

Lewis Wang

Kant on Propositional Content and Knowledge

Abstract: This paper explores Kant's account of propositional content and its implications for the relationship between his notions of knowledge (*Wissen*) and cognition (*Erkenntnis*). While previous commentators commonly read Kant as holding a Fregean theory of propositional content, in this paper I argue that Kant's theory of propositional content aligns more closely with Peter Hanks' recent account. According to my reading, Kant holds that individual acts of judging are both ontologically and explanatorily prior to propositions or Kantian judgments (*Urteil*). Furthermore, on my reading, acts of judging for Kant are acts of assertively predicating a property of an object rather than merely acts of neutral predication. This reading challenges the lately popular view that Kant's notions of knowledge and cognition are not only distinct but also disjunct. I instead suggest that we should regard Kantian knowledge that requires cognitions as its grounds as a species of Kantian cognitions.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been a surge of interest among Anglo-American commentators in Kant's notion of knowledge (*Wissen*) and its difference from his notion of cognition (*Erkenntnis*). For Kant, knowledge is a subspecies of assent (*Fürwahrhalten*), or literally holding-to-be-true. Assent for Kant is a general kind of propositional attitude that includes any endorsement of a proposition's truth – regardless of how confident, rational, or justified one is in that endorsement – and knowledge for Kant is the species of assent that is based on and justified by “a ground of cognition that is objectively as well as subjectively sufficient”, i. e., a ground that indicates a sufficiently high likelihood for the truth of that proposition (AA 9:70). By contrast, cognition, in the core sense of that term that is most central to the first *Critique*, is a kind of representation of an object that requires the com-

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Lewis Wang, ###affiliation###

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bination of intuition and concept. The concepts of knowledge and cognition for Kant are thus clearly distinct.¹

But although knowledge for Kant is ultimately a kind of propositional attitude, there has been little to no detailed investigation into Kant's account of propositional content and attitude. Most commentators who work on Kant's notion of *Wissen* simply do not pick up this topic, and the few who do often attribute to Kant a view that is similar to Frege's without much argument. According to this standard reading of Kant's theory of propositional content, Kant's equivalent of what we call propositions today is what he calls judgments (*Urteil*).² They are possible objects of attitudes such as assent (*Fürwahrhalten*), and possible contents of mental acts such as judging. They are, however, inherently attitude-less. That is, to possess a judgment or proposition implies in no way one's assent to it. Instead, an act of judging a proposition to be true requires two steps: one must first neutrally grasp or entertain a proposition, and only then can one add the attitude of assent to it.³

The main thesis of this paper is that this reading is wrong. Instead, I argue that Kant's view of propositional content is closest to the view recently proposed by Peter Hanks (2015). On my reading of Kant, individual acts of judging are both ontologically and explanatorily prior to propositions or what Kant calls judgments (*Urteil*). By ontologically prior I mean that for Kant, *Urteile* or propositions do not exist independently of individual acts of judging. Instead, they are types of acts of judging whose existence depends on their token acts. By explanatorily prior I mean that for Kant, the representational profile and truth value of a judgment are derived from, and thus are to be explained by, the representational profile and truth value of its token acts. To make sense of both priorities, I propose that we read propositions or judgments (*Urteil*) for Kant as types of acts of judging.

Furthermore, on my reading, acts of judging for Kant are acts of *assertively* predicating a property of an object, i.e., attributing a property to an object while also assenting to the truth of that predication. Through this same act, not

1 In this paper, I use the word "knowledge" to refer only to Kant's notion of *Wissen* and never *Erkenntnis*. Instead, I use the term "cognition" to refer to Kant's notion of *Erkenntnis*. In addition, unless otherwise noted, when I mention cognition or *Erkenntnis* I mean its core sense. For more on different senses of *Erkenntnis* in Kant, see Watkins & Willaschek (2017).

2 The term *Urteil* in Kant admits of an ambiguity: it could mean either a representation that is a possible object of assent, i.e., the equivalent of what we now call a proposition, or the mental act of judging that a proposition is true. To avoid confusion, in this paper I use the word "judgment" only in the former sense, and use "judging" instead for the latter sense.

3 This view of propositional content has been attributed to Kant by Stevenson (2003), Chignell (2007a), and Willaschek and Watkins (2020), among others. I will discuss these readings in more detail in section 2 below.

only is the propositional content presented to the judge; but the judge also holds that proposition to be true. No separate act of assent is needed. Since for Kant, acts of judging are inherently assertive, propositions, as types of acts of judging, are also inherently assertive. There are, of course, certain contexts in which one merely utters or entertains propositions without holding them true. On my reading, Kant would not explain them as involving inherently neutral acts of entertainment or neutral predication. Instead, he would say that in those cases, we still perform the inherently assertive acts of predication, but we withhold the assertive force inherent in those acts.

How we understand Kant's view on propositional content deeply impacts our understanding of the relationship between Kant's notions of knowledge (*Wissen*) and cognition (*Erkenntnis*). It is standard opinion today that these two concepts are distinct for Kant. Acknowledging this, however, is still compatible with claiming that they are closely connected to each other. Perhaps they coincide with each other; or perhaps knowledge is a species of cognition.⁴

Some recent scholars, however, such as Willaschek & Watkins (2020) and Tolley (2020), want to deny that there is a close connection between those two Kantian concepts. To make room for us to have some general knowledge about things in themselves, they argue that Kant's concepts of knowledge and cognition are "not only distinct, but even disjunct", i.e., they are not closely connected to each other.⁵ On their reading, Kantian knowledge neither coincides with nor is a species of cognition because knowledge and cognition for Kant are two fundamentally distinct kinds of mental states. While knowledge for Kant is a species of assent, they argue that assent is not an essential component of cognitions.⁶ This reading, I argue, rests on a Fregean or Soamesian reading of Kant's theory of propositional content, according to which a cognition is inherently neutral and contains no assent to itself. By contrast, if my reading of Kant's theory of propositional content is right, then this reading is false. Instead, cognitions for Kant are in principle possible to be knowledge. On my reading, then, Kant's notions of knowledge and cognition are not disjunct. Quite to the contrary, I suggest that we should regard Kantian knowledge that requires cognitions as its grounds as the species of cognitions that is both true and justified by objective grounds.

