
KANTIAN COGNITIVISM

BY

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Abstract: According to many of its advocates, one of the main attractions of Kantian moral philosophy is its metaethical innocence. The most interesting argument for such innocence appeals to Kantians' rationalism. Roughly, if moral action is simply rational action, then we do not need to appeal to anything beyond rationality to certify moral judgment. I assess this argument by reflecting on (dis)analogies between moral and logical forms of rationalism. I conclude that the Kantian claim to metaethical innocence is overstated. Kantians cannot avoid substantial metaethical commitments. Or if they can, it is not their rationalism that explains why this is so.

There is a distinct anti-metaphysical strain in contemporary neo-Kantian moral philosophy. One prominent expression of this strain is the self-conscious rejection of Kant's transcendental idealism – in particular, Kant's conception of the moral agent as transcendently free. Although Kant himself stakes the very possibility of morality on such freedom, his followers have mostly abandoned its defense on grounds of metaphysical extravagance. Thus, a viable Kantianism, as John Rawls said, 'must be detached from its background in transcendental idealism' and made to satisfy 'the canons of a reasonable empiricism' (Rawls, 1977, p. 165).

But there is another way in which contemporary Kantians have tried to minimize metaphysics; one tied less to the repudiation of Kant's own account and more to a particular interpretation of its core commitments. Although this line of thought, like the first, has roots in Rawls, it has been pressed with special vigor by his students. Consider, for example, Christine Korsgaard's claim that

[p]art of the appeal of [the Kantian approach to moral philosophy] is that it avoids certain sources of skepticism that some other approaches meet with inevitability. If ethically good action is simply rational action, we do not need to postulate special ethical properties in the world or faculties in the mind, in order to provide ethics with a foundation (Korsgaard, 1996a, p. 311).

In this way, Kantianism is supposed to provide an attractive alternative to moral realism, which many think founders precisely on such postulation. By grounding ethics in reason rather than the world, the Kantian claims to do more with less: to get maximum normative bang for minimum metaethical buck.

Although the (in)dispensability of transcendental idealism for Kantian ethics is of great importance, I will not address the issue here. Rather, I want to focus on the second anti-metaphysical strain, which, in part because of Rawls' and Korsgaard's influence, has

become something close to orthodoxy in contemporary discussions of Kantianism.¹ Indeed, under the name ‘constructivism’ it has become, for many people, nearly definitive of Kantianism.² That said, I think the case for constructivism is not strong, either as an interpretation of Kant or, more importantly, as an articulation of the philosophically defensible core of Kantianism. My aim in this paper is to rough out one reason why.

In particular, I want to challenge the thought, suggested by the Korsgaard quote above, that Kantianism is metaethically innocent – more specifically, that Kantians’ *rationalism* allows them to avoid substantial metaphysical commitment. I will do this in three stages. First, I distinguish two degrees of metaphysical commitment Kantians might avoid in the form of two kinds of constructivism they might embrace: one of which avoids moral metaphysics altogether (non-cognitivism), the other of which simply domesticates moral metaphysics by making it mind-dependent (idealism).³ Second, focusing on the non-metaphysical, non-cognitivist form of constructivism, I cast doubt on its relation to rationalism. I do this by reflecting on Bernard Williams’ intriguing thought that Kantians model morality on logic. As I explain, there is a sense in which this is true, but not a sense that supports non-cognitivism. Third, I use the logical analogy to argue that the Kantian account of morality is in fact most naturally understood as cognitivist. If this is right, then Kantians cannot avoid substantial metaphysical commitment, if only of an idealist kind. Or if they can, it is not their rationalism that explains why this is so.

I.

As I noted above, Kantian constructivism is typically presented as an alternative to moral realism. This seems right. But there are different ways to resist realism, and it is not always clear which way the constructivist wants to take. To see this, consider the following passage from another Kantian constructivist, Andrews Reath, in which he contrasts constructivism with realism:

[According to realists,] the objectivity of moral claims comes from [a] mind-independent order of moral facts: moral judgments about right and wrong are true when they accurately reflect these facts. Constructivists, by contrast, do not appeal to any such mind-independent order of moral facts to ground moral objectivity. A moral judgment is correct not because it accurately reflects the independent moral facts, but because it is arrived at through correct reasoning – i.e., through deliberation that satisfies the constraints that come from practical reason and the aim of reasonable agreement (Reath, 2010, p. 463).

The realist position here is clear enough: There are mind-independent moral facts and moral correctness – or, as I shall prefer to say, moral truth – is to be understood in terms of the accurate representation of those facts.⁴ The constructivist denies this. But what is it exactly that the constructivist denies? There seem to be two possibilities, depending on which of the above conjuncts she objects to.

First, the constructivist could object to the realist’s *metaphysics*. The problem here would be that the realist misunderstands the nature of moral facts. The realist thinks they are mind-independent when they are actually mind-dependent. This would, in effect, make constructivism a form of *idealism*. There really are moral facts, and moral judgments really are true when they represent those facts accurately. It is just that those facts depend on us, in the sense that they are constituted by the outcome of our ideal reasoning.⁵

Second, the constructivist could object to the realist’s *semantics*. The problem here would not be that the realist has misunderstood the nature of moral facts. The problem would be that she has misunderstood the nature of moral truth. Moral judgments are not true in virtue of their accurately representing moral facts, whatever their nature may be. They are true in virtue of

something else, namely, in virtue of satisfying the principles of correct reasoning, which are principles that, presumably, do not themselves depend for their correctness on their relation to the facts. This would, in effect, make constructivism a form of *non-cognitivism* – more specifically, a form of *semantic non-factualism*.⁶ Moral judgments can be true, but it is not the facts that make them so.

