# Kant's Account of Epistemic Normativity

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**Abstract**

According to a common interpretation, most explicitly defended by Onora O'Neill and Patricia Kitcher, Kant held that epistemic obligations normatively depend on moral obligations. That is, were a rational agent not bound by any moral obligation, then she would not be bound by any epistemic obligation either. By contrast, in this paper, I argue that, according to Kant, some epistemic obligations are normatively independent from moral obligations, and are indeed normatively absolute. This view, which I call *epistemicism*, has two parts. First, it claims that in the absence of other kinds of obligations, rational agents would still be bound by these epistemic obligations, i.e., that the latter are normatively independent. Second, it claims that, no matter what other obligations are at stake, rational agents are bound by these epistemic obligations, i.e., the normativity of these epistemic obligations is absolute in that it cannot be undercut by any moral or other sort of obligation. The argument turns on an exploratory reading of Kant's remarks in "What Is Orientation in Thinking?" (1786) about the maxim of "thinking for oneself" as the "supreme touchstone of truth." In contrast to O'Neill and Kitcher, I argue that if we interpret this maxim as stating the unifying principle of theoretical and practical reason, then we must interpret it as stating an *epistemic,* and not merely practical imperative. This result, I argue, vindicates epistemicism and illuminates interesting lessons about Kant's conception of the category of "epistemic" norms. Further, it helps us make headway with Kant's enigmatic remarks about the unity of practical and theoretical reason in the *Groundwork*, first and the second *Critiques*, and the *Lectures on Logic*. On my proposal, principles of the practical and theoretical uses of reason are unified through a formal *epistemic* principle.

## 1. Introduction

What is the relationship between epistemic obligations and moral obligations? According to a view which I call *epistemic moralism*, epistemic obligations normatively depend on moral obligations. That is, were a rational agent not bound by any moral obligation, then she would not be bound by any epistemic obligation either. To be sure, epistemic moralists can maintain that there are independent epistemic *rules:* for example, the rule that one is epistemically better off if one propor-

tions one's beliefs to evidence. But, on their view, such epistemic rules have the force of an obligation only if there is a moral demand to follow them.[1]

In *Kant's Thinker* (2011), Patricia Kitcher interprets Kant as an epistemic moralist. She writes:

> Intellectual accountability is ... an important aspect of ... [Kant's] views and of his legacy. Although this point is clearly correct, it does not imply that he thinks that there is a special sort of accountability involved in cognition. Rather, his view is that cognizers must use their cognitive faculties in accord with the moral law.[2]

According to Kitcher's reading, Kant holds that there is no epistemic normativity *per se*, i.e, insofar as epistemic obligations are binding, they are a species of moral obligations.

I contrast epistemic-moralism with the view that epistemic obligations are normatively independent from moral obligations, and are indeed normatively absolute. This view, which I call *epistemicism*, has two parts. First, it claims that in the absence of other kinds of obligations, rational agents would still be bound by epistemic obligations, i.e., that the latter are normatively independent. Second, it claims that, no matter what other obligations are at stake, rational agents are bound by these epistemic obligations, i.e., the normativity of these epistemic obligations is absolute in that it cannot be undercut by any moral or other sort of obligation. .[3] In this paper, I argue that Kant is best understood as an epistemicist.[4]

Why should we care about this debate? The form of epistemicism that I attribute to Kant can make headway with one of the most difficult and central issues in his philosophy, namely, accounting for the unity of theoretical and practical reason. On my exploratory proposal, what Kant calls practical and theoretical norms of rational cognition can be understood to be unified in virtue of being derived from a "purely formal" norm of rational cognition. But, as I argue, "purely formal" norms of rational cognition are in effect purely formal *epistemic* norms.

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[1] Arpaly, *Merit, Meaning, and Human Bondage*, 104–16.
[2] Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, 247.
[3] Note that normative absoluteness entails normative independence, but not vice versa. That is why epistemic-moralism is just a denial of normative independence of epistemic rules.
[4] As it will become clear, I do not suggest that the textual evidence is fully decisive one way or another. My reading is thus partially reconstructive.

Consequently, the question of the normativity of purely formal epistemic norms must be front and center of any account of Kant's theory of normativity. Put differently, I maintain that Kant's question concerning the source of moral normativity can only be answered by starting with his account of the normativity of purely formal epistemic norms.

Here is the plan. First, I explain what it means to attribute epistemicism to Kant (section 2). I then offer an exposition of the epistemic moralist interpretation (section 3). After that, I suggest that epistemic moralists do not appreciate the fact that Kant gives us a radically different and interesting way of carving up the category of *epistemic* norms. On my reading, Kant's distinctions between practical and theoretical norms of cognition, as well as formal and material norms of cognition, are *not* distinctions between the epistemic and non-epistemic. If this is correct, I propose, then Kant's views about the unity of theoretical and practical reason bear directly on the question of whether he was an epistemicist (sections 4 to 6). I then offer my positive argument for epistemicism in three steps (sections 7 to 9). Finally, I reply to some possible objections (section 10).

## 2. The question of epistemicism vs. epistemic-moralism

We expect considerations about evidence, rules of inference, and principles of inquiry and conceptualization, that is, *epistemic* considerations, to be determinative of our *epistemic* obligations. For example, suppose you want to know why we should proportion our beliefs to evidence, as opposed to, say, form beliefs regardless of evidence. A promising strategy in answering this question would be to claim that although proportioning our beliefs to evidence does not guarantee that our beliefs will be accurate, we do not have any better way of establishing accurate beliefs.[5] By answering the question in this way, we consider epistemic reasons to determine our epistemic obligations.