⁴ For one recent suggestion in this direction, see Grüne (2009).

⁵ Willaschek & Watkins (2020, 3195). Others who endorse or imply this view include Chignell (2014), Watkins & Willaschek (2017), and Schafer (2022).

⁶ My discussion in this paper will focus only on recent Anglophone literature on the issue of whether *Wissen* and *Erkenntnis* for Kant are disjunct. To keep this paper within a manageable scope, I must set aside the extensive literature on Kant's notions of *Wissen* and *Erkenntnis* among continental European, and especially German-speaking, commentators.

In this paper, I proceed as follows. In section 1, I present a quick overview of three analytic theories of propositional content by Frege, Scott Soames, and Peter Hanks respectively. In section 2, I argue that Kant's theory of propositional content is neither Fregean nor Soamesian. Instead, it is closest to the theory of Peter Hanks, since Kant's view is act-first rather than content-first, and he rejects the content-force distinction. Finally, in section 3, I explain in more detail the implication of my reading of Kant's theory of propositional content *vis-à-vis* the relationship between Kant's notions of knowledge and cognition.

Before moving on, let me make one point of clarification about the topic of this essay, namely Kant's theory of propositional content. By propositional content, I mean generally the propositions that serve as the content of our mental and speech acts; and by propositional attitude, I mean attitudes such as believing (in the contemporary sense, not Kant's sense of *Glauben*⁷), desiring and wishing, which one takes towards the propositional content of a mental or speech act in performing that act. Different propositional attitudes can be directed at the same propositional content, and the same propositional attitude can be taken towards different propositional content. In the context of Kant's theoretical philosophy, the most prominent example of propositional attitude is assent (*Fürwahrhalten*) and its species, and my discussion of Kant's theory of propositional content and attitude will be centered upon them.⁸

1 Three Theories of Propositional Content

To start, in this section I present an overview of three views of propositional content in analytic philosophy. This overview largely follows the roadmap laid out by Peter Hanks.⁹ Its only purpose is to introduce a convenient conceptual map of different positions on propositional content and the theoretical differences among them, so that I can situate Kant's view in this conceptual map later. Given my rel-

7 *Glauben*, commonly translated as belief but also sometimes as faith, is for Kant a species of assent that is, roughly put, justified on moral or pragmatic grounds but does not amount to knowledge. For more on Kant's notion of *Glauben*, see Stevenson (2003), Chignell (2007b) and Pasternack (2011).

8 One might wonder what, for Kant, can legitimately count as a propositional attitude in general. To the best of my knowledge, however, nowhere does Kant offer an answer to that question. Consequently, the view of propositional content I attribute to Kant in this paper is entirely based on his theory of judgment and its relation to the attitude Kant calls assent.

9 See Hanks (2015, 12–42).

actively narrow and unambitious goal with this overview, I believe Hanks' picture is sufficient for my purpose, even though it is by no means an exhaustive survey.¹⁰

These three views differ along two axes. The first axis is whether the view is content-first or act-first.¹¹ A content-first theory holds that the propositional content is ontologically and explanatorily prior to the individual acts of judging, while an act-first theory holds the opposite. The other axis is whether the view subscribes to the content-force distinction. A view that accepts this distinction holds that the propositional content of an assertive judgment is entirely neutral and has nothing assertive to it at all, while the assertive force is provided by a separate act of assent. A view that rejects this distinction, by contrast, holds that no proposition is inherently neutral. Instead, the propositional content of an assertive judgment is itself assertive.

1.1 Frege

The Fregean theory of propositional content has been historically the most influential view, and is still the default view for many philosophers today. The Fregean view consists of two key elements.¹² Firstly, for Frege, propositions – which he calls *thoughts* (*Gedanke*) – exist neither in the physical world nor in our minds. They are not the products of any mental processes or mental acts. Instead, they are mind-independent abstract objects that exist in a Platonic third realm, prior to and independent of any particular mental or speech act, such as that of judging or questioning. And to perform such an act, one must first grasp an existing proposition before assenting to it. Thus, on Frege's view, propositions are *ontologically prior* to individual acts of judging, i. e., no act of judging is possible without first taking for granted the existence of their propositional content. Furthermore, for Frege, propositions are also *explanatorily prior* to individual acts of judging. For Frege, propositions are true or false independent of us, and our individual judgments have truth values only in virtue of their propositional content. To explain why my judgment '1+1=2' is true, according to Frege, we must appeal to the fact that its propo-

¹⁰ Although my overview here follows the conceptual map drawn by Hanks, this conceptual map is all that I am borrowing from him. In this paper I will stay entirely neutral on the plausibility of Hanks' theory of propositional content and his arguments against Frege and Soames. The way Hanks lays out the different positions in the debate itself, however, is not uncommon or unorthodox; see also Moltmann & Textor (2017), ch.1. and Recanati (2019) for similar layout.

¹¹ I borrow these terms from Moltmann and Textor (2017).

¹² Cf. Frege (1948; 1956; 1979).

sitional content, i. e., the proposition ‘ $1+1=2$ ’, is itself true. Frege’s theory of propositional content is thus content-first.