While Kantian constructivists do not typically identify as idealists, there seems no special difficulty classifying them as such, at least when their view is construed metaphysically. The same cannot be said of their non-cognitivism. Indeed, Reath explicitly warns against understanding constructivism as a form of non-cognitivism on the grounds that constructivists, unlike non-cognitivists, allow moral judgments to be true and to express beliefs (Reath, 2010, p. 463). But this is a mistake, or at least misleading. First, as I noted a moment ago, the form of non-cognitivism at issue here is semantic rather than psychological; it concerns the kind of truth moral judgments realize, not the kind of state moral judgments express.⁷ Second, so understood, the key dispute between cognitivists and non-cognitivists does not concern whether moral judgments can be true *simpliciter*. Rather, it concerns whether moral judgments can be true in virtue of accurately representing moral facts. According to cognitivists, they can be. According to non-cognitivists, they cannot, although they may still be true in some other way.⁸ What is distinctive of non-cognitivist Kantian constructivism, then, is its particular account of what this other way is: again, moral judgments are true in virtue of satisfying rational principles.

These two interpretations of Kantian constructivism, the idealist and the non-cognitivist, are not often distinguished, even (and especially) by constructivists themselves. But they are clearly and importantly different. In particular, idealist constructivism, like the realism it opposes, is a form of cognitivism; it appeals to moral facts as truth-makers of moral judgment and so is obliged to provide some account of these facts, an obligation it discharges, again, by reference to the outcome of our ideal reasoning. Non-cognitivist constructivism, by contrast, precisely because it is non-cognitivist, dispenses with moral facts. They are idle. We can account for moral truth perfectly well without them. To this extent, non-cognitivist constructivism seems more radically minimalist, more metaethically innocent, than idealist constructivism, purporting to do without metaphysics altogether – or, at least, with no more metaphysics than is necessary to account for the operations of reason itself.⁹

Because, again, Kantian constructivists do not often distinguish these interpretations, it is difficult to say with confidence which constructivism is being advanced when, and I will make no attempt to settle the issue here.¹⁰ That said, I think we can sensibly consider which lines of Kantian thought might reasonably be taken to corroborate which constructivist conclusions and whether they in fact do so. This is what I propose to do here, limning the outer bounds of Kantian metaethics by examining the non-metaphysical, non-cognitivist form of Kantian constructivism. What I want to know is this: Do Kantian premises plausibly support non-cognitivist conclusions?

II.

Now, there is an obvious reason one might answer in the affirmative. Kantianism supports non-cognitivism because, according to Kantians, moral judgments are practical, and what is practical cannot be at the same time cognitive. This is a Humean thought, although not one thought by Humeans alone. Indeed, Korsgaard herself appears to endorse it in a number of places, and no less an authority than Allan Gibbard counts her a non-cognitivist for precisely this reason.¹¹

But while this *practicality argument* for non-cognitivism is perhaps the most obvious available to the Kantian, it is not the only or the most interesting one. For there is another, more distinctively Kantian argument, suggested by the Korsgaard quote cited in my introduction: ‘if ethically good action is simply rational action, we do not need to postulate

special ethical properties in the world or faculties in the mind, in order to provide ethics with a foundation' (Korsgaard, 1996a, p. 311). What Korsgaard seems to be claiming here is that metaethical innocence follows from Kantian rationalism itself. It is because Kantians assimilate the moral to the rational that they are able to minimize their metaphysical commitments.¹²

Because Korsgaard does not distinguish idealist and non-cognitivist forms of Kantianism, it is not clear how minimal she takes these commitments to be – in particular, whether the 'special ethical properties in the world' that the Kantian can (allegedly) do without are simply mind-independent properties, in which case, the Kantian could still be an idealist; or whether they are ethical properties *simpliciter*, in which case, the Kantian would be a non-cognitivist.¹³ But whatever Korsgaard has in mind here, I think it is worth entertaining the more radical, non-cognitivist interpretation of her claim. So understood, we can read her as at least adumbrating a *rationality argument* for non-cognitivism. Kantianism supports non-cognitivism because, according to Kantians, the assimilation of the moral to the rational allows for an explanation of moral truth in terms of principles rather than facts.

This is not, I think, an unusual way of understanding Kantian metaethical ambitions. Consider, for example, Bernard Williams' discussion of Kantianism in his paper 'Ethics and the Fabric of the World' (Williams, 1995). Although ultimately a critic of Kantianism, Williams agrees with Korsgaard that traditional forms of moral skepticism, represented in his discussion by John Mackie, do not have purchase against the Kantian. In particular, they presuppose a picture of moral objectivity and truth that Kantians reject.

According to Mackie, the only way moral judgment could be objectively true is if it were made true by 'the fabric of the world' (Mackie, 1977, p. 15). But, Williams claims, we needn't accept this worldly condition on moral objectivity and truth. For if, as Kant thinks, morality can be assimilated to rationality – if moral demands are 'one[s] that a rational agent must accept if he is to be a rational agent' – then '[while] moral claims are objectively correct or incorrect, ... when one gives a general explanation of what makes them so, that explanation does not run through the relation of those statements and the world ...' (ibid., p. 174).¹⁴ That is to say, Kant's rationalism allows him to explain the objective truth of moral judgment not in terms of moral judgment's convergence on a common world, but in terms of moral judgment's guidance by a common reason. Such judgments are objectively true not because they accurately reflect the facts, but because they satisfy rational principles. Reason is all; the world is nothing.¹⁵

So understood, I think Williams presents a powerful statement of Kantian metaethical ambitions, at least in their more radical, non-cognitivist form.¹⁶ Moreover, he connects these ambitions explicitly to Kantian rationalism and so seems to be suggesting a rationality argument for Kantian non-cognitivism. But what interests me most about William's discussion is his further remark that this unworldly Kantian conception of objectivity and truth applies to logic as much as to morality. Indeed, Williams avers that insisting on this equal applicability is in fact 'part of Kant's point' (ibid.).

