

## CHAPTER 7

# Real Repugnance and Belief about Things-in-Themselves: A Problem and Kant's Three Solutions<sup>1</sup>

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### Identifying the Problem

Kant famously claims that it can be rational to accept propositions on the basis of non-epistemic or broadly practical considerations, under certain circumstances, even if those propositions include “transcendental ideas” of supersensible objects. But he also worries about how such “ideas” (of freedom, the soul, noumenal grounds, God, the kingdom of ends, things-in-themselves generally) acquire positive content in the absence of an appropriate connection to intuitional experience. How can we be sure that the ideas are not empty “thought-entities [*Gedankendinge*]”—that is, speculative fancies that do not and perhaps even cannot have referents in reality (A771/B799)?

This is a fair question, and when he is focused on it Kant often issues dire warnings about the casual employment of “empty” ideas, especially in metaphysical speculation:

Representations that are devoid of all intuition (to which, as concepts, no corresponding intuition can be given) are absolutely empty (without cognition of their object). (8:214)

How can two people conduct a dispute about a matter the reality of which neither of them can exhibit in an actual or even in a merely possible experience, about the idea of which [they] only brood in order to bring forth from it something *more* than an idea, namely the actuality of the object [*Gegenstand*] itself? (A750/B778)

To demonstrate the reality of our concepts, intuitions are always required. If they are empirical concepts, then the latter are called *examples*. If they are pure concepts of the understanding, then the latter are called *schemata*. But if

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<sup>1</sup> A small portion of the material in this paper is drawn from two related pieces recently published by DeGruyter: Chignell 2008 and 2010. I am grateful to the editors of those volumes, and to the Press, for permission to re-publish that material here.

one demands that the objective reality of the concepts of reason, i.e., of the ideas, be demonstrated, and moreover for the sake of theoretical cognition of them, then one desires something impossible, since no intuition adequate to them can be given at all. (5:351)

The concepts of reason are, as we have said, mere ideas, and of course have no object [*Gegenstand*] in any sort of experience, but also do not on that account designate objects that are made-up and at the same time thereby assumed to be possible. They are merely thought problematically... mere thought-entities [*Gedankendinge*] the possibility of which is not demonstrable, and which cannot therefore be used to ground the explanation of actual appearances through an hypothesis. (A771/B799)

Note that in the last two passages, Kant says that showing that a concept is not “empty” in the relevant sense involves demonstrating or exhibiting its “objective reality,” and that this in turn involves appealing to an empirical example or a schema. In the last passage he also explicitly associates these issues about positive conceptual content and “objective reality” with the problem of demonstrating that the concept has a really possible object.

It thus appears that there are at least four distinct problems with respect to the transcendental ideas of reason (hereafter simply “ideas”):

- (1) The problem of finding *rational grounds* for assents involving ideas.
- (2) The problem of finding *positive content* for ideas.
- (3) The problem of establishing the *objective reality* of ideas.
- (4) The problem of proving the *real possibility* of objects of ideas.

I have offered an account of Kant’s answer to (1) elsewhere (Chignell 2007a, b). The grounds are non-epistemic or “subjective” in Kant’s special sense: they correspond to various pragmatic, theoretical, or moral interests, and they are sufficient to license rational “assent” (*Fürwahrhalten*) for certain subjects under certain conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Problems (2), (3), and (4) appear to be distinct, but Kant often suggests that they can be answered together, or even equated. In some passages, such as the first one above, from “On a Discovery,” he appears to link (3) with (2) by claiming that an idea with no objective reality is “absolutely empty” (8:214). Elsewhere he assimilates (3) and (4): in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, for instance, we’re told that reflection on the conditions of willing the highest good lead us to

presuppose three theoretical concepts (for which, because they are only pure rational concepts, no corresponding intuition can be found and consequently,

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Kant’s “holding-for-true” or “assent” is a somewhat more expansive concept than our contemporary concept of “belief.” For instance, very weak opinions or hunches that we would not consider beliefs would still count as assents for Kant.

by the theoretical path, no objective reality): namely, freedom, immortality, and God. Thus by the practical law that commands the existence of the highest good possible in a world, the *possibility of those objects of pure speculative reason, the objective reality which the latter could not assure them, is postulated.* (5:134, my emphasis)

The main claim here is that practical considerations license us in “pre-supposing” the ideas of God, freedom, and immortality. And this is said to be equivalent to postulating their *objective reality* as well as the *real possibility* of their objects.

But *are* problems (2), (3), and (4) really equivalent? Consider (2) and (4) first in conjunction with a familiar example from contemporary metaphysics. Zombies are typically defined as beings that are physically qualitatively identical to human beings but lack consciousness. Now suppose that we know something about the content of the predicates involved: that is, something about what a human body is, what consciousness is, and thus what the absence of consciousness is, and so forth. Obviously the concept has some positive content for us, even if no empirical example of it can be identified. But is a zombie really possible? That is a different (and much harder) question, one that persists even after we answer the question of whether the concept has positive content.

It should be clear that conceiving of the central problem here as one about *content* or *sense*, on any normal understanding of those terms, is a dead end. Kant obviously does not take ideas of the supersensible to be *nonsensical*. On the contrary, they are content-rich concepts that we can entertain, analyze, and successfully rid of logical contradictions. True, they are also “empty,” but for Kant that is a technical notion: it involves, among other things, being “without an object [*Gegenstand*]” that we could sensibly intuit (A290/B347). Thus in the second *Critique* he characterizes the idea of a “*causa noumenon*” as a “possible, thinkable concept [which is] nevertheless an empty one.” In other words, the idea of a noumenal cause has some positive content, but is still “empty” in the technical sense of being “without any intuition which is appropriate to it” (5:55-6; cf. 8:214). Such an “empty” idea has no *Objekt* or *Gegenstand* in empirical reality, then, but it may still be profitably entertained and analyzed, and it may even pick out a supersensible *Ding*.

In some passages (such as the fourth one in the list above (A771/B799)), Kant’s real worry about the ideas of reason is more clearly expressed. The real worry (I submit) is that even when they *do* have sufficient determinate content, the positive predicates involved may, for all we know, be “really repugnant” in a way that makes their objects “really impossible.” In other words, their content may be such that they can be thought, entertained, analyzed, and shown to be logi-

cally consistent, but still be such that no corresponding object even *could* obtain. (Note that some contemporary physicalists say precisely that about the concept of a zombie: i.e, that it is logically/conceptually but not metaphysically possible for there to be an entity that coinstantiates the predicates *being physically qualitatively identical to a human person* and *not having consciousness*). Thus it looks as though, for Kant, there is no way to know through mere conception and analysis whether the positive predicates of an idea are “really harmonious” rather than “really repugnant.” The confusion arises when we mistake Kant’s concern about how ideas acquire *this* sort of content—really harmonious content—for concern about how they acquire *any* positive content whatsoever.

The best way to keep all of this straight is to add yet another problem to our list:

(2’) The problem of finding *really harmonious positive content* for ideas.

(2’) is different from (2) since, as we have seen, “empty” ideas may have *some* positive content, even if it is not harmonious content. (2’) is equivalent to (3), however: a concept can be shown to have objective reality, in Kant’s sense, just in case we can prove that its content is really harmonious.<sup>3</sup> And it should be obvious that if an idea has really harmonious content, then its object will be really possible in the internal or “absolute” sense that is of interest here. After all, its predicates are logically consistent *and* really harmonious: there is nothing in the concept or nature of the thing that stands in the way of its being real.<sup>4</sup> Thus Kant says that establishing the objective reality of an idea amounts to showing “that an object corresponding to it is possible” [*daß*

3 Kant uses the term “objective reality” in a very loose fashion: sometimes it means that the concept has an actual instance (5:5, 28:1015); sometimes it means merely that an instance is *logically* possible (5:54). Typically, however, it means that an instance of the concept is *really* possible, and that’s how I use it here. Adding to the confusion is the fact that Kant thinks the *knowledge* of something’s real possibility is often inferred from *knowledge* of its actuality (see A231-2/B284). But this epistemological connection does not entail a conceptual collapse; real possibility and actuality are distinct modal notions.

4 Of course, the object might *still* fail to be really possible in some extended sense by failing to have an external ground in reality, or by being metaphysically incompatible with something else that necessarily exists. Leibniz as well as later Leibnizeans (Wolff, Baumgarten, and Meier) distinguished between what is “internally,” “per se,” or “absolutely” really possible, and what is “externally” or “relatively” really possible *given God’s necessary existence and essential willing of the best*. The latter, of course, is a much narrower domain than the former—indeed, it may include only one maximal set of compossible essences. This external or relative kind of real possibility is not something that we can “prove” since we are incapable of knowing *a priori* which combination of essences is the best. By “real possibility” in what follows I will mean “absolute” or “per se” real possibility unless otherwise noted.

[*daß ihm gemäß ein Objekt möglich sei*] (5:396). This means that a solution to (2') and (3) is *ipso facto* a solution to (4), and vice versa. In what follows, then, I propose to focus primarily on (4)—the problem of how to know whether the objects of ideas are really possible. My goal is to discern whether Kant has resources to reply to criticisms (raised in his own day and ours<sup>5</sup>) that he violates the epistemological and/or semantic strictures of his own critique by recommending Belief in (or even discussing!) supersensible objects of transcendental ideas.