The second key element of Frege’s theory is his content-force distinction, which has been dubbed ‘the Frege point’.¹³ Frege observes that sometimes we merely utter a sentence without asserting it. For example, when I make the conditional judgment ‘if I am hungry, I will eat chips’, I uttered the sentence ‘I am hungry’ without asserting its truth. And it seems like whether I assert it or merely utter it, the content of the sentence remains the same. This observation leads Frege to the view that the propositional content of a judgment is something inherently neutral or forceless, and the same content can be shared by different mental and speech acts with different linguistic forces, i. e., with different attitudes (asserting, questioning, hypothesizing, etc.) that one can towards the same propositional content. In accordance with this distinction between the content and force of a judgment, Frege further holds that judging has a two-step structure. The first step is to grasp a neutral proposition from the third realm and merely entertain it in one’s mind, without making any commitment to the truth of the proposition. Then, in the second step, one appends the relevant force to the content by assenting to the truth of that proposition.

1.2 Soames

The view proposed by Scott Soames (2010) differs from the Fregean view along one axis and agrees with it along another. Unlike Frege’s content-first view, Soames’ view is act-first. For Soames, propositions are *act-types*. More specifically, they are types of acts of predication. For example, suppose both Alex and Diana judge that Kant is German. The act Alex performs is numerically distinct from the one Diana performs, as they are performed by different people at different times. And yet, they fall under the same type: Alex and Diana both predicated the property of being German of the same man, Kant. Although this act-type is not itself an act of predication, Soames holds that it can still represent the state of affairs that Kant is German in virtue of the fact that all its token acts represent that state of affairs. Soames further holds that this act-type can be true or false, and it derives its truth conditions from its token acts: it is true when the state of affairs it and its tokens represent is the actual one, and false if otherwise. Because types of acts of predication can represent and bear truth value, Soames proposes to identify them as propositions. Thus, unlike Frege, Soames thinks that in-

13 Geach (1965).

dividual acts of judging are explanatorily prior to their propositional content: one can explain the representational profile and truth value of an act-type only by appealing to its token acts. Soames' view is thus act-first.¹⁴

On the other hand, Soames does agree with Frege in accepting the content-force distinction. Just like Frege, on Soames' picture, judging also has a two-step structure. But since propositions on Soames' picture are nothing but types of acts of predication, to merely grasp a proposition is nothing but to perform an act of that type. Thus, for Soames, to judge is to first predicate a property of an object *neutrally*, that is, without thereby endorsing the truth of that predication. Then, in a separate act, one endorses the truth of that predication. Since acts of predication are neutral for Soames, their types, i. e., propositions, are also inherently neutral, which means that Soames also accepts the content-force distinction.

1.3 Hanks

The final view I will survey is the one recently proposed by Peter Hanks (2007; 2015). Hanks' view diverges from the Fregean view along both axes. On one hand, Hanks agrees with Soames that propositions are types of acts of predication. Accordingly, his view is also act-first. Hanks disagrees with Soames, however, on the neutrality of acts of predication. According to Hanks, an act of predication is an inherently assertive act: to predicate a property of an object is to also endorse that predication, even though that endorsement may be later modified or repealed. Hanks argues that in an ordinary case of judgment, one performs only one act rather than two. Rather than first neutrally entertain a proposition and then endorse it, all that one does in judging is to predicate a property of an object. It is through that same act of predication that one both grasps the proposition and endorses the truth of it. Furthermore, since propositions are types of acts of predication, and acts of predication are inherently assertive, it follows that propositions themselves are inherently assertive. Hanks thus rejects the content-force distinction. For him, the propositional content of a judgment comes with its own force.

Because he rejects the content-force distinction, however, Hanks must come up with an alternative explanation of the observation that originally motivated Frege to make that distinction, namely that there is no difference in content between uttering and asserting a declarative sentence. Hanks' answer to this challenge is can-

¹⁴ Both Soames' and Hanks' views are act-first merely in virtue of the fact that they take individual acts of judging to be explanatorily prior to their propositional content. As I argue in section 2.1, however, Kant goes even further to claim the ontological priority of acts of judging.

cellation.¹⁵ He proposes that although acts of predication are inherently assertive, their assertive forces can be cancelled by certain linguistic and practical contexts. Some examples of such contexts include disjunctions, conditionals, and quotations. So, for example, when Shaq asserts that “‘The earth is flat’, says Kyrie”, he does perform the inherently assertive act of predicating flatness onto the earth. But the assertive force of that predication is cancelled by the quotation context he places the predication in, such that he does not count as in any way assenting to the truth of the claim “the earth is flat”.

2 Kant’s Theory of Propositional Content

In the previous section, I surveyed three theories of propositional content in analytic philosophy. In this section, I argue against the Fregean and the Soamesian readings of Kant’s theory of propositional content. Instead, I argue that Kant’s view on propositional content is closest to Hanks’, insofar as it is also act-first, and it rejects the content-force distinction.

Before arguing for these points, however, let us first clarify which Kantian concept we are taking as equivalent to the concept of proposition in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. In the standard translations of Kant today, the English word ‘proposition’ is reserved for the German term *Satz*.¹⁶ Most commentators, however, identify Kantian judgment (*Urteil*) as the equivalent of what we now call proposition.¹⁷

I believe both *Satz* and *Urteil* are the equivalent of what we now call proposition, since Kant seems to be using these two terms interchangeably in most places. For example, Kant has phrased the central question of the first *Critique* as both “how are synthetic judgments [*Urteile*] a priori possible?” (*CPR*, B19) and “how are synthetic a priori propositions [*Sätze*] possible?” (*CPR*, B73). Moreover, in the B-Introduction Kant says that “properly mathematical propositions [*Sätze*] are always a priori judgments [*Urteile*]” (*CPR*, B14, my emphasis). Now admittedly, there are instances in his logic lectures where Kant distinguishes between *Urteil* and *Satz* by claiming that *Urteile* are inherently problematic while *Sätze* are assertoric (AA 24:934; 24:765; 9:109). I will return to some of these passages below, since Chignell cites them as evidence for his Fregean reading. For now, it suffices to note that Kant’s use of the word *Satz* does not follow the distinction he makes even in

¹⁵ For further details on Hanks’ notion of cancellation, see Hanks (2019) and Recanati (2019).