From this perspective, epistemic moralism might seem an odd view. Do epistemic moralists hold that moral obligations, e.g., the categorical imperative, determine our epistemic obligations, e.g., the obligation to proportion our belief to evidence?

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[5] Here I am echoing Peter Railton's imaginative dialogue in "On the Hypothetical and Non-Hypothetical in Reasoning About Belief and Action," 294–99.

This puzzle arises because "determining" an obligation is an ambiguous expression. What determines the *content* of an obligation could be different from what determines its *normative validity*. For example, biological facts can be used to determine the content of the obligation to get healthy: "in order to get healthy, you should eat vegetables!" But biological facts are equally suited to determine the content of the obligation to get unhealthy: "in order to get unhealthy, you should eat lots of junk food!" If we are interested in determining the content of these obligations, we ask: What should I do if I should get healthy (or unhealthy)? By contrast, in order to determine the normative validity of these obligation, we must ask the further question concerning ends: Should I get healthy or should I get unhealthy?

Both epistemicists and epistemic moralists are likely to accept that the *contents* of epistemic obligations are determined by epistemic considerations alone. The disagreement, then, concerns the *normative validity* of epistemic obligations. Epistemic moralist hold that moral obligations determine the normative validity of epistemic obligations. Epistemicists hold that epistemic obligations determine their own normative validity, and that (in a yet to be specified sense) they do so absolutely. But to make things more precise, I will start by showing how Kant has a unique way of distinguishing between determining the content of an obligation and determining its normative validity. On my reading, he accounts for this distinction by distinguishing between two modes in which an imperative could take the form of an obligation: a hypothetical and a categorical mode. Let me unpack this distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives in terms of the distinction between determining the content and normative validity of obligations.

For Kant, *all* imperatives determine the content of obligations, that is, they determine what one ought to do in order to achieve an end that is good in one way or another. In the *Groundwork,* he tells us that an imperative is a formula for a course of action that is "*good in some way*."[6] "Eat vegetables in order to get healthy!" prescribes a course of action that is good by way of promoting health, "Eat comfort food in order to feel pleasure!" is good in that it promotes hedonism, and so on.

However, Kant famously distinguishes between two modes in which imperatives can determine the *content* our obligations, namely, categorical and hypothet-

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[6] *Groundwork*, 4:414; emphasis added. Earlier, he writes: "*All* imperatives are expressed by an *ought... They* say that to do or to omit something would be good" (Ibid., 4:413).

ical. Categorical imperatives in and of themselves *also* determine the normative validity of what they prescribe. By contrast, hypothetical imperatives acquire normative validity in virtue of an agent's *other* normative commitments.

One way in which Kant expresses this idea is by claiming that *hypothetical* imperatives determine that an action would be good for some "subjective end", whereas a *categorical* imperative determines that an action is good for an "objective end."[7] In Kant's technical vocabulary, an end is objective if and only if a rational agent is obliged to pursue that end just in virtue of her rational nature.[8]

Now, for Kant, to say that hypothetical imperatives have "subjective ends" means that their normative validity is contingent. In this case, Kant tells us, the question of "whether the end is rational and good is *not at all the question here*, but only what one must do in order to attain it."[9] That is, whether a given hypothetical imperative is binding for an agent depends on her other normative commitments (plans, goals, desires, *etc.*).[10] The *content* of the imperative at hand is almost always determined independently of an agent's other normative commitments.[11] For example, my other normative commitments make no difference to the determination of the content of the imperative "If you want to win the chess game, move your rook to E3!" Nevertheless, my other normative commitments do make a difference to determining the *normative validity* of this imperative, e.g., to the question as to whether I should try to win the chess game. To use a contemporary terminology, hypothetical imperatives only determine our wide-scope obligations.[12]

By contrast, to say that categorical imperatives have "objective ends" means that they have normative validity necessarily. I take this to mean that a rational agent is bound by categorical imperatives even if nothing else was at stake, i.e., that

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[7] Ibid., 4:426-429; Kant, *MM*, 6:389. In other places, and perhaps more famously, he makes this distinction in terms of "an end in itself" vs. "relative and arbitrary ends" (Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:436.) See footnote 16 for details.

[8] As Kant puts it, "what serves the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is an end, and this, if it is given by reason alone, must hold equally for all rational beings" (Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:427.)

[9] Ibid., 4:415. Emphasis added.

[10] Kant further distinguishes between hypothetical imperatives concerning ends that we *could* have and those concerning ends that we *do* have. As he puts it, an imperative is *problematically* hypothetical if it determines the content of an obligation for "*possible* purpose[s] of some will" (Ibid., 4:414-415; emphasis added.). An imperative is *assertorically* hypothetical if it determines the content of an obligation for an end that I happen to set for myself (Ibid., 4:4419.).

[11] As famously argued by Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives."

