equally compelling contents (A51/B75). Here I will claim the notion of 'spontaneity' is non-metaphorical: it refers to a mind's capacity to literally bring into being representational contents that are not reducible to previously received content. To complicate matters further however, there are grounds for thinking that this might not adequately distinguish spontaneity either, for it is the case that for Kant our receptive capacity, i.e., sensibility, *also* produces representational content out of itself. Nevertheless, some of Kant's canonical occasions of characterizing the spontaneous work of the understanding – such as the Second Analogy – are also more plausibly interpreted, I will claim, as occasions of the subject actively *introducing content* into one's perceptual states.

Given these complications, I don't aspire to resolve the question of the meaning of spontaneity in Kant's Critical philosophy here but instead aim to present some neglected historical considerations that go some way to explaining the genesis of this complexity.¹¹ There has been no shortage of consideration of the development of Kant's epistemology in the context of the works of Locke, Hume and Leibniz and the Wolffian tradition.¹² There are other important and perhaps surprising sources however that can illuminate

¹¹ For one thing, the issue of Kantian spontaneity in the Anglophone literature is entangled with the question as to whether Kant's model of cognition might be thought to anticipate certain broadly functionalist and material theories of the mind. This thought seems to have originated in (Sellars 1970) and was subsequently taken up by (Brook 1994) and (Kitcher 1990; Kitcher 2011). The view faces opposition from (Allison 1996) and (Pippin 1997). The discussion I present here is not designed to have any bearing on this particular debate.

¹² A further source of influence, one I deliberately neglect here for lack of space, concerns the Newtonian conception of 'power' and the relevance (if any) of Kant's subsequent scientific work to his transcendental philosophy of mind.

Kant's intellectual development – here I present some context provided by considering the views of Cudworth and Rousseau.¹³ Firstly, I offer (in §2) a brief synopsis of some of Cudworth's arguments in the *True Intellectual System of the Universe* – a work with which Kant was familiar – for the existence of an active intellectual power as the key necessary source of human knowledge. Here we find an argument schema that gets replayed subsequently in different forms by different thinkers. This argument moves from claims regarding the paucity of the representational information given by the senses to the conclusion that content must be contributed by an active intellectual power. I then (§3) outline how Jean-Jacques Rousseau deployed the argument in *Émile* in opposition to what he saw as the pernicious influence of materialist thinkers such as D'Holbach, De la Mettrie, and especially Helvetius's *De l'Esprit*. Here the argument is presented with the particular focus upon the active contribution of spatial information in perceptual complexes. In §4 I argue that Kant takes up Rousseau's claim that spatial relational information is not given in by the senses as part of his claim regarding the subject's contribution of spatial and temporal intuition as part of experiential cognition. In §5 I argue how the argument schema is implicit in Kant's argument for the understanding's spontaneous contribution of causal relational information in the Second Analogy. I conclude with some questions regarding the implications of interpreting Kant's appeal to spontaneity as involving claims regarding norms of epistemic responsibility.

¹³ My aim is to draw attention to some neglected sources that were likely to have been influential for Kant. Kant possessed a copy of the Latin version of Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* in his library (Warda 1922, 47). However, the possible influence of the work has not been examined in the secondary literature. Secondly, while Rousseau's *Emile* is by contrast widely acknowledged to have been an enormously influential work for Kant, the influence of Rousseau's epistemological reflections have been similarly neglected. This is not to exclude the possibility of other sources of influence however, e.g., the reception of some of the arguments I claim Kant was concerned have Platonic origins, such as in the *Theaetetus* and the *Phaedo*, the latter of which was made very popular by Moses Mendelssohn. However, Cudworth's *True Intellectual System* abounds in Platonic references, and could have as easily been the source of many of Kant's thoughts here. The appearance of these arguments in *Emile* in the 1760s, when Kant was developing many of the crucial positions of the Critical period, and – as I will argue – the focus there upon *spatial* relations – suggest a likely source of formative influence. I'm grateful to anonymous reviewers pressing me to clarify the scope of my claims here.

2. Cudworth's Mirror

Kant would have been familiar with arguments for the role of the active intellect from Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*. One of the central claims is for a two-power model of human cognition, one passive and one active:

...[T]here are two kinds of perceptive cogitations in the soul; the one passive, when the soul perceives by suffering from its body, and the objects without; the other active, when it perceives by exerting its own native vigor from within itself.

(Cudworth 1743, II: 428)

Cudworth's further goal is to align sensation with the passive power and intellect with the active power of the human mind. In Book III Cudworth aims to 'show the different natures of sense and intellection or knowledge' (Cudworth 1743, II: 401). More specifically, he aims to begin with 'sense, to show what it is, and that it is not knowledge' (Cudworth 1743, II: 401). For Cudworth, '[s]ense is but the offering or presenting of some object to the mind, to give it an occasion to exercise its own inward activity upon' (Cudworth 1743, II: 409). He maintains a very high criterion for the acquisition of knowledge of objects, holding that representations 'which doth not reach to the essence of any thing, cannot reach to truth or knowledge' (Cudworth 1743, II: 412). By stipulated definition however, sensory representations do not 'reach to the essence' of objects. This is because human beings are passively affected through representations brought about in us *by* the objects. Sensory representations are thereby characterized as derivative effects of the things themselves, and non-reflective of their 'inner' nature.