## Harmonious Content and Real Possibility: a modal condition on knowledge

In *The Only Possible Basis for a Demonstration of God's Existence* (1763)—where Kant first makes extensive use of the logical vs. real modality distinction—something's real possibility is said to be “given” in its very representation. In other words, the early Kant assumed that by carefully analyzing an idea, we are able to see whether it refers to something really possible, or whether some of its constituent predicates are really repugnant. The fact that real possibilities are “given” to thought in this way—in conjunction with a rationalist commitment to explaining such modal facts—led Kant to posit the necessary existence of a most real being (*ens realissimum*) whose predicates ground or explain these facts (2:77-86).<sup>6</sup>

In the critical period, Kant becomes much more concerned about epistemological issues, and no longer presumes that real possibility is “given” to us in reflective analysis. Instead, he seeks to understand *how* we know that a thing is really possible—i.e. how we know that the positive predicates (or “realities”) composing its concept are really harmonious and not just logically consistent. With respect to the idea of an *ens realissimum*, for instance, Kant now says that we “must be able to know that the effects of the realities do not cancel one another” before using it in an explanation (28:1015-6).

Such modal-epistemological questions can't be answered by appeal to some external ground; rather, we have to consider the nature and limits of our intellectual faculties. Furthermore, an appeal to our consistent *thought* of a thing won't be enough, since mere thought (in the critical period) tracks logical possibility rather than real possibility (Bxxvi, 5:136, 8:137). Thus, Kant suggests, we have to make a connec-

5 See, for example, the appendix to the second edition of Jacobi 1787, as well as Bennett 1974, p. 52, Strawson 1966, pp. 11-12, and Höffe 1992.

6 For a detailed reconstruction of this argument, see Chignell 2009.

tion between the thing and possible experience if we want to be sure that our idea is not a mere thought-entity:

In a word: it is only possible for our reason to use the conditions of possible experience as conditions of the possibility of things [*Sachen*]; but it is by no means possible for it as it were to create new ones independent of those conditions, for concepts of the latter sort, although free of contradiction, would nevertheless also be without any object [*Gegenstand*]. (A771/B799)

The claim here is that the *only* way we can be justified in taking something to be really possible is by being justified in holding that it is an actual or possible object of *our* experiential cognition. The realm of *knowable* real possibility is thus restricted to what can in principle be sensibly experienced. Kant calls this the realm of “empirical real possibility” and says that it is co-extensive with the realm of knowable actuality (A232/B285, “Metaphysics L<sub>2</sub>” (25:558)).

Of course, it is not always easy to determine whether this condition is satisfied. Are we in principle able to experience water that is XYZ rather than H<sub>2</sub>O, or Parfit’s post-fission person, or a zombie of the sort mentioned earlier? And in discerning this, must we appeal to minds with our limitations or can we consider minds analogous to ours but with enhanced faculties or other abilities? I leave these issues to the side for now, but it should be clear that by taking cognizability to be the “proof” of real possibility, we do not thereby acquire answers to all of the interesting metaphysical questions. Indeed, for Kant, the fact that something is really possible is not even *explained* by the fact that we can cognize it. When he’s being careful, he keeps the epistemology and the metaphysics separate—even in the critical period—and leaves plenty of logical space for objects to *be* really possible, even though we could never *know* that they are.<sup>7</sup> Cognizability is a reliable guide to, but not an analysis of, a subset of the domain of real possibility; there are still “absolute real possibilities” that are, necessarily, beyond our cognitive ken (again, see A232ff/B285ff).<sup>8</sup>

The important point for present purposes is that the critical Kant thinks it is not *epistemically* justified to assent to propositions—even

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7 Kant makes this point by saying that the problem with our ideas of such objects is not that they *don’t* have objective reality (how could we know *that?*), but rather that they are “concepts into whose objective reality there can be no insight” (A473/B501). Note that if this is correct, it works against Henry Allison’s claim that the “objective reality” of a concept is equivalent to its “empirical significance” (Allison 1983, p. 61). The “significance” or referent (*Bedeutung*) of an objectively real concept might well be non-empirical.

8 Kant holds that God and the immortal soul are *actual*, as he makes clear in the practical works. Thus he must think that they are really possible in some sense, even though he consistently denies that we can even in principle hope to have theoretical cognition of them.

propositions that fall out of otherwise good arguments—without being able to “demonstrate” or “prove” that the objects of all the concepts they refer to are really possible (5:398, Bxxiv, A602/B630). In other words, even if we have a valid argument with apparently plausible premises, the conclusion does not count as knowledge (*Wissen*) unless we can also be *certain* that there is no real repugnance amongst any of the predicates of the concepts involved. Kant’s claim can be captured in the following necessary condition:

**Modal Condition:** Necessarily, S knows that *p* only if S is in a position to prove the real possibility of the objects referred to in *p*.<sup>9</sup>

### Positive Applications of the Modal Condition

With respect to what Kant calls “empirically certain” knowledge, the Modal Condition is satisfied by way of the subject being able to appeal to her own perceptual or memorial experiences, or to known causal laws connecting the object with something she has experienced. The very same experiences and causal connections are the objective grounds that allow the relevant assents to satisfy other conditions on knowledge as well. In such cases, we might say, the proof of (empirical) real possibility comes along for free by way of the trivial inference from actuality to possibility (cf. 28:557). Likewise for “intuitively certain” synthetic a priori knowledge in mathematics: the mathematician is able to ground her assent by constructing an example of the relevant object in pure intuition, and so the Modal Condition is easily satisfied if and when the other justification conditions are satisfied.

The case of synthetic a priori philosophical knowledge is somewhat more complex. The only assents that are epistemically justified in this context, for Kant, are based on “transcendental” arguments—i.e., inferences from some known fact to the “only possible basis” of that fact (call these “inference-to-only-possible-explanation” (IOPE) arguments for short).<sup>10</sup> Here is a crude simplification of the argument of the Second Analogy:

9 The “in a position to prove” operator here makes the Modal Condition weak enough to be at least somewhat plausible. Kant himself typically speaks of being “able to prove real possibility.”

10 With respect to the pure concepts of the understanding, Kant says that “their objective reality is founded solely on the fact that because they constitute the intellectual form of all experience, it must always be possible to show their application in experience” (A310/B367). This is of course what Kant spends much of the *Transcendental Deduction* trying to establish. Conversely, in the third *Critique* he says that the idea of a teleological causality in nature “can of course be thought without contradiction, but it is not

(1) Necessarily, we have cognitive experience only if every phenomenal event has a phenomenal cause.

(2) We have cognitive experience.

Thus,

(3) Necessarily, every phenomenal event has a phenomenal cause.

(1) says that the truth of the causal principle in (3) is part of the only possible explanation of a fact we take for granted—namely, (2). But given the Modal Condition, knowing that (1) requires that we be in a position to prove the real possibility of all the objects referred to, and thus to prove that

(0) A phenomenal cause is really possible.

Because “cause” is an a priori category, the truth of (0) can only be proved by appeal to the sort of pure example that Kant calls a “schema,” as noted in a passage cited earlier (5:351; cf. 5:69). Thus the availability of schemata allows the synthetic principles generated from the categories to meet the Modal Condition and to count as a priori knowledge. Conversely, the unavailability of schemata for “ideas” prevents them from figuring into items of knowledge.

So in transcendental IOPE arguments like (0)-(3), the real possibility of the object referred to in the conclusion again comes along for free, as part of the basis for the conclusion itself. Without at least implicitly containing a premise like (0), however, the argument would be valid but epistemically impotent—thanks to the Modal Condition—and thus result at most in rational Belief (Glaube).

Probabilistic empirical knowledge works somewhat differently (note that Kant thinks of direct perceptual knowledge as “empirically certain” and not probabilistic (8:70)). Consider the following inference-to-best-explanation (IBE) argument, where *p* is the proposition that the universe contains phlogiston.

(1) We have observed phenomena *X*.

(2) The best explanation of *X*, given our current knowledge of causal laws and our best empirical theories, is that *p*.

Thus,

(3) Probably, *p*.

This is again a crude simplification of a complex inference. The important point for present purposes is that the IBE referred to in (2) is not

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good for any dogmatic [i.e. epistemic] designations, because since it cannot be drawn from experience and is not *required* for the possibility of experience its objective reality cannot be required by anything” (5:397). So there is no theoretical IOPE argument for its objective reality (and thus for the real possibility of natural teleology).



sufficient to license empirical certainty that  $p$ , and so even if  $p$  is true, our knowledge of it is probabilistic, as stated in (3). This means that our grounds for holding that  $p$  do not all by themselves provide full-blown “proof” of the real possibility of phlogiston in the way that, say, an observation or deductive proof of the existence of phlogiston would. Proof of real possibility does not come along for free in the case of IBE. But can’t we still know propositions such as  $p$  on the basis of such arguments?