[12] Dancy, "The Logical Conscience."

these imperatives have normative independence, and, further, that a rational agent is bound by categorical imperatives no matter what else might be at stake. To use McDowell's suggestive metaphor, categorical imperatives "silence" other competing requirements;[13] that is to say, they are normatively *absolute.*

In short, first, Kant does *not* consider categorical imperatives to pertain to obligations that have no end whatsoever. Rather, he considers them to formulate obligations that have a special kind of end, i.e., what he calls objective ends.[14]

Second, Kant holds that an objective end is an "end in itself" in that it is intrinsically good (i.e., it is good even if nothing else was at stake) and it is absolutely good (i.e., it is an end that is to be pursued no matter what else is at stake). For instance, when he identifies the end of the categorical imperative (namely, "rational being" or "humanity"), he writes:

> [T]hese are not merely subjective ends, the existence of which as an effect of our action has a worth *for us*, but rather *objective ends*, that is, beings the existence of which is in itself an end, and indeed one such that no other end, to which they would serve *merely* as means, can be put in its place, since without it nothing of *absolute worth* would be found anywhere.[15]

Finally, for reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper, Kant holds that the only imperatives that can satisfy these conditions are those that determine the content of an obligation for ends which we must have just in virtue of our rationality.[16] For example, the end of playing chess is an end that I may have for "arbitrary" or "relative" reasons. But, in his view, the end of respecting rational capacities in

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[13] McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?," 28.

[14] As Sally Sedgwick notes, Kant is always careful not to state that categorical imperatives are determined with *no purpose* in mind. Rather, he always claims that categorical imperatives determine our obligations as objectively necessary "without reference to *another* end" (*Groundwork*, 4:414; emphasis added). (Sedgwick, *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 98–99.)

[15] Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:428-429.

[16] As he writes, "all maxims have [...] a *matter,* namely an end, and then the formula [of humanity] says: that a rational being, *as an end according to its nature* [i.e., in virtue of its rationality], *and hence as an end in itself* [i.e., an objective end], must serve for every maxim as the limiting condition of all merely relative [i.e., subjective ends that we happen to have] and arbitrary [i.e., subjective ends that we could have] ends" (Ibid., 4:436; emphasis added.). Elsewhere he writes, there can be a categorical imperative only if "rational nature" as an "objective end" is an end in itself (*Ibid., 4:428.*). For an influential reconstruction of Kant's argument for the claim to exclusivity of "rational nature" as the only possible end for categorical imperatives, see chapter 3 of Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity.*

myself and others is an end that I must set for myself just in virtue of being rational, regardless of any other ends that I may or may not have.

Thus, for Kant, we would be formulating a categorical imperative when we formulate an obligation to pursue an end which a rational being, in virtue of her rationality must set for herself. This would be the formulation of an obligation which has normative independence from all other obligations, and which is normatively absolute.

We can now formulate more carefully what it would mean to attribute either epistemic moralism or epistemicism to Kant. According to epistemic moralism, Kant holds that if we were to formulate the imperatives of epistemic obligations in isolation from moral obligations, we would have a set of merely hypothetical imperatives. No hypothetical imperative is in and of itself normatively valid. Thus, without moral obligations, epistemic obligations would not be normatively valid. That is a denial of normative independence for epistemic obligations.

Yet we are interested in the normative character of epistemic obligations "in isolation from moral obligations" because hypothetical imperatives of skill *can* acquire the force of a moral categorical imperative *derivatively*. For example, suppose a tyrant would kill innocent children unless you play chess and win the game by following the rules of chess. In that case, there may be a categorical *moral* imperative to follow the rules of chess. But in and of themselves, the imperatives to follow rules of chess remain hypothetical. Likewise, epistemic moralists could consistently claim that there is a categorical *moral* imperative to follow epistemic rules, but that epistemic imperatives are in themselves hypothetical.[17] In short, an imperative is *non-derivatively* categorical just in case it is in and of itself necessarily normatively valid.

By contrast, according to the epistemicist reading of Kant, epistemic obligations, considered in isolation from all other kinds of obligations, contain some cate-

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[17] Indeed, both epistemic-moralist and epistemicist readers of Kant can agree that there is *a* moral obligation to cultivate one's epistemic talents. After all, Kant explicitly talks about an imperfect moral duty to cultivate one's powers of mind and understanding (Kant, *MM*, 6:391-392.). But it is one thing to accept that there is *a* moral obligation to be epistemically talented, and another thing to say that that is the only source of normativity for epistemic obligations. By analogy, we could live in a state where there is a *legal* obligation to be moral. In that case, there will be *a* legal source of normativity for moral obligation, but by no means it would entail that moral obligations are not in and of themselves normative.

gorical imperatives. But, if epistemic obligations, in isolation from other kinds of obligations, contain a categorical imperative, then a rational agent would be bound by them even if they were not bound by any other kind of obligation. Hence, on this view, epistemic obligations (or at least some of them) are normatively valid in and of themselves. Moreover, as we saw, according to Kant, an obligation is in and of itself normative just in case it follows from the nature of rationality. But arguably, any such obligation would also be absolutely normative, i.e., rational agents would be bound by them no matter what else is at stake. As we will see, at least some epistemic obligations follow from the nature of rationality. Thus, they are normative absolutely. In short, then, on the epistemicists reading, Kant held that epistemic obligations are normatively independent from other kinds of obligations, and indeed are normatively absolute.