Cudworth appeals to standard arguments from perceptual variability, illusion, and dreaming in support of the claim that sensation cannot provide knowledge of objects. Subsequently, in Book IV he claims that it ‘must needs follow from hence, that knowledge is an inward and active energy of the mind itself’ (Cudworth 1743, II: 423). In support of this claim, he argues that since knowledge involves understanding, then even ordinary everyday perceptual knowledge must involve some understanding. If it did not, i.e., if it were to be expressed as the mere receipt of sensory information (say, in the form of visual images), then the same understanding of the content of what is perceived ought to be attributed to anything that is capable of merely receiving such images. This however is a capacity that can be attributed even to inanimate objects:

If intellection and knowledge were mere passion from without, or the bare reception of extraneous and adventitious forms, then no reason could be given at all why a mirror or looking-glass should not understand; whereas it cannot so much as sensibly perceive those images which it receives and reflects to us. (Cudworth 1743, II: 424).

He concludes that since knowledge of the essence of objects is possible (since it is actual) and since objects ‘without’ the mind are only sensed and not known, it must be that what is known when we know an object is something that ultimately lies within the mind: and this means that the ‘immediate objects of intellection are not without the mind that understands’ (Cudworth 1743, II: 425).

Cudworth initially argues that human cognition cannot be purely receptive on the grounds of the actuality of the contents of the mind that are not derived from perceptual experiences and moreover cannot ‘be pictured at all by the fancy in any sensible colours’. Such ideas include ‘wisdom, folly, prudence, imprudence, knowledge, ignorance, verity,

falsity, virtue, vice, honesty, dishonesty, justice, injustice, volition' etc. (Cudworth 1743, II: 432). The existence of an active intellect as a source of representational content is argued for on other grounds also. Whereas the preceding ideas are thought of as relating to 'incorporeal things' there also 'are many relative notions and ideas, attributed as well to corporeal as incorporeal things that proceed wholly from the activity of the mind comparing one thing with another' (Cudworth 1743, II: 432). There are notions that are generated from acts of a subject's comparison of two or more sensed objects – and so therefore originate on occasions of our sensory experience with corporeal objects – and yet do not derive their content from those objects themselves.

In order to press the point home, Cudworth again uses the example of a mirror, although he now runs the argument in the opposite direction. He claims that the physical eye functions much as a mirror does, i.e., as something that can merely receive and retain visual imagery. If human visual perception were a purely receptive capacity, then the images received and retained in the human eye would be identical in grasped content to the images retained in a mirror. But in ordinary perception of empirical objects, Cudworth claims, much more content is grasped than is presented in a mirror's reflection. Taking the example of a watch being held before the mirror, all that it (or the human eye) can represent is 'only its being variously affected, from different colors, figures, protuberancies [*sic*], cavities, sculptures, local motions, one after another...' (Cudworth 1743, II: 432). Actual human perception however, which involves the intellect working in cooperation with the senses, represents far more:

But now the mind or intellect being superadded to this sentient eye, and exerting its active and more comprehensive power upon all that which was reflected from the mirror, and passively perceived by the sentient eye, as it doth actually and intellectually comprehend the same things over again, which sense had perceived

before in another manner...so it proceeds further, and compares all the several parts of this ingenious machine or self-mover one with another. (Cudworth 1743, II: 434).

What is perceived, Cudworth claims, is the watch hanging from a chain, the motion of its movement when the chain is moved, the movement of parts, that some of the parts are larger than others, the division of the watch face into equal parts, and so on. From this, he concludes, it must be that these contents are actively provided by the intellect itself:

Whereupon the intellect, besides figure, color, magnitude and motions, raises and excites within itself the intelligible ideas of cause and effect, means, end, priority and posteriority, equality and inequality, order and proportion, symmetry and asymmetry, aptitude and inaptitude, sign and thing signified, whole and part, in a manner all the logical and relative notions that are. Whereas the sentient eye by which this whole mechanism was represented to the intellect, perceived none of all this things...(Cudworth 1743, II: 435)

The argument is effectively a kind of poverty of the stimulus argument.¹⁴ If the eye possesses a purely receptive function for visual sensory stimuli, and if visual perception of empirical objects is purely receptive, then the content of visual perception ought to be identical to the content that an eye (or a mirror) can receive. Since ordinary perceptual content is in fact much richer, and since it is accepted that the physical eye performs a purely receptive function, the premise that visual perception of empirical objects is purely receptive must be rejected. The argument schema is relatively straightforward. The first premise is that ordinary perceptual cognition of objects is rich in content, including

¹⁴ The type of argument, usually associated with Chomskyan nativism, is discussed at length in (Cowie 1999) and (Laurence and Margolis 2001).

complex relational content such as spatiotemporal, mereological and causal information. The second premise involves an unargued-for phenomenological claim that sensory content does not include any such complex relational information.¹⁵ For Cudworth, the eye can represent only ‘colour and figure’ and he states that with regard to the intelligible ideas listed above ‘there is no colour nor figure in any of these things’ (Cudworth 1743, II: 435). A third unstated premise is that human beings’ passive capacity to receive representational information ‘from without’ is exhausted by the content delivered by the senses. It is then concluded that the complex relational content routinely grasped in ordinary perceptual cognition of objects must stem from a *non*-passive capacity.