John Locke’s rather stern answer to the question would be “no,” if we are talking about the high-level knowledge (*scientia*) he valorizes in the Essay. Our assent to  $p$  will at best be able to count as “right judgment,” or “Belief,” or “hypothesis,” for Locke, precisely because we cannot prove through mere thought and IBE-style reasoning that the quality-combinations referred to in our complex idea of phlogiston are really possible (Locke 1700, IV.xiv).<sup>11</sup>

Kant seems to depart from Locke in allowing propositions like (3) to count as knowledge. But his argument on this score constitutes, I submit, a serious weakness in his overall account. When discussing this kind of empirical assent that is not “certain” because it is not based on direct observation or demonstrative inference, Kant suddenly appeals to a broader conception of real possibility—one that he calls “formal possibility” in one place (A127), though I will call it “formal real possibility” in order to distinguish it from merely “formal” or logical possibility.<sup>12</sup> If we know that the objects referred to in  $p$  would be appearances—i.e. located in the spatio-temporal-causal nexus that is governed by the “forms” of intuition and the general principles of pure understanding—then, says Kant, we know that  $p$  is consistent with the formal conditions of our experience. Moreover, that alone is sufficient to allow assent like (3) to satisfy the Modal Condition and count, if true and otherwise justified, as knowledge. In general, then, for Kant the conclusions of IBEs and other probabilistic inferences do satisfy the Modal Condition, as long as they refer exclusively to appearances that we can prove to be formally really possible.

This seems like a weakness in the account because it is not clear why conceiving of something as part of the spatio-temporal-causal nexus proves that it is not afflicted by subject-canceling real repugnance. Consider in this connection some familiar examples from contemporary metaphysics: a donkey that is an orange, Queen Elizabeth I with a father who isn’t Henry VIII, water that is XYZ rather than H<sub>2</sub>O, a zombie, and so forth. Insofar as we successfully conceive of these things at

11 See Chignell 2010 for further discussion of the origin of this problem in Locke.

12 For discussion of the various types of possibility in Kant, see Chignell/Stang 2010.

all, we conceive of them as being in space and time and governed by the general principles of pure understanding (cause-effect, substance-property, reciprocity, etc.). So they count as “formally really possible” on Kant’s view, and thus do satisfy the Modal Condition. But surely there is still a serious question about whether such things are really possible! Without some independent account of why anything that is governed by the axioms and the principles cannot suffer from subject-canceling real repugnance, then, Kant’s appeal to formal real possibility as a way of satisfying the Modal Condition seems decidedly *ad hoc*. Satisfying those conditions does not—at least not obviously—remove the worries that motivated the Modal Condition in the first place.

By contrast, the much stricter notion of “empirical real possibility”—i.e., conformity to spatio-temporal axioms, the principles of pure understanding, and the empirical laws and facts—is such that by satisfying its conditions a thing is guaranteed to be exempt from real repugnance. That’s because, as we have seen, something that is empirically really possible is in principle perceptible in this world and thus actual. If we can know that all the objects referred to in *p* are empirically really possible then we have obviously and richly satisfied the Modal Condition.<sup>13</sup>

Given all of this, it seems that Locke has the more consistent, albeit more restrictive, position on this issue. If we agree that knowledge requires proof of real possibility, and if subject-canceling real repugnance is not *ipso facto* ruled out by spatio-temporal-categorical conformity (and it is hard to see why it should be), then scientific theories that postulate quality combinations that aren’t proved to be empirically really possible can at most deliver “right judgment” or “rational hypothesis,” just as Locke says. Of course, this result may lead those with lower epistemological standards than either Kant or Locke to think that there is something wrong with the Modal Condition in general.

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13 Kant occasionally seeks out yet another middle position by appeal to analogy. If we know that certain predicate combinations are really possible, and we can draw analogies between those combinations and the ones we’re theorizing about, then perhaps we can count as responding, in some extended and analogical fashion, to the concerns underlying the Modal Condition. Kant is clearly committed to something like this with respect to Belief (cf. the discussion of the Third Solution below), but he also occasionally suggests it in discussions of natural-scientific knowledge. See for example “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy” (1788), where Kant says that we can seek “the connection between certain present properties of the things of nature and their causes in an earlier time,” and then go ahead and postulate those causes but “only so far as permitted by analogy” with what we observe (8:160-2). This passage is highlighted in Kain 2009, 72ff. Perhaps this occasional reference to analogy in scientific contexts can make the explicit appeals to analogy in the context of Belief seem less out-of-the-blue.

## Negative Applications of the Modal Condition

When he turns to cases of the supersensible—the realm beyond all possible empirical awareness—Kant joins Locke in holding that the Modal Condition prevents otherwise reasonable assents from counting as knowledge. Consider by way of (admittedly anachronistic) illustration the following argument against physicalism:

- (1) If physicalism is true, then it is necessary that physical properties of such-and-such a configuration are accompanied by consciousness.
- (2) It is really possible that there is a zombie, i.e. a being with physical properties of such-and-such a configuration but without consciousness.

Thus,

- (3) Physicalism is not true.

The argument is valid and (1) is merely a statement of the physicalist's position in the form of a conditional (where "such-and-such" is a placeholder for some complicated physical description). (2) explicitly *asserts* the real possibility of zombies. So even though this argument appeals to a strange metaphysical entity, the relevant qualities of which (let's grant) are not even in principle perceptible, the satisfaction of the Modal Condition will come along for free *if* the premises are known.

The problem, of course, is that it not clear where we would find independent proof of (2), given that mere thinking tracks the contours of logical rather than real possibility.<sup>14</sup> In the absence of such, however, the argument will not be sound, and there will be no armchair way (here at least) of proving the falsehood of physicalism. Reflection on this case shows that and why Kant would not be a friend of the "conceivability" arguments popular in contemporary metaphysics.

There is another kind of argument involving the supersensible that requires examination, one that does not explicitly premise a claim about real possibility:

- (1) If we are causally responsible for our actions, then our will is incompatibilistically free.
- (2) We are causally responsible for our actions.

Thus,

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14 This is obviously true if by "real possibility" in (2) we mean *absolute* real possibility. But it is also true if we mean Kant's "formal real possibility." For as we have seen, the latter requires coherence with the formal conditions of experience—viz., the forms of intuition and the categories. But if, as the physicalist suggests, mental states are identical to or strongly supervene on brain states, then there will be no world (even one in which the causal laws and initial conditions differ) in which there is a zombie. According to physicalism, a zombie is not really possible in any sense.

(3) Our will is incompatibilistically free.

Grant for the sake of argument that we theoretically know (2) somehow.<sup>15</sup> Can we appeal to (1) to ground knowledge of (3)? Kant's answer is "no," and his reason is that (1) and (3) contain the idea of supersensible freedom. And though there is *some* positive content in the (let's suppose) logically consistent concept of a free will, we still lack theoretical proof that

(0) An incompatibilistically free will is really possible.<sup>16</sup>

Thus (1) is not a candidate for theoretical knowledge, and neither is (3).

This is also Kant's problem with his speculative theistic proof from 1763. In the critical period he still thinks that the argument is formally valid, but holds that there is no way to ground the assumption that an *ens realissimum* is really possible. Thus the Modal Condition is no more satisfied with respect to the idea of God than it is with respect to the idea of freedom of the idea of a zombie: again, such ideas are of "mere thought-things [*Gedankendinge*], the possibility of which is not demonstrable, and which thus cannot be used to ground the explanation of actual appearances" (A771/B799). It is when dealing with ideas of deities, free wills, souls, afterlives, zombies, worlds, and so forth, that the problem of real repugnance becomes a real problem.

What, if anything, can we make of the Modal Condition from a contemporary point of view? Although I can't defend this at length here, the claim that the objects referred to in our positive propositional attitudes need to be demonstrably really possible has something by way of appeal. It smacks of bald stipulation or wish-fulfillment to postulate something on the basis of a probabilistic causal argument or inference-to-best-explanation when we're not independently sure that such a being is really possible. Indeed, our *prior* sense of what is really possible is often what marks out the domain of explanations that we take to be candidates for the "best."

Needless to say, there are competing accounts of what this prior sense of what is really possible amounts to, and some of them do not

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15 In early lectures, and even in the A-edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Groundwork* (cf. 4:451-3), there are passages where Kant suggests that there is a theoretical proof of transcendental freedom. In the B-edition as well as the second *Critique*, however, Kant clearly holds that the only valid argument for transcendental freedom is practical. Such an argument produces "practical knowledge" at best. (For discussion of the development of Kant's views here, see Ameriks 2003, chapters 6-9 and Allison 2006).

16 In the second *Critique*, Kant explicitly says that we can't have theoretical insight into "how freedom is even possible" (5:133). Karl Ameriks cautions, however (in conversation) that "insight" into "how" something is possible might be a more complex and difficult-to-achieve state than mere knowledge *that* something is really possible.

require appeal to intuition or experience. Perhaps the most familiar account says that we know a thing is really possible if we can positively *conceive* of it; there is lively debate over what it means positively to conceive of something.<sup>17</sup> Kant's account, on the other hand, seeks to divide and conquer: he develops a very stringent policy regarding theoretical *knowledge* (*Wissen*) and a much less stringent policy regarding what he calls "Belief" (*Glaube*).<sup>18</sup> With respect to the former, mere conceiving, imagining, or thinking is not enough; there has to be some appropriate and demonstrable connection to intuition. With respect to the latter, the story is more complicated. The Modal Condition doesn't apply to Belief: we don't have to be able to *prove* the real possibility of the objects involved. But Kant is not willing to relinquish the demand represented in the Modal Condition altogether, even with respect to assents based on practical or other non-epistemic grounds. In other words, Kant seems convinced that *some* response to the problem of real repugnance is needed if Belief (practical or theoretical) is to be legitimate from a rational point of view. Again, the motivation for this is presumably the conviction—expressed in the passages quoted earlier—that it isn't rational to assent to propositions about objects which may, for all we can tell, be really impossible.

