

Obscure representations from a pragmatic point of view

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Abstract

Kant's most sustained discussion of obscure representations can be found in the first book of his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. What is puzzling is that in the middle of the section devoted to the topic, Kant asserts that “because this field can only be perceived in his passive side as a play of sensations, the theory of obscure representations belongs only to physiological anthropology, and so it is properly disregarded here.” So, do obscure representations belong to pragmatic anthropology or not? Kant's official position is that they do not, yet the textual evidence—we find discussions of obscure representations in 20 years of his work on pragmatic anthropology—suggests that they do, in fact, belong here. Most of the literature on obscure representations focuses on their contribution to cognition and none has clarified what it would mean to assume a “pragmatic point of view” on obscure representations, and to study them in the context of pragmatic anthropology. My aim in this paper is to provide such clarification, focusing on Kant's discussion of our propensity to “play with” obscure representations and what he calls our “art of obscuring.”

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the first book of his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant¹ analyzes the faculty of cognition, and the first six sections of this book are devoted to self-consciousness and its limits. In section 6, we find Kant's most extended discussion of obscure representations [*dunkle Vorstellungen*], “representations that we have without being conscious of them” [*Vorstellungen, die wir haben, ohne uns ihrer bewußt zu sein*]. But in the middle of the section, Kant writes:

Thus the field of *obscure* representations is the largest in the human being.—But because this field can only be perceived in his passive side as a play of sensations, the theory of obscure representations belongs only to physiological anthropology, and so it is properly disregarded here.

A 7:136

This is puzzling. Kant has already analyzed obscure representations at some length, and in fact he continues to do so directly after this comment, analyzing the ways we like to “play with” obscure representations. So, do obscure representations belong to pragmatic anthropology or not? Kant's official position is that they belong to physiological anthropology, yet the textual evidence—the fact that we find discussions of obscure representations in all of his work (published writing and over 20 years of lecture notes) on pragmatic anthropology—suggests that obscure representations do, in fact, belong here. The topic of the present paper is this “disciplinary puzzle” of obscure representations. My aim is to clarify how obscure representations can indeed be considered “from a pragmatic point of view” and so how they could properly belong to pragmatic anthropology.

The *Critique of Pure Reason* develops a transcendental argument that self-consciousness plays a constitutive role in the formation of knowledge and object-directed experience. It is well-known that the central philosophical innovation of the first *Critique* is to analyze self-consciousness, not as a form of receptive consciousness of a self *qua* object, but as an *active* and *spontaneous* consciousness, wherein consciousness of one's own representations involve actively *making* them conscious. In the *Anthropology*, Kant addresses the pragmatic and normative questions to which our self-consciousness gives rise. In the small contemporary literature on obscure representations,² the topic is approached primarily as an issue in Kant's theory of cognition, and in this context obscure representations tend to be conceived as making “subliminal” contributions to cognition and experience. As such they are conceived as theoretical posits invoked to explain the latter achievements. Patricia Kitcher writes, for instance: “Kant thought we could ‘undoubtedly conclude’ (7:135) that we have obscure representations, because these were required to explain reportable representations and other uncontroversial cognitive achievements” (1999, p. 349). But understood as such, it is not clear how obscure representations raise specifically *pragmatic* issues.

If obscure representations can be a topic for pragmatic anthropology, then the relevant questions are not only, *what are obscure representations?* and *what is their cognitive function?*, but also: *How should an “earthly being endowed with reason” conceive of and relate to the obscure aspects of his own mind? How can a person live well with obscure representations and the limits of self-consciousness?*³ I will argue that the first five sections of the *Anthropology* should be understood as providing what I call a “pragmatics of consciousness” in light of various “vicissitudes of consciousness,” and that Kant's discussion of obscure representations should be interpreted in this context. Within this context, Kant's specifically *pragmatic* concern is with our bad habit of “playing with” obscure representations, and with what he calls our “art of obscuring.”

I begin (section 2) by turning to the intellectual context in which Kant articulated his two conceptions of anthropology—physiological and pragmatic—in order to set up the disciplinary puzzle. I then (section 3) turn to the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, to Kant's discussion of what I am calling the “pragmatics of consciousness.” I then focus squarely on obscure representations. I argue (sections 4–6) that Kant emphasizes two dimensions of consciousness and obscurity: (i) clarity and distinctness, and (ii) cognitive control. I then articulate three different ways in which we can become aware of representations *as* obscure. I also distinguish between “mundane” and “playful” obscurity, which distinction will be crucial for specifying when and how obscure representations raise pragmatic concerns, and look at Kant's discussion of “sexual love” as exemplary of such play. I conclude (section 7) with suggestions as to why Kant might have wavered on the disciplinary questions of where obscure representations belong. I propose that Kant's wavering indicates some uncertainty as to where, how, and why to draw the boundaries of the Kantian pragmatic subject, as well as some uncertainty as to how to draw the boundaries between pragmatic and physiological anthropology.

2 | PHYSIOLOGICAL AND PRAGMATIC POINTS OF VIEW

Kant was a pioneer of anthropology as an academic discipline. The discipline of anthropology was born at a historical moment of increasing regimentation of, and increasing anxieties about, competing and potentially conflicting academic faculties. In 18th-century Europe, anthropology developed partly in order to emancipate the study of human nature from scholastic metaphysics, and partly in response to the rise of medicine and the natural sciences. In this intellectual context, there was a live question as to whether philosophy and anthropology were companion disciplines of the human being or competitors (see Buchenau, 2017; Loudon, 2000). At stake in the development of anthropology was, at once, a question of what the human being is *and* a question of what disciplines are appropriate for understanding him. Kant's own pragmatic anthropology should thus be conceived, first, as a kind of humanist defense of the human being against medical, physiological objectification, *and* as a kind of humanist defense of philosophy as an authoritative discipline of the human being against the rise of medicine and physiology.

Kant began lecturing on anthropology in 1772.⁴ He taught the course every winter for more than two decades before publishing his “manual” in 1798. These were Kant's most popular classes and the manual was intended for a popular audience. As Kant puts it in the Introduction to the 1781 *Menschenkunde* lecture: “our anthropology can be read by everyone, even by women at the dressing table” (LA 825:57) (thus David Clark suggests that the *Anthropology*, with its emphasis on popularity and rules for living, resembled handbooks like *The Housewife in All her Occupations*, a manual on domestic affairs that Kant sent to his sister-in-law [2001, p. 224]). Like his public essay “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” (1784) Kant's anthropology manual is addressed to the reading public and functions as a kind of guidebook for how to understand oneself as, and work to become, a proper Kantian subject.

For Kant anthropology is the study of “the human being according to his species as an earthly being endowed with reason” (A 7:119), and this study can be carried out from either of two points of view, physiological or pragmatic:

physiological knowledge of the human being concerns the investigation of what *nature* makes of the human being; pragmatic, the investigation of what *he* as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself.

(A 7:119)

This distinction is familiar, but it is important to spend time with it since Kant will return to this methodological frame to justify his expulsion of obscure representations from pragmatic anthropology. The questions toward which we are aiming, by way of Kant's discourse on method, are: how should obscure representations be studied, physiologically or pragmatically? And what is at stake in making and maintaining this distinction?