¹⁶ This translation makes good sense, as Kant sometimes uses *Satz* as his translation of the Latin word *propositio*. See AA 9:120; 24:765.

¹⁷ See for example Stevenson (2003), Chignell (2007a) and Höwing (2016).

the same lecture where he makes it. Right after he makes the *Urteil-Satz* distinction in the *Jäsche Logic*, for example, Kant says that “immediately certain judgments [*Urteile*] are indemonstrable and thus are to be regarded as elementary propositions [*Sätze*]” (AA 9:110). Since Kant treats *Urteil* and *Satz* in most cases as interchangeable, it is safe, I think, to seek Kant’s theory of propositional content in his remarks regarding both concepts.

2.1 Kant’s ~~Content-First~~ Theory of Propositional Content

So far as I know, the recent surging of interest in Kant’s theory of knowledge (*Wissen*) and assent (*Fürwahrhalten*) among Anglophone commentators started with Leslie Stevenson (2003). In his essay, Stevenson distinguishes three different senses of the term ‘judgment’ (*Urteil*) in Kant. The first is “an object (or possible object) of an act of judging, that is, a proposition”. The second is “a mental act of judging, in which someone judges a proposition... this means judging it to be true – not merely entertaining it” (74). And the last is the faculty for judging. The distinction between the first two senses, one might notice, already hints at the content-force distinction, because it implies that acts of holding-true are outside and distinct from their objects, i. e., what we call propositions and what Kant calls judgments.

This thought is later developed further by Chignell (2007a). In his paper on Kant’s theory of justification, Chignell interprets what Kant calls judgments (*Urteile*) as identical to what we today call propositions. They are, in Chignell’s words, “intrinsically ‘problematic’ – i. e., they are logical structures to be entertained, analyzed, and then perhaps assented to in the ‘assertoric’ or ‘apodictic’ modes” (2007a, 58, note3). Clearly, Chignell reads Kant as accepting the content-force distinction: if Kantian judgments are intrinsically problematic, then to possess them is nothing but to consider them merely as possible; no assent to their truth is thereby implied. In other words, to call Kantian judgments intrinsically problematic is to say that there is no assertive force that is inherent to them. Accordingly, Chignell’s reading also attributes the two-step model of judging to Kant. On this reading, to judge for Kant is to first entertain a proposition, which one considers merely as possible without yet endorsing its truth, and then add assent to its truth in a second step.

Chignell further claims that “although Kant speaks loosely of “forming” or “making” judgments, what he really means is forming assents which have a subject-predicate judgment as their object” (2007a, 35). If forming a judgment (*Urteil*) for Kant is nothing but assenting to that judgment, then an act of judging for Kant will not contain any act of literally forming or making the judgment from its constitutive parts. This implies that the judgment to be assented to must be already

existing and readily graspable well before any particular act of assent, and all that we need to do before the act of forming assent to a judgment is to entertain it in one's mind. And that is what makes Chignell's reading content-first. If I am understanding Chignell right, then, his reading of Kant seems to be, among the three views surveyed above, closest to the Fregean view.

Kant, however, does not accept a content-first theory of propositional content. He never, to the best of my knowledge, mentions any mysterious third realm or grasping anything from it. Quite to the contrary, for Kant, it is the act of synthesizing two concepts in one consciousness that is most explanatorily prior. In §19 of the B-Deduction, Kant says:

I have never been able to satisfy myself with the explanation that the logicians give of a judgment [*Urteil*] in general: it is, they say, the representation of a relation between two concepts [...] I note only that it is not here determined in what this relation consists (*CPR*, B140–1).

One of the logicians Kant has in mind is G.F. Meier. In his *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*, which Kant uses as his logic textbook, Meier defines judgment in the exact way Kant opposes:

The agreement or conflict of several concepts is the logical relation of concepts (*logica conceptuum relatio*). A judgment (*iudicium*) is a representation of a logical relation of several concept (AA 16:624).

Kant's definition of judgment, by contrast, is:

A judgment is the representation of the unity of the consciousness of various representations, or the representation of their relation insofar as they constitute a concept (AA 9:101; cf. *CPR*, A68/B93; AA 24:928).

This contrast of definition reveals a clear difference between Kant's and Meier's ways of understanding the relationship between two concepts in a judgment. On Meier's view, the relationship of agreement or disagreement between concepts is a logical relationship that holds independently of any act of judging. As the representation of such a logical relationship, a judgment is also true or false independently of any act of judging. If to judge is to assent to a judgment (or proposition in today's terms), then whether a particular act of judging is true depends entirely on whether the judgment itself is true. The propositional content of an act of judging is thus explanatorily prior to the act itself. Meier's view is thus content-first.

Kant, by contrast, takes the concepts in a judgment not as logically related to each other, but as unified in the same consciousness.¹⁸ And for Kant there is no unity of consciousness except through synthesis (*CPR*, B133). That is, it is only in virtue of my combination of two representations in my consciousness that they are unified in my consciousness. Thus, for Kant, the relation between two concepts in a judgment is something that I bring to the judgment through my act of synthesis of these two concepts, or equivalently, through my act of predicating one concept of another.¹⁹ Kant further elucidates this point using the following example:

In every judgment, then, there is a certain relation of different representations insofar as they belong to one cognition [*Erkenntnis*]. E. g., I say that man is not immortal. In this cognition I think the concept of being mortal through the concept of man, and it thereby happens that this cognition, which constitutes the unity of two different representations, becomes a judgment (AA 24:928).