Now, the introduction of logic into this metaethical discussion might seem surprising, but I don't think it should be.

First, bracketing for the moment what Kant himself thought, many contemporary Kantians are drawn to the logical analogy, and it is not hard to see why.¹⁷ After all, it seems, if any principles can be assimilated to rationality, it is logical ones. Thus, if it can be shown that morality stands to rationality as logic does, then moral foundations will be as rationally secure as logical ones – which, one might think, is as rationally secure as anything can be.¹⁸ Williams perhaps goes further than most in connecting the logical analogy to moral semantics, but he has clearly tapped into a deep current in Kantian thought, one that sees logic and morality alike as, to borrow a phrase, woven into the fabric of reason.

Second, it is clear that Kant himself is a rationalist non-cognitivist about logic in more or less the way Williams describes.¹⁹ That is, as Kant sometimes puts it, what makes a logical judgment true is not its objective, material relation, that is, its agreement with its object, the feature of the world that it is about. Rather, what makes a logical judgment true is its subjective, formal relation, that is, its agreement with the ‘universal laws of the understanding or reason,’ the principles of rationality (Kant, 1992, *JL* 9:50–9:51; Kant, 1996a, *KrV* A58–A60). Again, reason is all; the world is nothing.

One might naturally infer from these considerations, as Williams seems to, that Kant has a unitary view of logical and moral semantics – in which case, Kant’s point in drawing the logical analogy would be clear. He is a non-cognitivist about both logic and morality and, apparently, for the same rationalist reasons. But, in fact, such an inference would be a mistake. Kant does not have a unitary view of logical and moral semantics. He is non-cognitivist about logic but not about morality and this despite being a rationalist about both.

In what follows, then, I will examine Kant’s reasons for thus distinguishing the semantic implications of logical and moral rationalism. If these reasons are sound, as I believe they are, then we should be skeptical about the rationality argument for Kantian non-cognitivism. As Kant himself understands, even if his followers do not, there is no straight line to be drawn from rationalism to non-cognitivism. Even if the moral can be assimilated to the rational, the unworldliness of moral truth does not follow.

III.

I begin with some rudiments of Kant’s rationalist conception of logic.²⁰ Kant’s most basic characterization of logic is in terms of rules, principles, or laws of rational thought. More specifically, rules of logic are *a priori* rules of thinking, that is, the propositional activities of judging, inferring, etc., that Kant attributes to the intellectual faculties of understanding and reason. So understood, logical rules just are rational rules. They tell us not simply how we do think. They tell us how we rationally ought to think.

Identifying logic in this way allows Kant to make some distinctions between kinds of logic that can seem a little unnatural to us. In particular, he distinguishes the logic of ‘the general’ and ‘the particular’ use of the understanding. The former concerns ‘the absolutely necessary rules of thinking, without which no use of the understanding takes place’ (Kant, 1996a, *KrV* A52/B76). The latter ‘contains the rules for correctly thinking about a certain kind of object’ (Kant, 1996a, *KrV* A52/B76). So understood, it is clear that there is but one ‘general logic’ as Kant calls it, but many ‘particular logics,’ of which metaphysics and mathematics are examples (Kant, 1992, *JL* 9:12).^{21,22}

To be clear, this distinction between general logic and particular logics concerns only the domain of logical rules: whether they govern all thought, irrespective of its object – general – or whether they govern only certain kinds of thoughts, individuated by their kinds of objects – particular. It is in this sense that the former are, as Kant says, absolutely necessary and the latter are not; whenever you are thinking, you (rationally) must think in accord with the rules of general logic.

But there is another sense in which the latter are just as necessary as the former; whenever you are thinking about a certain kind of object, you (rationally) must think in accord with the rules of the relevant particular logic. Under this condition, the rules of the particular logic have the same normative necessity as the rules of general logic. You cannot beg off the rules, except by begging off the thought governed by those rules, that is, by thinking different kinds of thoughts, thoughts about different kinds of objects.²³

Additionally, as this emphasis on kinds makes clear, Kant thinks that even particular logics do enjoy a qualified generality. Although they do not govern all thought about all objects, they do govern all thought about all objects of a certain kind, where the kind in question can be quite

general. So much is evident, I think, from Kant's prime example of a particular logic, metaphysics, represented by what he calls in the first Critique 'transcendental logic.' This is the particular logic of theoretical thought, thought about nature. The rules of transcendental logic are rules for thinking about any natural object. This does not include everything, but it includes quite a lot, a point to which I will return shortly.

So, for Kant, logic is the genus; general logic and particular logic are species of the genus; and metaphysics, mathematics, etc. are sub-species of the species particular logic. Again, this taxonomy can seem a little unnatural to us, but it appears to track real distinctions among kinds of rational rules, and so long as we fix our terms, we can avoid confusion.²⁴ In particular, in what follows, I will favor the Kantian rather than the standard usage of the term 'logic' – that is, I will use it to pick out the genus of rational rules rather than the species of general logic, which is usually what we have in mind when we speak of logic *simpliciter*: the single set of rational rules that govern thinking as such. As we shall see, this usage will help bring into relief the similarities and differences between general logic and logics of other kinds, including, eventually, morality.