### 3. Kitcher's Argument for epistemic moralism

In the previous section, I suggested that according to epistemic moralists, epistemic obligations are in and of themselves only hypothetical. This claim nicely fits with Kitcher's interpretation of Kant. When she claims that, in Kant's view, "cognizers must use their cognitive faculties in accord with the moral law," she does *not* mean that the *content* of epistemic obligations are determined by the moral law. Kitcher helps us see this point clearly when she writes:

> From the perspective of … [Kant's] ethical theory, it is clear why the faults of [epistemic] inattention and indulgence are imputable. The individual fails to do his obligation because he is not developing – or even exercising – his *talents*.[18]

Although Kitcher does not expand on this point, her use of the term "talent" is careful and suggestive. For Kant, imperatives of skill refer to a subcategory of hypothetical imperatives.[19] Thus, on her reading, the moral law determines the normative validity of epistemic obligations, but epistemic considerations would have to be employed to determine the content of epistemic obligations. But how does she argue for this reading?

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[18] Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, 247; emphasis added.
[19] *Groundwork*, 4:415; *CJ*, 5:172.

Kitcher rightly observes that the task at hand is this: we need to isolate a kind of agent who is subject to epistemic rules but is not subject to moral obligations. Can we, for this kind of agent and according to Kant, identify a categorical epistemic obligation? If yes, then Kant holds that epistemic obligations in and of themselves are categorical. If not, then he holds that epistemic obligations are in and of themselves hypothetical (though they may be derivatively categorical). The latter scenario would vindicate epistemic-moralism.

Now, Kant suggests that we can indeed isolate a kind of agent who is subject to epistemic rules but not subject to moral obligations. In the *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), he entertains the possibility of what we may call *non-practical rational beings*.[20]  He writes:

> [F]rom the fact that a being has reason [it] does not at all follow that, simply by virtue of representing its maxims as suited to universal legislation, this reason contains a faculty of determining the power of choice unconditionally, and hence to be "practical" on its own; at least, not so far as we can see. The most rational being of this world might [...] apply the most rational reflection to [the objects of inclination ...] without thereby even suspecting the possibility of such a thing as the absolutely imperative moral law which announces to be itself an incentive, and, indeed, the highest incentive. Were this law not given to us from within, no amount of subtle reasoning on our part would produce it or win our power of choice over to it.[21]

At least on one interpretation of this passage, Kant seems to be entertaining the possibility of so-called Humean agents,[22] i.e., agents who possess the faculty of reason, but for whom reason is not "practical." In Kant's narrow sense of the term, reason is *practical* for a rational agent if she can be motivated to act on the basis of

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[20] Kitcher refers to this case as a case of "a mere cognitive beings" (Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, 245.). Later it becomes clear why I find Kitcher's label problematic.
[21] *Religion*, 6:26f.
[22] "[R]eason," Hume famously declared, "is perfectly inert, and can never either prevent or produce any action or affection" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.3.2.)

rational considerations alone.[23] Thus, for Kant, it is not analytically true that someone who is subject to epistemic rules is also subject to moral obligations.[24]

However, a non-practical rational being is still subject to epistemic *rules*. For example, the epistemic rule that a rational being proportions her beliefs to evidence applies to a non-practical rational being just as much as it applies to agents with practical reason. For our purposes then, the crucial question is this: *Do any epistemic rules, according to Kant, have the force of a categorical obligation for a non-practical rational being?*

On Kitcher's reading, the above passage from *Religion* shows that, for Kant, epistemic rules do *not* have normative validity in isolation from moral obligations. Here is how I reconstruct her argument[25]:

> **1:** If non-practical rational beings are not transcendentally free, then epistemic *rules* do not have the force of an *obligation* for them.
> **2:** Non-practical rational beings are not transcendentally free.
> **Therefore**, epistemic rules do not have the force of an obligation for non-practical rational beings.

Given Kant's practical philosophy, the first premise is well supported and can be granted. For Kant, the notion of obligation makes sense only for agents who can be thought of as transcendentally free;[26] that is, roughly, for agents who can be thought of as the beginning of a causal chain.[27]

My disagreement with Kitcher concerns the second premise of her argument. Kitcher takes the above passage from *Religion* as a *prima facie* reason for accepting the second premise, since our awareness of our "power of choice" seems to be tightly connected to our awareness of our transcendental freedom. As Kitcher puts it, epistemic obligations "in the deep sense" can exist only if non-practical

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[23] *CPrR*, 5:15; 5:71-89. There is an interesting and to my knowledge unexamined question as to whether Kant, in the above passage, concedes that Humean agents represent a real possibility or rather a merely logical possibility (i.e., such that there is no contradiction in terms).
[24] For a similar reading, see Engstrom, *The Form of Practical Knowledge*, 92.
[25] See Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, 245–47.
[26] *CPrR*, 5:30; *MM*, 6:233.
[27] "A causality must be assumed through which something happens without its cause being further determined by another previous cause, i.e. an absolute causal spontaneity beginning from itself [...]" (Kant, *CPR*, A446/B474.

judgments can "be adopted through a free *power of choice*."[28] The passage from *Religion* seems to suggest that if we were not bound by moral obligations, then we would not be aware of our power of choice. Consequently, we would not be in the position to think of ourselves as transcendentally free. She takes Kant's apparent rejection of a form of doxastic voluntarism as further evidence that Kant would accept her second premise. To support this view, she cites a well-known passage from the *Jäsche* lectures on logic, where Kant is reported to say that "[t]he will *[Wille]* does not have any influence immediately on holding-to-be-true; this would be quite absurd."[29] She concludes that "Kant explicitly rejects a Cartesian voluntaristic view of belief."[30]