For Kant, the physiological anthropologist⁵ studies the human being observationally or “speculatively” as a complex natural object. The perspective occupied here is “third-personal” and the object—the human being—is studied as a term in the matrix of natural causes and effects. Kant writes:

He who ponders natural phenomena, for example, what the causes of the faculty of memory may rest on, can speculate back and forth over the traces of impressions remaining in the brain, but in doing so he must admit that in this play of his representations he is a mere observer and must let nature run its course, for he does not know the cranial nerves and fibers, nor does he understand how to put them to use for his purposes. Therefore all theoretical speculation about this is a pure waste of time.

(A 7:119)⁶

Kant emphasizes that physiological anthropology places the human being in the position of “mere observer” regarding the “play of his representations.” To consider the human being from a physiological point of view requires that

the human being attempt to stand *outside* of his own mental life in order to study it as one object among others. Kant also emphasizes that physiological anthropology is specialist or “scholastic”: “he who makes a scholastic use of his knowledge is a pedant, he knows how to describe his concepts merely with the technical expressions of the school and speaks merely in scholarly phrases of expression” (LA 25:853). Physiological anthropology is by experts, for experts, articulated in technical, scholarly terms, for the purpose of advancing a specialized body of theoretical knowledge and need not have any “practical relevance” (A 7:122). As “scholastic,” the language and forms of explanation of physiological anthropology will thus be discontinuous with the language and forms of explanation that ordinary human beings adopt in understanding themselves and others as persons (including what we now call “folk psychology”).

So, for instance, when Kant says that the human being “does not know the cranial nerves and fibers,” this obviously does not mean that the human being doesn’t know what a cranial nerve is or how it works, since evidently the physiological anthropologist does know this. What Kant means is that there is no such thing as a pre-theoretical or pragmatic participant’s perspective on “cranial nerves.” The only kind of understanding we have is speculative and specialist. What one discovers in physiological anthropology is precisely what an ordinary human being does not know “from the inside.” Instead, one speculates about what’s going on behind the scene of consciousness. As Julian Offray de la La Mettrie writes in his 1747 *L’Homme-machine*, the “physician philosophers”—what Kant calls physiological anthropologists—“probe and illuminate the labyrinth that is man. They alone have revealed man’s springs hidden under coverings that obscure so many other marvels” (1996, p. 29). By stepping outside and probing the human being, the physiological anthropologist illuminates what *in us* would otherwise remain entirely hidden to us.

By contrast, *pragmatic* anthropology is the investigation of what the human being as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself. In this context, the philosopher considers human beings not from the vantage of an external, expert observer, but *as* that very being, as a “*participant*” (A 7:120). Pragmatic anthropology reflects the “worldly” knowledge that one gains not by observing but by inhabiting or “having a world” (A 7:120). This means that the perspective of the pragmatic anthropologist is not the external perspective of a “mere observer” and the object of study is not regarded a bit of nature “running its course.” Rather, as Allen Wood puts it, “pragmatic anthropology is supposed to involve the oriented sort of knowledge of human nature that people gain through interacting with others rather than the theoretical knowledge of a mere observer” (2003, p. 41). While pragmatic anthropology involves observation and study, these are not the disengaged, objectifying observations that an empirical scientist makes of its object, but call on the kind of engaged, “oriented” observations that one human being makes of himself and others.

Because pragmatic anthropology is concerned with the participant’s perspective and with pragmatic questions, we can also expect that its language and forms of explanation will not be scholastic or depart too widely from the language and forms of explanation used by ordinary persons (even women at their dressing-tables). There is thus a perspectival and conceptual *continuity* between pragmatic anthropology’s perspective on the human and the human being’s “participant” perspective on himself and others (Sturm, 2008, p. 504). The pragmatic anthropologist does not probe the human being to reveal and study hidden springs, but wants to understand *us persons* in order that we may better understand ourselves and others, as beings engaged, individually and with others, in the practice of self-making.⁷⁸

Most importantly, pragmatic anthropology is “the investigation of what [man] as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself.” Because pragmatic anthropology is produced *by* the human being for the human being so that he can *make something* of himself, this means, first, that pragmatic anthropology is not just descriptive, but normative and practicable.⁹ His anthropology is meant to be “practically relevant,” to promote “enlightenment for common life” (AM 25:853), and to this end he offers “useful rule[s] for a psychological diet” (A 7:180). But second, while pragmatic anthropology is meant to help the human being make something of himself, it cannot simply tell the human being, *qua* free-acting being endowed with reason, what to think and do, since this would contradict Kant’s enlightenment commitments and his conception of freedom as self-determination. Rather, Kant should be read as providing materials that can aid the human being in his own practice of self-making. As Sabina Bremner puts this point, following Michel Foucault, Kant’s *Anthropology*

requires the active involvement of the reader, since it merely provides an occasion for the reader's exercise of her own judgement rather than giving determinate instructions for its use. As a result, what is most relevant for Kantian anthropology, as Foucault interprets it, is not its content, but its *form*: not the specific pieces of advice it proffers, but their *effects*—as well as the relation it establishes with its readership in the process.

(2020, p. 10)

In virtue of providing a picture of the human being that the human can *recognize* as himself, and in virtue of its pragmatic-normative orientation, the texts of pragmatic anthropology institute a distinctively engaged and reflexive readerly relationship. The reader must work not only to understand the text, theoretically, but to recognize himself (and others) in it, for pragmatic purposes.¹⁰ Only thus can the reader exercise her own judgment about Kant's rules and draw connections to her own life.

In sum there are four crucial features of Kant's "pragmatic point of view": it is articulated from an *internal*, participant's point of view rather than that of an external observer; it describes and develops an engaged *participant's* understanding of the human being, rather than that of a specialist; it is *recognizable*, continuous with the way we understand ourselves and others; and it is *normative*, oriented by particular ideals of human agency and by the ideals of psychic health that facilitate such agency.

The question now is: from what point of view and within which discipline should obscure representations be studied? What could it even mean to study obscure representations from a pragmatic point view? And how could there be anything of practical relevance or anything like a participant's perspective on representations that we have without being conscious of them?

3 | A PRAGMATICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Before turning to obscure representations, I want to situate them within the context of the first sections of the *Anthropology's* first book, "On cognition," which are concerned with consciousness and self-consciousness. Given the pragmatic orientation, we must read Kant as here providing his readers with ways of both understanding and directing their own consciousness, and he issues various "warnings" against "improper," "unnatural," dangerous, and unhealthy exercises of the mind. Kant begins the first section, "On consciousness of oneself," with the idea that adult human beings are (uniquely) self-conscious beings, capable of using the first-person pronoun, and he proceeds to consider the characteristic pathologies to which such self-consciousness renders us vulnerable and how these pathologies can be avoided or alleviated. Self-consciousness makes a (finite) creature prone to forms of egoism (logical egoism, aesthetic egoism, and moral egoism); these are the topics of the second section. From there, in section three, Kant considers how we become conscious of our representations through attention and abstraction, and how misuse of these capabilities leads to both loss of cognitive control and unhappiness. Next Kant considers how the capacity for self-observation can be engaged well or poorly; he suggests that while observation of one's own mental *activity* is important and necessary for philosophical reflection, observation of the "involuntary course of one's thoughts and feelings" (A 7:133) can lead to madness and despondency, as evidenced by thinkers like Pascal and Haller (A 7:134) (we will return to this). And then, in section five, Kant turns explicitly to representations that we have without being conscious of them.