IV.

So far, I have spoken only of logic in terms of rules or norms, the 'oughts' of thought. But, of course, I am primarily interested in logical truth and whether it should be explained cognitively or not. The relation between these issues, however, is not obvious. After all, 'oughts' are imperatives and so don't seem to have truth values; in which case, the problem of accounting for their truth simply does not arise. Thus, it seems, if we are even to reach the question of cognitivism, we need some bridge between prescriptive, imperatival principles and descriptive, indicative ones.

There seem to be two ways to go here. One way would be to embed the prescriptions in the content of the descriptions, so that logical truths are about logical norms, in the sense that they tell us what those norms are. Consider, for example, the general logical principle of (non-)contradiction. On this way of thinking, the principle can be expressed in two ways: as a logical norm that commands us not to think of anything that it has and does not have a given feature, and as a corresponding logical truth that refers to the norm, stating that one ought not to think of anything that it has and does not have a given feature.²⁵

But there is another way to bridge these two aspects of logic. On this way, one would, as it were, reverse the above order, embedding the descriptions in the content of the prescriptions, so that the logical norms are about the logical truths, in the sense that they tell us, in effect, to think in accord with the truths.²⁶ So, consider contradiction again. There is, as before, a norm that says not to think of anything that it has and does not have a given feature. But in this case, the corresponding truth doesn't refer to the norm. Rather, it refers to what the norm would bid us think, namely, that nothing has and does not have a given feature.

It is clear, I think, that the dominant way of thinking about the relation of logical norms and logical truths, in Kant's time and our own, is the second way and that Kant agrees.²⁷ The logical truths at issue are not truths about the norms of thought but truths about the objects thought about – truths, again, like nothing has and does not have a given feature or that everything is what it is. This is especially evident once one remembers that, for Kant, logic is the genus of which general and particular logics are species. For in the particular case, just as much as in the general one, we can query the relation between logical norms and logical truths, for example, the rules for thinking correctly about metaphysical and mathematical objects and metaphysical and mathematical truths themselves. And there is no question that in such cases, the relevant truths are not about the rules but about the objects. Thus, the transcendental logic of the first Critique, which, as I noted above, is a particular logic of theoretical thought, thought about nature, issues in truths like the Analogies of Experience, for example, in all change substance persists, all alterations occur in accordance with the law of the connection of cause and effect, etc.

These particular logical truths are about nature. They are not truths about how we ought to think about nature.²⁸

Generally speaking, then, logical rules are rules for thinking; logical truths are truths about the objects we think about. So much is true, again, of the genus. Applied to the distinction between general and particular logics, which are species of the genus, we can thus say that general logical rules are rules for thinking about any object, and so general logical truths are truths about any object we can think about; particular logical rules are rules for thinking about certain kinds of objects, and so particular logical truths are truths about objects of those kinds.

So, our question becomes as follows: how to understand the nature of these logical truths? Are they made true by their objects (cognitivism) or are they not (non-cognitivism)? Here, I think, it is clear that Kant thinks that the general case demands a different treatment from the particular ones. Kant's key thought, I take it, is something like this. Again, general logical truths are truths about any object we can think about; that is to say, they are truths that are true of everything. But, Kant supposes, if the truths are true *of* everything, then they can't be made true *by* anything. Thus, as Kant says, general logic abstracts 'from all content of cognition, i.e., *from any relation of it to the object*, and considers only the logical form in relation of cognitions to one another, i.e., the form of thinking in general' (Kant, 1996a, *KrV* A52/B76, *KrV* A55/B79; my emphasis).²⁹ What makes such logical truths true, then, is not their agreement with the object, with the world and everything in it. What makes them true is their agreement with the 'universal laws of the understanding and reason,' which expresses the form or structure of thought itself (Kant, 1992, *JL* 9:51). Thus, in the general logical case, Kant thinks, logical truth must be understood non-cognitively.³⁰

Importantly, no parallel argument holds in the case of particular logics. Particular logical rules are rules for thinking about certain kinds of objects, so particular logical truths are truths about objects of those kinds. But here, Kant thinks, there is no pressure to semantically sever thought and world, for there is no problem at all in thinking that truths that are true *of* a certain kind of object are made true *by* objects of that kind. Indeed, he seems to regard it as obvious that this is the case. Where the logical rules 'depend on a determinate object of cognition,' as in metaphysics and mathematics, the corresponding logical truths are thus answerable to those objects (Kant, 1992, *JL* 9:12). In this respect, particular logical truths are no different from non-logical truths, for example, ordinary empirical truths, whose truth depends on the world if anything does. The *a priori* of logical truths complicates this dependence, but it does not call it into question.³¹

Put another way, Kant treats cognitivism as the default position in logical semantics. Truth is world-oriented, so we should presume that logical truths, like other truths, are made true by the world.³² Of course, Kant believes that this presumption can be rebutted in the case of general logic. But whether he is right or wrong about this, the main point is simply that it must be rebutted; that general logic is a special case, an exception to the general rule of cognitivism.³³ For, as Kant understands, there is nothing in the nature of logic as such – nothing about rational rules and their corresponding truths – that implies semantic independence from the world.

V.

What, then, of morality? It seems clear enough that Kantian morality qualifies as a kind of logic in the generic Kantian sense.³⁴ Moral rules are *a priori* rules of thought. But not just any kind of thought, of course. Moral rules are rules of specifically practical thought, the rules of practical rationality, which tell us how we rationally ought to think when we are thinking practically.