An implicit but crucial element of Cudworth’s analysis is that the spontaneous introduction of content must be made to preserve the truth of judgments regarding complex relations. Cudworth’s attack is upon what Klein calls the *reality principle*, i.e., the claim that ‘the distinction between reality and fantasy matches the distinction between what the mind receives passively from sensation and what it actively creates in thought’ (Klein 2009, 418). The essence of the opposition to the principle are the claims that the representational content provided by sensation is always simple and atomistic in character, and that the complex relational character of content grasped even in ordinary perception cannot be plausibly modeled as aggregates of such simple atomistic elements. Thus one must adopt an extremely wide-ranging error theory, and claim that such judgments are uniformly false or – if one accepts that at least some such judgments can be true – reject the reality principle.

Cudworth’s diagnosis of why some philosophers adopt the model of a purely receptive cognitive subject is that they confuse the occasions of perceptual experience with the sources of perceptual content:

¹⁵ The premise is, it seems to me, one that was remarkably popular in Early Modern philosophy of mind. A direct attack upon this premise – as pointed out to me by reviewer – would emerge in Stumpf’s *Erkenntnistheorie* (Stumpf 1939, 228).

Because the notions...of those...ideas....are most commonly excited and awakened occasionally from the appulse of outward objects knocking at the door of the senses. And these men not distinguishing betwixt the outward occasion or invitation of these cogitations, and the immediate active or productive cause of them, impute them therefore all alike...to the efficiency or activity of the outward objects upon us. (Cudworth 1743, II: 432–3)

When Kant comes to his famous introduction to the project of the First *Critique* in the B-edition, he begins by drawing attention to the same basis of the fallacy:

But although all our cognition commences **with** experience, yet it does not on that account all arise **from** experience: For it could well be that even our experiential cognition is a composite of that which we receive through impressions and that which our own cognitive faculty (merely prompted by sensible impressions) provides out of itself, which addition we cannot distinguish from that fundamental material until long practice has made us attentive to it and skilled in separating it out. (B1-2)

The diagnostic element that Kant may have inherited from Cudworth is that adherence to the reality principle can seem a natural and intuitive position given the necessary enabling conditions of experiential cognition. Given that the sensory stimulus generated by an ontologically independent object is a necessary condition of experience, it is natural to fall into the thought that by attending to what is given solely from such sources we might attend more closely to reality. A way of avoiding this commitment to the reality principle is to begin with the data of some accepted true judgments and then to infer from that the mind-independent and mind-dependent conditions that must obtain in order for such judgments' truth conditions to obtain. Kant's strategy in the First *Critique*,

whereby *a priori* cognition in the form of mathematical and dynamical judgments is accepted from the outset, provides an instance of such a strategy in operation (cf. B4-5).

3. Rousseau's Sticks

When Kant offers his distinction between sensibility and understanding, he characterizes the difference between the two in terms of the receptivity of the former and the spontaneity of the latter. This latter distinction is in turn cashed out in terms of two different powers: one power of the mind to receive representational content from without, and a second representational capacity to produce representational content from within:

If we will call the receptivity of our mind to receive representations insofar as it is affected in some way sensibility, then on the contrary faculty for bringing forth representations itself, or the spontaneity of cognition, is the understanding. (A51/B75)

However, it is clear that Kant thinks that sensibility itself, considered as a 'capacity...to acquire representations through the way in which we are affected by objects' (A19/B33) is to be understood in terms of a hylomorphism. The matter of sensibility is sensation, but the *form* of sensibility is intuition. Kant characterizes the form of sensibility in terms of a capacity for a relational ordering of those sensations that are the matter of sensibility. Kant quickly argues for the *a priori* status of the form of sensibility by claiming that 'that within which the sensations can alone be ordered and placed in a certain form cannot itself be a sensation' and that therefore the form of sensibility must 'all lie ready for it in the mind *a priori*' (A12/B34). Thus by virtue of the definition of receptivity and

spontaneity, our capacity to contribute the form of sensibility appears to itself be something that could accurately be described as an exercise of spontaneity.¹⁶

This surprising claim might appear less odd when one considers the fact that one of the decisive influences upon Kant's intellectual development involved a discussion of how the subject's spontaneity can be observed in simple cases of the cognition of *spatial* relations. In describing why sense cannot communicate any intelligible ideas, Cudworth commented that it is only the intellect that 'compares all the several parts...one with another' (Cudworth 1743, II: 434). This capacity for *comparison*, he maintains, is constitutive of the distinction between the passive senses and active intellect:

Sense sees particular things absolutely, intellect compares them according to those relations they have to one another, has a comprehensive idea of a *totum*, whole, made up of several parts as one thing. (Cudworth 1743, II: 439)

This distinction between particulars being presented and comparisons and relations between them being drawn would have also emerged in an entirely different context, that of his famous encounter in the 1760s with the works of Rousseau, and in particular with *Émile*. While the impact of Rousseau's writings upon Kant's intellectual development has been widely recognized, this influence has usually been discussed with regard to Kant's practical philosophy.¹⁷ As is acknowledged however, large portions of *Émile* are taken up with some of Rousseau's epistemological reflections.¹⁸ These reflections were stimulated by Rousseau's reading of Helvetius's *De l'Esprit* and his attempt to combat what he saw as Helvetius's dangerous combination of sensationism, materialism, Epicureanism and

¹⁶ The relationship between the two faculties is a notoriously vexed one, from Kant's odd suggestion that each capacity might nevertheless trace back to a single source (A15/B30) to his claim that the original intuition of space is itself a product of the synthesis of the understanding (B160-1 – note). I don't attempt to resolve these difficulties here.