What unites these sections is the idea that our consciousness and self-consciousness make possible ordinary and extraordinary cognitive achievements *and also* render us vulnerable to characteristic kinds of pathology, where Kant is especially concerned with the pathologies that hinder the exercise of finite rational agency.¹¹ These sections address the following kinds of pragmatic question: given that we are self-conscious but finite, what are our special vulnerabilities, pathologies, and bad habits? What capacities and practices ought we cultivate, and what ought we avoid? Which thinkers and historical figures count as models for what to pursue and what to avoid? How should

we conceive of and live with our self-consciousness and its limits, in a way that befits us as earthly beings endowed with reason? These first sections of the *Anthropology* should thus be read as developing a *pragmatics of consciousness and self-consciousness*, and Kant's discussion of obscure representations must be read as part of that project.

4 | ON OBSCURITY

Before we can ask whether obscure representations belong to pragmatic anthropology, we have to clarify what Kant means by obscurity and how he understands consciousness. For our purposes, it will be helpful to articulate three kinds of distinction with regards to obscurity. *First*, Kant suggests that there are two components to consciousness and obscurity: (a) clarity and distinctness and (b) cognitive control, and both come in degrees. *Second*, I will argue (in section 5) that we can distinguish between “mundane” and “playful” obscurity.¹² This will be crucial for specifying when and why obscure representations raise pragmatic concerns. *Third*, obscure representations may be totally obscure or unconscious, but we may also enjoy a kind of awareness of our representations *as* obscure; regarding the latter, I differentiate three different kinds of awareness of obscurity.

Kant begins section five by introducing the idea of obscure representations as representations of which we are not directly conscious, but whose existence we can infer (be “indirectly conscious” of [A 7:135]) in light of the representations of which we *are* directly conscious and that depend on such obscure representations. Characterized as such, obscure representations can be understood as a kind of theoretical posit: we must posit such obscure representations, regardless of what we are familiar with from experience, in order to explain what we *do* consciously experience. As such, their theorization is neither constrained nor supported by any participant's perspective or experience; as theoretical posits, they are invoked solely in response to explanatory demands formulated in third-personal terms.¹³ As Yibin Liang writes, “the crucial point of the concept of obscure representations is that they are indispensable in the process of empirical cognition, although the subject knows nothing about such representations directly” (2017, p. 360). Notice, though, that if obscure representations were only theoretical posits of this kind, it is not clear what pragmatic questions they could raise. Later I will argue against interpreting obscure representations exclusively in these terms.

In the *Anthropology*, Kant focuses on three kinds of obscure representation: obscure sensations, obscure intuitions, and what I will call obscure imaginative associations (A 7:137; 7:176).¹⁴ I will first consider clarity and distinctness, and then cognitive control.

As has been well-noted,¹⁵ Kant basically accepts the Leibnizian-Wolffian view of consciousness and obscurity. First, for Kant and the Leibniz-Wolffians, and unlike for Locke,¹⁶ consciousness is not an intrinsic or essential feature of representations. If a representation is conscious, it is *clear*, and if it is not conscious, it is *obscure* (JL 34).¹⁷ A representation is clear if I can differentiate it from others, and a clear representation is (also) *distinct* if I can differentiate the manifold contained within it (ibid.; A 137-138). How does this apply to sensations and intuitions?

Sensation is “the effect of an object on the capacity for representation insofar as we are affected by it” (CPR A19/B34). When our senses passively receive the impact of given objects, this produces a sensation. Sensations can vary in degrees of what we now call, following Block (1995), phenomenal consciousness, where there is something it is like for the subject of the representation: for example, I can be acutely conscious of some sound, smell, or touch, or a sound, smell, or touch can impact me subliminally yet without any phenomenal conscious awareness, when it is very faint or when my attention is focused elsewhere.¹⁸ However, notice that while a blastingly loud noise or searing pain would be intensely phenomenally conscious, it is not “intensely conscious” in Kant's sense.¹⁹ When I hear a song at a tolerable volume or have a manageable headache, I can differentiate the song's notes, tempo, and volume, and I can track the rise and fall of my headache, when it is sharp and when it is dull, and so forth. In these cases, I am conscious of my representations, in Kant's sense, because I can differentiate one sensation-representation from another (they are clear) and differentiate their inner constituents (they are distinct). Thus, as Sturm and Falk argue

(2010), consciousness as clarity and distinction, not phenomenal consciousness, is Kant's primary concern. When sensations are obscure, this means I cannot discriminate them; I cannot make anything of them.

Sensible intuitions are representations that refer to a given object and intuitions require the synthesizing, organizing activity of the imagination. Intuitions can also range in degrees of clarity and distinction. For example, I see a person from a distance and conclude (in a theoretical mood) that I must have obscure representations of the parts of his face (eyes, nose, mouth, etc.), even though I cannot see them (A 7:135). But then as the person gets closer, his features become gradually less and less obscure, and then I can clearly perceive his face, differentiating its parts. Or, I see a small object in front of me and cannot distinguish its constituent parts, and so it remains somewhat obscure because indistinct; but when I put it under a microscope, which functions to “spread the images out more,” then what was previously obscure becomes clear (A 7:136). In these cases of obscurity, the intuition is not sufficiently “spread out” in space: I cannot differentiate one representation from another (nose from eyes) nor can I differentiate the components of a representation (the nose and the eyes as components of the face). Here too, the most relevant sense of consciousness is clarity and distinctness.²⁰

Finally, consider what I am calling obscure imaginative associations. Here is one of Kant's examples: he notes that the saying “clothing makes the man” holds even for “intelligent people,” that is, even for people who know that clothing has nothing to do with character. Yet even such intelligent people will tend to see well-dressed people as important. He writes:

understanding still cannot prevent the impression that a well-dressed person makes of obscure representations of a certain importance. Rather, at best it can only have the resolution afterwards to correct the pleasing, preliminary judgment.

(A 7:137)

In this case, I imaginatively and unconsciously associate being well-dressed with being important. The link is not one I consciously draw, and indeed I may even consciously reject any such link. However, thanks to this obscure imaginative association, I see persons *as* important or not depending on their dress. In this case, I have not—and Kant suggests, *cannot*—make clear and distinct the ways in which these two representations have been linked. Thus, the imaginative association remains obscure.

To take one more example to which we will return: later in the *Anthropology* Kant discusses the associative imagination. He writes:

This association [of ideas] often extends very far, and the power of imagination often goes so fast from the hundredth to the thousandth that it seems we have completely skipped over certain intermediate links in the chain of ideas, though we have merely not been aware of them. So we must often ask ourselves: “Where was I? Where did I start out in my conversation, and how did I reach this last point?”

(A 7:176)

Here, Kant describes the familiar experience of arriving at a place in one's thinking (or speaking) where one realizes one does not know how one got there or what one's point was. The imaginative associations that linked one idea to the next are obscure to me, and I find myself lost in my own thought or speech. Here too, what remains obscure is how one representation is linked to and differentiated from the next, and this means that while I am aware of “this last point,” it too is to some extent obscure to me insofar I do not understand its relationship with what came before.