In response to Kitcher, many other commentators who are sympathetic to the idea that Kant admits of epistemic obligations *per se* have argued that his doctrine of the "spontaneity of understanding" amounts to attributing transcendental freedom to agents in forming, revising, and maintaining non-practical judgments. To make this point, these commentators often argue that transcendental freedom need not make reference to the notion of "free choice." Thus, what is at stake in that debate is the correct metaphysical characterization of transcendental freedom, i.e., whether it presupposes some sort of "leeway" freedom or not.[31]

While I think this debate is important in its own right, in this paper, I put aside the notoriously difficult metaphysical question of transcendental freedom. Instead, I offer a *normative* argument for reading Kant as an epistemicist.[32] I will do this by establishing his commitment to a categorical epistemic obligation. This strategy mirrors Kant's own strategy in the second *Critique* for establishing that the moral law has the force of an obligation for us. According to at least one line of interpretation, Kant in the *Groundwork* tries to establish the normative validity of

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[28] Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, 247; emphasis added.
[29] (Kant, *LL*, 9:73-74.).
[30] Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, 169. For a similar and more detailed reading of the passage see Chignell, "Kant's Concepts of Justification," 36.
[31] For example, see Kohl, "Kant on Freedom of Empirical Thought"; McLear, "On the Transcendental Freedom of the Intellect." Two influential earlier attempts to defend Kant's conception of freedom in non-practical thinking are Allison, "On Naturalizing Kant's Transcendental Psychology"; Pippin, "Kant on the Spontaneity of Mind." For other arguments to the contrary see Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*, 173–74; Grüne, "Kant and the Spontaneity of the Understanding."
[32] In contrast to Willaschek, "Die „Spontaneität Des Erkenntnisses"." my argument is not a moral (or practical) argument. Of course, my view remains compatible with Willaschek's view. It is possible to have both epistemic-normative and moral-normative reasons to attribute freedom to non-practical thinking.

the moral law by first showing that we are free, whereas he reverses the order of explanation in the second *Critique*.[33] In the latter work, he argues that we must assume that we are free because we are aware of a binding categorical moral obligation.[34]

Following a similar model of argumentation, I thus ask whether Kant does formulate an epistemic categorical obligation that would be binding for even a non-practical rational being. If he does, then we must *assume* that we are free qua non-practical thinkers as well. I thus *ponens* where Kitcher *tollens*.

## 4.   Kant's search for the "common principle" of reason

In this section, I argue that what I regard as a categorical *epistemic* obligation is one and the same as what Kant calls the "common principle of reason." However, as we will see in section 6, so much turns on how we should interpret the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic in Kant's philosophy.

We can find the phrase, "the common principle of reason," in the A-Preface to the first Critique, where Kant announces that his philosophical system aims to formulate reason's "common principle" [gemeinschaftliches Prinzip]. All other purely rational principles of reasons, Kant tells us, must be derivable from this common principle.[35] That is, he seems to be committed to the existence of a single supreme principle of reason.

However, most commentators agree that the first *Critique* does not explicitly formulate this common principle of reason *in general*. While Kant does specify a "supreme principle" of reason,[36] there are at least two important passages that cast doubt on the idea that this principle is the one from which all other theoretical and practical principle can be drawn.

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[33] Ameriks, "Kant's Deduction of Freeedom and Morality."
[34] *CPrR*, 5:4f.
[35]  *CPR*, Axx.
[36] What Kant calls the "supreme principle of reason" in this context is meant as the supreme principle of *theoretical* reason. For a similar view, see Willaschek, "The Structure of Normative Space According to Kant". According to this principle, we must "assume that when the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself conditioned, is also given." (*CPR*, A308/B365.) For discussion, see Willaschek, *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics*, chap. 3. For a useful overview, see Williams, "Kant's Account of Reason."

Firstly, in later works Kant seems to admit that he has not yet formulated the supreme principle of reason in general. In the *Groundwork*, he notes that in order to complete his system, he will need to offer the second *Critique* because he has not yet formulated the common principle of pure reason:

> I require that the critique of pure practical reason, if it is *to be carried through completely*, be able at the same time to present the unity of practical with speculative reason in a common principle, since there can, in the end, be only one and the same reason, which must be distinguished merely in its application.[37]

Since Kant did not take himself to have completed this task in the first *Critique*, we should expect to find a discussion of the principle common to theoretical and practical reason in the second *Critique*.

Yet, in the second *Critique*, Kant does not treat the common principle either. He notes that attempts to compare and contrast the structure of theoretical and practical reason are valuable,

> for they rightly occasion *the expectation of being able some day* to attain insight into the unity of the whole rational faculty (theoretical as well as practical) and to *derive everything from one principle.*[38]

We can draw three important lessons from the above chronology.

First, since the supreme principle of *theoretical* reason, i.e. what Allison calls the "intellectual categorical imperative,"[39] was already formulated at the time of writing the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*, that principle is *not* the unifying principle of theoretical and practical reason.[40]

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[37] *Groundwork*, 4:391; emphasis added.
[38] *CPrR*, 5:91; emphasis added.
[39] Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, 312.
[40] There is an alternative reading available: maybe, Kant does take the "supreme principle" from the first *Critique* as the supreme principle of reason in general. However, the task that he leaves unfinished is the task of *presenting* how all the other principles of reasons can be derived from that one principle. I think that is a viable option, and I will not argue against it. Instead, I offer an alternative reading which puts emphasis on another principle that he formulates in a later writing. To be sure, a third option also remains open: namely that the principle that I am going to underline is in some sense equivalent to the "supreme principle" from the first *Critique*. Again, that is a question that I leave for another occasion.