¹⁷ E.g. see (Ameriks 2012; Cassirer 1983; Shell 2009; Velkley 1989; Zammito 2002).

¹⁸ For discussion of Rousseau's epistemology see (Hanley 2012; Marshall 2012).

atheism.¹⁹ The work begins by putting forward what might initially be thought of as a two-power model of cognition. However, Helvetius is explicit in identifying them as ‘two passive powers’. Firstly, there is the ‘faculty of receiving the different impressions caused by external objects’ which he calls ‘Physical Sensibility’; secondly there is ‘Memory’ i.e., ‘the faculty of preserving the impressions caused by these objects’ (Helvetius 1807, 1–2, Essay I, Chapter 1). It is clear that the faculty of memory is for Helvetius at the end of the day nothing but the handmaiden of the senses – its function is just reproductive, i.e., it retains the contents that have come in through sensibility which is the source of all original representational content.

More than this though, Helvetius claims that all what might be thought of as ‘higher’ cognitive faculties, i.e., judgment and inference, are themselves to be thought of as nothing more than variations on the operations of sensibility:

This principle being laid down, I farther say, that all the operations of the Mind consist in the power we have of perceiving the resemblance and difference, the agreement or disagreement, of various objects among themselves. And this power, being the Physical Sensibility itself, every thing is reducible to feeling. (Helvetius 1807, 7, Essay I, Chapter I)

This power of judgment is for Helvetius reducible to a power of perceiving, which in turn is in effect the activity of comparing the resemblances and differences, the agreements and disagreements, that subsist between [objects]’ (Helvetius 1807, 8, Essay I, Chapter I). In order to motivate this sensory reductionism, Helvetius gives an example of an act of examining two objects of different lengths:

¹⁹ For a recent discussion see (Audidière 2016). My attention was drawn to Rousseau’s critique of Helvetius by Wayne Martin’s unpublished *ms* ‘Inverse Psychologism in the Theory of Judgment’.

The question being thus properly limited, I shall proceed to examine, if Judgment be not Feeling. When I judge of the magnitude or the colour of objects presented to me, it is evident, that the judgment is formed from the different impressions made by those objects on my senses; and therefore may said, with the greatest propriety, to be nothing more than a sensation. For I can equally say, I judge, or I feel, that of two objects, the one, which I call a fathom, makes a different impression on me, from that of the other, which I call Foot; also, that the colour which I call Red acts upon my eyes differently from that which I call Yellow: from whence I conclude that in all parallel cases, Judging is the same with Feeling. (Helvetius 1807, 8–9 Essay I, Chapter I)

The reasoning is uncomplicated: just as we can represent the difference between two objects of different colours by citing their individual colour properties, so too can we distinguish two objects of different lengths by appeal to the content of each representation considered individually. Thus Helvetius endorses a kind of sensationist atomism not just as his theory of perception but of judgment and inference also.

Rousseau was by all accounts outraged by the implications of the sensationist account he himself had inherited from Condillac, and took up Helvetius on exactly these points late in the composition of *Émile* in 1762 (Rousseau 1979). It is ridiculous to maintain a sensationist reductionist account of judgment, Rousseau holds, and its falsity can be easily demonstrated:

To perceive is to sense; to compare is to judge. Judging and sensing are not the same thing. By sensation, objects are presented to me separated, isolated, such as they are in nature. By comparison I move them, I transport them, and, so to speak, I superimpose them on one another in order to pronounce on their difference or their likeness and generally on all their relations. According to me, the distinctive faculty of

the active or intelligent being is to be able to give a sense to the word *is*. I seek in vain in the purely sensitive being for this intelligent force which superimposes and which then pronounces; I am not able to see it in its nature. This passive being will sense each object separately, or it will even sense the total object formed by the two; but having no force to bend them back upon one another, it will never compare them, it will not judge them. (Rousseau 1979, 270–1)

Judging, Rousseau claims, is to pronounce, to recognize something to be thus and so, and different in *kind* from the sensory content upon which we make such pronouncements. To this extent we might think that Rousseau is identifying something like the normative conception of spontaneous judgment. However, it is clear that for Rousseau the characteristic feature of this power of judgment is that it is an active manipulation of sense contents into new ones – Rousseau speaks of ‘superimposition’, of ‘transportation’ and of the ‘bending back’ of sensations upon themselves. Just what this actually involves we’ll have to leave untouched; however, we can see at least that for Rousseau the activity of judgment is not passive, we are not just purely ‘sensitive beings’, but are agents who can and do actively manipulate the representational contents received *via* sensibility.

Secondly, Rousseau claims that the grasp of the relations between sensations is made only through the contribution of the activity of judgment. The argument seems to be that the grasp of relations requires the manipulation of sensations; the power of sensibility itself can receive but not manipulate sensations; therefore the grasp of relations cannot be within the purview of the faculty of sensation itself. It’s worth noting a third point here, which is that this argument depends on an acceptance of Helvetius’s atomistic picture of sensations themselves. It is only because sensations are in themselves

‘separated, isolated’ atomistic contents that we can understand that the relations between the atoms cannot themselves be perceived.

