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Does Kant Debunk Robust Metaphysics?

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Abstract:

Robustly realistic metaphysical readings of Kant's mature views have become popular in recent years, largely because of the apparent coherence of applying *unschematized* categories like that of causation to things in themselves. There is, however, an overlooked problem that arises even for robust realist readings that privilege unschematized categories. The problem is that Kant provides all the elements for what is now called a 'debunking explanation' of metaphysical representations of things in themselves. His account of the categories as arising from mere forms of judgment, and being applied primarily for the unity of consciousness, is detached from the issue of whether there are causes among things in themselves. This detachment seems to imply that it would be a huge coincidence if unschematized categories corresponded to anything such causes. After making this argument, using the category of causation as my central case, I consider three potential responses: that Kant's account implicitly appeals to things in themselves' causation, that Kant has a separate account of non-coincidental representation, and that Kant's account is merely incomplete in a way that poses no debunking threat. None of these responses, I argue, are successful, so I conclude that either robustly realistic metaphysical readings are mistaken, or there is internal incoherence in Kant's views.

A central question in 17th – 18th century European metaphysics was the nature of reality, as it exists independently of human minds. Of particular interest in this regard was *causation*. According to one view, endorsed by (e.g.) Descartes, Conway, Locke, Wolff, and Crusius, some causal forces or relations do not depend on the representations of finite beings. On that view, causation's independence was both metaphysical, with some causal facts not holding in virtue of facts about representations, and semantic, with

some causal judgments involving no essential reference to representations. Let's anachronistically call this view "robust realism" about causation.¹

Is Kant a robust realist about causation? On the one hand, robust realism about causation is central to the dogmatic metaphysical tradition that Kant attacks in the *Critique of Pure Reason*,² and Kant is often read as an anti-metaphysician. According to many the anti-metaphysical readings, Kant attacks dogmatic metaphysics by arguing that all objects of possible experience are representation-dependent (see A42/B59) and that concepts like <causation> "are of none but an empirical use, and they have no sense at all when they are not applied to objects of possible experience, i.e., to the world of sense" (A696/B724).³ Such claims can easily be read as rejections of robust realism. Something similar is suggested by Kant's famous claim that "the proud name of an ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general in a systematic doctrine (e.g., the principle of causality), must give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding." (A247/B303).

On the other hand, Kant seems to begin the *Critique* by saying that our basic sensory representations are the *result* of causal affection by objects (A19/B33), which appears to express a belief in causal relations that are prior to representation, and so robust realism about causation. Moreover, his defense of the possibility of moral freedom seems to hinge on there being causal powers outside the world of sense (e.g., A532/B560), as does his claim that we cannot rule out the existence of a causally-powerful God (e.g., Bxxxiv). These latter views seem to require at least openness to

¹ The phrase "robust realism" comes from Enoch 2011, where it is applied to normative properties. The qualifier "robust" is useful since some forms of realism do not imply representation-independence. On most commonsense views, some representation-dependent things are real (see, e.g., Rosen 1994), and Kant himself claims to be some sort of realist about representation-dependent appearances (see A28/B44). Note that I use "representation-independent" instead of "mind-independent," since one (broadly Leibnizian or Conwegan) option for a robust realist view would hold that all causation exists because of minds' basic powers – see §3.1 below for more on this issue.

² References to the *Critique* will use page numbers from the first (A) and second (B) editions. References to Kant's other works use an abbreviated title with the volume and page number of the Academy edition. I use angle brackets in referring to concepts such as <causation>, as opposed to their referents

³ Prominent anti-metaphysical readings include Strawson 1966 (though Strawson also acknowledges metaphysical dimensions within Kant's transcendental psychology), Allison 2004, and Van Cleve 1999. Note that under "anti-metaphysical" readings, I include readings (such as Bird 2006 and Hanna 2006) on which Kant denies that things have a (robustly real) way they are in themselves that's distinct from their appearances, though the defenders of such readings might reject that label.

robust realism. In the past two decades, robust realist readings of Kant have become widespread, fueled in large part by attention to Kant's broader corpus.⁴

Defenders of robust realist readings offer alternative interpretations of the passages that motivate anti-metaphysical interpretations. One particularly powerful strategy they use is what we can call the "thick/thin move." The idea behind the thick/thin move is that when Kant states (e.g.) that <causation> has only an empirical use, he means "use" in a *thick* sense, perhaps along the lines of "includes specific information about" or "represents very determinately." If so, then, on Kant's view, there can also be a legitimate *thin* use of <causation>, as when he posits representation-independent causes, even while lacking specific information/determinate representation of them.⁵ Perhaps the thin use amounts to some sort of abstract knowledge, while the thick use amounts to the richer representational accomplishment that Kant calls "cognition" ("*Erkenntnis*"). Because a mere statement of robust realism about causation lacks specific information/determinate representation, there would therefore be nothing incoherent in claiming that there is unobservable, representation-independent causation while also claiming that <causation>'s only thick, cognition-providing use is empirical.

Elsewhere, I have defended a robust realist reading of Kant,⁶ and I still think that the thick/thin move can handle most of the purportedly anti-metaphysical passages. My aim in this paper, though, is to present an argument against robust realist readings. This argument is not answered by the thick/thin move, and I do not see any attractive robust realist answer to it. The general gist of the argument runs is as follows. In the *Critique*,

⁴ Recent notable robust realist readings include Allais 2015, Ameriks 2000, Hogan 2009, Langton 1998, Stang 2015, and Watkins 2005. Findlay 1981 is an interesting (and under-appreciated) precedent.