Second, the supreme principle of *practical* reason, i.e. the categorical imper-ative, was already formulated at the time of writing the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique* and therefore, despite what Kicher and O'Neill have argued, is *not* the uni-fying principle of theoretical and practical reason.[41]

Third, Kant claims that the common principle of reason to be formulated "some day" unifies the theoretical and practical uses of reason by showing that all rational principles can be "derived" from it. In this sense, this purported unifying principle of reason is similar to the categorical imperative. Just as we must be able to "derive" particular practical principles from the categorical imperative, we must be able to "derive" the first theoretical and practical rational principles from this purported unifying principle of reason. While it is notoriously hard to make sense of his notion of derivation, Kant does claim that there is a sense of derivation from the categorical imperative to a particular practical obligation.[42] Plausibly, we should expect a similar kind of derivation from the supreme principle of reason in general to particular practical and theoretical principles of reason.

It is debatable whether Kant ever formulated this unifying common princi-ple of reason. Arguably, in the third *Critique*, Kant tries to complete his system by accounting for the unity of theoretical and practical reason through the power of judgment.[43] But Kant's project in the third *Critique* is beside the point for us. The account of the unity of reason presented in the third *Critique* is either not a unify-ing *principle* or is not a unifying principle from which other rational principles can be *derived.* Some commentators hold that the third *Critique* offers an account of the unity of theoretical and practical reason insofar as the *object* of those two uses of

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[41] O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 59; Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, 248. Likewise, Sasha Mudd argues that the "command [...] to seek the systematic unity of our cognition [...] is the fun-damental principle of theoretical reason, of which all others are but expressions or manifes-tations" (Mudd, "Rethinking the Priority of Practical Reason in Kant," 81; notably this is quite different from Willaschek's formulation that we encountered above). She claims that this supreme principle of theoretical reason is ultimately a *practical* principle. Since the Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of practical reason, it seems to follow that, on Mudd's reading, the Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of reason in general. But as I have argued, this cannot be right.
[42] *CPrR*, 5:8f.
[43] Guyer, "The Unity of Reason"; Guyer, "Reason and Reflective Judgment"; Klemme, "Is the Categorical Imperative the Highest Principle of Both Pure Practical and Theoretical Rea-son?"

reason are unified (i.e., the natural world and the moral world).[44] But Kant's claim in the first and second *Critique*, and the *Groundwork* about the "common principle of reason" seems to concern the unity of reason's own *principles,* and not the objects for which the principles are used. Other commentators argue that the third *Critique* does offer us the unifying *principle* of reason, but that it is not a principle from which we can *derive* other principles. Rather, the principle seems to regulate our uses of the theoretical and practical principles of reason by function as the "idea" that a benevolent God has created a teleologically ordered world.[45]

That leaves us with two possible interpretative options. Either we can think that Kant eventually gave up the ambition of identifying the unifying principle of reason in general.[46] Or, we can try to formulate the unifying principle of reason in general by reconstructing arguments that he did not fully develop, and putting together ideas that he did not explicitly combine.

In what follows (sections 5 to 8), I suggest an exploratory strategy for understanding the unifying principle of reason in general that relies on premises that are explicitly stated by Kant but draws conclusions that he did not always draw. On this account, the unifying principle of reason in general will turn out to be at the same time a categorical epistemic obligation and, thus, vindicate an epistemicist reading of Kant.

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[44] Guyer suggests that Kant never offered this unifying principle. But even on his reading, Kant originally aimed to establish reason's own unity through principles, but later he wisely retreated to the third *Critique's* more modest project of showing that the objects of reason can be unified (Guyer, "The Unity of Reason").

[45] Kleingeld, "Kant on the Unity of Theoretical and Practical Reason"; Timmermann, "The Unity of Reason - Kantian Perspectives."

[46] Guyer, "The Unity of Reason"; Willaschek, "The Structure of Normative Space According to Kant."

## 5.  The General Categorical Imperative (General-CI)

In her *Constructions of Reason* (1990), O'Neill underscores Kant's hint at a formulation of the common principle of theoretical and practical reason in "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" (1786). In a footnote, Kant writes:

> To make use of one's own reason means no more than to ask oneself, whenever one is supposed to assume something, whether one could find it feasible to make the ground or the rule on which one assumes it into a universal principle for the use of reason.[47]

I propose to call this principle the 'General Categorical Imperative (General-CI)'. The similarity between General-CI and the Universal Law formulation of the categorical imperative is unmistakable.[48]

Yet O'Neill seems to identify the General-CI with the supreme principle of *practical* reason, i.e., the categorical imperative.[49] But as I have already argued, we cannot square that reading with Kant's ongoing search for the common principle of reason in the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique.* So, if the General-CI *is* the common principle of reason, then we should interpret it in a way that does not identify it with the Categorical Imperative.

Unlike Kant's Universal Law formula of the categorical imperative, the General-CI is not limited to *practical* judgments, but rather demands that one universalizes the ground of one's judgments *simpliciter*, be it practical or not. How do we interpret the wider scope of the General-CI? As O'Neill sees it, this means that the supreme principle of *practical* reason, the categorical imperative, can be *extended* to govern non-practical judgments. On the alternative proposal that I want to explore, we can take the wider scope of the General-CI as indicating that it formulates a more fundamental principle of reason than the supreme principle of *practical* reason. That is, I argue, it formulates a *formal epistemic* principle of reason.