To motivate his position, Rousseau takes up on Helvetius’s own example of a comparative judgement of length:

To see two objects at once is not to see their relations or to judge their differences. To perceive several objects as separate from one another is not to number them. I can at the same instant have the idea of a large stick and of a small stick without comparing them and without judging that one is smaller than the other, just as I can see my entire hand at once without making the count of my fingers. These comparative ideas, larger and smaller, just like the numerical ideas of one, two, etc. certainly do not belong to the sensations, although my mind produces them only on the occasion of my sensations. (Rousseau 1979, 271)

The claim appears to be that there is a difference *in content* between two propositions that may equally be grasped off the bat of a single perceptual achievement simultaneously representing two objects. From that single achievement I might grasp

(1) Stick *a* is of length *x*, stick *b* is of length *y*.

Alternatively, that same perception might afford me the thought:

(2) Stick *a* is longer than stick *b*.

In the former judgment two different lengths are predicated of two objects; in the latter judgment the different objects are compared in terms of the relation of the difference of their lengths. Rousseau’s central claim is that the content afforded to consciousness by

sensation does not include any of the comparative relational information expressed in the latter proposition.

The argument schema is similar to the one Cudworth uses. In the first instance a perceptual achievement of ordinary objects is identified, in this case a comparative judgment of length. Secondly, there is the phenomenological claim that while we can sensorily represent sticks of different lengths, we cannot sensorily represent the difference between them, i.e., there is no corresponding sensation or sensations within our perceptual phenomenology from which the contents ‘is larger than’ or ‘is shorter than’ derive. Thirdly, there is the same assumption our receptive capacity is exhausted by the content of the senses. Rousseau similarly infers that the source of the comparative representational content must be the act of comparing engaged by the active intellect. Moreover, Rousseau is clear that the activity of the intellect is that uncaused spontaneity that materialists would banish from their ontologies and that to ‘act, to compare and to choose are operations of an active and thinking being’ (Rousseau 1979, 275).

4. Kant on Spatial Representation

It is notable that the case that Rousseau focuses upon in *Émile* is that of relations of length, i.e., relations of *spatial* magnitude. While it is well known that *Émile* exercised a monumental effect on Kant’s intellectual development in the mid-to-late 1760s, it is less frequently commented upon that the *Inaugural Dissertation* in 1770 can be seen as involving a radicalization of Rousseau’s claim regarding the active contribution of spatial representational content. In the *Inaugural Dissertation* Kant introduced not just the distinctions between concept and intuition and phenomenon and noumenon, but also explicated the activity of the cognitive subject in terms of a hylomorphism. For Kant part

of the contribution of the active intellect is the contribution of *form*, which is in turn initially characterised in terms of ‘co-ordination’ that is found in cognized wholes (*Inaugural Dissertation*, 2: 390).²⁰ Kant identifies this form as ‘the concepts of *space* and *time*’ (*Inaugural Dissertation*, 2: 391). The form that is contributed however here relates only to the ‘conditions of sensitive intuition’ and to how objects *appear to us* (and not how they are in themselves):

In a representation of sense there is, first of all, something which you might call the *matter*, namely, the *sensation*, and there is also something which may be called the *form*, the *aspect* namely of sensible things which arises according as the various things which affect the senses are co-ordinate by a certain natural law of the mind.
(*Inaugural Dissertation*, 2: 292-3)

Moreover, Kant seems to claim the non-sensory form of objects as a self-evident phenomenological premise, saying that although form ‘co-ordinates for itself that which is sensed’ it is also the case that ‘objects do not strike the senses in virtue of their form or aspect’.²¹ Finally, he strikingly claims that from this it follows that the sensed form of objects is contributed as ‘an internal principle in the mind’ (*Inaugural Dissertation*, 2: 293). The schema of the argument is broadly the same as it is for Cudworth and Rousseau, in that it is claimed that while cognition of sensed objects possess some content (in this case spatial form), that content is not reducible to the input of sensation, and that this is claimed on phenomenological grounds. It is also assumed that sensation exhausts the scope of possible received content, and so that the form that is present in experience must nevertheless be contributed by the mind.

²⁰All references are to the translation in (Kant 1992) and accompanied with the standard *Akademie* references.

²¹ For discussion of Kant’s theory of sensation, see (George 1981; Falkenstein 1995).

Kant's introduction of a capacity for spatial sensitive cognition can nevertheless be understood as responding to a serious lacuna in Rousseau's account. What is lacking in Rousseau's observations is an account of just *why* the reality principle is false and why it is possible that content that originates from the subject's spontaneous cognitive capacities can have objective truth conditions. It is obvious that the judgment that one stick is longer than the other is, when true, a true judgment *about the objects*, and not the subject. Yet the essential content that constitutes the sense of that judgment, i.e., the *is-longer-than* spatial relation, is not a content that has its source in the content received from being affected by the objects themselves. Instead such content is projected onto the objects by the subject subsequently to such affection. Thus were one to endorse the reality principle, one would be faced with the absurd entailment that judgments such as those in the form of (1) above might be true (since their truth conditions can be exhaustively given by appeal to data received directly from the affection of the objects themselves), while judgments of the form (2) might be false (since while the judgment aspires to say something true about the objects, the truth conditions are in part given by the subject). If the falsity of (2) weren't implausible enough, it is obviously the case that (2) follows from (1).