This is just to say, however, that morality is not a general logic but a particular one. Indeed, Kant is explicit on this point, including morality among metaphysics and mathematics as key cases of particular logic (Kant, 1992, *JL* 9:12). Moreover, he is evidently right to do so, because

morality obviously lacks the distinguishing feature of general logic, namely, its generality. That is to say, moral rules are not rules for thinking about any object, and so the corresponding moral truths are not truths about any object we can think about. Rather, as in metaphysics and mathematics, moral rules are rules for thinking about certain kinds of objects, and so moral truths are truths about objects of those kinds.

The consequences for cognitivism should be obvious. If morality is a particular logic, then the Kantian argument for the non-cognitivism of general logic, even if it were successful, simply does not apply. Moreover, because, as I noted above, cognitivism seems the default position in logical semantics, absent some special reason to worry about the cognitive credentials of morality, it should follow that moral semantics are cognitive too. No less than the rules of metaphysical and mathematical thinking, the rules of moral thinking ‘depend on a determinate object of cognition,’ and so the corresponding truths of morality are ultimately answerable to those objects (Kant, 1992, *JL* 9:12).³⁵

Now, of course, the plausibility of this conclusion will depend on just what these objects are. Again, Kantian morality is the particular logic of practical thought. Thus, moral rules are rules for thinking about practical objects, and moral truths are truths about practical objects. But which objects are these? Kant answers this question in a number of different ways, talking at times about freedom, what ought to be, acting, and the good. Although I believe that these are all ultimately equivalent, I also believe that Kant’s most perspicuous answer combines the latter two. As Kant puts it in the second Critique, ‘the only objects of a practical reason are therefore the good and the evil,’ where he is clear that ‘good and evil is, strictly speaking, referred to actions’ (Kant, 1997a, *KpV* 5:58, 5:60). Thus, practical thought is thought about the practical good (or evil). And so moral rules, as the particular logic of practical thought, are rules for correctly thinking about what it is good (or evil) to do, and moral truths are truths about what it is good (or evil) to do.

At this point, I think, it is helpful to compare the theoretical and practical cases.

As I noted before, the transcendental logic of the first Critique is a particular logic of theoretical thought. Like all logics, this logic can be understood either as a system of norms or as a system of truths. That is to say, transcendental logic tells us both how we ought to think about nature in general and what that nature we think about is like in general. So understood, the truths of transcendental logic are formal, not in the sense that general logical truths are formal – abstracting from all content, from any relation to an object – but in the sense of characterizing the generic structural features of its object, the constitutive conditions, we might say, of natural objecthood. So, for example, Kant thinks, without knowing anything about what objects are in nature – whether, say, they are all material or not – we can and do know that those objects must be substances standing in reciprocal causal relations with one another, namely, the three Analogies of Experience. This is (part of) what it is to be a natural object.

The analog of transcendental logic on the practical side, the particular logic of practical thought, is represented by the moral law, in its various formulations, identified and defended in the *Groundwork* and the second Critique.³⁶ Again, this ‘practical logic,’ as we might call it, can be understood as a system of norms or as a system of truths. That is to say, it tells us both how we ought to think about what is good in general and what the good we think about is like in general. So understood, the truths of practical logic are formal, not in the sense that general logical truths are formal – abstracting from all content, from any relation to an object – but in the sense of characterizing the generic structural features of its object, the constitutive conditions, we might say, of practical objecthood. So, for example, Kant thinks, without knowing anything about specific practical objects, specific good actions, we can and do know that those actions must have maxims that are universalizable, that reflect the dignity of rational nature, that are consistent with the autonomy of the will, etc. This is (part of) what it is to be a practical object, a genuine good.

Now, in both the theoretical and the practical cases, the truths that we are typically concerned with are more specific than these formal, logical ones. We want to know not just that the world is causally ordered, but what causal order it has. We want to know not just that the good can be jointly pursued by all agents, but which actions actually meet this condition. In order to know these things, we must go beyond the *a priori* principles of theory and practice and enter the empirically enriched domains of physics and ethics, the fuller sciences for which theoretical and practical logics provide the foundations. To this extent, Kant is not, so to speak, a logicist in either the theoretical or practical domains. Not all theoretical or practical truths are derivable from the relevant kind of logic alone.³⁷

But however exactly we think about the relation between these logical and non-logical truths, it should be clear that all of these truths are understood in cognitive terms. Whether logical or non-logical, whether theoretical or practical, they are all made true by their objects.

VI.

My aim in this paper has been to assess the case for Kantian metaethical innocence, especially in its most radical, non-cognitivist form. I have done this by focusing on what I dubbed *the rationality argument*. According to this argument, Kantianism supports non-cognitivism because, according to Kantians, the assimilation of the moral to the rational allows for an explanation of moral truth in terms of the satisfaction of rational principle rather than the reflection of moral facts. In order to better understand and evaluate this argument, I followed Williams' suggestion that Kantian moral semantics mirrors Kantian logical semantics – in particular, that in both cases, there is a straight line to be drawn from rationalist premises to non-cognitivist conclusions. By reflecting on Kant's own account of logic and morality, I argued that this is not so. While Kant does think that (general) logical rationalism leads to (general) logical non-cognitivism, he does not think that moral rationalism leads to moral non-cognitivism. And with good reason, because the feature of (general) logical rationalism that underwrites this purported implication does not obtain in the moral case. Thus, even if the moral can be assimilated to the rational, as Kantians think, this provides no support for moral non-cognitivism. Kantians cannot avoid substantial metaphysical commitment. Or if they can, it is not their rationalism that explains why this is so.