Kant offers three solutions to this problem of real repugnance vis-à-vis Belief—solutions that are different but not incompatible. We will examine each of these in the sections that follow, but here is a brief overview. The First Solution (prominent in the first *Critique* as well as in "What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" (1786)) appeals to the non-sensible "matter," "content," or "data" provided by the very same needs and interests of reason that justify the Belief itself. Presumably what this means is that if we have subjective grounds for holding that an object is actual, then we also have subjective grounds (the same ones!) for holding that it is really possible. Here, as in the case of *a priori* and empirically certain knowledge, the proof of real possibility comes along for free when the other justification conditions are satisfied.

The Second Solution (prominent in the second *Critique* and other ethical writings) appeals to a non-sensible "practical cognition" that provides the basis for justified Belief or even "practical knowledge" about specific things-in-themselves. The latter state is different from

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17 See the introduction to Gendler and Hawthorne 2002, as well as Chalmers 2002 in the same volume.

18 Though it may be that the policy regarding "practical knowledge" falls somewhere between these two. See Patrick Kain's contribution to the present volume for more on this elusive but intriguing notion in Kant.

theoretical knowledge in important ways, as we will see. But like the First, the Second Solution appeals to the principle that actuality entails possibility: if we practically know that the thing is actual, then we also practically know that it is really possible. The solution to the problem of real repugnance comes along for free, though in a practical rather than a theoretical mode.

The Third Solution (prominent in the late 1780s, the “Real Progress” essay, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and beyond) seeks to forge a much stronger connection between sensibility and ideas by invoking the notion of “symbolism” or “schematism by analogy.” Even if we can’t exhibit or schematize an idea, Kant thinks we may be able to *symbolize it* in order to gain a fragmentary grasp on what it would be like for it to have an actual object. The process of symbolization thus gives us some sensible indication—a “trace or sign,” as Kant says in one place (5:300)—that the content of the idea is really harmonious rather than really repugnant, and goes at least some way toward attaching genuine intuitional content to the marks included in the ideas.

## First Solution: rational needs

Kant’s First Solution to the problem of real repugnance for Belief involves an appeal to the legitimate (though in a technical sense “subjective”) needs, interests, and propensities that make a particular Belief rationally acceptable for certain subjects in certain situations. These needs, issuing from the very “womb of reason” itself, justify the assumption that the objects referred to in the Beliefs they ground are actual. And if those objects are actual, of course, then they are really possible.

At times, Kant conceives of the appeal to these rational needs as a kind of transcendental argument. Just as the official Deduction establishes the objective validity of the principles of pure understanding, an appeal to the needs of reason establishes the objective validity of articles of rational Belief. In the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic we’re told that

the ideas of reason, of course, do not permit of any deduction of the same kind as the categories; but if they are to have the least objective validity, even if it is only an indeterminate one, and are not to represent merely empty thought-entities (*enti rationis ratiocinantis*), then a *deduction of them must definitely be possible*, granted that it must also diverge quite far from the deduction one can carry out in the case of the categories. (A669-70/B697-8, my emphasis)

This striking passage, coming on the heels of the sustained assault on speculative metaphysics in the Dialectic, explicitly says that there *is* a

sort of deduction that can be carried out for the ideas of reason, although the objective validity of the resulting postulates will remain “indeterminate.”<sup>19</sup> The argument that Kant goes on to provide deals primarily with a theoretical kind of Belief about entities like the *ens realissimum* or the ultimate ground of reality. The argument is also confusing because Kant sometimes seems to conflate the demand for the “validity” (i.e. sufficiency or justification) of assents with the demand for “reality” (i.e. really harmonious content) in their constituent concepts (cf. Bxxviii). But it is reasonably clear that when Kant talks about “indeterminate objective validity” in passages like the one just quoted, he is referring to the status of having what he elsewhere calls “subjective sufficiency”—a broadly practical or subjective kind of justification for an assent (A820ff/B848ff).

Note, however, that in the case of the categories, Kant thinks the Deduction has to be supplemented by the Schematism in order for the Modal Condition to be satisfied. In other words, we have to show not just that the relevant principles have good grounds, but that the temporally structured versions of their constituent concepts have objective reality (see the “Schematism” chapter in the first *Critique* as well as the third *Critique*, 5:351). As far as the First Solution is concerned, Kant doesn’t seem to offer any counterpart to schematization with respect to Belief involving rational ideas. If he says anything at all, it is that the problem of real repugnance is *also* solved by appeal to reason’s various needs and desires (perhaps this helps explain the conflation mentioned in the last paragraph). Such an appeal assures the metaphysician that she is not dealing with “merely empty thought-entities” because the same subjective grounds that render Belief subjectively valid or sufficient also show that the ideas involved “have their reality and are by no means merely figments of the brain” (A314/B371). Kant puts his position this way in the context of a discussion of moral Belief:

(T)here is a ground of assent that is, in comparison with speculative reason, merely *subjective* but that is yet *objectively* valid for a reason equally pure but practical ... objective reality is given to the ideas of God and immortality and a warrant [*Befugnis*], indeed a subjective necessity (a need of pure reason) is provided to accept [*anzunehmen*] them, although reason is not thereby ex-

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19 Likewise at the beginning of the Dialectic Kant says that “No *objective deduction* of these transcendental ideas is really possible, such as we could provide for the categories. For just because they are ideas, they have in fact no relation to any object [*Objekt*] that could be given congruent to them. But we can undertake a subjective derivation [*Ableitung*] of them from the nature of our reason, and this is to be accomplished in the present section” (A336/B393). Erdmann’s text reads “*Ableitung*” here, though other editions insert “*Anleitung*” (“introduction”). In light of the quotation just provided in the body of the text, however, it seems that “*Ableitung*” is more adequate to Kant’s intentions.

tended in theoretical cognition and, instead, all that is given is that their [real] possibility, which was hitherto only a *problem*, here becomes an *assertion* and so the practical use of reason is connected with the elements of the theoretical. (5:4-5)

Genuine moral activity requires Belief in freedom, God, and immortality, and thus our practical commitments allow us rationally to accept and assert that these objects are actual and really possible. There is no separate argument that would seek to meet an analogue of the Modal Condition.

If this reading is correct, then the First Solution is effectively an attempt to make Belief function like *a priori* knowledge and non-probabilistic empirical knowledge with respect to the problem of real repugnance. In the case of those kinds of knowledge, as we have seen, the grounds that justify assent to the actuality of the objects also simultaneously establish the real possibility of those objects. The First Solution likewise says that if a need of reason provides S with subjectively sufficient grounds for Belief in an object O, then it also grounds Belief in O's real possibility. Elsewhere Kant varies his terminology and says that an appeal to rational needs and interests establishes the "*subjective reality*" of the ideas (A339/B397) and the "*practical possibility*" of their objects (5:115).<sup>20</sup> But the overall picture is the same.

An objector might worry that this is ill-gotten gain. Even if we agree that a rational need pushes us to adopt a Belief that refers to some object O, how does this tell us *anything* about whether O is really possible? How does appeal to a need (of reason or anything else) tell us something about what can or cannot find a footing in reality? Again, there are no sensible intuitions involved here, no appeal to the forms of intuition, and no constructions, images, or schemata. There is thus a

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20 Kant also uses "objective practical reality" to refer to this property or status, especially in the second *Critique* (e.g. 5:48-9). But that term, too, has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, "objective practical reality" makes the fact that it is a kind of harmonious content or "objective reality" explicit. On the other hand, it makes it sound as though the considerations that ground our confidence in the object's real possibility must always be strictly "practical." And while it's certainly true that Kant relegates the considerations that support *Belief* to the realm of the "practical," this is potentially misleading because it can sound as though he's speaking of strictly *pragmatic* or *moral* considerations. There are *broadly* "practical" considerations which are neither pragmatic nor moral under the usual definitions, and which can ground a kind of *theoretical Belief* in particular (see Chignell 2007a). "Subjective reality" nicely establishes a parallel to the "subjective sufficiency" discussed in the Canon of Pure Reason, and also makes clear that our confidence in a transcendent object's real possibility has an important subjective aspect that our confidence in the "objective reality" of an object of our experience does not. Alas, Kant doesn't stick to this terminology, and so I continue to use "objective reality."



serious disanalogy between the deduction of the categories and the deduction of the ideas, a disanalogy that Kant ignores in these texts.