Kant's approach to spatial representation in the *Inaugural Dissertation* can be understood along the lines of the following strategy to address this absurd entailment. What Rousseau failed to note was that it is not merely comparative judgments of spatial relations that involve contributed content, but rather *all* spatial judgment whatsoever. That is, judgments that locate a single object as being at some spatial co-ordinates, judgments that attribute certain spatial properties (such as shape-properties) and judgments that assert fundamental spatial relations (such as *being-to-the-left-of*, or *being-above*) *all* fail to be expressed in sensation and all equally have their source in the active contribution of the intellect. Kant denies that the fact that some concepts have a

subjective origin in the subject's cognitive capacities entails that the judgments formed with such concepts are false. They are true judgments, he claims, so long as the domain of possible judgment is restricted. If we consider them to be judgments about the world *as it appears*, he claims, we can grasp a sense in which such judgments can have objective truth-conditions. That sense emerges because the capacity for spatial representation is not merely one that allows for true interpretations of existing sensory information, but rather makes the very initial receipt of such information itself possible:

For things cannot appear to the senses under any aspect at all except by the mediation of the power of the mind which co-ordinates all sensations according to a law that is stable and which is inherent in the nature of the mind. (*Inaugural Dissertation*, 2: 204)

Kant thus takes Rousseau's fundamental insight and radicalizes it. Rousseau's model implies a logically and temporally prior moment when a subject sees (for example) two sticks of differing length, and then posits a possible second moment of judgment of spatial comparison between the two. Kant's claim in the *Inaugural Dissertation* is that such activities always occur upon any possible sensory experience that can be taken up into cognition. He thereby denies that there can be a logically prior moment of cognition constituted by pure sensing, and instead argues that judgment involving the conscious registering of spatial relations between sensations is logically coterminous with the registering of the sensations that constitute the relevant *relata* themselves. Whereas the spontaneous power of the intellect was for Rousseau proven by its *possible* operation *upon* sensory perception, for Kant it is proven by the fact of its *necessary* operation *within* sensory perception.

Kant retains many of the core claims from the *Inaugural Dissertation* into the Critical period. In the passage at A20/B34 they reappear as part of Kant's initial defining of terms:

I call that in the appearance which corresponds to sensation its **matter**, but that which allows the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations the **form** of appearance. Since that within which the sensations can alone be ordered and placed in a certain form cannot itself be in turn sensation, the matter of all appearance is only given to us *a posteriori*, but its form must all lie ready for it in the mind *a priori*, and can therefore be considered separately from all sensation.

Kant retains the notion from the *Inaugural Dissertation* that sensation is the matter of appearance but that sensation itself does not come ready-encoded with its form, i.e., the patterns of coordination that exist between the sensorily represented atomistic elements. He also makes a crucial alignment between three elements in that account. The aspects of perceptual manifolds that are *formal* are those that are *a priori*, and those that are *a priori* are those that lie within the mind.

It might be objected that since Space and Time are for Kant forms of receptivity, that they might themselves be things that are 'given' in some sense. For example, Kant makes the well-known claim in the 'Transcendental Aesthetic that space 'is represented as an infinite **given** magnitude' (B39). It is crucial to note the ways in which this fundamentally misrepresents Kant's approach however.²² For Kant, Space and Time are

²² Kant's claim from the Metaphysical Exposition that we represent space as a given infinite manifold is meant to contrast with the thought that we might initially represent finite manifolds and only acquire a notion of infinite space subsequently. In fact, Kant claims our representation of space is presented to consciousness as an infinite continuum in the first instance. This claim, compelling or not, is obviously compatible with the claim that the representation itself is contributed.

‘originally’ fundamentally *contributed* representational contents. Those representations are ontologically dependent on the subject and therefore are contributed rather than received. However, those very contents function to provide a matrix or medium within which objects that are ontologically independent of us are represented. It is such considerations that are at the heart of the first argument of the Metaphysical Exposition of Space, where relational empiricist accounts of the origin of the concept of space are attacked (A23/B38). One way of retaining the reality principle and the legitimacy of the concept of space would be to claim that the content of that concept simply refers to the totality of all perceived spatial relations between particular objects. Kant attempts to undermine this approach by arguing that in order for that account to get going, it must posit atomistic relata that are themselves already represented as individually occupying spatial locations. Thus some logically prior spatial representation capacity must be at work in order for the initial sensation of particulars to take place. Such arguments are deployed in order to show that the mind actively provides the form or manner for representational reception of those ontologically independent objects. It is in this sense that they constitute a ‘form of receptivity’. In a slogan, the form of receptivity is not itself something received.

It is important to note that the transcendental argument at play is not that we require a criterion to distinguish reliably between different kinds of experience, but rather is directed at explaining how any such experience is possible in the first place. There are many occasions where error in spatial judgment (e.g. mistaking a two-dimensional image for a three-dimensional one, making mistaken judgments of size due to perceptual relativity, and so on) but nothing in the Transcendental Aesthetic provides a subject with a rule in accordance with which that subject might discriminate between good and bad cases. If anything, Kant’s argument is directed at showing the conditions that make such errors possible. We can only make errors in spatial judgment because there is spatial

information there to misinterpret – the primary goal is to explain how such information enters our perceptual complexes in the first place.