Here, Kant further specifies the relation between concepts in every judgment as that of belonging to the same cognition, i. e., all concepts in a judgment are unified in one's consciousness in a way such that they together represent one unified state of affairs.²⁰ For Kant, this relation holds of these concepts not independently of us, as Meier would say, but rather only in virtue of one's act of predication. Using Kant's example, the concept of being mortal and the concept of man are unified in representing the state of affairs that all men are mortal because of my act of thinking the former concept through the latter. Since for Kant, there is no way to represent with concepts except by judging with them (*CPR*, A68/B93), that act of predication is nothing but the act of judging that all men are mortal.

We can now show that for Kant, individual acts of judging or predication are explanatorily prior to Kantian judgments (*Urteil*). To start, for Kant, the representational profile of a judgment is derived from individual acts of predication. For Kant, a judgment represents what it represents because there is a unity of consciousness among its concepts, and that unity is ultimately brought about by the

18 For a similar reading of Kant's theory of judgment, see Kitcher (1990, 86–9). Kitcher's view goes beyond mine, however, in arguing that judging requires the synthesis not only of concepts but also of intuitions. I am sympathetic to this view, but discussing it in detail will carry me beyond the scope of this essay.

19 This equivalence only holds for categorical judgments, which Kant takes as the paradigmatic kind, and thus is what I focus on. Admittedly, however, in the cases of questions or commands, on Kant's view we also perform acts of synthesis that combines concepts in our unity of consciousness, even though they are not acts of predication *per se*.

20 Here the term *Erkenntnis* should not be read in its core sense (as the combination of intuition and concept), but in a more general sense as conscious, objective representations.

acts of synthesizing those concepts into one's own consciousness. Thus, for Kant, the judgment 'Socrates is mortal' represents the state of affairs that Socrates is mortal, because to perform an act of judging with that content is to perform the act of predicating mortality of Socrates. Furthermore, for Kant, truth is the "agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] of cognition with its object" (*CPR*, A58/B82). In other words, a judgment is true for Kant when it represents reality. Insofar as what a judgment represents ultimately is to be explained by individual acts of judging, so is the truth of a judgment: the judgment 'Socrates is mortal' is true because the act of predicating mortality of Socrates agrees with reality. Hence, on Kant's view, a judgment's representational profile and truth value are both to be explained by individual acts of judging, which means that acts of judging are explanatorily prior to judgments (*Urteil*) or propositions. Kant's view is thus act-first.

Kant's view, however, does not stop at explanatory priority, as Soames and Hanks do. Instead, for Kant, individual acts of judging are also *ontologically prior* to judgments (*Urteil*) or propositions. Both Soames and Hanks take propositions to be act-types, and both take types to be abstract objects that exist independently of us. Consequently, both reject "the idea that propositions depend for their existence on being judged or asserted" (Hanks 2015, 20). Kant, by contrast, takes the unity among the concepts in a judgment as the product of acts of judging or predication. And insofar as for Kant, "[a]ll judgments [*Urteile*] are [...] functions of unity among our representations", a judgment or proposition cannot exist prior to or independent of the individual acts of judging that give rise to its unity (*CPR*, A69/B94). In that sense, Kant takes acts of judging to be ontologically prior to judgments.²¹

Now, to be sure, to say that acts of judging are ontologically prior does not mean that we literally form or create judgments through our acts of predication all the time. The unity between two concepts brought about by one's acts of predication is strictly speaking a private unity that only holds true of those concepts within my own mind, but not for someone who has never thought about that judgment. That private unity between concepts, however, cannot be the equivalent of what we today call a proposition, as propositions are supposed to be communicable and shareable by different acts of different people. If propositions are ultimately private mental entities, then it becomes difficult to see how one's act of judging

21 My view here again is similar to Kitcher (1990), who also reads Kant as having an act-first view. According to her, "A judgment achieves content in being generated from a particular set of intuitions...the content of [a judgment] is, in part, constituted by its generation from those particular types of intuitions" (110–1). Kitcher's reading is different from mine, however, in that she believes that what is ontologically prior is the act of generating judgments not from concepts, but from intuitions.

can share the same content with someone else's, which in turn makes it hard to see how people can understand and communicate with each other.

Instead, I propose that we should understand the Kantian equivalent of propositions – which Kant calls judgments (*Urteil*) – as types of acts of predication. For Kant, when different people judge with the same propositional content – or as we ordinarily call it, ‘make the same judgment’ – they perform numerically distinct acts of predication that bring the same concepts into the same kind of unity, namely transcendental unity of apperception. In fact, these acts of predication share the same propositional content precisely because they bring the same concepts into the same kind of unity. If we borrow the terminology of act-types from Soames and Hanks, we may say that for Kant, all acts of predication that bring the same concepts to transcendental unity of apperception are of the same type. From this it follows that for Kant, acts of predication share the same propositional content because they are of the same type, which implies that Kantian judgments (*Urteil*) or propositions are types of acts of predication.

This proposal, however, may initially sound counterintuitive. On this reading of Kant, propositions are universals that are shared by individual acts of judging, something akin to properties common to objects. It may be objected, however, that universals are not the kind of thing that we can form attitudes towards in making a judgment. This is not a problem for my reading, however, because on Kant's view, propositional content and attitude are not constitutive parts of acts of judging. That is, when we perform an act of judging, what we do is not literally forming an attitude towards a proposition, but rather performing an act of predication or synthesis. For Kant, the act of judging, in the case of categorical judgment at least, is nothing but the act of predication, which in turn is identical to the act of synthesis that unifies the relevant concepts in one's consciousness. If it makes any sense to talk about parts of an act of judging, those parts can only be the concepts involved.²²

Instead of being constitutive parts to acts of judging, I believe that on Kant's view, propositional content is merely a moment that we abstract from acts of judging. And the primary role of this abstracted moment, according to Kant, is that they serve as rules for the subsumption of individual objects. This is implied in Kant's remarks that “[i]f the understanding in general is explained as the faculty of rules, then the power of judgment is the faculty of subsuming under rules, i. e., of determining whether something stands under a given rule or not” (CPR, A132/

²² To be clear, to call propositions act-types does not mean that to judge is to perform an act of picking out a type of acts of predication. Such a reading still takes propositional content to be in some sense a constitutive part of an act of judging. Instead, on my reading of Kant, an act of judging is ultimately nothing but an act of synthesis.