⁵ There are two versions of the thick/thin move. One appeals to thick vs. thin versions of the basic metaphysical concepts, drawing on Kant's discussion of schematized vs. unschematized categories (e.g., A138-39/B177-78). The other version appeals to thick vs. thin epistemic/semantic notions, drawing on Kant's distinction between cognition and mere thought (e.g., B146). Adams 1997 is one of the most influential discussions in these respects (see also Findlay 1981, 1-2, and Van Cleve 1999, 137-38). Allais 2015 offers a helpful overview. The thick/thin move does not help against Markus Kohl's recent argument (Kohl 2015), which attacks robust realist readings based on Kant's apparent claims that (a) an intuitive intellect such as God would not use our basic metaphysical concepts and (b) an intuitive intellect would correctly and exhaustively represent representation-independent things. Kohl's argument, however, is framed in terms of an apparent assumption of realism about causation (since Kant seems to define intuitive intellection in terms of causation – see B145, but cf. Kohl 2015, 111), and in terms of a strong claim about the nature of representation-independent things. The present argument avoids both this assumption and this strong claim, though it draws from similar passages. I discuss Kohl's argument further in Marshall 2018.

⁶ Marshall 2010, Marshall 2013.

Kant provides a debunking explanation for the belief in representation-independent causation. Given this debunking, it would be incoherent (though not logically inconsistent) for Kant to assert there are representation-independent causes. Insofar as we should avoid ascribing incoherence to Kant, we therefore have a reason not to accept robust realist readings.

If successful, this argument likely extends to other basic metaphysical concepts like <substance>, <accident>, <actuality>, and <necessity>. If Kant has a debunking explanation for beliefs in representation-independent causation, then he probably has one for robust realist metaphysics more generally.⁷ To be clear: my claim does not imply that Kant's ultimate *aim* is to debunk robustly realistic metaphysics. Rather, perhaps his ultimate aim is to vindicate metaphysics in anti-realist or non-robust realist terms. Or, perhaps Kant simply did not realize how his explanations for our metaphysical representations undermine some of his own views.

One might wonder why we need to bring in the contemporary notion of debunking, given that there is a long history of worries about how Kant could make his realist-sounding claims.⁸ There are two benefits to invoking the contemporary notion. First, recent Kant scholars have, I hold, largely overlooked an important and difficult issue in making sense of Kant's metaphysical commitments, and indexing it to contemporary discussions can help illustrate its importance and difficulty. Second, the debunking explanation I attribute to Kant is more extreme, in some respects, than most contemporary debunking challenges and, unlike most contemporary challenges, does not hinge on claims about evolution or social contingencies. Therefore, drawing attention to this aspect of Kant might contribute to contemporary discussions of debunking challenges.

My discussion proceeds as follows. In §1, I briefly characterize debunking explanations and propose a sufficient condition for when such an explanation poses a problem for robust realist views. In §2, I outline Kant's explanation of the origin of our

⁷ See Marshall and Barker Forthcoming for some discussion of the modal case. On Julian Wuerth's reading, Kant holds that we gain <substance> from the immediate intuition of ourselves as substances (Wuerth 2014, see also Laywine 2005). While Kant made such statements in some of his notes and metaphysics lectures, appear to be inconsistent with his official statements about the origins of metaphysical concepts in the *Critique*. Wuerth does not address the latter.

⁸ Perhaps most famously, Jacobi 1787, 223.

causal representations and causal beliefs, arguing that this explanation satisfies the sufficient condition from §1. In §3, I critically consider three replies a robust realist interpreter might make.

1. Debunking explanations

Debunking challenges are widespread in contemporary philosophy. Daniel Korman offers the following general characterization:

At the heart of the debunking arguments is the contention that there is no appropriate explanatory connection between our beliefs about which objects there are... and the facts about which objects there are. Such a connection could either take the form of a world-to-mind explanation of the beliefs in terms of the facts or a mind-to-world explanation of the facts in terms of the beliefs.⁹

For example, some opponents of moral realism argue that the best explanation of why we have moral beliefs makes no reference to the ‘objects’ of morality (e.g., properties of rightness and wrongness).¹⁰ This is then supposed to debunk those beliefs in something like the way that S’s belief that it is a hot winter day is debunked by an explanation of that belief in terms of S having a high fever, an explanation that makes no reference to the weather. To avoid begging the question against the realist, a debunking explanation should allow one to grant that the objects of the beliefs exist (understood realistically), and then show that even with their existence granted, those objects would not figure in the explanation of those beliefs. This is sometimes put in terms of *coincidence* – Hartry Field writes that “our belief in a theory should be undermined if the theory requires that it would be a huge coincidence if what we believed about its subject matter were correct.”¹¹ Debunking explanations are often taken to support anti-realism about a

⁹ Korman 2014, 2. I am simplifying matters slightly here: Korman takes debunking *arguments* to be aimed at the conclusion that our beliefs are unjustified (or have their justification undermined). A debunking *explanation* just shows that, *if* realism about the objects of the beliefs held, there would be no connection between the beliefs and their objects. An anti-realist might use such a debunking explanation to argue that the relevant beliefs are justified, provided we understand their content in anti-realist terms.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Joyce 2006.

¹¹ Field 2005, 77. Field’s focus is on theories that imply their own debunking explanations, as opposed to cases where the debunking explanation has a source other than the debunked beliefs. Yet the talk of coincidence applies naturally to both (see Street 2006).

subject matter over most forms of realism (especially robust realism). That anti-realism could take the form of error theory (the objects of the relevant beliefs do not exist) or of some form of representation-dependence (the objects of the belief exist, but depend on our beliefs).