One strategy here is to emphasize the parallels between the transcendental arguments that justify the pure categories of the understanding and the “deduction” of ideas by appeal to rational needs. In both cases, it is a *rational* need for something like explanation, rather than some irrational need, that underwrites the principles involved. I’m not sure there is much more to do by way of defending Kant, except to emphasize again that we are talking about mere Belief rather than theoretical knowledge. Meeting a legitimate need of reason in the right way (via a metaphysical argument that provides “completeness,” say, or a moral argument that heads off a kind of absurdity in our moral vocation) makes a firm Belief (theoretical or moral) fully legitimate from a rational point of view. And if a Belief that *p* entails Belief that *O* exists, then it trivially entails Belief that *O* is really possible. Such Beliefs—especially the theoretical ones—will in many cases be tentative and defeasible: if someone can show that the object of the Belief is really *impossible*, or logically impossible, or that the grounds on which the Belief is based are faulty, or that there are stronger grounds for a logically incompatible proposition, then we will have to re-evaluate our assent. But in the absence of such defeaters, the Belief that *p* will be consistent with what we know by way of theoretical reason, and our rational needs will make *O* a legitimate part of our picture of the world.<sup>21</sup>

It is worth reemphasizing that a consequence of Kant’s First Solution is that metaphysical arguments that start from the bald postulation of the real possibility of something (such as the zombie argument against physicalism above) are unacceptable. For according to the First Solution, the real possibility of an object of speculative metaphysics is something that we accept only because we have independent grounds to Believe that the object is *actual*. Thus we accept the real possibility of free wills or God because we already have an argument (albeit on “subjective” grounds) for their actuality. An argument that simply *starts* with the real possibility of a bodiless soul or a soulless body will lack

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21 “It is clear that, even if from the [speculative] perspective [reason’s] capacity does not extend to establishing certain propositions [about supersensibles] affirmatively, although they do not contradict it, *as soon as these propositions belong inseparably to the practical interest* of pure reason it must accept them—indeed as something offered to it from another source, which has not grown on its land but yet is sufficiently authenticated—and try to compare and connect them with everything that it has within its power as speculative reason, being mindful, however, that these are not its insights but are yet extensions of its use from another, namely a practical perspective; and this is not in the least opposed to its interest, which consists in the restriction of speculative mischief” (5:121).

grounds for its initial premise: there is no rational need that pushes directly for this modal assumption, and the critical Kant doesn't think we have a faculty that "clearly and distinctly perceives" (or, to use Chalmers' language, "ideally positively conceives") real possibility in a reliable way (see Chalmers 2002). Kant's own argument for the soul, of course, goes from the rational need to avoid practical absurdity to Belief in an afterlife, and from there to a Belief in the "future life" of the soul (which may or may not be immaterial). So although Kant has no problem with *some* traditional metaphysical propositions construed as objects of Belief, he would reject speculative arguments that simply *start* with the putative real possibility of some supersensible entity (an immaterial soul, a zombie, a being than which none greater can be conceived, and so forth).

Early in the critical period, Kant often makes recourse to the First Solution to the problem of real repugnance regarding Belief. But he also gestures in the direction of a Second Solution, one that becomes more prominent later in the 1780s. Perhaps Kant began to feel that the First Solution was somehow unsatisfactory: as we have seen, even though he talks about "transcendentally deducing" the ideas, what he is really doing is showing that various subjective aspects of our rational vocations as speculating, inquiring, and acting creatures lead us to generate those ideas and, perhaps, to accept that their objects exist. In the absence of a Modal Condition on Belief, the postulates can seem like mere projections of our rational needs onto the screen of our world-view, projections whose real possibility is dubious. Switching metaphors, the seeds that would be cultivated later by James (in a positive light) and Feuerbach (in a negative one) are already sown in this theory, and Kant may have sensed that something stronger and more closely connected to cognition or sensibility would be preferable.<sup>22</sup>

## Second Solution: practical data

The Second Solution is largely focused on one idea—the idea of freedom—though Kant sometimes applies it to other postulates of practical

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22 We needn't wait for the 19th century to see the Feuerbachian sort of objection arise. Kant himself refers to criticisms put forward by Wizenmann in a 1787 article in the *Deutsches Museum*: "he disputes the authorization to conclude from a need to the objective reality of its object and illustrates the point by the example of a *man in love*, who, having fooled himself into an idea of beauty that is merely a chimera of his own brain, would like to conclude that such an object really exists somewhere." Kant responds by distinguishing between assent based on mere inclination, and assent based on needs of *reason* (5:144n). Cf. Wizenmann 1787.

reason as well. After turning away from Leibnizean compatibilism in the late 1760s, Kant appears to have thought for a time that there is a *theoretical proof* of the reality of the incompatibilist freedom of the will (see, e.g., *Metaphysik L<sub>1</sub>*, 28:269).<sup>23</sup> But by the mid-1780s, he had relegated assents about transcendental freedom to the status of things we can only hold on subjective grounds. Still, Kant seems to say that our assent about freedom is somehow stronger or more secure than the assents about God and the afterlife that are based on rational needs and count as practical and theoretical Belief. So we find him—seldom in the A edition but often in the B edition—speaking of “practical cognition” (*praktische Erkenntnis*) of the supersensible. Here is a suggestive passage from the B Preface:

Now after speculative reason has been denied all advance in this field of the supersensible, what still remains for us is to attempt to see whether data is to be found in its practical cognition [*in ihrer praktischen Erkenntniß Data finden*], for determining that transcendent rational concept of the unconditioned, in such a way as to reach beyond the boundaries of all possible experience, in accordance with the wishes of metaphysics, cognitions *a priori* that are possible, but only from a practical point of view [*Absicht*]. (Bxxi)

Practical cognition “determines” the idea of freedom somehow, and this allows us to go beyond Belief, though still only from a practical point of view.

In the second *Critique*, we’re told more about the nature of practical cognition. It turns out that it is not *bona fide* cognition at all, if by the latter we mean the bringing of pure or sensible *intuitions* under concepts. Rather, it appears to be the result of an *inferential* conclusion from what Kant calls the “fact of reason”—i.e., our fundamental awareness of the moral law and our subjection to it as rational beings. If we are subject to the moral law, the inference goes, then we must be able to follow it (and to disobey it), and thus we must be incompatibilistically free. Ought implies can here in a substantive metaphysical way (cf. 5:89-106). Indeed, in some places Kant refers to the conclusion of this argument as full-blown “practical knowledge [*Wissen*]” (5:4, for instance).

Setting this argument aside, note that in the logic lectures we’re told that “practical cognition” has at least three different uses (9:86ff). First and most strictly, it refers to cognition of what we *ought* to do—knowledge involving hypothetical or categorical imperatives. But it can also refer, second, to cognition of what *exists* just in case that existence has clear implications for what we ought to do. For instance, speculative cognition that there is a God (supposing we could achieve it) would

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23 See Ameriks 2003, chapters 6 and 9 and Allison 2006.

count as practical cognition insofar as it would lead us to try to discover that being's commands. Clearly this second sort of practical cognition is practical only in its application, however; it could very well be theoretical cognition "in itself," so to speak.

Third, "practical cognition" can refer to an existence-claim *derived* from an ought-claim. Such cognition presupposes a commitment to the principle that ought implies can, and the most significant case of it is the argument for transcendental freedom. Once I *practically cognize* that I ought to follow the moral law, I can infer that I am transcendently free as another item of practical cognition or knowledge. This is not a mere "as-if" attitude: Kant often calls it "assertoric" rather than "problematic," though he always qualifies it as assertoric "from a practical perspective" or "in a practical respect" (5:105).

Kant's mid-1780s adherence to the Second Solution is confirmed by an important footnote in the B Preface that I've mentioned but not quoted at length. The note is attached to Kant's assertion, in the body of the text, that although we cannot cognize things-in-themselves, we can at least *think* of them. Kant glosses this claim starting with the now-familiar point that "to cognize an object, it is required that I be able to prove its possibility (whether by the testimony of experience from its actuality or *a priori* through reason)" (Bxxviii). Kant is obviously talking about real possibility here; the claim is that, in order to count as theoretically cognizing an object, I must be able to *prove* that it is really possible by forging some sort of connection between it and possible experience. He also explicitly says that this will often take a route "from [the object's] actuality" to its real possibility.

Having made this point with respect to theoretical knowledge, Kant notes that

I can *think* whatever I like, as long as I do not contradict myself, i.e., as long as my concept is a possible thought, even if I cannot give any assurance as to whether or not there is a corresponding object [*Objekt*] somewhere within the sum total of all possibilities. But in order to ascribe objective validity to such a concept (real possibility, for the first sort of possibility was merely logical) something more is required. This "more," however, need not be sought in theoretical sources of cognition; it may also lie in practical ones. (*Ibid.*)

Discursive "thought" is guided by the principles of general logic and, more specifically, the logical forms of judgment that correlate with the unschematized categories (cf. 5:136). Thus, as already noted, the sort of possibility that "thought" tracks, for the critical Kant, is logical rather than real, and *mere* thought-entities do not have objective reality. This means that in order to guarantee objective reality for ideas and real

possibility for their objects, “something more is required.”<sup>24</sup> Kant’s rather oblique claim about finding that “something more” in the practical “sources of cognition” is, I suggest, a gesture at the practical cognition of freedom that is central to the Second Solution.