5. Categorical Representation

So far I have attempted to muddy the waters with regard to Kant's claim that sensibility is a non-spontaneous cognitive power. One might wish to resist such problematizing by claiming that while there is some minimal sense in which our mind contributes the form of sensibility, this is a lesser sense of 'spontaneity' than the more important sense that characterizes the operation of the understanding. The spontaneity of the understanding, it might be claimed, performs a very different function, one whereby a subject, having already contributed the spatial form to experience now makes a voluntary and executive decision in perceptual judgment. On such occasions the subject holds that things are thus and so within a presented sensed scene. Thus in the Second Analogy, for example, it might appear that Kant is claiming that, given that the information that is grasped via apprehension does not determine what is the *correct* interpretation of the sensed scene, we require a spontaneously produced norm of judgment in accordance with which we might interpret the scene so as to afford us a judgment practice that is both epistemically reliable (in that it tracks the truth) and epistemically responsible (in that one can cite that norm of judgment to justify the grounds for one's reliable judgment within an epistemic community).

It is unlikely however that this is in fact Kant's argument here.²³ The judgment is not that the causal maxim provides a norm in accordance with which one might judge of a

²³ One must qualify one's claims here regarding the difficulty of interpreting the Second Analogy itself, and given the variety of readings available. For a very small selection of the relevant

coherent sensory experience what it truly represents. Rather, the structure of the argument is very similar to the arguments regarding spatiality and to those outlined by Cudworth and Rousseau. The Second Analogy argues that unless one were *already* deploying the *a priori* concept of cause within our ordinary perceptions of temporal events, experience itself would be impossible. This claim is highlighted in the B-Introduction to the First *Critique*, where the second section is entitled ‘We are in possession of certain *a priori* cognitions, and even the common understanding is never without them’ (B3). Kant claims that *a priori* cognitions - such as that of the law of causality – are ones that ordinary subjects routinely employ in their everyday experience. Here he compares the concept of space with the category of substance, claiming that if we remove all the input generated from sensory experience, we are nevertheless left with these contents, ones that accompany all our experiences even though it must not be derived from them and that therefore one must ‘concede that it has its seat in your faculty of cognition *a priori*’ (B5-6). From the outset then, Kant claims a similarity between the spatial representations and categorial ones, in that their apriority can be marked by the fact that their content is part of ordinary experience yet not given by sensory input. Whereas the argument for space hinged on the claim that spatial relational information is not conveyed by sensation, in the Second Analogy, Kant attempts to show that modal and temporal information is similarly not conveyed by sensation. Kant’s famous contrasting examples of the successive perception of the sides of a house and the perception of the ship travelling downstream are meant to illustrate this crucial difference.²⁴ In the former case, we can have a successive experience of one side of the

literature here see (Bardon 2002; Bayne 1994; Bayne 2000; Strawson 1966; Allison 2004a; O’Shea 1997; Friedman 1992; Osborne 2006; Osborne 2007; Watkins 2004; Watkins 2005; Harper 1981). In what follows, I present what I take to be one plausible reading of how to take the section for the purposes of showing that such a reading is in keeping with the argument schema detailed above; however, a full defence of this interpretation of Kant on causation would have to be undertaken elsewhere.

²⁴ The examples are at A190/B235 and A192/B237 respectively.

house followed by another but in doing so we understand the temporal order of those perceived elements to be an arbitrary one. As he puts '[e]very apprehension of an occurrence is therefore a perception that follows another one' (A192/B237) but this ordering is not taken to say anything in particular about the nature of the object. For example, the judgment might take a form like:

- (1) North side of house, west side of house.

In making such a judgment one understands that one's experience might have been otherwise (e.g., one might have proceeded from the north side to the east side, or begun at the west side, etc.) and so the temporal relations that exist between the atomistic elements of the judgment are in an important sense contingent. Importantly, the contingent ordering of those atomistic elements are what might be registered by a purely receptive, one-power subject, since one in such a scenario mere sensorily 'apprehends' those elements one after the other.

In the latter case of the perception of the ship on the other hand, which is understood as a perception of 'a happening' (A192/B237), a particular state of being of the object (the ship being upstream) is grasped as *necessarily* having had to precede another state of being of that thing (that of its being downstream). Were we subjects possessing a single cognitive power however, we would merely register these successive states of the ship without perceiving the necessary ordering relation between them. Apprehension of sense might afford me the judgment:

- (1) Ship *a* is upstream, ship *a* is downstream.

However this is obviously *not* how we perceive these states of the being of the object in ordinary perception, i.e., not as one state merely following the other in a contingent order. Only application of the category of cause, Kant claims, can afford me the more complex (yet ordinarily achieved) causal judgment:

(2) Ship *a* moved from upstream to downstream.

As far as apprehension is concerned, perceptual judgment is like that of the house, without there being any content of the relation between the two states of the ship being grasped by consciousness. Yet as Kant says, such ‘a rule is always to be found in the perception of that which happens, and it makes the order of perceptions that follow one another (in the apprehension of this appearance) **necessary**’ (A193/B238).