How and whether debunking explanations work is controversial. One difficult question is what it takes for there to be an “appropriate explanatory connection” between an object and a belief. After all, it seems possible to explain why we believe in the sun without explicitly mentioning the sun (talking only in terms of particles, radiation, and mental states), but most philosophers would not think that means robust realism about the sun is debunked.¹² For my purposes, it is enough to leave the notion of explanatory connection on an intuitive level. I will rely on the following (imprecise) sufficient condition for debunking:

A belief in *O*'s is debunked if the accepted explanation of that belief is *detached* from *O*'s, even granting that *O*'s exists.

Detachment is whatever relation (or lack thereof) makes the beliefs problematic – different debunkers might offer different characterizations of that relation. In focusing on *accepted* explanations, I set aside cases where a realist rejects the purported explanation.¹³ The sufficient condition leaves open what exactly the resulting problem for the realist is supposed to be. One common answer is that explanatory detachment has troubling *epistemological* implications for the relevant beliefs (by, say, undermining their justification), and thereby perhaps showing that it would be irrational for anyone who knows the explanation to accept realism. Another possibility, though, is to see the problem as *semantic*, where the debunking explanation makes it hard to see how the beliefs could refer to the relevant facts or entities.¹⁴ Finally, it could be that the problem concerns *explanatory unity*, where the debunking explanation precludes a unified

¹² For a relevant discussion, see Rosen 1994, Joyce 2006, 190-208 (but cf. Korman 2014). For other important concerns, see Clarke-Doane 2016.

¹³ Since this is a merely sufficient condition, I also set aside the question of whether the mere *lack* of an alternative, non-debunking explanation yields a problem for the realist.

¹⁴ For one relevant discussion, see Schroeter and Schroeter 2019.

explanation for the existence of similar entities (in particular, a representation of x and x itself).¹⁵ For my purposes, it is enough to say that debunking explanations based on accepted explanations pose problems for the *coherence* of realist views. This is not a worry about logical consistency, but instead about how well the overall view about beliefs and their objects fits together.

One difficult question is whether a debunking explanation poses a problem for a *semi-robust* realist view that merely says that representation-independent objects of the relevant sort are metaphysically possible. I suspect that they can, especially if metaphysical possibilities are (i) relatively scarce and (ii) sharply distinguished from logical possibilities. Since Kant arguably accepts (i) and (ii), some of his claims about possibility (e.g., his resolutions to the Antinomies) may also run into a debunking problem when read in a semi-robust way, but I won't discuss this issue in detail.¹⁶

Note that, on any way of understanding debunking arguments, a belief might be debunked and yet still be otherwise justified. For example, Richard Joyce claims that debunking arguments show that our moral beliefs lack *epistemic* justification, but grants that we might have overwhelming *pragmatic* reasons for them.¹⁷ For what follows, then, we can set aside Kant's views on non-epistemic justifications, as well as his views on states of acceptance that do not call for epistemic justification.¹⁸

I am myself unsure whether debunking challenges to robust realism ultimately work. But assuming do, I believe we can find the materials for an argument against robust realism about causation in Kant's *Critique*. Now, there are two potential difficulties about applying the debunking framework Kant's claims about representation-independent causation. First, many explanations of beliefs are themselves causal. Yet if all belief explanation invoked representation-independent causation, it would be hard to see how there *could* be an explanation of causal beliefs that debunked

¹⁵ For example, if we discovered that the only alien life in the universe perfectly resembled the 1980's sitcom character Alf, we would have trouble believing that there had been no (direct or indirect) causal connection between that form of life and Alf's creators – regardless of semantic and epistemological issues.

¹⁶ For one relevant discussion, though, see the discussion of concept debunking in Queloz 2023.

¹⁷ Joyce 2006, 227-28. Justin Clarke-Doane argues that a belief might be debunked (in the sense of being shown to be unreliable) and yet still have a strong form of epistemic justification in virtue of having an indispensable explanatory role (Clarke-Doane, 2015). Clarke-Doane's suggestion fits well with the argument I make below.

¹⁸ For a relevant discussion, see Chignell 2007, 348-51.

robust realism about causation. Fortunately, many epistemologists have moved away from causal formulations of debunking challenges (see, e.g., Field 2005). More importantly for our present purposes, the terms in which Kant frames his discussion allow us to bracket this issue, in ways that will become clear in §2. The second potential difficulty is that Kant may or may not have our contemporary notion of belief.¹⁹ Kant's term "*Glaube*" arguably refers to something closer to faith than to the state central to contemporary epistemology (see A822/B850). When I speak of "belief" below, however, I mean only the state that Kant seems to be expressing in making assertions. Robust realist interpreters take Kant to be expressing belief (in the contemporary sense) in representation-independent causes. Moreover, it turns out that the central part of Kant's explanation focuses on the *concept* of causation itself (<causation>), which is prior to beliefs about causes.

2. How Kant debunks causal beliefs

While the language of debunking is a recent trend, Kant is clearly concerned about explanatory connections between representations and their objects. In his well-known 1772 letter to Marcus Herz, he writes:

What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call "representation" to the object? If a representation comprises only the manner in which the subject is affected by the object, then it is easy to see how it is in conformity with this object, namely, as an effect accords with its cause, and it is easy to see how this modification of our mind can *represent* something, that is, have an object... Similarly, if that in us which we call "representation" were active with regard to the object, that is, if the object itself were created by the representation (as when divine cognitions are conceived as the archetypes of things), the conformity of these representations to their objects could also be understood... However, our understanding, through its representations, is neither the cause of the object (save in the case of moral ends), nor is the object the cause of our intellectual representations in the real sense (*Correspondence* 10:130)

There are obvious similarities between Kant's talk of causal or creative relations between representations and objects and Korman's talk of world-to-mind and mind-to-world

¹⁹ See again Chignell 2007.

explanations, though Kant focuses on sub-judgmental representations instead of judgments or beliefs.²⁰ Since Kant invokes causation in framing the question here, he can plausibly be read as a robust realist about causation at this point. But when we turn to the 1781 *Critique*, we find an account for our causal beliefs that makes no explicit appeal to causation.²¹

Kant's critical account of our causal beliefs has three stages: an explanation of the *origin* of <causation>, an explanation of why we employ <causation> in *normal experience*, and an explanation of why we are drawn to apply <causation> *beyond the bounds of experience*. Once we look at their details, we see that even if there were representation-independent causation, these explanations would be detached from it. That would not undermine belief in representation-*dependent* causation, but it would challenge beliefs in representation-independent causation.