B171). In other words, for Kant, we abstract propositional content from acts of judging of the same type so that later we may apply it to a different object. But if the primary role of judgments (*Urteil*) or propositions for Kant is to serve as rules for subsumption, then there is nothing counterintuitive about judgments being universals shared by acts of judging: a rule under which something can be subsumed must indeed be a universal. And to subsume an object under a judgment is precisely to perform an act of judging of that type with respect to that object.

2.2 Kant's Rejection of the Content-Force Distinction

Above, I explained why Kant's theory of propositional content is not content-first but act-first. It is possible, however, to accept this point and still insist on to the content-force distinction, thereby proposing a Soamesian reading of Kant. Willaschek & Watkins (2020) can be read as offering a reading of this sort. In a footnote to their paper, they make the following remark:

Kant explains judgment as a kind of complex conscious representation and never mentions assent. It is one thing consciously to represent some objective state of affairs (such as a ball's being red), it is another to take it to be true that this state of affairs obtains (that the ball is red) (3204, n.26).

On such a reading, an act of judging for Kant consists of two steps. First, one neutrally represents some state of affairs, i.e., one predicates one concept of another without endorsing the truth of that predication. One then performs a separate act of holding the first neutrally represented state of affairs to be true.

Kant sometimes might seem to suggest this model. Chignell (2007a), for example, cites the following passage from *Jäsche Logic*:

On the distinction between problematic and assertoric judgments rests the true distinction between judgments [*Urteilen*] and propositions [*Sätzen*], which is customarily placed, wrongly, in the mere expression through words, without which one simply could not judge at all. In judgment [*Urteile*] the relation of various representations to the unity of consciousness is thought merely as problematic, but in a proposition [*Satz*] as assertoric. A problematic proposition is a *contradictio in adjecto*. Before I have a proposition, I must first judge; and I judge about much that I cannot settle [*ausmachen*], which I must do, however, as soon as I determine a judgment as a proposition. It is good, by the way, first to judge problematically, before one accepts the judgment as assertoric, in order to examine it in this way. Also, it is not always necessary to our purpose to have assertoric judgments (AA 9:109).

Here Kant distinguishes between judgment (*Urteil*) and proposition (*Satz*), which he usually uses interchangeably. An *Urteil* is defined as a representation of the re-

lation between two concepts as problematic or merely possible, while a *Satz* is an assertion of an *Urteil*, a representation of that relation as actually holding true. On Chignell (2007a)'s reading, an *Urteil* is identical to an inherently neutral proposition in contemporary philosophy, and *Satz* "is a positive attitude towards an *Urteil*" (58, note 3). Consequently, he reads Kant's remarks that "before I have a proposition (*Satz*) I must first judge (*urteilen*)", and that "I determine a judgment (*Urteil*) as a proposition (*Satz*)", as pointing towards a two-step structure of judging: to judge one must first entertain a neutral proposition, and only then can one assent to that proposition (AA 9:109). I take that a more Soamesian reading, such as that of Willaschek & Watkins (2020), will similarly read an *Urteil* in this passage as a type of neutral acts of predication, and a *Satz* as an assertion of an *Urteil*. According to this reading of Kant, to judge, one must first represent neutrally before assenting to that representation as true.

The problem with the Soamesian reading, however, is that for Kant, a problematic judgment cannot be a type of *neutral* acts of predication. A problematic judgment for Kant is "one in which I only consider the relation of two concepts undetermined, but do not posit it [...] i.e., I establish no relation in the judgment, but instead I only see what would follow from this were it really so" (AA 24:276). If this is the sense in which *Urteil* is thought as problematic in the passage above, then on the Soamesian reading, the type of neutral acts of predication that is *Urteil* must be neutral in the sense that it posits or establishes no relation between the concepts in that judgment.

But no act of predication can be neutral in this sense. Kant makes clear in the B-Deduction that the copula "is" in a categorical judgment "designates the relation of the representations to the original apperception and its necessary unity" (CPR, B142). Thus, to predicate a concept of another using the copula "is", is to posit a certain relation of unity in one's consciousness between the concepts connected by "is". It is precisely in virtue of this posited relation that I can judge that, using Kant's own example, "this body is heavy", rather than merely the subjective feeling report that "if I carry a body, I feel a pressure of weight" (CPR, B142). In short, there would be no unity of judgment (or what we today call unity of proposition), and thus no judgment, without this positing of relation.

This, I take it, is why Kant makes the seemingly absurd claim that "In categorical judgments nothing is problematic, rather, everything is assertoric" (AA 9:105). Read literally, this claim cannot be true: surely there are problematic categorical judgments – for example, that unicorns are white. The falsity of this claim on a literal reading is just too obvious for this reading to be plausible. Instead, what I take Kant to be getting at here is the fact that categorical judgments, in virtue of their form (the copula "is"), are all inherently assertive, i.e., they all involve the positing of a relation of unity among its concepts. Insofar as that unity is

brought about by our acts of predication, it follows that acts of predication are also inherently assertive. In other words, Kant rejects the content-force distinction.

If acts of predication are inherently assertive, then to judge one needs to perform only one act rather than two. One needs only to assertively predicate a concept of another, rather than to perform first a neutral act of predication or grasping and then a second act of assenting. This, again, is revealed by the B-Deduction. Throughout the B-Deduction, Kant mentions only one act in which experience consists in, namely the act of synthesis of representations under the transcendental unity of apperception.²³ There is no mention of a two-step structure in which one first performs a neutral act of synthesis that presents a judgment to oneself, and then performs a separate act of synthesis through which one assents to that judgment. In other words, in the case of experience or cognizing something empirically, Kant holds that one performs only one act rather than two, and that one act of synthesis is responsible for both the content and the assertive force of that experience, insofar as most ordinary experiences involve committed acts of judging rather than merely neutral cognitions. Again, Kant rejects the content-force distinction.