Although Kant calls our awareness of the fact of reason “practical cognition,” there is an important disanalogy between the structure of this cognition and that of its theoretical counterpart. On most interpretations of the fact of reason, the awareness of the moral law that constitutes it is intellectual and not sensible: it doesn’t involve inner or outer intuitions from sensibility. This means that despite Kant’s metaphorical talk of “data” in the passage cited earlier, our awareness of our status as obligated beings doesn’t provide any *intuitional* content determinable by the application of a concept. Any “data” that rational ideas acquire from this sort of cognition will thus be markedly less determinate or “material” when compared to the intuitional content of our empirical concepts. So it is hard to see, in the end, how practical cognition and knowledge of our freedom is anything more than a very distant cousin of the cognition of objects that we get in the theoretical/empirical context.<sup>25</sup>

This difference, I think, is what motivates Kant to develop yet one more response to the problem of real repugnance with respect to ideas—a response that reflects our situation as sensible, intuiting beings, and not just Gradgrindian rational inquirers. It is in the Third Solution to the problem of real repugnance (and especially the part of it that appeals to beauty in art and nature) that we see Kant’s concern that intuitional “indications” of the reality of ideas be provided—if not as evidence, exactly, then at least as accommodations to our sensible nature and its central role in guiding assent.

### Third Solution: sensible symbols

In writings on the problem of real repugnance at the end of the 1780s, Kant makes a slight but discernible shift toward an approach that is different from, though compatible with, those already discussed. It is

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24 In this passage, Kant again seems to use “objective validity” to refer to what he usually calls “objective reality.” In general, however, *objective validity* is the property that attaches to propositions when they have a truth value and objectively sufficient grounds. *Objective reality* is the property that attaches to concepts when their objects are really possible.

25 Not necessarily an illegitimate cousin, however. Again, see Patrick Kain’s essay in this volume for an engaging discussion of how practical cognition might provide substantive (albeit still “practical”) knowledge of the objects of ideas.

not that he abandons the first two approaches, exactly: references to both can be found in texts throughout Kant's career. But for whatever reason, toward the end of his career he starts appealing to a special kind of *sensible* experience as a source of positive content for ideas. His technical term for this ersatz mode of supplying content is "symbolization." The claim is that even if we can't prove, demonstrate, or exhibit that a rational idea can have an object in reality, we can still *symbolize* the object in order to gain a fragmentary grasp on what it would be like for it to have an actual instance.<sup>26</sup> Because this mode of "indicating" real possibility involves appeal to some sort of experience, it is structurally closer to Kant's method for proving real possibility in the case of knowledge (empirical and *a priori*). The symbolic analogue of a schema gives us a sense (though not a proof) that the content of an idea is really harmonious rather than really repugnant, and thereby goes at least some way toward legitimating our use of that idea. Symbolization is thus an important part of Kant's philosophy—one that has been largely neglected in the literature.<sup>27</sup>

### The Third Solution in *Real Progress*

By the late 1780s, Kant was feeling pressure from critics (e.g. Jacobi, Wizenmann, and Eberhard) who had accused him of violating (in the Appendix to the Dialectic, the Canon, and the practical works of the mid-1780s) his own policies regarding what we can and cannot say or know about things beyond the bounds of possible experience.<sup>28</sup> The First and Second Solutions had failed to quiet these critics—as well, perhaps, as the nagging critic within. The account of symbolization in an essay from that period—namely, *What Real Progress has been Made in Metaphysics since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?*—is thus meant to show *both* that Kant's philosophy had progressed beyond Leibniz's and Wolff's uncritical adherence to the Principle of Sufficient Reason *and* that it can account, on its own terms, for the legitimacy of talk about ideas and rational Belief in their objects.

The main section to consider is in the middle of the essay, where Kant is discussing what he calls "practical dogmatic assent." This atti-

26 Note that this is quite different from the Leibnizian-Wolffian conception of a "symbol" as a more-or-less arbitrary sign. See Leibniz 1989, p. 25.

27 Important exceptions include Kang 1985 and, with respect to the practical philosophy, Bielefeldt 2001.

28 Again, see Jacobi 1787, Wizenmann 1787, and the second *Critique* at 5:144n. Eberhard's critique of Kant can be found in the first volume of *Philosophisches Magazin* (1788-9) and in Allison 1973.

tude appears to be the same as what he elsewhere calls “Belief”: it is assent (*Fürwahrhalten*), typically about supersensibles, that is objectively unjustified but yet subjectively “sufficient” (justified) by way of responding to certain needs or interests of reason itself. The title of the section raises the worry at the heart of our discussion here, namely, “How to Confer Objective Reality on the Pure Concepts of Understanding and Reason.”

The pure concepts (or categories) of the understanding, Kant says, acquire objective reality via schematization—“objective reality is accorded to the concept directly (*directe*) through the intuition that corresponds to it, i.e. the concept is immediately presented” (20:279, cf. A310/B367). A transcendental idea of the supersensible, on the other hand, “cannot be presented immediately, but only in its consequences [*indirecte*], [and] may be called the symbolization of the concept” (20:280). Symbolization, Kant then explains,

is an expedient [*Nothülfe*] for concepts of the supersensible which are therefore not truly presented, and can be given in no possible experience, though they still necessarily appertain to a cognition, even if it were possible merely as a practical one. (*Ibid.*)

Note that here Kant seems to link the Second Solution—according to which we can practically cognize freedom through our awareness of the moral law—with the Third Solution, which appeals to the “expedient” of sensible symbolization. The latter is said to be the *only* sort of presentation available for supersensibles, *including* the freedom that we practically cognize by inference from the fact of reason (cf. 5:43ff). So by 1790, Kant is apparently thinking of the Third Solution as a complement to the Second. But the Third Solution also goes further than the Second, since symbolization is available for many ideas whose objects we don’t practically cognize at all.<sup>29</sup>

So what *is* symbolization anyway, and how is it accomplished?

The symbol of an idea (or a concept of reason) is a representation by analogy, i.e., by the same relationship to certain consequences as that which is attributed to the object in respect of its own consequences, even though the objects themselves are of entirely different kinds. (20:280)

29 Guyer suggests that Kant introduces the *Nothülfe* because “the rationalism of the *Critique of Practical Reason* was too austere even for Kant himself” and the fact that we are embodied, sensing beings “makes it necessary not just that the constraints but also that the attractions of morality be accessible to our senses as well as our intellect.” One of the main “attractions” of morality, according to Guyer, is that it entails us being truly, transcendently free (Guyer 2005, p. 225). I suggest below that the attempt to appeal to our sensible nature potentially includes all of the ideas—and many different kinds of symbols—rather than just the ideas of freedom and morality.

This is opaque, but Kant provides an example to illustrate what he means:

I conceive of certain products of Nature, such as organized things, animals or plants, in a relation to their cause like that of a clock to man, as its maker, viz., in a relationship of causality as such ... which is the same in both cases, albeit that the subject of this relation remains unknown to me in its inner nature, so that only the one can be presented, and the other not at all... (*Ibid.*)

The claim seems to be that we can get a limited sense of whether a thing is really possible by drawing an analogy between *its* relationship to something we know to be really possible, and the relationship between two *other* things that we already know to be really possible.<sup>30</sup> In doing this, symbolization allows us to import some intuitional or even imagistic content into our idea of a thing. As Kant says in an earlier *Reflexion*: “A *symbolum* is an indirect intuition [*indirecte Anschauung*]. Words are not *symbola*, because they don’t provide a picture [*Bild*]” (25:710).

With this in mind, consider Kant’s example of God and the clock-maker (and note that he is writing before Paley). We see that the clock is an organized system, and know that it has an intelligent designer. But nature as a whole, too, seems to be an organized system. Thus we can take the two organized systems to be analogous “consequences” of analogous causes and conclude that, just as the watch has a maker, so too it might make sense to think of the world-whole as having an intelligent author (*Welturheber*).

Kant is not implausibly suggesting that this analogy somehow demonstrates that a world-author *in fact* exists, or even that we can univocally ascribe predicates to our concept of such a being.<sup>31</sup> But he does think it gives us an indication of whether the idea has positive harmonious content—i.e., of whether it describes something that could find a footing in reality: “For just as in the world one thing is regarded as the

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30 Compare this quotation from the third *Critique*: “All *hypotyposis* (presentation, *subjecto sub adspectum*), as making something sensible, is of one of two kinds: either *schematic*, where to a concept grasped by the understanding the corresponding intuition is given *a priori*; or *symbolic*, where to a concept which only reason can think, and to which no sensible intuition can be adequate, an intuition is attributed with which the power of judgment proceeds in a way merely analogous to that which it observes in schematization, i.e., it is merely the rule of this procedure, not of the intuition itself, and thus merely the form of the reflection, not the content which corresponds to the concept” (5:351; cf. 5:464n). This is a bit misleading, insofar as it is not *merely* the formal activity of mind that is similar in both cases; rather, the contents of the states are themselves analogous and thus symbolically related. See Chignell 2006 for an argument along these lines.

31 Kant warns in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* against the illegitimate “*metabasis eis allo genos*” (a switch from one genus to another) that results from univocal ascriptions of sensible predicates to a supersensible like God (see 6:65).



cause of another thing when it contains the ground of this thing, so in the same way we regard the whole world as a consequence of its ground *in God*, and argue from the analogy” (28:1023).<sup>32</sup>

Another caveat: clearly such methods are not going to demonstrate or prove the real possibility of a thing in the same way that establishing a connection to experience would. But where proof is not available, Kant suggests that symbolization can provide at least a sense of what it would be for the object of the idea to exist—even as a thing-in-itself—by drawing analogies to objects and relations with which we are acquainted. Schemas and examples give us proof of real possibility; symbolizations give us intimations of such.<sup>33</sup> Limitations notwithstanding, it is crucial that such symbolization of rational ideas take place, since otherwise those who accept various articles of Belief could be accused, on Kant’s principles, of trafficking in incoherent concepts of really impossible objects:

As far as reality is concerned, it is evidently intrinsically forbidden to think it *in concreto* without getting help from experience, because it can only pertain to sensation, as the matter of experience, and does not concern the form of the relation that one can always play with in fictions. (A223/B270)

Rational people will thus have a strong interest in anything that can provide sensible content, however symbolic, to rational ideas.