2.1. *The origin of our concept of causation*

Kant is confident that there is no empiricist account of <causation>: “no one would say that the category, e.g., causality, could... be intuited through the senses” (A138-38/B176-770). In the *Critique*, the Metaphysical Deduction of the Categories is Kant's core account of how the basic pure concepts of the understanding, the categories, arise (“*entspringen*” (A79/B105)).²² <Causation> is one of these concepts, alongside <substance>, <accident>, <inherence>, <reality>, and the modal categories – in short, nearly all the central concepts of traditional metaphysics.²³ Though the details of the

²⁰ For an application of a debunking argument to both beliefs and concepts, see Joyce 2006, 181-82.

²¹ Kant notably drops causal language in a later passage that parallels his letter to Herz: “There are only two possible cases in which synthetic representation and its objects can come together, necessarily relate to each other, and, as it were, meet each other. Either if the object alone makes the representation possible, or if the representation alone makes the object possible” (A92/B124-25).

²² In addition to this core account, Kant also holds that empirical conditions need to be in place for the pure concepts to come into use (see, e.g., B1, *Anthropology* 7:155, “On a Discovery” 8:221-223). Since these conditions are not relevant to the categories' basic referential and epistemic properties, I set them aside.

²³ Two possible exceptions re the concepts <form> and <matter>, which Kant uses extensively (see A266/B322 and Marshall 2014). I do not think Kant suggests anything like a debunking explanation for this concept (though see Longuenesse 1998, 161-62) – here, his story seems closer a Leibnizian account of metaphysical concepts, which I discuss below. Another possible exception is a metaphysical sense of “a priori” (see Hogan 2009, 525-56).

Metaphysical Deduction are far from straightforward,²⁴ the basic idea is fairly clear: these concepts arise from the basic logical functions of judgment (A70/B95). This derivation of concepts from functions of judgment is the central illustration of Kant's claim that we can "trace all actions of the understanding back to judgments, so that the understanding in general can be represented as a faculty for judgment" (A69/B94).

<Causation>, on this view, is somehow derived from the hypothetical (if-then) function of judgments.²⁵ There is an important similarity between this claim and Hume's claim that <causation> arises from the "customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant" (*Enquiry* §7).²⁶ Kant and Hume agree that the representation does not arise from our experiencing representation-independent causation, but instead from something concerning operations of the mind. Of course, they disagree about what those operations are (judgment vs. imagination), in a way that Kant holds has profound consequences (see, e.g., B5 and B168). Even so, both accounts sound like debunking explanations, in that both seem to be detached from any representation-independent causes. One could object that the accounts *implicitly* invoke causation (an objection I consider below), but both Kant and Hume present their accounts as explanations of the origin of causal representations from acausal sources. These accounts are logically compatible with there *being* representation-independent causation, but that robustly real causation would seem to be detached from the origin of the basic causal representations.²⁷ Of course, perhaps unlike Hume, Kant takes himself

²⁴ For a helpful discussion, see Longuenesse 2005. See also Engstrom 2018 for a study of Kant's derivation of <substance>. One realist response to the present argument would be to downplay the importance of the Metaphysical Deduction, but this no small task.

²⁵ Kant's derivation, as I understand it, implies neither that all hypothetical judgments involve the concept of causation, nor that causal dependence must be thought of as logical dependence. Rather, Kant seems to hold that there is a certain form of representation that is originally found in hypothetical judgments, but, in application to intuitions, becomes <causality>. This may be similar to Aristotelian formal explanations.

²⁶ Strictly speaking, this is Hume's account of the idea of necessary connection, which is the philosophically problematic component of the idea of causation. The nature of Hume's account of causation is controversial (see Garrett 2015 on projectivist, reductionist, and realist readings of Hume), but the interpretation I describe here is a familiar one.

²⁷ Barry Stroud, for example, writes that, for Hume, "In human beings' thoughts of causation... they take something that arises in the mind solely as a result of the comings and goings of perceptions there, and they form a new idea that they then project outwards... That explains how and why human beings come to believe certain things about the world they live in. But their actually living in such a world and finding such within their experience of it is no part of that naturalistic explanation" (Stroud 2006, 346). This may pose a debunking-related challenge to the 'New Hume' interpretation, according to which Hume believed in representation-independent causation (see, e.g., Read and Richman 2000).

to be *vindicating* our application of <cause> (concerning genuinely necessary connections), but only in reference to the empirical, representation-dependent world.

Kant's account here is more radical than many contemporary debunking explanations. According to Kant, the sub-judgmental representation <causation> has its essential origin in a pure logical form, not any representation of an object. By contrast, a contemporary debunking explanation of theological beliefs might say that the representation of God at least begins with a representation of some real object that could resemble God (say, that of an ancestral king, a la Nietzsche, *Genealogy* 2.19-23). The Metaphysical Deduction therefore detaches the very origin of causal representations from representation-independent reality.