This conclusion that in judging one performs only one act is in fact already implied in the *Jäsche* passage quoted above. At the end of that passage, Kant suggests that “It is good, by the way, first to judge problematically, before one accepts the judgment as assertoric, in order to examine it in this way” (AA 9:109). If Kant already holds a two-step model of judging, then such a suggestion makes no sense, as that should be what we are already doing. This suggestion only makes sense, instead, if we read Kant as saying that judging involves only one act, but sometimes (or even often) we should add another act of examination before judging to make sure we are not judging too hastily.

This conclusion is further supported by Jill Vance Buroker (2017)’s work on Kant’s rejection of Descartes’ direct doxastic voluntarism.²⁴ Buroker has argued that for Descartes, judging involves two logically independent acts by two distinct faculties: the understanding’s conceiving of a proposition and the will’s voluntary act of judging or affirming that proposition. Descartes is thus similar to Frege and Soames in that he also takes judging to have a two-step structure. By contrast, according to Buroker, Kant holds the view that every act of judging has a modal form or mode of assent that characterizes the subject’s attitude towards the propositional content of the act, and that modal form – whether it is problematic, assertoric

²³ To be sure, there are different kinds of synthesis under this banner; we can at least distinguish between synthesis of concepts and synthesis of intuitions. Neither however can be identified with the Fregean neutral act of entertaining or the Soamesian neutral act of predication.

²⁴ I thank an anonymous referee for pointing me to this work.

or apodictic – is generally not within one’s direct control except in the limited cases of *Glauben*. In other words, unlike Descartes, Kant does not think that *generally* there is a second voluntary act of the will that affirms the truth of a proposition. Instead, it is the same act of the understanding – namely the act of predication – that is responsible for both the syntactical forms of the propositional content (i.e., those under the titles of quantity, quality and relation) and the modal form that characterizes one’s propositional attitude. For Kant, then, an act of predication is at the same time an act of assenting to that predication.

To say that acts of predication are inherently assertive does not mean, of course, that we cannot judge problematically. But judging problematically is possible for Kant not because we can somehow neutrally predicate, but rather because we can withhold or reserve the assertive forces inherent in the acts of predication. Kant discusses this ability of ours in the case of suspension of judgment. According to Kant, to suspend judgment is to withhold (*zurückhalten*) one’s approval or assent to a judgment by treating one’s grounds for that judgment as non-determinate, and that is how “we distinguish provisional from determinate judgment [*Urteil*]” (AA 24:860). What is worth noting here is that for Kant, to withhold one’s assent is not merely to remain in the default position of a merely entertained, inherently problematic judgment, as those who subscribe to the content-force distinction would claim. Instead, withholding assent for Kant is an extra act [*Handlung*] – and in fact “a hard act [*Handlung*] even for one who has a strong power of judgment” – that is performed by one’s power of judgment: “[t]o withhold [*zurückhalten*] one’s approval is a faculty of a practiced power of judgment” (*Ibid.*). This implies that Kant thinks that we get provisional or problematic judgments not by default, but rather through acts of withholding the assent that is inherent in one’s acts of judging. This act is sometimes performed after the act of judging as a renunciation of a judgment. Or it is sometimes planned prior to the performance of an act of judging, e.g., when one is merely entertaining a judgment to see what follows from it. Finally, in yet other cases, the withholding of assent is done with the help of certain logical or linguistic structures. For example, when I utter a categorical judgment as a part of a hypothetical judgment or a quotation, the structure helps me think merely problematically, even though I may not be intentionally trying to withhold the assertive force inherent in my acts of predication (AA 9:107).

3 Proposition, Cognition and Knowledge

In the previous section, I showed that Kant’s theory of propositional content is act-first, and that Kant rejects the content-force distinction. I now want to bring out the implications of my reading of Kant’s theory of propositional content *vis-à-vis*

the relationship between Kant's notions of knowledge (*Wissen*) and cognition (*Erkenntnis*). As I mentioned previously, there is a recent trend among some Kant commentators to pull Kant's concepts of knowledge and cognition fully apart and argue that there is no close connection between them. Willaschek & Watkins (2020), for example, claim that "the concepts of cognition and knowledge in Kant are not only distinct, but also disjunct" (3195). Tolley (2020) similarly stresses on "the disjointedness of the two concepts" (3241). To be sure, these scholars do acknowledge that cognitions (*Erkenntnis*) can and often do supply the grounds for the justification of knowledge (*Wissen*). They deny, however, any further connection between these two concepts. On their reading of Kant, knowledge and cognition do not coincide. Furthermore, neither is a species of the other, and neither is a necessary precondition for the other.

It is worth mentioning that what ultimately motivates this reading is a possible strategy to respond to a classical challenge to Kant by Jacobi, namely whether one can make compatible Kant's thesis of noumenal ignorance with his repeated assertions that things in themselves exist, affect us, ground appearances, and are not in space and time.²⁵ If *Wissen* and *Erkenntnis* are not only distinct but disjunct from each other, then that could clear the path for the reading that Kant allows us to have *Wissen* of the assertions he makes about things in themselves, even though he allows for no *Erkenntnis* of things in themselves. The incoherence that Jacobi accuses Kant of would thus be resolved.