To summarize: in the cases of sensations, intuitions, and imaginative associations, representations can be obscure in the sense that we are not conscious of their internal characteristics (distinctness) or their relations with surrounding representations (clarity), and these can range in degree. Notice that I read Kant, at least in this text, as suggesting that a representation that is clear but indistinct (where I can distinguish it from others but cannot make out its constituent parts) is to some extent obscure.

The other crucial aspect of consciousness and obscurity, for Kant, concerns *cognitive control*: representations are conscious not only to the extent that they are clear and distinct, but to the extent that they are under my cognitive control and thereby *my* thoughts.

For Kant, representations are not intrinsically conscious, but must be actively *made* conscious by being ordered or synthesized by the imagination and the understanding. Thereby, representations *in* me are *my* representations. While this topic is given extensive, transcendental treatment in the Deduction of the first *Critique*, in the *Anthropology* Kant describes the synthesizing activity of making representations conscious in terms of “attending to” and “abstracting” from representations, and by relating representations to one another by bringing them under concepts and rational rules. In the proper, “healthy” case, the thinking subject is the *agent* of his representations: he actively thinks and coordinates them in light of rules and thereby makes these representations at once conscious and properly his own. This demonstrates “a freedom of the faculty of thought and the authority of the mind, *in having the object of one’s representations under one’s control*” (A 7:131-emphasis in the original). In the good, healthy case, representations do not move through my head on their own accord; rather, I am conscious of my representations because they are under my cognitive control and thereby *mine*.

By contrast, when representations “come into the mind *unbidden* and on their own (this happens through the play of the power of imagination when it is unintentionally meditating)” (A 7:133-134), when I do not understand *why* they come to me or how one representation relates to what comes next, then these representations will qualify as to some degree *obscure*. This constitutes “a reversal of the natural order in the faculty of knowledge, because the principles of thought do not lead the way as they should but rather follow behind” (*ibid.*). In this kind of case, I do not actively and comprehendingly attend to and abstract from relevant and irrelevant representations; rather my imagination plays “unintentionally” [*unwillkürlich*] with “inner sensations” (A 7:161), “ideas of inner sense” (*ibid.*), and imaginative representations of objects that are not present (7:167). When the principles of thought do not lead the way, then I do not actively, authoritatively *think* these thoughts, and because of this, they are not properly *mine*; rather, thoughts and feelings come to me “unbidden and on their own.” They are not representations that I *think*, but representations that I “suffer” (cf. 7:161).

My suggestion is that insofar as they lack cognitive agency and cognitive ownership, insofar as I cannot comprehend their relations with one another, insofar as these thoughts are not *mine*, such passive, involuntary, unbidden thoughts can be characterized as obscure. Such ersatz “thinking” approximates Kant’s description of infancy, which, he says, “was not the time of experiences, but merely of scattered perceptions not yet united under the concept of an object” (A 7:128), thus making early childhood like a dream [*als ein Traum sein*] (A112).²¹ Such scattered, disorganized, unconceptualized representations that are not under my cognitive control, that I do not understand, and that do not constitute experiences, are obscure.

Finally, notice that clarity and distinctness, and cognitive agency, hang together for Kant. I can only *bring* a representation, and the representations that surround it, to clarity and distinctness by *actively* attending and abstracting. Contrawise, if I cannot make out my representation and its relations to others, if it lacks sufficient clarity and distinctness, then I am unable to *make anything* of it, it is out of my cognitive control.²²

So far we have seen that a representation is obscure if it lacks clarity and distinctness, and if it is not under the subject’s cognitive control. I have also suggested that representations can vary in degrees of obscurity. Regarding the latter, we still need to consider whether and how we are ever aware of our representations as obscure. We also still need to differentiate two types of obscurity: mundane and playful. This requires that we now turn to the disciplinary puzzle of obscure representations, and to the central concern of the present paper: where do they belong?

5 | OBSCURE REPRESENTATIONS DO NOT BELONG HERE

Kant concludes his main discussion of obscure representations writing that

the field of *obscure* representations is the largest in the human being.—But because this field can only be perceived in his passive side as a play of sensations, the theory of obscure representations belongs only to *physiological* anthropology, not to pragmatic anthropology, and so it is properly disregarded here.

(A 7:136)

Because obscure representations belong to man's sensible, receptive capacity ("his passive side"), obscure representations are best understood as part of what nature makes of us, and so belong to physiological anthropology, not pragmatic anthropology. Which is to say: obscure representations do not belong *here*, even though Kant has already discussed them here, and even though he turns in the very next sentence to continue the discussion, considering how we like to "play" with obscure representations.

This is the disciplinary puzzle of obscure representations. Kant analyzes obscure representations in his pragmatic anthropology while at the same time asserting that they do not belong. Several considerations seem to justify Kant's consigning obscure representations to physiological anthropology. First, with respect to representations that are entirely obscure, it would seem that, almost by definition, they cannot be approached from the participant's perspective and can only be studied "from the outside," from an "observer's" point of view. Obscure representations would seem to be paradigmatic of the kind of hidden, "obscured" springs to be revealed by La Mettrie's "probing." Second, if they are unconscious and if they are not subject to the principles of the understanding and as such are not part of the subject's active self-making, then it is not clear what pragmatic anthropology would have to say or how it could offer any advice or rules for a psychological diet. If we do not know that we have them (except from a theoretical, explanatory point of view) and if we can do nothing with or about them, then obscure representations seem to be something I am simply stuck with, part of what nature makes of me, hence a topic of physiological anthropology.

Recall now my suggestion in the Introduction that the question of *how and where* to draw the boundaries of the discipline of pragmatic anthropology overlaps with the question of *how and where* to draw the boundaries of the Kantian pragmatic subject. On this issue of the boundaries of the self, Thomas Nagel's remarks from his 1969 paper "The Boundaries of Inner Space" are entirely apt:

How much of all that a man's body and mind do, can *he* be said to do? [...] At some point it will be clear to everyone that by traveling deep enough inside the person we have lost him, and are dealing not with the means by which he ties his shoes, but with the physiological and mental substructure of his actions. If there is a line between a person and the rest of that [...] elaborately organized organic system in which his life proceeds, where does the line fall, and what kind of line is it?

(1969, p. 453)

By relegating obscure representations to physiological anthropology, Kant is suggesting that obscure representations are so "deep inside"—beyond consciousness and out of control—that we have lost "the person" and have reached the "physiological and mental substructure of his actions." There is no participant's perspective in the depths, there is nothing I could recognize as myself, and there is nothing that I *qua* finite rational agent (or "person") can or should *do*. The physiological anthropologist (or in our time: the cognitive scientist or neuroscientist) might be able to tell us what's going on down there, about the movements of nerves and springs (physiological and mental substructure), but we are not *there*, and for this reason, pragmatic anthropology would seem to have nothing to say. Academic-disciplinary boundaries and the boundaries of the pragmatic subject are drawn together. According to Kant's official drawing, obscure representations fall outside the boundaries of the Kantian subject and outside the boundaries of pragmatic anthropology.