2.2. *The basic application of our concept of causation*

Kant recognizes that the Metaphysical Deduction raises worries about how the categories relate to objects. This is the motivation he gives for the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories. Kant says that the categories “require a [transcendental] deduction for their entitlement, since proofs from experience are not sufficient for the lawfulness of such a use, and yet one must know how these concepts can be related to objects that they do not derive from any experience” (A85/B117).²⁸ A representation that was derived from experience could have a clear explanatory connection to its object, but Kant denies that any such connection holds for pure concepts like <causation>.

Kant holds that a transcendental deduction can be provided for the categories, showing that we are indeed entitled to make use of them. How to understand this deduction is remains controversial, but most interpreters agree that a key claim is that the use of the categories somehow provide the *unity* of conscious experience. For example, Kant writes:

That action of the understanding... through which the manifold of given representations... is brought under an apperception in general, is the logical function of judgments (§19). Therefore all manifold, insofar as it is given in one

²⁸ Such statements seem to show that Kant would reject a Moorean defense of robust realism, which some contemporary realists use in response to debunking challenges (e.g., Nagel 2012, 107-112).

empirical intuition, is determined in regard to one of the logical functions of judgment, by means of which, namely, it is brought to a consciousness in general. But now the categories are nothing other than these very functions for judging, insofar as the manifold of a given cognition is determined with regard to them. (B143)

The unity of conscious experience, Kant claims, ultimately constitutes objective cognition: “the unity of consciousness is that which alone constitutes the relation of representations to an object, thus their objective validity” (B137). The central purpose of the categories is thus providing unity to our representations, thereby allowing objective empirical representation. Kant writes that “the synthetic unity of apperception is the highest point to which one must affix all use of the understanding, even the whole of logic and, after it, transcendental philosophy” (B134n.). We use categories like <causation>, therefore, for the sake of having a unified self-conscious experience. None of this explanation appeals to representation-independent causation.

After the Transcendental Deduction, Kant’s explanation of the use of the categories continues into the Analytic of Principles, where he describes how particular categories contribute to the unity of experience. Causation is the topic of the Second Analogy of Experience, which focuses on the principle that all alterations have causes (A188/B232). As with the Transcendental Deduction, how to understand Kant’s argument in the Second Analogy is controversial. However, it is clear that the Second Analogy (like the First and Third) is still focused on representational unity:

An analogy of experience will therefore be only a rule in accordance with which unity of experience is to arise [*entspringen*] from perceptions (not as a perception itself, as empirical intuition in general), and as a principle it will not be valid of the objects (of the appearances) constitutively but merely regulatively. (A180/B222)

In saying the Analogies are regulative, Kant’s point is that they primarily concern the combination of perceptions, instead of the immediate objects of the perceptions

themselves (A179/B222).²⁹ Such combination is necessary for a unified experience (see B130-31).³⁰

The specific sort of combination relevant to the Second Analogy involves distinguishing subjective from objective temporal succession. In the B edition, Kant summarizes the argument as follows:

I am... only conscious that my imagination places one state before and the other after, not that the one state precedes the other in the object; or, in other words, through the mere perception the objective relation of the appearances that are succeeding one another remains undetermined. Now in order for this to be cognized as determined, the relation between the two states must be thought in such a way that it is thereby necessarily determined which of them must be placed before... The concept, however, that carries a necessity of synthetic unity with it can only be a pure concept of the understanding... and that is here the concept of the relation of cause and effect (B233-34)

Kant's overall claim, then, is that <causation> provides unity to experience by making possible the representation of objective successions. He makes it clear that <causation> has its origin solely in the understanding. This appears to be Kant's core account of the legitimate use of <causation>. Yet all of this seems detached from representation-independent causation.³¹

2.3. *Thoughts of representation-independent causes*

The Transcendental Deduction and the Second Analogy focus on the application of the categories to objects of experience, that is, to appearances. Yet Kant thinks that

²⁹ Kant contrasts regulative representations with constitutive representations. The latter are not detached from their objects, but only because they make those objects possible (see A178-79/B221). An opponent of robust realist readings can take this as grist for their mill.

³⁰ In a related vein, Kohl claims that "since the unschematized categories are conditions for bringing representations to the unity of consciousness, it seems that they cannot play a role in the kind of cognition that would be achieved by a divine intellect: for such an intellect would not bring a manifold of representations to unity" (Kohl 2015, 95).

³¹ One way to avoid detachment would be if <causation> provided unity *in virtue of* there being representation-independent causal unity in the objects of experience (cf. Strawson 1989, 72). Few realist readers would be willing to go this far, however (though Dai Heide explores a related reading of Kant's pre-critical work in Heide 2022), and even this claim would not help with the problem concerning the Metaphysical Deduction. Thanks to Dan Korman for discussion on this point.

appearances are representation-dependent (in some sense – see, e.g., A490-91/B518-19). So something more needs to be said about how he thinks we form beliefs about representation-independent causes.

Kant allows that we can *think* of representation-independent causes: “I can think whatever I like, as long as I do not contradict myself” (Bxxvi). This allowance, however, does not tell us *why* we might have formed beliefs about causation outside the realm of appearances. In the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant gives a positive story about how such beliefs come about. The story begins with a demand by the faculty of reason to seek the conditions for every conditioned, something like an intellectual desire for complete explanations. Kant says this demand of reason is “merely a subjective law of economy for the provision of our understanding” (A306/B362). Causes are conditions, so this demand leads us to consider the totality of causes for any given alteration (A414/B441-42). This, in turn, leads us to the idea of something self-caused that begins a series of causes (A418/B446), which Kant later calls the “transcendental idea of freedom” (A533/B561). However, since no spatiotemporal object can be its own cause, Kant holds that we can avoid inner conflict on this point (the antinomy of reason) only by recognizing that there might be something outside the world of appearances that initiates causal chains (A525/B563ff.).