### The Third Solution in the Third *Critique*

The fact that Kant thinks that the symbolization of ideas is useful for handling the problem of real repugnance comes out just as clearly in the major work written around the same time as the *Real Progress* essay—the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). At the end of the section on aesthetics, Kant suggests that many artworks—and perhaps some aspects of nature—are valuable to us insofar as they symbolize that which cannot be directly presented or exhibited, viz., the transcendent

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32 For another prominent example of symbolization, see the analogy Kant draws between divine love of creatures and a parent’s love of a child in *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* (4:358n).

33 Symbols are also supposed to be available for specifically Kantian ideas such as the idea of the “unity of reason” in which all the concepts and principles of the understanding are somehow systematically combined into a “unity.” With respect to this idea, Kant says that “although no schema can be found in *intuition* for the thoroughgoing systematic unity of all concepts of the understanding, an *analogue* of such a schema can and must be given, which is the idea of the *maximum* of division and unification of the understanding’s cognition in one principle” (A665/B693). It would be worth deciphering exactly what this analogical relationship is and how it is supposed to work, but I don’t propose to attempt that here.

objects of rational ideas. In an unpublished reflection he goes so far as to suggest that we should find beautiful *only* those works and natural vistas that somehow symbolize rational ideas: “The entire use of the beautiful arts is that they set moral propositions of reason in their full glory and powerfully support them” (25:33).

This last claim is in tension with Kant’s position early on in the third *Critique* according to which curlicues on wallpaper, crustaceans, birdsongs, and the like can count as beautiful solely on account of their “purposive form.” Without trying to resolve the tension here, I think we can at least say that *one* important function that beautiful art plays for Kant is that of exhibiting, in fragmentary fashion, objects which are officially “unexhibitable.” Kant also thinks that beauty in *nature* can “indicate” that certain rational ideas have objective reality,<sup>34</sup> in other words, it can “show some trace or give a sign” that their content is not metaphysically incoherent. Moreover, “reason must take an interest in every manifestation in nature of a correspondence similar to this; consequently, the mind cannot reflect on the beauty of *nature* without finding itself at the same time to be interested in it” (5:300). Given that reason “needs” to accept articles of Belief involving ideas, Kant says that it is crucial for us to have experiences that suggest that these ideas are coherent and may have objects. Indeed, taking an interest in beautiful art and nature is the sign of a good soul, since many of the ideas are *moral* ideas, and someone who is looking for their objects is also likely to have a strong predisposition to morality.<sup>35</sup>

“Taste” on this picture, becomes “basically a faculty for judging the sensible rendering [*Versinnlichung*] of ... ideas by means of a certain analogy” (5:356). Making an aesthetic judgment, of course, is an *active* process of assent-formation, but it is preceded by a pleasurable representational response to the object as it is beheld, a response which Kant sometimes dubs an “aesthetic idea.” It is appropriate to call such aesthetic responses *ideas*, Kant says, because in the process of having them our mind

strives toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience, and thus seeks to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason (intellectual ideas), which gives them the appearance of an objective reality. (5:314)

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34 “Indicate” (*anzeigen*) is from *Reflexion* 1820a at 16:127. Kant says there that “Beautiful things indicate that the human being fits into the world”—that is, that the natural world is also what Leibniz calls a “moral world.”

35 “[H]e who takes such an interest in the beautiful in nature can do so only insofar as he has already firmly established his interest in the morally good. We thus have cause at least to suspect a predisposition to a good moral disposition in one who is immediately interested in the beauty in nature” (5:300-1).

In other words, our aesthetic response to certain objects involves imaginative “striving” toward the supersensible, presumably because there is something in the objects that we associate with ideas of the latter. The associative chain of representations that “yield” (*geben*) such an aesthetic idea in us will never adequately exhibit a rational idea, of course, since by definition the latter cannot be exhibited (cf. 5:315). But aesthetic ideas are accompanied by a fragmentary, symbolic, intriguing sense—which we can think of as a kind of confirmation or indication—that rational ideas *could* have a real object.

Kant notes that literature, in particular, often contains explicit attempts to exhibit rational ideas:

The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature, by means of an imagination that emulates the precedent of reason in attaining to a maximum. (5:314)

Because literature, more than any of the other arts, is often guided by the explicit desire to symbolize ideas such as these, Kant says that “it is really the art of poetry in which the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure” (*Ibid.*).

It is important to reiterate that Kant would *not* say that the fact that a work of art depicts the supersensible in some fragmentary way is what *grounds* positive aesthetic judgments about it. A number of commentators have tried to salvage Kant’s Deduction of Taste by developing an interpretation along these lines<sup>36</sup> and, admittedly, Kant himself seems to suggest this in places (again see 25:33). But I think this is an interpretive mistake, since it conflicts with the overarching doctrine that the normativity of judgments of taste cannot stem from *any* intellectual interest that we have in rational ideas (5:204-5).

What Kant offers us, on the contrary, is a subtle theory according to which aspects of art or nature symbolize rational ideas for us and thus occasion the sort of mental episode (“aesthetic idea,” “free play of the faculties”) that is itself the source of aesthetic pleasure and the proper “subjective” basis for a judgment of taste. So the symbolic content of the object may be important for grounding a judgment of taste, but only *indirectly*—i.e., it is one aspect of an object or vista that may lead beholders to have the form of characteristically aesthetic experience that

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36 For example, Crawford 1974 and Savile 1993.

is itself the only legitimate basis for aesthetic judgment.<sup>37</sup> A central task of the Kantian critic would thus be to draw our attention to the way in which an artwork can be “closely or remotely” associated with particular rational ideas (5:326) and to try to decrypt the “cipher by means of which nature figuratively speaks to us in its beautiful forms” (5:301).

Interestingly, Kant plays the critic himself at one point, and offers a specific (albeit politically suspect) example of the way that symbolization in art occurs:

When the great king [i.e. Friedrich the Great] expresses himself in one of his poems thus:

*Let us depart from life without grumbling and without regretting anything, leaving the world behind us replete with good deeds. Thus does the sun, after it has completed its daily course, still spread a gentle light across the heavens; and the last rays that it sends forth into the sky are its last sighs for the well-being of the world,*<sup>38</sup>

he animates [*belebt*] his idea of reason of a cosmopolitan disposition even at the end of life by means of an attribute that the imagination (in the recollection of everything agreeable in a beautiful summer day, drawn to a close, which bright evening calls to mind) associated with that representation, and which arouses a multitude of sensations and supplementary representations for which no expression is found. (5:315-6)

Whether Kant is seriously recommending Friedrich’s poetry here is not the main issue; the point, rather, is that part of the poem’s value is said to consist in its ability to “animate” an idea of reason—in this case, the moral idea of a perfect cosmopolitan or stoic disposition.<sup>39</sup> The poem gives some positive content to this idea by drawing an analogy to a late summer’s sunset—it says, in effect (and what follows is a flat-footed gloss), “look at the way the sun sets and casts its rays gently and generously across the world as it departs—that is an analogue of the way that the ideal cosmopolitan sage feels and acts when approaching the end of

37 For different views on how to work this out, see Allison 2001, chapters 10-12 and Guyer 1998, as well as my own suggestion in Chignell 2007c.

38 Kant is loosely rendering this poem, which Friedrich wrote in French:

*Oui, finissons sans trouble, et mourons sans regrets,  
En laissant l’Univers comblé de nos bienfaits.  
Ainsi l’Astre du jour, au bout de sa carrière,  
Répand sur l’horizon une douce lumière,  
Et les derniers rayons qu’il darde dans les airs  
Sont ses derniers soupirs qu’il donne à l’Univers.*

39 Kant does not deny that some people of particularly good character can *partially* exhibit certain moral ideas of virtue. He admits that such an “idea of practical reason can always actually be given *in concreto*, though only partially” (A328/B385) but emphasizes that “no human being will ever act adequately to what the pure idea of virtue contains,” which is why it still counts as an idea (A315/B372).

his or her time on earth.” For Kant, this poem has aesthetic value because it excites aesthetic response in us *by way of* symbolizing that moral idea.

Someone might worry that Kant’s theory of taste here threatens to be too narrow—ascribing aesthetic value only to those works or vistas that we somehow associate with rational ideas. Like Plato in the *Symposium*, it might be suggested, Kant on the present interpretation is so fixated on transcendental ideas that he sidelines the important this-worldly aspects of art and nature, aspects which clearly contribute to their aesthetic value. This worry, however, rests on a misunderstanding. Although the connection to ideas is, for Kant, *one* of the aspects of an object that can evoke aesthetic response from us, there are other aspects that can do so as well. I have already mentioned Kant’s extended discussion, earlier in the third *Critique*, of the aesthetic merits of mere “form”—lines, metric form, shapes, and so forth.