This seems to be how, for instance, Liang interprets Kant's obscure representations. For Liang, obscure representations operate entirely subliminally. We enjoy only indirect awareness of them by theoretically positing them as necessary to explain cognition, and the only kind of consciousness that accompanies obscure representations is—

using Ned Block again—“access-consciousness”: nonphenomenal consciousness that makes contents of mental states available for subliminal cognitive acts (e.g., subliminal association) and for other faculties like feeling and desire (Liang, 2017, p. 363). According to Liang, “there should by definition be no awareness of the existence of obscure representation at all” (2017, p. 361). Liang’s interpretation would support Kant’s official conclusion that obscure representations fall outside the scope of pragmatic anthropology, since on this interpretation they should be conceived as part of our mental substructure, known only inferentially and theoretically. But this interpretation makes it puzzling why obscure representations would show up in pragmatic anthropology at all, and it gives us no resources for understanding Kant’s next proposal that we like to “play with” obscure representation and enjoy “walking in the dark.” In fact, I think Kant’s turn to the topic of play is key. I suggest that if we want to find a place for obscure representations in pragmatic anthropology, we must be able to make sense of this play. That is, I think it is our tendency to *play* with obscure representations that makes them a proper topic for pragmatic anthropology. This is the task to which I turn now.

6 | A PRAGMATICS OF OBSCURE REPRESENTATIONS

As we have seen, Kant follows his expulsion of obscure representations by immediately continuing his discussion of them. While obscurity as unclarity, indistinctness, and lack of cognitive control remains constant, the nature and focus of the discussion changes. Kant writes:

We often play with obscure representations, and have an interest in placing their objects, whether liked or disliked, in the shade before the power of the imagination. However, more often we are ourselves a play of obscure representations, and our understanding is unable to save itself from the absurdities into which they have placed it, even though it recognizes them as illusions. Such is the case with sexual love [...] (A 7:136; translation modified).

*Wir spielen nämlich oft mit dunkelen Vorstellungen und haben ein Interesse dabei, beliebte oder unbeliebte Gegenstände vor der Einbildungskraft in Schatten zu stellen; öfter aber noch sind wir selbst ein Spiel dunkeler Vorstellungen, und unser Verstand vermag nicht sich wider die Ungereimtheiten zu retten, in die ihn der Einfluß derselben versetzt, ob er sie gleich als Täuschung anerkennt. So ist es mit der Geschlechtsliebe bewandt [...]*²³

I will return to the specific topic of *Geschlechtsliebe*. My concern at the moment is with “play.” The passage suggests that it is not just that we “have” obscure representations or that they are “in” us, but that we have an interest in *obscuring* representations, placing them “in the shade,” where this allows us to imaginatively “play with” them. In the good, “healthy” case of cognition and experience, the object, so to speak, “tethers” the imagination and “prevents our cognitions from being haphazard or arbitrary” (A 7:104); by contrast, when the intuited object or representation is obscure, the imagination is no longer “tethered” and can wander in the dark as it pleases.²⁴ Obscurity gives the imagination free reign. Kant then suggests that in the process of playing with obscure representations, we ourselves risk being “played” by them. Can this passage clarify how obscure representations belong in pragmatic anthropology?

Here is my proposal. On the one hand there are, as Kant puts it, “infinitely many” *mundane* obscure representations on the map of the mind, and these hold little if any pragmatic interest. I can’t make out what is on the wall across the room and this representation is obscure in a mundane way. Or, I can *barely* make out that there is *something* on the wall across the room, and again this representation is obscure—unclear and indistinct, and I cannot make something of it—but again, in a mundane way.

But in the passage above, Kant says that we have an “have an interest” in *putting* objects or representations in the shade, in *obscuring them*, and this allows us to imaginatively “play” with them. As he puts it in the *Anthropology* lectures: “through artificial obscurings [...] the imagination is made to create more” (LA 1441). Without the tether of the clearly perceived object or the clearly conscious representation, the imagination is free to conjure, rearrange, and play. But because our representations are here unclear and indistinct and we are not in cognitive control, we are vulnerable to being “played” by those very representations, vulnerable to being taken in by illusions, and even to developing serious mental illness like, for instance, hypochondria, a “fantastic mental condition” producing “chimeras” and “obscure representations” (MH 2:266).²⁵ This suggests a crucial difference, in Kant’s account, between what I am calling “mundane” and “playful” obscurity: the first case is inexorable for finite beings, and not per se a problem; the latter is something like a bad human habit, a problematic tendency, and something that we can *do something* about as pragmatic subjects. Playful obscurity raises pragmatic concerns.

The passage also suggests that there are different ways in which we might be aware of representations as obscure. I have suggested that consciousness and obscurity come in degrees, and Kant is quite explicit about this (see A 7:138-9; JL 9:64). In the B Paralogisms, he writes that “a certain degree of consciousness, which however is not sufficient for memory, must be met with even in some obscure representations [...] there are infinitely many degrees of consciousness down to its vanishing” (CPR B414-415).²⁶ In the Vienna Logic, he distinguishes between “total and partial obscurity” (VL 840). If consciousness and obscurity range in degree, if consciousness must be met with even in some obscure representations, and if obscurity can be total or partial, this all suggests that we do, sometimes, enjoy some degree of awareness of our obscure representations as obscure.²⁷ As Rudolph Makkreel writes, in these cases “we can only be dimly aware of them,” which suggests that “the field of obscure representations can be regarded as a vague horizon” (2014, p. 19). Granting that there are obscure representations that are wholly unconscious and known purely theoretically or inferentially, it is also possible to be “dimly aware” of at least some obscure representations as obscure. I suggest that we differentiate three kinds of such awareness.

First, looking across the room, I can make out that there is a postcard on the wall, but I cannot see where its boundary ends and where its frame begins, and I cannot see what the postcard depicts (its manifold). This intuition is to some degree obscure (unclear and indistinct) and I am aware of it as obscure, in a fairly mundane way (this could be extended to faint or obscure noises, bodily sensations, sounds, smells, etc.).

A second way that I might become aware of obscure representations as obscure is suggested by the case of losing one’s train of thought. In this case, it is not so much that I am aware of a representation as obscure in the way I am aware that I cannot clearly make out the postcard. Rather, I become aware of gaps in my conscious thinking, so that I ask: “Where was I? Where did I start out in my conversation, and how did I get to this last point?” Because I do not know what ideas and links led me to this point, I find myself disoriented in my own thinking, and this disorientation constitutes a kind of awareness of (stretches of) my own thinking as obscure. Of course, this will still involve a kind of inference: I am not conscious of what I was thinking and how my thoughts were connected, but I *must* have been thinking something to get me where I am, therefore there must be thoughts that are obscure to me. But the awareness is not entirely or neutrally theoretical because of the experiential dimension of disorientation, which could be quite minor or more pronounced, depending on how difficult or disturbing it is to reconstruct the links (“I was thinking about work... how did I end up thinking about my 3rd grade classmate?” or “I was thinking about my wife... how did I end up thinking about my 3rd grade teacher?”). This disorientation constitutes a kind of experiential, not-entirely-theoretical awareness of my representations as obscure.

Finally, when Kant says we like to throw objects or representations in the shade and imaginatively play with their obscure representations, this suggests a third kind of awareness of representations as obscure, and this, I suggest, is Kant’s central pragmatic concern. For in this case, I enjoy a kind of awareness of my representations as obscure and I am attracted to this obscurity. For instance, Kant describes fantasy (*Phantasie*) as a form of lawless imaginative activity that “swarms one who studies by candle-light in the still of the night.” He observes that “some people enjoy this so much that they like to stay awake into the night” (LA 25:1258) and proposes that “the taming of the power of imagination, by going to bed early so that one can get up early, is a very useful rule for a psychological

diet” (A 7:180-181; see my Russell, 2024). The point, again, is that in this kind of case, one is not only aware of one's representations as obscure; one *likes* this obscurity.