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[47] "What Is Orientation in Thinking? (1786)," 8:146f.
[48] *Groundwork*, 4:421.
[49] O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 59; 247. Also see Mudd, "Rethinking the Priority of Practical Reason in Kant."

Hence, in what follows, I argue that the General-CI specifies a formal *epistemic* categorical obligation. I present this account in three steps: First, I claim that the General-CI states a *formal epistemic* prescription. Second, I outline an account of normative epistemology that would follow from the General-CI. Third, I show that the General-CI states a formal epistemic categorical *obligation* and not merely an epistemic rule.

## 6. The General-CI is a <u>formal epistemic</u> principle

The General-CI is an *epistemic* principle in that it states a rule for cognition in general, regardless of whether the cognition is theoretical or practical. As Kant would put it, the General-CI states a purely *formal* epistemic rule. Let me explain.

Unlike "ethics", "ontology", or "metaphysics", the English term "epistemology" is a 19th-century invention. It was not until 1854 that James F. Ferrier introduced "epistemology" as "the doctrine or theory of knowing."[50] The German tradition is not so different. As Jan Woleński notes, Ernst Reinhold introduced the term, "*Theorie der Erkenntnis*" ("theory of knowledge") in 1832, but the label "*Erkenntnistheorie*" did not become popular until the 1860s.[51] This is to say that in studying Kant's conception of epistemic normativity and epistemic so-and-so, it is inevitable to get in dispute about terms. The task is to make sure that these terminological disputes track genuine conceptual divisions and are not merely verbal. Moreover, as I will try to show in this section, there are insights that we can gain about our conception of the category of "epistemic" norms, especially as related to practical or logical norms, by trying to think how Kant would carve up the space of epistemic normativity and reasons.

Now, call the thesis that, for Kant, epistemic principles are exhausted by the principles of theoretical reason, the *epistemic=theoretical* doctrine. I argue that epistemic=theoretical thesis is mistaken. For Kant, epistemic principles do include principles of the theoretical use of reason, but they also include principles of the practical and the formal uses of reason.

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[50] Ferrier, Institutes of Metaphysics: The Theory of Knowing and Being, 46.
[51] Woleński, "The History of Epistemology," 3.

Throughout his Critical philosophy, Kant distinguishes between formal and material rational cognition. In the latter case, he holds, we employ principles of reason to "determine" an *object*, either as the object *is* (in the case of theoretical rational cognition) or as it *ought to be* (in the case of practical rational cognition).[52] Kant explicitly makes this distinction in the first page of the *Groundwork*, among other places:

> All rational cognition is either *material* and concerned with some object, or *formal* and occupied only with the form of the understanding and of reason itself and with the universal rules of thinking in general, without distinction of objects. Formal philosophy is called *logic*, whereas material philosophy, which has to do with determinate objects and the laws to which they are subject, is in turn divided into two. For these laws are either laws of **nature** or laws of **freedom**. The science of the first is called **physics**, that of the other is **ethics**; the former is also called the doctrine of nature, the latter the doctrine of morals.[53]

Thus, theoretical cognition and practical cognition are two kinds of material rational cognition. Provided that epistemology is the study of our capacity for rational cognition per se, it seems to follow that the topic of Kant's epistemology is superordinate to the distinction between theoretical and practical cognition. For Kant, in other words, the distinction between theoretical and practical rational cognition is not a distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic. Arguably, for him, the distinction between norms that govern cognitive vs. affective states is more relevant to the distinction between epistemic vs. non-epistemic norms.[54]

Moreover, as I noted above, Kant's distinction between formal and material uses of reason is also a distinction between two kinds of rational cognition. For example, consider his characterization of "pure general logic" from the *Jäsche* lectures:

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[52] Kant often talks about cognition as an act of determining an object. The "determining" is the task of the understanding, while the determinable is provided by either sensibility or feeling (*CPR*, B151-152; *Groundwork*, 4:414f; For discussion, see Engstrom, "Understanding and Sensibility").

[53] *Groundwork*, 4:387; Also see, Kant, *CPR*, A633/B661; Bix-Bx; Kant, *CJ*, 5:171.

[54] Contrast this, with for example Konstantin Pollock's recent work, where he identifies epistemic norms with norms that concern the empirical use of concepts (*Kant's Theory of Normativity*, 2–11.).

Logic is … a self-cognition of the understanding and of reason, not as to their faculties in regard to objects, however, but merely as to form. In logic I will not ask what the understanding cognizes and *how much* it can cognize or *how far* its cognition goes. For that would be self-cognition in regard to its *material* use and it belongs to metaphysics. In logic the question is only, *How will the understanding cognize itself?*[55]

To be sure, Kant is steadfast in his rejection of the broadly rationalist doctrine that logical cognition can give us *material* cognition about the world, ourselves included in it.[56] Nevertheless, he also still insists that logic is concerned with "self-*cognition* of the understanding" and that in logic our reason tries to "*cognize* itself*," and so on. In other words, since in his view, purely formal cognition is *not* cognition of objects, logical principles of formal cognition are *not* identical to the principles of theoretical cognition (as it is sometimes assumed by his readers). Thus, for Kant, formal rational cognition encompasses principles that are distinct from both theoretical and practical principles. In short then, Kant's distinction between material and formal principles of reason is not a distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic principles, either.