Furthermore, Kant’s use of Friedrich’s poem highlights the fact that the domain of rational ideas, for him, is large. It is not that all great art points narrowly to God or the Good, as some readings of the *Symposium* suggest; rather, there is a vast array of moral, religious, and metaphysical ideas that can be symbolized in art, and all such symbolizations can serve as the occasion for aesthetic response. Thus (and this too will be crude and flat-footed from an art-critical point of view) some of Wagner’s music might give symbolic content to the metaphysical idea of an *unconditioned totality*, whereas Holst’s *The Planets* might provide a musical analogue for our cosmological idea of the *world-whole*. The characters in *Sense and Sensibility* clearly provide symbolic content to the moral idea of *decorum*, whereas Iago symbolizes *envy* and Ivan Karamazov *intellectual honesty*. Michelangelo’s David could symbolize the ideal of perfect (masculine) human beauty, and perhaps the Petronas Towers are symbols of the idea of *transcendence* generally.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the literary portrait in the Gospels is said by Kant to approximate “the ideal of humanity pleasing to God (hence of such moral perfection as is possible to a being pertaining to this world and dependent on needs and inclinations)” (6:61; cf. 6:65n). Clearly,

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40 I take comfort from the fact that Kant’s description of how symbolization works in nature is almost as flat-footed as my description of how it works in art:

Thus the white color of the lily seems to dispose the mind to ideas of innocence, and the seven colors, in their order from red to violet, to the ideas of (1) sublimity, (2) audacity, (3) of candor, (4) of friendliness, (5) of modesty, (6) of steadfastness, (7) of tenderness. The song of the bird proclaims joyfulness and contentment with its existence. At least this is how we interpret nature, whether anything of the sort is its intention or not. (5:302)

the possibilities for symbolizing ideas are wide-ranging, and this is not a narrow Platonism about aesthetic value.

Having said that, I should admit that there is an unmistakably Platonic flavor to the theory. Kant is suggesting that one of the main goals of art- and nature-appreciation is to help us catch sight, so to speak, of the transcendent objects of rational ideas. Kant's language is that of both aesthetic appreciation and Platonic *eros* when he asks: "Why has Providence set many objects, although they are intimately connected with our highest interest, so high that it is barely granted to us to encounter them in an indistinct perception, doubted even by ourselves, through which our searching glance is more enticed than satisfied?" (A743-4/B771-2). One answer to the question might be: so that we would make beautiful art, and learn to appreciate beautiful nature. Beauty entices us by giving us symbols—indistinct perceptions, doubted even by ourselves—of transcendental ideas.

Three final remarks about symbolization in the third *Critique*: (i) First, it is crucial to distinguish the instances of symbolization I have just been discussing from another and better known instance in this text. In section 59, Kant claims that the *way* we make aesthetic judgments (i.e. the way the faculties of imagination and understanding freely "harmonize") *itself* provides a symbol or analogue of the way that rational agents make moral judgments (i.e., the way the faculties of reason and will freely "harmonize"). It is in this way that "beauty is a symbol of morality," as the title of section 59 announces, or that "taste is an *analogon* of perfection—it is in intuition what morality is in reason" (25:196). This means that in a genuine aesthetic judgment, there may well be two different symbolization-relations obtaining. First, the *content* of the artwork or the natural object itself may symbolize for the beholder some idea of reason. And, second, the *form* that aesthetic judgment assumes in the mind of the beholder will symbolize the form of an authentic moral judgment. My sense is that commentators have focused largely on the second sort of symbolization and neglected the importance of the first.

(ii) Kant is apparently willing to use "cognition" (*Erkenntnis*) even to describe the kind of transaction with the supersensible that mere symbolization affords. But he usually includes an explicit denial that it is *theoretical* cognition, since the latter involves a straightforward empirical or schematic exhibition of concepts, rather than an analogical one. Instead, symbols provide us with or are involved in *practical* cognition (*praktische Erkenntnis*) of ideas. This use of "practical" can be misleading, however, because the process we are talking about can involve not just narrowly *moral* ideas, but other ideas as well. The metaphysical idea of a noumenal ground or an *ens realissimum*, just as

much as the moral idea of a cosmopolitan sage, can be symbolized in beautiful art and nature.<sup>41</sup> So it is important to note that while the considerations that ground the relevant assents may be broadly speaking “practical,” the ideas involved need not be.

This provides another indication that around 1790 Kant starts to conflate or at least link the Second Solution to the problem of real repugnance with the Third Solution. It also suggests that Kant’s considered view is that practical cognition can *either* constitute (or perhaps ground) “practical knowledge”<sup>42</sup> of the supersensible *or* provide a non-standard kind of positive or material content to ideas for the purposes of mere *Belief*, depending on the content of the assents involved.

(iii) Third, lest there be any doubt that the role that Kant assigns to symbolization in rational inquiry is an important one, it is worth noting that it is *the* main mode of giving positive content to many of our most important philosophical concepts:

Our language is full of such indirect presentations, in accordance with an analogy, where the expression does not contain the actual schema for the concept but only a symbol for reflection. Examples are the words *ground* (support, basis), *depend* (be held from above), from which *flow* (instead of follow), *substance* (as Locke expresses it: the bearer of accidents), and innumerable other nonschematic but symbolic hypotyposes and expressions for concepts not by means of a direct intuition, but only in accordance with an analogy with it, i.e., the transportation of the reflection on one object of intuition to another, quite different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond. (5:352)

This passage is puzzling because in the first *Critique* Kant says that at least some of these ideas (substance, ground, etc.) can be schematized for use in an *a priori* metaphysics of experience. Setting this aside, it is certainly clear that the theoretical *Belief*—which for Kant is the only rational result of what the tradition called *special* metaphysics—will traffic in a great deal of symbolization. In particular, the idea of God is clearly “merely symbolic, and anyone who takes it, along with the properties of understanding, will, etc., which prove their objective real-

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41 In notes he made for the *Real Progress* essay, Kant reflects on the problem of real repugnance specifically with respect to the idea of the *ens realissimum* (which is a metaphysical rather than an explicitly moral idea). He says there that, in general, we can resort to “either the real schematism (transcendental), or the schematism by analogy (symbolic). The objective reality of the categories is theoretical, that of the idea is only practical” (20:332). It seems clear from this that some very broad notion of “practical” can be used to refer to all of the transcendental ideas, including speculative metaphysical ideas like that of an *ens realissimum*. But this is not a narrow, morality-focused sense of “practical.” See also 5:353.

42 Cf. the talk of practical knowledge (*Wissen*) at 5:4 and of the “*scibilia*” at 5:467-8.

ity only in beings within the world, as schematic, lapses into anthropomorphism” (5:353).

In the account of symbolization in the third *Critique* and *Real Progress*, then, we have the groundwork for a *via analogia* account of metaphysical and religious concepts in general. Kant continues to build on this in the subsequent decade (e.g. at 28:1023, 1048ff), and thus joins a long tradition of holding that ideas of the supersensible get much of their content by making analogies to beings and properties we experience in the terrestrial sphere: “We always need a certain analogy with natural being in order to make supersensible characteristics comprehensible to us,” Kant writes in the *Religion* (6:65n). Or, in a later German philosopher’s more colorful phrase: “The more abstract the truth you want to teach, the more you must seduce the senses to it” (Nietzsche 2002, §128).

## Conclusion

The problem of real repugnance with respect to articles of rational Belief—moral and theoretical—is a serious one for Kant, but he thinks that he has the resources to respond. His First Solution appeals to the “needs” of reason, his Second to an intellectual awareness of the “fact of reason,” and his Third to sensible experience of an analogical/symbolic sort. The third *Critique*’s version of the Third Solution focus on the way sensory experience of beautiful objects or vistas, in particular, can symbolize the objects of “unexhibitable” rational ideas.

It is important to note, finally, that for Kant it’s not worth symbolizing just *any* idea in the manner of the Third Solution. There are certainly objects that can’t be given to us empirically or schematically, but that also don’t have a connection to any of the practical or theoretical “needs of reason.” In the first *Critique*, Kant provides the example of an entire series of effects of a given cause. Such a series “has no transcendental use” and if we nevertheless “make for ourselves an idea of an absolute totality of such a synthesis ... then this is just a thing of thought (an *ens rationis*), which is thought up only arbitrarily, and not presupposed by reason” (A337/B394). Thus here we encounter a crucial division among concepts that cannot be intuitively exhibited: on the one hand, there are the genuine ideas of reason that we are naturally predisposed to generate and for which we postulate objects on the basis of “subjective grounds.” These are the ideas that raise the problem of how to find really harmonious content for them, even if it can only be symbolic.



On the other hand, there are the concepts that “idle brains” dream up, reflection on which “makes the spirit dull, the object gradually disgusting, and the mind dissatisfied with itself and moody because it judges that in reason’s judgment its disposition is contrapurposive” (5:326). The latter are just empty thought-entities: of no important use to reason, metaphysically repugnant for all we know, and liable to lead us into the blind alleys of mystical “enthusiasm” or speculative “pedantry” in which Kant thought so many of his predecessors had been lost (5:70-1, A486/B514). For concepts such as these, the problem of real repugnance has no solution.<sup>43</sup>

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