Kant also describes what he calls “studied” or “affected” obscurity, where artists and writers “feign profundity and thoroughness” (A 7:137; see also MM 6:206).²⁸ He says that *skotison* (“*mach's dunkel!*”) is the decree of all mystics. In these cases, engaging with obscure texts, works of art, and mystics might feel, for instance, mysterious, stimulating, profound and in ways that cannot be clearly understood or articulated. And it is only because such engagement with obscurity *feels* mysterious and profound that Kant thinks we are at risk of enthusiasm, the pathology of accepting a play of ideas as experiential cognition, of “dreaming when awake” (A 7:160). In these cases, there is *something it is like* for one's representations to be obscure, and this *something* is, Kant suggests, attractive, pleasurable. Obscure representations raise pragmatic, normative questions because we like to play with them, and because this is dangerous.

Finally, consider what Kant says about sexual love, which he takes to be exemplary of our play with obscure representations and their play with us:

How much wit has been wasted in throwing a delicate veil [*einen dünnen Flor*] over that which, while indeed liked, nevertheless still shows such a close relationship with the common species of animals that it calls for modesty? And in polite society the expressions are not blunt, even though they are transparent [*durchscheinend*] enough to bring out a smile.—Here the power of imagination enjoys walking in the dark [*Die Einbildungskraft mag hier gern im Dunkeln spazieren*].

(A 7:136)

Kant makes a similar remark in the *Anthropology* lectures:

Nature has certain secrets, such as the natural needs and the difference between the sexes, which she always wants to have hidden though obscure representations. These appear to be below the dignity of human beings, for in these respects he agrees with the animals. Hence we always speak of these things in obscure representations, and the more obscure they are, the better and more agreeable [...] Hence one sees that the human being possesses an art of obscuring [*eine Kunste zu verdunkeln*].

(LA 1223; see also LA 1441)

Both sexual attraction (“natural needs”) and the genitals (“the difference between the sexes”) reveal our likeness with non-rational animals and for that reason (“hence”) they are hidden, veiled, or obscured. This is our “art of obscuring.” Such an art might involve literally covering people up in clothes (while revealing just enough to signal what is hidden). It might involve the social practice of discussing sex in obfuscating metaphors, *façons de parler* and “oblique modes of speech” (LA 25:481), that are nonetheless transparent enough to bring out a smile in those who are canny. It may involve long traditions of prohibition and taboo.²⁹ This in fact is just what Kant proposes in the *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History*:

The human being soon found that the stimulus to sex, which with animals rests merely on a transient, for the most part periodic impulse, was capable for him of being prolonged and even increased by the power of the imagination [...] The figleaf was thus the product of a far greater manifestation of reason than that which it had demonstrated in the first stage of its development. For to make an inclination more inward and enduring by withdrawing its object from the senses, shows already the consciousness of some dominion of reason over impulse and not merely, as in the first step, a faculty for doing service to those impulses within a lesser or greater extension. *Refusal* was the first artifice for leading from the merely sensed stimulus over to ideal ones, from merely animal desire gradually over to love.

(CB 8:112-113)

Kant suggests here that animal instinct becomes properly human sexual love by withdrawing its object from the senses (and by refusing and delaying satisfaction). Here too, obscuring the object, throwing it in the shade or under the figleaf, gives the imagination freer rein for play. The interesting suggestion is that it is precisely our art of obscuring—obscuring the object of desire and refusing immediate satisfaction—that transforms merely animal desire into human love, marking our difference from non-rational animals.³⁰ Béatrice Longuenesse is, as far as I know, the only other commentator to stress the connection between obscure representations and sexual love. She argues that in this passage Kant singles out sexual desire as a source of “representations of the imagination with respect to which we are passive, and over which the efforts of our understanding have limited control” (2017, p. 194). I agree, and this is how I’ve argued that we should understand the dynamic between “playing with” obscure representations and being “played” by them. Longuenesse further claims that for Kant, sex is “an aspect of our mental life in which one might say that even for Kant our bodies own us rather than the other way around” (2017, p. 194). But I think it is important that Kant does not say that in sexual love we are overwhelmed or “owned” by the *body*, but that we are overwhelmed by the (imaginative) *mind* in its play with obscure representations. Of course, our imagination would not play in this way were it not for our intensely desiring bodies. But just as, for Kant, inclinations do not themselves overwhelm reason (R 6:57–58), likewise, I suggest, for Kant it is not “our bodies” that threaten to own or overwhelm us, but our imaginative, obscure representations of our and others’ bodies. What makes sex risky is not just that we make improper use of our bodies, but that we make improper use of our partly conscious, partly obscure minds.

Fantasy, studied obscurity, mysticism, and sexual attraction each exemplify man’s art of obscuring and our tendency to play with obscure representations. This sheds retrospective light on Kant’s warnings in earlier sections of the *Anthropology*. Kant writes, for instance, that one should not engage with the involuntary course of one’s thoughts and feelings or with attending to thoughts that come unbidden through the play of the imagination, since this is either already a disease of the mind or will lead to the madhouse (A 7:134). I argued earlier that the involuntary, unbidden imaginative representations are obscure even though we may be to some extent aware of them. My proposal now is that it is precisely the attractive, mysterious experience of their obscurity that can generate a feeling of “inspiration and powers flowing into us, without our help, from who knows where” (*ibid.*).³¹ Or it may incline their subject to believe, for instance, that their mind harbors secret recesses containing “flattering ideas” in the case of the mystic Antoinette Bourignon,³² or “terrifying and fearful ones” in the case of Pascal (A 7:133). The point is that when the subject experiences his representations as obscure *and* plays with them, then it makes sense for Kant to issue his pragmatic warnings. Which, again, is to say that here it makes sense to treat obscure representations from a pragmatic point of view.

Unlike in the case of fully unconscious obscure representations of which any awareness we have is entirely theoretical, it is crucial that Kant’s reader is able to *recognize*, from the participant’s perspective and from her own experience, what Kant is talking about here. Kant invokes *what it’s like* to be a subject of obscure representations who can enjoy peculiar, pleasurable, playful forms of awareness of such obscurity. That we enjoy such awareness does not mean we thereby transform obscure representations into conscious, clear, and distinct ones; rather it means we enjoy a kind of awareness of obscurity itself, where this pragmatically-relevant kind of awareness is different than either theoretical, speculative knowledge of obscure representations, or the kind of mundane awareness I have of my obscure intuition of the postcard across the room.

So, returning to the disciplinary puzzle: when Kant writes that obscure representations can only be “perceived in [man’s] passive side” and so can be “properly disregarded here,” we should interpret him as follows: *insofar* as obscure representations are perceived and studied exclusively as part of man’s passive side, and *insofar* as obscure representations are studied theoretically and speculatively, then they belong to physiological anthropology. But *insofar* as obscure representations are perceived and studied as the stuff of imaginative play, *insofar* as we enjoy walking in the dark and are taken in by “affected obscurity,” *insofar* as man is capable of an “art of obscuring,” then obscure representations belong to pragmatic anthropology. For here we can ask: given that we do play with obscure representations, *should* we? Given that we enjoy walking in the dark, *should* we? Is this kind of play conducive to the project of self-making, or does it compromise that project and, potentially, drive us mad? To the extent that obscure representations raise these pragmatic questions, then they do have a proper place in pragmatic anthropology.