This is a negative result, but it has a positive consequence. For by understanding the deficiencies of non-cognitivist Kantianism, we have shed light on a cognitivist alternative, one that allows us to vindicate the logical analogy while keeping moral truth tethered to the world. According to this view, morality is akin not to general logic but to transcendental logic. So understood, the moral law does not simply provide principles of practical thought. It also provides principles of practical-*cum*-moral metaphysics, limning the generic structural features of practical-*cum*-moral objects, namely, good actions. And so, moral judgments are true not simply when they accord with rational principles but when they accord with moral facts, facts about what it is good to do.

Again, to be clear, this is a semantic claim about moral truth. It is not a metaphysical claim about moral facts. As such, this kind of Kantian cognitivism is entirely consistent with the more moderate, idealist version of Kantian constructivism I sketched in Section I. That is, Kantians could hold that there really are moral facts and moral judgments really are true when they represent those facts accurately (cognitivism). It is just that those facts depend on us, in the sense that they are constituted by the outcome of our ideal reasoning (idealism). Thus, even if I am right that Kantians cannot avoid substantial metaphysical commitment, they may still try to minimize this commitment by making moral facts mind-dependent.

Now, I don't think that Kant is or that his followers should be idealists any more than they should be non-cognitivists. On the contrary, I think Kant is and his followers should be realists, though I have not argued the case here.³⁸ My present point is simply that Kantianism does not

support non-cognitivism – or, at least, that Kantian *rationalism* does not support non-cognitivism. There is nothing in the thought that the moral can be assimilated to the rational that should, on its own, lead to the semantic severing of thought and world. So far as I can see, the better (and more Kantian) Kantianism is a cognitive one.³⁹

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NOTES

¹ See especially Rawls 1980 and 2000 and Korsgaard 1996b and 2008.

² Hence, T. M. Scanlon can write a paper called ‘How I am not a Kantian,’ where what he very clearly describes is how he is not a constructivist (Scanlon 2011).

³ To be clear, this is moral idealism. It is not transcendental idealism, of the sort that underwrites the possibility of transcendental freedom. The former is practical and concerns the subject matter of morality. The latter is theoretical and concerns the subject matter of natural science, physics broadly construed. Moral idealism would thus be the practical analog of Kant’s physical idealism.

⁴ Although constructivists are sometimes allergic to truth talk, their general tendency is to accept it. Indeed, it is clear from other passages that Reath uses ‘correctness’ and ‘truth’ more or less interchangeably, for example, ‘[a]ccording to constructivism, [the correct] process of reasoning also specifies [the principles] truth conditions: What makes a principle true or correct is that it follows from correct reasoning’ (Reath 2010, p. 463). Cf. Korsgaard’s claim that ‘as long as there is some way of applying the concepts of the right and the good, we will have moral and more generally normative truth. Statements implying moral concepts will be true when those concepts are applied correctly’ (Korsgaard, 1996b, p. 35; Korsgaard, 2008, p. 324).

⁵ For example, reasoning that satisfies the conditions laid out in the so-called ‘Categorical Imperative Procedure.’

⁶ I borrow the term ‘semantic non-factualism’ from Mark van Roojen, who identifies it as one of two ‘central common non-cognitivist claim[s]’ (van Roojen, 2018, sect. 1.1). The other is what he calls ‘psychological non-cognitivism.’ I briefly discuss the contrast in the next paragraph.

⁷ While there are certainly views that accept both of these theses and indeed relate them, I am inclined to think they are independent. (See van Roojen, 2018, sect. 2.6 for discussion and n30). In any case, I will focus exclusively on the semantic thesis in this paper. It is no part of my account of non-cognitivist constructivism that it denies that moral judgments express beliefs.

⁸ Of course, some non-cognitivists do deny that moral judgments are truth-apt in any sense at all. But, again, this is not distinctive of non-cognitivism, because not all non-cognitivists so deny. Indeed, the two leading lights of contemporary non-cognitivism, Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, are committed to extending truth, belief, and the whole suite of traditionally cognitive concepts to ethical thought and language, non-cognitively construed. See Blackburn, 1993 and 1998, and Gibbard, 1990 and 2003.

⁹ One might say that the non-cognitivist constructivist replaces a metaphysics of the object with a metaphysics of the subject. It is here that worries about transcendental freedom loom especially large. Again, I set such worries aside.

¹⁰ Reath himself seems to be an idealist. He claims that ‘constructivists can hold that correct moral principles and moral facts are *constituted* by practical reasoning, in the sense that correct principles are those that would result from this idealized process of reasoning’ (Reath, 2010, p. 423, my emphasis). Korsgaard is, I think, harder to pin down, sometimes sounding non-cognitivist notes and sometimes sounding idealist ones.

¹¹ See Korgaard, 1996b, Korsgaard, 2008, Gibbard, 1999, and Gibbard, 2003. For further discussion of Korsgaard, Gibbard, and doubts about the Kantian appropriation of the practicality argument, see Elizondo, 2013.

¹² Hereafter, when I speak of Kantian rationalism, I am speaking about this assimilation claim. One can be a rationalist without accepting this claim. But one cannot, I think, be a Kantian.

¹³ I assume here that doing without properties is tantamount to doing without facts, because facts characterize states of the world, including objects and their properties. In what follows, I will treat the semantic independence of judgment from facts, the world, objects, and properties as equivalent ways of expressing the core thesis of non-cognitivism.

¹⁴ Williams is not a Kantian precisely because he rejects this rationalist antecedent. He does, however, seem at least sympathetic to the conditional.