For my purposes, two things are important about this story. First, Kant holds that the concept involved in our thoughts of representation-independent causation is the very same concept that is derived from the pure understanding.³² Second, this account of our beliefs does not involve any appeal to representation-independent causation. Rather, it revolves around a merely “subjective law”. At the end of his discussion of freedom, Kant claims that “we have not even tried to prove the possibility of freedom... Freedom is treated here only as a transcendental idea” (A558/B586). This language suggests that Kant sees the story as being detached from the question of whether there is representation-independent causation.

2.4. Summary

³² See Watkins 2002 for a relevant discussion.

Kant's core account of our causal beliefs can be summarized as follows: <causation> arises from the hypothetical form of judgment, we (legitimately) apply that concept in order to unify our perceptions, and we (illegitimately) apply that concept beyond appearances based on a demand of reason. All of this seems detached from representation-independent causation, however. It therefore qualifies as a debunking explanation. Of course, Kant holds that some causal claims are true, but justifies that by appealing to idealism about empirical causation (see, e.g., B164). Given that, it would seem to be a huge coincidence if our beliefs in representation-independent causation were correct. This, I hold, poses a coherence challenge for robust realist readings of Kant.

3. Three objections and replies

If Kant has a debunking explanation for beliefs in representation-independent causation, and if debunking explanations generally challenge robust realist views, there is a problem for robust realist readings of Kant. On such readings, Kant would both be affirming the reality of representation-independent causation (e.g., in his claim about sensations arising from objects' affecting us), and yet debunking that very affirmation. To be sure, since "P, and my belief in P is debunked" is *logically* consistent, a robust realist interpreter could just bite the bullet. Charitably-inclined interpreters, however, would do better to avoid the problem. In this section, I explore three potential responses to the above argument.

3.1. Does Kant implicitly appeal to causation in explaining the category?

In §1, I described a putative debunking explanation of our beliefs about the sun that talked only of particles, radiation, and mental states. Most philosophers would not regard that as a genuine debunking explanation, since the sun would be *implicitly* involved in the explanation, by way of its constituents. Similarly, one might wonder whether causation is implicitly involved in the explanation of our causal beliefs. There are several steps in that explanation where one might try to locate such an implicit appeal: (a) the categories' *arising* from the functions of judgments, (b) the categories

bringing about the unity of experience, and (c) the demand of reason *leading to* the idea of something self-caused outside the realm of experience. Each of the italicized phrases can be read causally.³³ If so, then Kant's explanations implicitly appeals to causality.

A complication here is whether the sort of causation it concerns is sufficiently representation-independent for the robust realist's purposes. After all, if there is causation in (a)-(c), it is causation *within or relating to a mind*. Assuming that representational activity is essential the mind, causation within or relating to a mind might then be representation-dependent in some sense, and so not clearly robustly real.

However, for many early modern robust realists, this kind of representation-dependent causation would be sufficient for unproblematic representations of fully representation-independent causation. Locke, for example, claims that the mind "receive[s] its *Idea of active Power* clearer from reflection on its own Operations, than it doth from any external Sensation" (*Essay* 2.21.4). Leibniz takes a similar view in the *New Essays*, writing that

reflection is nothing but attention to what is within us, and the senses do not give us what we carry with us already. In view of this, can it be denied that there is a great deal that is innate to our minds, since we are innate to ourselves, so to speak, and since we include Being, Unity, Substance, Duration, Change, Action, Perception, Pleasure, and hosts of other objects of our intellectual ideas? (Preface, Leibniz 1996, 51)³⁴

Both Locke and Leibniz hold that we can, using these representations, form unproblematic true beliefs about causation that is independent of finite minds, in particular, God's creative acts.

³³ With (c), Kant explicitly claims that "in ideas... human reason shows true causality" (A317/B374). See also his talk of spontaneity in connection with self-consciousness at B157-58n.

³⁴ Kant's brief account of the categories in the *Inaugural Dissertation* can be read in line with Leibniz here: "the concepts met with in metaphysics are not to be sought in the senses but in the very nature of the pure understanding, and that not as innate concepts but as concepts abstracted from the laws inherent in the mind (by attending to its actions on the occasion of an experience), and therefore as acquired concepts. To this genus belong possibility, existence, necessity, substance, cause, etc." (2:395). The focus on *actions* of the mind in the quote supports a Leibnizian reading (see also R4674, where Kant writes "I am the original of all objects" (17:646)), though the passage could also be read as expressing a view closer to that of the *Critique*. In that vein, see Schulting 2016 for a recent attempt (following Reich 1992) to show that the categories are derived from the unity of apperception .

By contrast, on traditional anti-metaphysical readings of Kant, causation is representation-dependent in a stronger sense than merely occurring within a mind or involving a mind as a relatum. According to some of these readings, all causation depends on finite beings' *representations*, where that dependence is not just about causal relations holding *between* representations. According to other anti-metaphysical readings, all causal statements are equivalent to statements about sensory experience. But, someone objecting to my argument might insist, if (a)-(c) are causal statements, it is hard to see how they would describe representation-dependent causation (since they seem like *fundamental* facts about our representational capacities), or how they are equivalent to statements about sensory experience. For these reasons, finding causation in (a)-(c) might be sufficient to show that Kant's explanation of our beliefs about representation-independent causation was not a debunking one, and so would pose no threat to robust realist readings.