This rule is one that Kant identifies as being in play even for the coherence of temporal experience at all since, only upon the mind’s presupposition of such a rule that ‘is the experience of something that happens even possible’ (A195/B240). Kant is thus clear that the kind of failure is not that we might fail to reliably distinguish causal from non-causal events but that we might fail somehow even to formulate coherent experience of events at all. Kant is claiming that there is a real presentation of causal events in routine perceptual experience. The task is to explain how this *already secured* reliable epistemic achievement is possible. The explanation that Kant opposes is the caricatured Humean one, that such judgments might have been made possible by a subject’s repeated association of sensory elements into more complex constructs, some of which are arbitrarily deemed causal by the imagination, and others that are not. Kant claims on the contrary that a counterfactual thought experiment can make the impossibility of this model clear. The transcendental claim is that were human beings purely receptive subjects registering and responding to sensory stimuli alone, then their

experiences would lack the kind of temporal unity required for coherent experience (B234, A196/B241). Since the Humean model requires coherent temporal experience in order to motivate its account, the argument is supposed to cut off its possibility at the first moment. Again, the structure of the claim is more akin to the one found in Cudworth and Rousseau, whereby it is claimed that complex sensory representation cannot account for existing representational content that ordinary subjects possess and which form essential elements in their routine knowledge-claims. What it does not involve is the subject's provision of a norm that can provide a criterial rule for taking responsibility for the true and false interpretations of its coherent sensory experiences.

Kant emphasises the argument's similarity to those regarding the contributed form of sensibility. He acknowledges that the counter-intuitive nature of transcendental idealism's position stems from the default commonsensical but false notion that the concept of cause arises from the prior stimulation of sensory experience. Here the thought is that we first compare 'sequences of many occurrences on preceding appearances' and are thus 'led to discover a rule' and only then 'first prompted to form the concept of cause' (A195-6/B240-1). The categorial concepts are *a priori* just in the sense that they are contributed by the subject just for the purpose of making any experience at all possible. Thus we can know that content is present within experience just because we have coherent experience:

But the case is the same here as with other pure *a priori* presentations (e.g., space and time) that we can extract as clear concepts from experience only because we have put them into experience, and experience is hence first brought about through them.
(A196/B241)

The Humean account of the origin of the concept of cause is attacked on similar grounds as those used by Rousseau with regard to the origin of spatial relational concepts in that it is shown that ordinary experience contains more than passive sensation ‘teaches’ and so some actively contributed content must be posited. Kant develops the approach of Cudworth and Rousseau in a crucial way however. Cudworth and Rousseau’s argument can be seen to hinge the initial acceptance of the truth of judgments involving relational content. Since a purely passive subject could not form such true judgments, it is claimed that subject must actively contribute content. A steadfast one-power theorist might always simply bite the bullet and demand that the reality principle entails that all such judgments are in fact false. As already mentioned, some of Kant’s arguments seem to hinge on the acceptance of possessed true judgments, such as those of mathematics. Another side of his argumentative strategy however does not depend on such assumed knowledge-claims.²⁵ In the Second Analogy the argument begins from a premise regarding the possibility of coherent experience and particularly coherent temporal experience. The strategy also shows that the one-power theorist cannot maintain the reality principle either. True judgments about banal temporal experience are surely endorsed by that opponent, and it emerges that the contribution of content by an active intellect is a necessary condition of even those judgments. Therefore the idea that reality is captured only by the content delivered by the passive power must be rejected.

6. Content and Normativity

There is a line of reconstruction of Kant’s arguments regarding the role of the active power of the mind that is part of Kant’s answer to the question as to how synthetic *a*

²⁵ For discussion see (Ameriks 1978).

priori judgments are possible. The fact of their possibility is given from their actuality, but the *explanation* of that possibility is more demanding task. For Kant, as for Cudworth and Rousseau, their possibility can only be explained by appeal to content that is contributed by the mind. Cudworth had claimed that if the exclusive mind's active power of representation is essential to the explanation of the possibility of knowledge, then the outputs of the mind must be involved in the explanation of the truth conditions of the propositions known. This leaves behind an explanatory gap however as to how the abstract ideas that are involved in known propositions are true of the empirical reality that enables them to be grasped as such. Moreover it risks presenting the empirical conditions of grasping such ideas as lacking in reality compared to the reality of those ideas. Rousseau's appeal to spontaneous judgment in spatial judgment would have shown Kant how closely the contributed elements are connected to ordinary perceptual experience. Rousseau however lacked any account of what it is that makes such judgments true. Kant's move towards idealism can thus be seen as being motivated by Cudworth's and Rousseau's recognition of the ineliminable contribution of the mind to the truth conditions of judgments about empirical reality. The denial of the transcendental reality of space, and the claim that empirical reality could be identified with the world merely as it appears, afforded Kant an approach that could begin to meet that demand.

The account he developed was less concerned with providing a reliable guiding rule for avoiding falsehood in everyday particular judgment and more concerned with explaining the possibility of truth in general. The account he developed rather presents the role that the spontaneous power of the mind must play even for error and false judgments to arise in the first place. In order to ask oneself how one *ought* to judge an experience, one must first have a coherent possible experience to judge, either correctly or incorrectly. It is for making this prior state possible that the active power of the mind

is required. How this basic activity of spontaneity relates to Kant's further reflections on the practice of reliable and responsible judgment is of course a distinct question that must be pursued elsewhere.²⁶

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