¹⁵ I think a similar thought is at work in Williams' discussion of the Kantian position in Chapter 4 of *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy* (Williams, 1985). (Williams, 1995 was originally published in 1985). There he claims that the Kantian sees practical no less than theoretical reason as committed to the 'harmony of everyone's deliberation' (ibid., p. 69). In the theoretical case, this commitment is underwritten by our orientation to the facts, the truths of the world. In the practical case, it is underwritten (somehow) by the free exercise of reason itself. It is Williams' doubts about developing this last thought in a credible way that leads him to reject Kantianism.

¹⁶ Williams puts the point in terms of Kantian non-realism, but I think it would be better expressed in terms of Kantian non-cognitivism, because, as I have emphasized, there is more than one way for a Kantian to resist realism: the idealist way of domesticating the moral world by making it mind-dependent and the non-cognitivist way of doing without the world altogether. Williams' Kant apparently takes the latter tack.

¹⁷ Indeed, Korsgaard has gone so far as to identify moral principles as 'principles of the *logic* of practical deliberation' (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 67, her emphasis). See also Nagel in his early, more Kantian incarnation in Nagel, 1970 and Herman, 2006. Additionally, it is worth noting that many critics of Kantianism appear to target just this analogy when they deny that immorality is a species of incoherence or contradiction. Consider, for example, Scanlon's claim that, *pace* Kant, 'the special force of moral requirements seems quite different from that of, say, principles of logic, even if both are, in some sense, "inescapable." And the fault involved in failing to be moved by moral requirements does not seem to be a form of incoherence' (Scanlon, 1998, p. 151). See also Frankfurt, 2001, p. 259.

¹⁸ Notably, this Kantian-style argument is sometimes deployed in the service of non-Kantian conclusions. For example, Jaime Dreier endorses the strategy of trying to vindicate practical rules in the same way one vindicates logical rules, namely, by assimilating them to rules of rationality. That said, he thinks that, among practical rules, moral rules cannot be so vindicated; only instrumental rules can (Dreier, 1997). He is thus a Humean, but for Kantian reasons. J. David Velleman's argument in Velleman, 2009 might also put him in a similar camp. There he accepts the Kantian strategy, more or less as William describes it here. But while he agrees with Williams that the strategy fails to vindicate morality, he thinks it does nonetheless push us in a pro-moral direction. To this extent, it is, as he says, 'kinda Kantian,' marking a middle ground between Williams (and Dreier) – who think the Kantian strategy can only deliver logic and instrumental rules – and Kant himself – who thinks it delivers moral ones (Velleman, 2009, p. 149).

¹⁹ One might also put the point in terms of the analyticity of logical truth. However, because Kant uses the term 'analytic' in a variety of ways, not all of which privilege semantic independence from the world, I think it is more perspicuous to speak about the non-cognitivism of logical truth. Notably, it is this sense of analyticity, unmoored from Kant's rationalist commitments, that is at the fore in later logical empiricist accounts of logic. On this issue, see n30.

²⁰ My treatment of Kantian logic is quite limited and, in many respects, simplified. I aim only to lay out enough of the view to illuminate the relation between logical and moral rationalism and

logical and moral semantics. For further discussion of Kantian logic, and its relation to the history of logic before and after Kant, see Longuenesse, 2005, MacFarlane, 2002, and Burge, 2003.

²¹ To be clear, the metaphysics at issue in this section is theoretical metaphysics. I will turn to practical metaphysics in the next section.

²² Kant also distinguishes logics according to whether they are pure or applied. Roughly, pure logics are *a priori* and provide the norms for correct thinking. Applied logics are empirical and consider how those *a priori* norms are to be implemented in actual human thought, 'under the contingent conditions of the subject, which can hinder or promote this use...' (Kant, 1996a, *KrV* A54/B78). In what follows, I am concerned exclusively with pure logics, general and particular.

²³ In this respect, logical laws operate similarly to civil ones. So long as you live in California, you live under the jurisdiction of California law and not New York law. Move to New York, and the opposite is true. But wherever you live in the United States – in California, New York, or wherever – you live under the jurisdiction of the United States law. Both state and federal laws bind: the latter under a (more) general condition, the former only under a particular one.

²⁴ Lest one think this is simply an old-fashioned, outmoded way of thinking about logic, the basic structure can be found in later philosophers too, including, notably, the father of modern logic, Frege. As Frege says,

Any law that states what is can be conceived as prescribing that one should think in accordance with it, and is therefore in that sense a law of thought. This holds for geometrical laws and physical laws no less than for logical laws. The latter then only deserve the name 'law of thought' with more right if it should be meant by this that they are the most general laws, *which prescribe universally how one should think if one is to think at all* (Frege, 1997a, p. 202, my emphasis).

As John MacFarlane has argued, it is Frege's identification of logic with the most general laws of thought – that is, as what Kant calls 'general logic' – that explains how Frege and Kant could disagree about the truth of logicism, even granting their profoundly different accounts of logic (MacFarlane, 2002).

²⁵ Although the precise formulation of the principle of (non-)contradiction is controversial, I hope the present formulation will seem unobjectionable, consistent both with traditional, quasi-Parmenidean expressions ('nothing is and is not') as well as more modern, formal ones.

²⁶ I say 'think in accord with the truths' rather than simply 'think the truths' in order to avoid the obvious implausibility of thinking that logic tells us to think all the logical truths.

²⁷ As Frege (almost) puts the point, logic can be a normative science without having a normative subject matter (Frege, 1997b, p. 228).