The key obstacle to this line of thought, though, is what to make of the Metaphysical Deduction. For Locke and Leibniz, the origin of the idea of causation (activity, active powers, etc.) is straightforward: reflection reveals causation in ourselves, and we therefore form <causation> (Leibniz thinks there is a similarly straightforward story for the idea of substance, while Locke does not (*Essay* 2.13.18)). For that reason, it would make no sense for Locke or Leibniz to claim that <causation> is derived from a logical function of judgment or a subjective expectation following constant conjunctions. Why would we derive the representation from something acausal if we were directly aware of genuine causation in ourselves? Yet Kant *does* claim to derive the representation from the acausal hypothetical form of judgment. Insisting on a robust realist causal reading of (a), (b), or (c) would therefore seem to make Kant's view incoherent.

Note that an anti-metaphysical reader can avoid incoherence here in at least two ways. First, she can deny that (a)-(c) invoke any causal notions, perhaps by claiming that Kant is (understandably) straining at the limits of human vocabulary in describing the fundamental structures of subjectivity. Perhaps his account of causal representations is something we are meant to grasp through reflection that takes us beyond words' usual

(temporal, causal) connotations.³⁵ Second, the anti-metaphysical reader can allow that (a)-(c) invoke causal notions, but say that this causation is of a representation-dependent type that is *layered over* some acausal basis (perhaps as in Hume).³⁶

Is there a similar move that would allow a robust realist reader to avoid attributing incoherence to Kant? Not obviously. Perhaps the best candidate would be to claim that the hypothetical logical function of judgment itself involves causation. Yet it is hard to see how that would make sense, given how Kant understands logic. The functions of judgment are supposed to be merely formal, in a way that is detached from causation, mental or otherwise (see A52-55/B76-79, *Jäsche Logic* 9:13-14).³⁷

3.2. Does Kant have a separate account of our causal beliefs?

Another option for the robust realist reader would be to look at other parts of Kant's philosophy for a non-debunking account of how we come to represent representation-independent causation. The most obvious such place to look would be Kant's moral philosophy, where Kant claims that our representation of the moral law is the basis of our knowledge (the *ratio cognoscendi*) of representation-independent causal freedom (5:5n).³⁸ This freedom would be as real as Locke's active powers, which I suggested would be enough for the realist's purposes. Kant seems to allude to this doctrine in the *Critique*, saying, "that this reason has causality, or that we can at least represent something of the sort in it, is clear from the imperatives that we propose as rules to our powers of execution in everything practical" (A547/B575, see also *Groundwork* 4:452). How exactly awareness of the moral law leads to the representation

³⁵ This might be understood in terms of the sentences he uses being *partial truths* from which we cannot extract pure truths. Stephen Yablo suggests that "there might be truths accessible only as parts of larger falsehoods" (Yablo 2014, 3).

³⁶ For a proposal along these lines, see Kitcher 1999.

³⁷ To be sure, Kant describes the capacity for judgment in ways that suggest it is a power (a "*Kraft*"). But, in the *Critique* he does not appeal to that fact in explaining the origin of <causation> – otherwise his account would be of a kind with Leibniz's or Locke's.

³⁸ Another place to look would be Kant's talk of our awareness of our own representational activities, which Kant describes in what look like causal terms (e.g., B153-55 – see Watkins 2005, 274-81 for discussion). Such an approach faces the worry from the previous section: if we were aware of causality from our own representational activity, then there would be no need to derive the concept of causality from a form of judgment.

of freedom is not entirely clear, but perhaps Kant's *ratio cognoscendi* doctrine is sufficient for the realist's purposes.³⁹

The worry from the previous subsection applies here: it is hard to see how this story is consistent with the Metaphysical Deduction. If we got the (pure, unschematized) idea of causation from moral considerations, why would Kant derive it from a form of judgment? Even setting that aside, there is another, potentially more serious problem. Though some recent robust realist readings have been motivated by Kant's moral philosophy, Kant's claim about our representation of the moral law leading to representations of freedom could play into anti-metaphysical hands: an appeal to moral representations could be *part* of a debunking explanation of our beliefs in representation-independent causation. To illustrate this, say that we come to believe in representation-independent causes (e.g., a justice-distributing supernatural being) because we believe that certain people deserve to suffer. An explanation of our causal beliefs that began with such *moral* beliefs would seem detached from representation-independent causes. It would therefore seem incoherent to affirm robust realism about causation while accepting this as a full explanation of our beliefs in representation-independent causes.⁴⁰

3.3. *Is Kant's explanation safely incomplete?*

³⁹ Kohl argues that the concept of causal freedom relevant to morality "no longer represents a logical function of synthesis," and that there is a corresponding "distinctively practical, non-discursive sense of modality" (Kohl 2015, 107). This, he holds, allows for causal/modal judgments that do not face the same limitations of the ordinary categories. Kohl's suggestion has some advantages, but it would undermine the coherence of Kant's account, since the Metaphysical Deduction was meant to be the fundamental explanation of all basic concepts. Moreover (though this does not matter for Kohl's purposes), it does not avoid the debunking worry, since the explanation of these alternative concepts could still be detached from their objects.

⁴⁰ In Marshall 2023, I defend an interpretation of Kant's practical philosophy that avoids this problem, but only by attributing a radical metaphysical view to Kant. As I discuss in Marshall 2018, some passages suggest that we perceive physical causes (forces) through touch (and cf. Longuenesse 1998, 322). Those passages do not fit easily into a debunking explanation, but it is hard to see how they cohere with Kant's broader views on causation. In the second *Critique*, Kant ties his discussion of noumenal causation back to the account of the representation of causation from the first *Critique* (see, e.g., 5:55). An anti-metaphysical reader might take the noumenal causation Kant endorses in his practical philosophy to be something other than representation-independent causation (see, e.g., Allison 1990, 51-52).