7 | CONCLUSION

I suggested that there are four crucial features of the pragmatic point of view: it is articulated from a *participant's* perspective; it describes and develops a *participant's* worldly knowledge of the human being; it is *recognizable*, continuous with the way we view ourselves and others; and it is *normative*, oriented by ideals of human agency and by the ideals of psychic health that facilitate such agency. While a theory of obscure representations conceived as wholly unconscious could not meet these conditions and so would not belong to pragmatic anthropology, I argued that some of Kant's discussion of obscure representations does meet these conditions, specifically, his discussion of our tendency to play with obscure representations and our art of obscuring, and with the risks to which this play exposes us. Here, Kant's discussion meets the conditions for pragmatic anthropology: it elaborates a participant's familiarity of obscure representations, and often, though not always, does so from the internal, participant's point of view; it is recognizable, making contact with the way we experience ourselves and others; and it is normative, warning us against taking up the wrong kind of risky relationship to obscurity.

I will conclude with a proposal as to why Kant wavers on the question of whether or not obscure representations belong to pragmatic anthropology. I suggested that the disciplinary boundaries of pragmatic anthropology track the boundaries of the pragmatic subject, and that Kant was writing at a historical moment of anxiety and uncertainty both about what the human being *is* (a system of hidden springs or a finite, rational, responsible agent?) and about how he should be studied (physiologically or pragmatically?). In this context, Kant's pragmatic anthropology can be understood as a two-pronged defense: it is a defense of the human being as a pragmatic subject that can make something of himself (rather than a physiological object made by nature), and it is a defense of philosophy as a practically-relevant, pragmatic discipline that *addresses* its readers *as* pragmatic subjects. My proposed diagnosis is that Kant's effort to exclude obscure representations from pragmatic anthropology is a component of this defense mission; that is, it is a component of Kant's effort to determine, at once, what man and philosophy are and should be. For Kant, man is an earthly being endowed with reason, which “raises him infinitely above all other beings on earth” (A 7:127), and philosophy as pragmatic anthropology is the discipline needed to help him understand and realize this special position. But obscure representations complicate and offend against this picture, and so Kant officially excluded them from his pragmatic anthropology. By pronouncing their place in physiological anthropology, Kant was instructing his readers as to how to conceive of themselves and where to conceive of their limits, as if to say: *that is not you*. And yet, as we've seen, he did not fully or finally exclude obscure representations from his pragmatic project, which is to say, from the pragmatic subject. That Kant wavered here indicates a suggestive uncertainty about exactly where and how we can or should draw the line between what we make of ourselves and what nature makes of us, about the kind of being we are.³³

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ENDNOTES

¹ I have used the following abbreviations throughout the paper: A (Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View), CPR (Critique of Pure Reason) (Kant, 1999a), CJ (Critique of Judgment), CB (Conjectural Beginnings of Human History) (Kant, 1999b), CS (On the Common Saying) (Kant, 1999c), DS (Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics), JL (Jäsche Logic. In Lectures on logic) (Kant, 2004), LA (Lectures on Anthropology) (Kant, 2014), MH (Essay on the Maladies of the Head), MM (*The Metaphysics of Morals*) (Kant, 1999b). The references are to the Akademie edition of Kant's works, using the translations from the Cambridge Edition of Kant's Works (Cambridge University Press).

² See Grüne (2009, 2022), Liang (2017, 2020), Longuenesse (2017, 2023), McLear (2011), Sturm and Falk (2010). See Leland (2018) for a discussion of obscure representations in Kant's pre-critical writings.

³ Kant's moral philosophy is the other obvious place in his project where he pursues the topic of how to live well with the limits of self-consciousness and self-knowledge. Here, we would look at those passages where he affirms that we can never know for sure whether we acted from duty alone (A551/B579 fn; G 4:407; CS 8:284; MM 6:393, 6:447), those

where he affirms that certainty in such matters and at the First Command of All Duties to Oneself, the command to know yourself (MM 6:441). We would also have to look at the passages where Kant argues that “obligation with regard to moral feeling can be only to *cultivate* it and to strengthen it through wonder at its inscrutable source” (MM 6:399-400). But this would take us too far afield for the present paper. See my Russell ([in press-a](#)) paper “Kant and the Opacity of Human Action (Kant, 1999c).”

- ⁴ Though Kant did not start devoting a distinct chapter to obscure representations until the Friedländer lectures in 1775–1776. See Leland (2018).
- ⁵ Actual physiological or medical anthropologists in Kant's time included Julien Offray de la Mettrie, Le Comte de Buffon, Albrecht von Haller (whose poetry Kant frequently quotes), and Ernst Platner (who was Kant's most explicit target of criticism in his anthropological writings). Here, I won't engage with their work but will attend solely to the idea of physiological anthropology from Kant's point of view.
- ⁶ The target of the idea of “traces in the brain” and the final pejorative characterization of physiological anthropology is Ernst Platner, who published his book *Anthropology for Physicians and Philosophers* in 1772, the same year that Kant began lecturing on the topic. Platner was specifically interested in explaining “body and soul in their mutual relations and constraints upon another” (quoted in Sturm, 2008, p. 497), which is to say, providing physiological explanations of mental processes and functions (Sturm, 2008).
- ⁷ Obviously, this all raises the question of the *we* of pragmatic anthropology. Who is included in this community, and who is excluded, and how to do those exclusions help constitute the former community? How does Kant gender and racialize this community? For a thoughtful exploration of these questions, see Clark (2001).
- ⁸ Here, one might wonder whether understanding our “hidden springs” from a physiological perspective might still be pragmatically useful. Couldn't knowledge of our hidden springs contribute to the project of self-making? Recent books in popularized cognitive science suggest that it can. One possibility here is that we can make use of such knowledge yet in a way that is “alienated” from the pragmatic point of view, treating ourselves like objects to be manipulated. Thanks to Katharina Kraus for raising this question.
- ⁹ Of course pragmatic anthropology cannot disclose *moral* norms, only pure practical reason can do that. But pragmatic anthropology can help the human being navigate the contingently human pitfalls that complicate the pursuit of virtue. As Kant writes, “moral anthropology, which [...] would deal only with the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in fulfilling the laws of a metaphysics of morals. It would deal with the development, spreading, and strengthening of moral principles” (6: 217).
- ¹⁰ I discuss the prospect of “recognizing” ourselves in theory in Russell ([in press-b](#), 2024).
- ¹¹ The analog in Kant's moral philosophy is his discussion of self-conceit, which is a moral pathology to which we are prone thanks to our specific constitution as finite, sensible, social, rational creatures. See my Russell ([n.d.](#)).
- ¹² I draw this distinction in Russell (2024).
- ¹³ I take this phrasing, and the very helpful idea of purely theoretical psychological posits, from Gardner (1991).
- ¹⁴ In other texts, Kant discusses obscure concepts (JL 33-34; see especially Grüne, 2022), obscure acts of reflection (A 7:145), and the idea that every moral being harbors an obscurely represented metaphysics (MM 6:216; MM 6:375). I will here follow Kant's discussion in section five of the *Anthropology* and focus only on obscure sensations, obscure intuitions, and obscure imaginative associations (Kant 2002a).
- ¹⁵ See Dyck (2011), Leland (2018), Thiel (2011), Sturm and Falk (2010).
- ¹⁶ As Locke writes: “'tis altogether as intelligible to say, that a body is extended without parts, as that anything thinks without being conscious of it, or perceiving, that it does so” (Locke, Essay II.I.19; 118) (Locke, 1997).
- ¹⁷ In addition to the Leibniz-Wolff influence, Crusius—for whom consciousness was inner *sensation*—has also been seen as a major influence on Kant's theory of consciousness. See Inderegard (2018).
- ¹⁸ See Liang (2017), Longuenesse (2023), and McLear (2011) for discussions of obscure representations in terms of Block's distinction between “phenomenal consciousness” and “access consciousness.”
- ¹⁹ I owe this distinction between phenomenal consciousness and the kind consciousness that concerned Kant to Patricia Kitcher, who made this point to me in conversation. It suggests that while phenomenal consciousness is not irrelevant to consciousness as Kant is thinking about it in the *Anthropology*, it is not his primary concern (see also Sturm & Falk, 2010 for an argument that Kant was not concerned with consciousness in the contemporary sense of phenomenal qualia). I don't think this means that for Kant, a blastically loud noise is not conscious. The point, again, is just that phenomenal consciousness is not Kant's main target.
- ²⁰ This holds for concepts too. Kant says in the *Jäsche Logic*: “if we want an example of indistinctness in concepts, furthermore, then the concept of beauty may serve. Everyone has a clear concept of beauty. But in this concept many different