²⁸ Even if particular logical truths aren't about norms, one might wonder whether general logical truths are. It is hard to see, however, why this should be so. Again, there is nothing about such truths being logical that implies this, because it isn't true of particular logics. And there also seems to be nothing about such truths being general that implies this, because generality is simply a matter of domain. But if it is neither the generality nor the logicity of general logic that explains why its subject matter is normative while particular logic's is not, then I do not see what could explain it. At this level of description, Kant's account of the subject matter of logic seems unitary.

²⁹ It is surprisingly difficult to find clear statements of Kant's reasoning here, but something like this seems suggested by *JL* 9:12 (Kant, 1992).

³⁰ Notably, one finds more or less the same line of thought in the 20th century, among logical empiricists. As Carnap puts it, 'logical statements are true under all conceivable circumstances; *thus* their truth is independent of the contingent facts of the world' (Carnap,

1963, p. 25, my emphasis). Or, similarly, logical statements 'are analytic in the specific sense that they hold in all possible cases and *therefore* do not have factual content' (ibid., p. 47, my emphasis). Carnap credits Wittgenstein with this non-cognitivist conception of logical truth, one 'based only on [logical statements'] logical structure and the meaning of the terms' (ibid., p. 25). But it is clearly a linguistic variation on a Kantian theme. Thinking about the logical empiricists is useful here too, because it shows how that the semantic and psychological aspects of non-cognitivism that I mentioned in Section I might come apart. The logical empiricists are semantic non-cognitivists about both logic and morality. But they seem to be psychological non-cognitivists, typically emotivists (Ayer, 1952) or prescriptivists (Carnap, 1937, 1963, p. 81), only about morality.

³¹ It complicates it because while Kant thinks it is relatively easy to explain how ordinary empirical truths can be made true by the world, it is much harder to explain how metaphysical and mathematical truths are made true by the world. This difficulty motivates the main question of the first Critique – 'how is synthetic a priori cognition possible?' – as well as its ultimate answer – transcendental idealism. General logic is exempt from the question (and so its answer) precisely because its truths are not dependent on the world.

³² Kant is clear that the (nominal) definition of truth is 'the agreement of cognition with its object' (Kant, 1996a, *KrV* A58/B82; Kant, 1992, *JL* 9:49–50).

³³ In fact, I think he is wrong. The basic reason is this. The key move in Kant's argument, again, is his inference from general logical truth's being true of everything to its not being made true by anything. But this inference is too quick. For there seems an obvious alternative, namely, that such truths are true of everything because they are made true by everything. In this way, general logic would be semantically continuous with particular logic. Just as particular logical truths are made true by the objects they are about, so would general logical truths be made true by the objects they are about, namely everything. I noted earlier that the Kantian view is represented in the 20th century by logical empiricists like Carnap (n30). Recall Carnap's claim, quoted earlier, that logical statements 'are analytic in the specific sense that they hold in all possible cases and therefore do not have factual content' (Carnap, 1963, p. 47). But this seems too quick in exactly the way I just noted. For one could equally say that logical statements' holding in all possible cases can be explained by their characterizing necessary and often obvious features of the world. It is just these features that figure in their factual content. Unsurprisingly, this is very close to one of the arguments that Quine gives against Carnap in Quine 1976. For insightful discussion of the broader debate between Carnap and Quine on the nature of logical truth, which gestures to its long pre-history, see Burge, 2003.

³⁴ To be clear, I am not interested here in Kant's reasons for thinking that morality is a kind a logic, that is, his reasons for thinking moral rationalism correct. I am only interested in the relation between moral rationalism and moral semantics.

³⁵ Cf. Kant's comment in the *Groundwork* that unlike formal philosophy (logic), material philosophy (theoretical and practical) 'has to do with determinate objects and the laws to which they are subject' (Kant, 1997b, *G* 4:387). With respect to their interest in objects, Kant always treats theoretical and practical philosophy as on a par.

³⁶ Kant explicitly likens the principles of pure practical reason to the principles of transcendental logic at *KpV* 5:90 (Kant, 1997a). More generally, he clearly conceives of the structure of theoretical and practical philosophies as parallel. Of special interest here is his claim that just as the Analytic of the first Critique provides a 'logic of truth' (Kant, 1996a, *KrV* A62/B87), the Analytic of the second Critique provides 'a rule of truth' (Kant, 1997a, *KpV* 5:16). See also *KrV* A841/B869 (Kant, 1996a), *G* 4:387–389 (Kant, 1997b), *KpV* 5:89–90 (Kant, 1997a), *KU* 5:196–197 (Kant, 2000), and *MS* 6:214–218 (Kant, 1996b).

³⁷ The relevant contrast, of course, is Frege's logicism, according to which arithmetic is derivable from (general) logic alone. Cf. Gibbard's characterization of Korsgaard as a moral logicist in Gibbard, 1999.

³⁸ Thus, the analogy I have drawn throughout between Kant's theoretical and practical philosophies breaks down here. Although Kant is both a theoretical and a practical cognitivist, he is a theoretical idealist and a practical realist.

³⁹ I thank the audiences at UCSB, Amherst, the DC-Baltimore Kant Workshop, and Stanford for discussion of early drafts of this paper. I also thank Tyler Burge, Jorah Dannenberg, Tim Doyle, Barbara Herman, Whitney Schwab, and Yannig Luthra for helpful discussions of underlying issues.

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All references to Kant are to *Kants gesammelte Schriften* and employ the standard *Akademie* numbers. I will use the following abbreviations in citations: *Critique of Pure Reason* – *KrV*; *Critique of Practical Reason* – *KpV*; *Critique of the Power of Judgment* – *KU*; *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* – *G*; *Metaphysics of Morals* – *MS*; *Jäsche Logic* – *JL*.

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