A third way a robust realist interpreter might respond to the above is to point out that Kant does not take himself to be giving the *complete* explanation of our causal representations. In the Transcendental Deduction, he states:

for the peculiarity of our understanding, that it is able to bring about the unity of apperception *a priori* only by means of the categories and only through precisely this kind and number of them, a further ground may be offered just as little as one can be offered for why we have precisely these and no other functions for judgment (B145–46)

This passage seems to imply that there may be some further ground for why we have the functions of judgment we do, but that we have no access to that further ground. If so, then Kant may be open to representation-independent causes being part of the further ground – perhaps, say, because our minds were the causal productions of an infinite being. In that case, the complete (albeit humanly-inaccessible) explanation of our causal beliefs would not be debunking.

To see why this reply does not avoid the problem, imagine a parallel discussion concerning theism. A Nietzschean atheist presents an explanation of theistic beliefs in terms of weaklings controlling the strong using well-crafted stories. Say that a Cartesian theist endorses this explanation, but then points out that it is compatible with God being the causal sustainer of all finite things at every moment. Intuitively, the theist's view seems problematic, even if it is better than saying that God has no causal relation to the universe, and even though it makes God a sustaining cause of all beliefs. If the theist stops with the statement that God causally sustains the universe while endorsing the Nietzschean explanation, then there still seems to be an uncomfortable incoherence in their view. It would seem to be a huge coincidence for our theological beliefs to be true if the proximate (non-sustaining) explanation of our theological beliefs concerned weak, sneaky social manipulators.⁴¹ So the debunking explanation would still pose a problem.

⁴¹ Kant's own story about the origin of our representation of God in the *Critique* might also be read as similarly debunking, since it begins with reason's demand for the unconditioned. However, Kant considers the possibility of an expanded story like the one I consider below (see *Critique of Practical Reason* 5:130–31). In any case, most of his publications strongly suggest that Kant did not *take* himself to be debunking religious belief.

Now, perhaps the theist (still accepting the atheist's partial explanation) could emphasize the possibility that God had 'fine-tuned' the first cosmological event and natural laws with the *aim* of eventually bringing about weaklings who would inadvertently produce true theological beliefs. This expanded explanation might no longer have debunking power, because now God would be intimately involved in the proximate production of the theological beliefs. On that story, it would no longer be a huge coincidence that some theological beliefs were correct, and there might no longer be a debunking threat.⁴² Of course, this would raise questions about whether the theist's expanded explanation was *credible* and *dialectically fair*, but the story might take some force out of the atheist's initial debunking explanation.

Going back to the case of causation, it would therefore not be enough for the realist to claim that it is *possible* that representation-independent causation is involved somewhere or other in the complete explanation of our causal beliefs. Rather, that causation must enter in such a way that it is no longer a coincidence that beliefs in representation-independent causation are correct. This would require going far beyond Kant's text, however, and Kant was generally suspicious of specific claims about the relation of representation-independent causation to our basic faculties. For example, one could claim that God creates everything in accordance with the logical functions of judgment, where we share these functions of judgment with God. But this would approach a pre-established harmony view, which Kant explicitly rejects (e.g., A390). Recall that, at B145-46, Kant seems to say we have no access to the grounds for why we have the forms of judgment we do. Affirming some specific story about how representation-independent causation is involved in the full explanation of our causal representations would therefore yield other coherence problems for the robust realist interpreter, even if such a story could avoid the debunking problem.

Conclusion

⁴² For a defense of theistic belief along these lines, see van Inwagen 2009. Van Inwagen claims that the only non-theistic explanations of theological beliefs that would pose a problem for theists are those that 'resist incorporation' into a larger theological explanation (van Inwagen does not attempt an analysis of the relevant notion of resistance). I suspect that the Metaphysical Deduction does resist incorporation into a larger robust realist explanation. For a relevant discussion of proximate explanation in debunking arguments, see Levy and Levy 2016.

The line of thought I have described extends to other metaphysical concepts, such as <substance>, <modality>, and <God>. It therefore poses a general problem for the robust realist interpreter. As I see it, that interpreter has two options: either to argue against the widely-held philosophical view that accepted debunking explanations pose a coherence problem for realist views, or to admit that Kant's account is incoherent. Neither option is attractive.

None of this implies that anti-metaphysical readings of Kant are generally preferable. My own view is that there is overwhelming textual evidence in favor of a robust realist interpretation, so that this remains the best option overall. Perhaps we should just grant that Kant's views suffer from incoherence, but try to show that this incoherence arises for philosophically respectable reasons. Maybe Kant was holding to commonsensical realism in positing representation-independent causes (substances, etc.), but also discovered an independently attractive origin story for our basic metaphysical representations. Or maybe Kant had (non-obvious) grounds for not taking debunking-style worries seriously. If so, then tensions in Kant's views (or the tensions between Kant's views and those of contemporary debunkers) would point us towards philosophically deep questions.⁴³

The present argument may have non-exegetical implications as well. I have not discussed the philosophical merits of Kant's account of the origins of our beliefs in representation-independent causation. Yet if that account or something like it is defensible, then a Kantian account of our metaphysical beliefs might pose a new debunking challenge to contemporary forms of robust metaphysical realism.⁴⁴

⁴³ For a similar suggestion about Kant's modal philosophy, see Marshall and Barker (Forthcoming).

⁴⁴ This paper has benefited from exchanges with Andrew Chignell, Jonny Cottrell, Braeden Giaconi, Dan Korman, Conor Mayo-Wilson, Colin McLear, Mike Raven, Jonathan Simon, Andrew Stephenson, and Eric Watkins. Special thanks to Béatrice Longuenesse for comments on this paper, as well as for years of mentorship and inspiration.

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