marks occur, among others that the beautiful must be something that (i.) strikes the senses and (ii.) pleases universally. Now if we cannot explicate the manifold of these and other marks of the beautiful, then our concept of it is still indistinct" (JL 34). I follow Longuenesse in holding that such concepts are clear but obscure in the sense of indistinct. Precisely because they are obscure, Kant thinks that writers can manipulate them, and their readers, to feign depth and profundity.

- ²¹ I take this latter quotation from the well-known passage from the Transcendental Deduction: "without that sort of [categorical, apperceptive] unity, which has its rule a priori, and which subjects the appearances to itself, thoroughgoing and universal, hence necessary unity of consciousness would not be encountered in the manifold perceptions. But these would then belong to no experience, and would consequently be without an object, and would be nothing but a blind play of representations, i.e., less than a dream" [*nichts als ein blindes Spiel der Vorstellungen, d.i. weniger, als ein Traum sein*] (A112).
- ²² Kant provides a seeming exception to this rule. He describes the case of a freely improvising musician who plays a beautiful tune (with 10 fingers and both feet, while talking to someone standing next to him) yet without conscious awareness of all that he is doing, and where greater consciousness, diligence, and care "could never hope to bring off so well" (A 7:136). This seems to be a case where the subject is not conscious of her representations and yet remains in spectacular control of them. But in fact, here too, the subject is capable of successfully linking and differentiating each representation, of exercising very sensitive and agile attention and abstraction. I am inclined to say that while the musician's activity is obscure to him *qua* cognitive subject, in the sense that he is not explicitly conscious of what he is doing or even how, it is not obscure to him *qua* imaginative subject. Pursuing this thought would also require attending to Kant's discussion of genius in the *Critique of Judgment*, where he suggests that the genius does not understand how the ideas for a work come to home or even how he brings the work about (CJ 5:308). I am grateful to Patricia Kitcher for conversation about these ideas.
- ²³ Robert B. Loudon translates the first sentence as "We often play with obscure representations, and have an interest in throwing **them** in the shade before the power of the imagination, when **they** are liked or disliked." But this loses the all-important distinction between the *dunkelen Vorstellungen* and the (*beliebte oder unbeliebte Gegenstände*). Kant is clearly saying that we have an interest in throwing (liked or disliked) *objects* in the "shade," and this allows us to imaginatively "play with" the obscured representations. Failing to distinguish the *Vorstellungen* and the *Gegenstände* confuses things, since it says that we throw obscure *representations* in the shade; and yet, presumably *obscure* representations are already *in Schatten*. Though as Thomas Khurana pointed out to me, even with my adjustments, there is the passage is still ambiguous, since "*vor der Einbildungskraft in Schatten zu stellen*" is unusual and nonidiomatic, especially the suggestion of putting objects "before" or "in front of" the imagination. Thanks to both Khurana and Andreja Novakovic for discussing this passage.
- ²⁴ See my Russell (2024) for an extensive treatment of Kant's conception of fantasy as a kind of untethered imaginative play with obscure representations.
- ²⁵ Patrick Frierson writes: "in 'On the Power of the Human Mind', Kant ascribed his own 'natural predisposition to hypochondria' to his 'flat' and 'narrow chest' (7:104), and much of Kant's preoccupation with hypochondria throughout his life—and arguably his concern with mental disorder in general—can be traced to his efforts to combat this looming mental disorder of his own" (2009, p. 276) (Kant, 2006).
- ²⁶ Longuenesse (2023), Makkreel (2014), McLear (2011) all propose that obscurity comes in degrees, while Liang (2017, 2020) maintains that obscure representations are always, necessarily, entirely unconscious (Kant, 2002a).
- ²⁷ It is also possible to enjoy be aware of obscure representations but not be aware of them *as* obscure. For instance, as Longuenesse writes, "we may have, indeed we in fact mostly have, only unclear marks of the concepts we make use of in judging and reasoning. We thus have only indistinct or, rather, incompletely distinct concepts" (2023, p. 19). But, unfortunately, I often don't know just how unclear and indistinct my concepts are that I nonetheless continue to make use of. So this would be a case of having awareness of obscure representations yet without awareness of them *as* obscure. Here, one could imagine a Socratic trajectory: I use concepts without awareness that they are obscure to me; then I come to awareness of this obscurity (the moment of *aporia* or Socratic ignorance); and then, possibly, I can work toward greater clarity and distinctness and cognitive control.
- ²⁸ Perhaps unexpectedly, Nietzsche makes a similar observation/complaint in *The Gay Science*: "those who know that they are profound strive for clarity. Those who would like to seem profound to the crowd strive for obscurity [*Dunkelheit*]. For the crowd believes that if it cannot see to the bottom of something it must be profound" (GS §173) (Nietzsche, 2001).
- ²⁹ This raises the very interesting idea of what we could call "social practices of obscurity." This topic would connect with some of Kant's comments about "Oriental cultures," about which he writes: "the power of imagination's being unruled [...] is found among all oriental peoples, as with them everything is based on a play of images" (LA 25:1261). However, I will not be able to explore this topic here.
- ³⁰ I have benefited from many ranging conversations with Alex Wolfson on this topic.

- ³¹ In Russell (MS), I discuss the role of playful obscure representations in Kant's 1766 *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, which begins with the sentence “the realm of shades (*Shattenreich*) is the paradise of fantastical visionaries. Here they find a country without frontiers which they can cultivate at their pleasure” (DS 2:317) (Kant, 1992).
- ³² Though Kant refers to Bourignon with the masculine pronoun.
- ³³ I'd like to thank Béatrice Longuenesse, Patricia Kitcher, Owen Ware, and Katharina Kraus for their conversation about these ideas and feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

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