Now, the primary argument cited in support of the disjunction reading is that for Kant, knowledge (*Wissen*) and cognition (*Erkenntnis*) are two distinct kinds of mental states because while knowledge is a species of assent – and more specifically true assent justified by sufficient objective grounds – assent is not essential to cognitions. Willaschek & Watkins (2020), for example, claim that cognition for Kant "is not an assent and does not require justification or warrant (3197). Similarly, Tolley (2020) claims that "no act of mere cognizing can be identical with an act of knowing, since knowledge always involves acts (*viz.* holding-true) which are not a part of the form of cognizing itself" (3242). This view, however, presupposes either the Fregean or the Soamesian reading of Kant. According to both, judgments for Kant are inherently neutral and contain no assent to themselves. From this it follows that cognitions for Kant are also inherently neutral and contain no assent to themselves, insofar as Kant takes every cognition to contain a judgment because he believes that we can cognize with concepts only through judgments (*CPR*, A69/B94). This why those who endorse the disjunction reading, such as Willaschek and Watkins, favor a Fregean or Soamesian reading of Kant.

²⁵ Jacobi (1787).

By contrast, if my reading of Kant's theory of propositional content is correct, then the above-mentioned argument would fail, and knowledge (*Wissen*) and cognition (*Erkenntnis*) would not be fundamentally distinct kinds of mental states. Pace Tolley (2020)'s claim above, any single act of cognition, in virtue of the fact that it contains a withholdable assent to itself, is in principle possible to also be an act of knowing, provided that the cognition satisfies the justification requirement for knowledge, i.e., so long as the cognition is a sufficient objective ground for assenting to itself. This should indeed be quite common for mathematical cognitions. Since mathematical cognitions are *a priori*, for Kant, they carry with themselves a necessity: a cognition that demonstrates the truth of a mathematical proposition also demonstrates the necessity of the truth of that proposition, which means that that cognition can count as knowledge on its own without needing further justification.

Instead, my reading implies that Kantian knowledge (*Wissen*), or at least knowledge that must be grounded upon cognitions (*Erkenntnis*), should be regarded as a species of cognitions, namely justified (true) cognitions – justified, of course, in Kant's unique sense of having sufficient objective grounds.²⁶ This is because knowledge for Kant is justified (true) assent, and, on my reading, assent is generally speaking not a separate act but a withholdable element inherent to all acts of predication and thus to all cognitions.²⁷

To illustrate this, consider the simple example of my empirical knowledge (*Wissen*) that this laptop is black. On the Fregean or Soamesian reading of Kant, the ground of this knowledge is my inherently neutral cognition that this laptop is black, and the assent or asserting force of this knowledge comes from a separate act of assenting. By contrast, since on my reading, the act of cognizing this laptop as black is an inherently assertive act of predicating blackness of this laptop, this cognition is where the assent or asserting force of my knowledge that this laptop is black comes from. On the other hand, the ground for this assent – which is both its motivating and justificatory ground – comes from my intuitions that are part of my cognition of this laptop as black. That is, on my reading, the reason why I predicate blackness of this laptop is that I receive from my sensibility the intuition of blackness as part of my intuition of this laptop, and it is these intuitions that are the

26 Arguably, analytic knowledge cannot be species of cognitions because it is purely conceptual and requires no intuition, while cognitions in the core sense do require intuitions. But see Tolley (2020) for a plausible attempt to show how analytic knowledge also depends, in some sense, on intuitions.

27 I have put "true" in parentheses because while Kant himself never explicitly mentions it as a criterion for *Wissen*, Kant commentators today do typically add that criterion to avoid the counter-intuitive idea of false knowledge. I shall follow the standard practice here.

objective grounds that justify my assent to this predication as an instance of knowledge. Thus, for my knowledge that this laptop is black, both elements essential to Kant's notion of knowledge (*Wissen*) – “justified” and “assent”, or the justifying ground and the assertive force of the knowledge – come from my cognition of this laptop as black: the former comes from the act of predication and the latter comes from the intuitions that are part of that cognition. It thus makes sense to identify my knowledge that this laptop is black with my cognition of this laptop as black on my reading of Kant.

Not all knowledge can be identified with a single cognition, however. Empirical knowledge often requires multiple instances of empirical cognitions of the same type to satisfy the justification requirement for knowledge. For example, one instance of seeing smoke following from fire is surely insufficient for the knowledge that fire causes smoke. But repeated cognitions of smoke following from fire, taken together, can count as providing sufficient objective grounds for that knowledge. In such a case, the knowledge that fire causes smoke should be identified not with any single instance of cognition, but with those repeated cognitions taken together, insofar as both the asserting force and the justificatory grounds of that knowledge come from those repeated cognitions.²⁸

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Kant's theory of propositional content is different from the Fregean or Soamesian view and is instead closest to Hanks' view. This is because Kant holds an act-first theory of propositional content, as he takes individual acts of predication or judging to be both ontologically and explanatorily prior to propositions or what judgments (*Urteil*). Furthermore, Kant also rejects the content-force distinction and holds that acts of predication are inherently assertive. Consequently, on Kant's view, to judge requires only one act of assertive predication, rather than first a neutral preliminary and then an act of assent. Finally, I have suggested that if my reading of Kant is correct, then Kant's notions of knowl-

²⁸ One might worry how the assertive force of a single piece of knowledge can come from multiple cognitions. This would be a problem if we take acts of knowing as one-off acts, as acts of cognizing are. This, however, is not how knowledge is understood by Kant. Instead, Kant, as most philosophers do, thinks of knowledge as something we do not lose when we simply shift our focus elsewhere. Although Kant does not spell out the details on why this is so, one plausible explanation is that Kantian *Wissen* is a disposition to assent to a proposition based on certain grounds. If this is true, then there is nothing counterintuitive to the idea that the assertive force of a single knowledge-disposition can come from multiple individual cognitions.

edge (*Wissen*) and cognition (*Erkenntnis*) are not as far removed as some scholars argue. Instead, I propose that we take Kantian knowledge, or at least synthetic knowledge that requires cognitions as its ground, as the justified (true) species of cognitions.

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