Now, the General-CI is a prescription for universalizing the ground of one's judgment, be it practical, theoretical, or formal. That is, the prescription does not limit itself to any specific mode of representing the object of cognition (as the object ought to be, as it is, or as abstracted away). In this sense, the General-CI is a

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[55] *LL*, 9:14 (Jäsche).

[56] Of course, not all rationalists submit to the view that logic can afford material cognition, and in particular, material self-cognition. But it is fair to say that Kant sometimes attributes this view to what he calls the Leibniz-Wolff rationalist philosophy.

purely formal principle that governs all our cognition in general: it is thus a *formal epistemic* principle (see figure 1).[57]
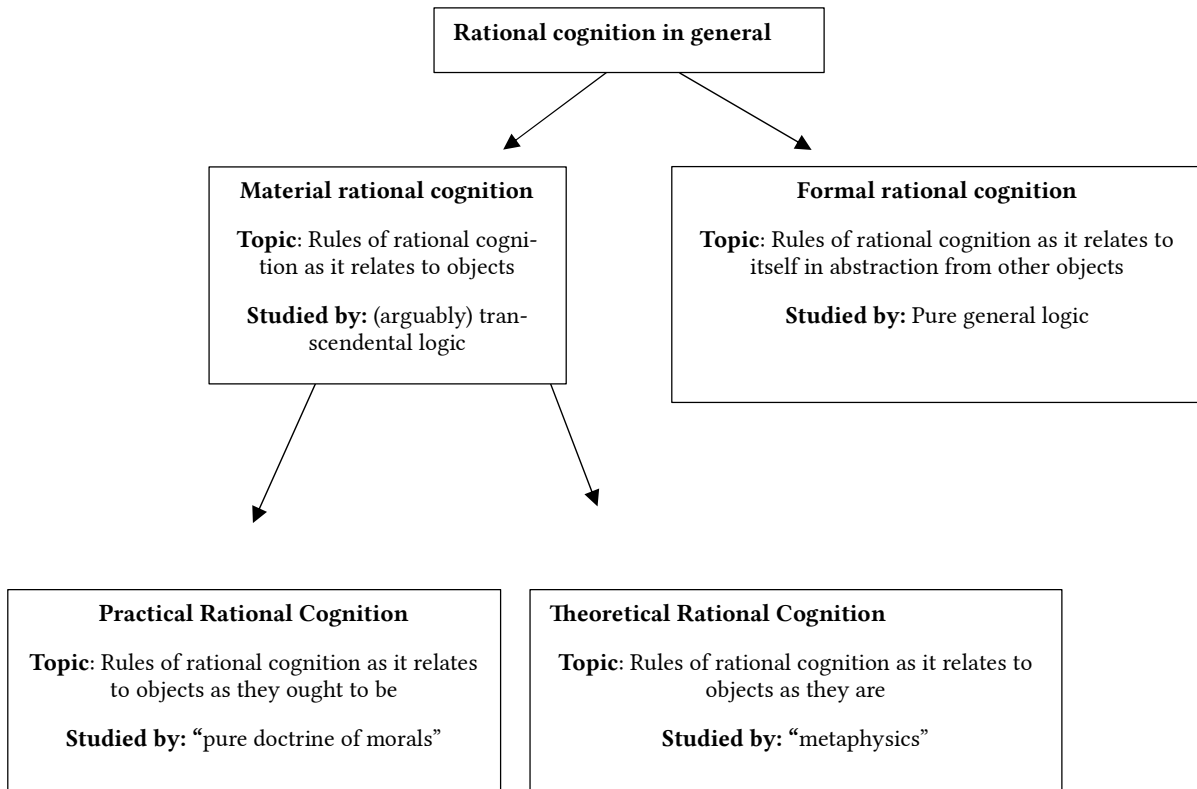
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                    ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                    │ Rational cognition in general │
                    └──────────────────────────────┘
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**Material rational cognition**

**Topic**: Rules of rational cognition as it relates to objects

**Studied by:** (arguably) transcendental logic

**Formal rational cognition**

**Topic**: Rules of rational cognition as it relates to itself in abstraction from other objects

**Studied by:** Pure general logic

**Practical Rational Cognition**

**Topic**: Rules of rational cognition as it relates to objects as they ought to be

**Studied by:** "pure doctrine of morals"

**Theoretical Rational Cognition**

**Topic**: Rules of rational cognition as it relates to objects as they are

**Studied by:** "metaphysics"

*Figure 1: Kant's Division of the "system of rational cognition," or the domain of the epistemic*

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[57] In several other places, Kant lists the General-CI alongside two other principles: "1. To think *for oneself* [which corresponds to the General-CI], 2. To think oneself [...] into the place of every *other person*, 3. Always to think *consistently* with *oneself*." (Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, 7:288; also see Kant, *CJ*, 5:294.). In this paper, I do not have the space to analyze the relationship between these three maxims. But for the most part, I agree with Alix Cohen's interpretation that these three maxims are different formulations of the same principle. As she correctly observes, this is a kind of structure that we see in Kant's moral philosophy, too, as he insists that the three formulations of the Categorical Imperative are formulations of the same principle. On this picture, the General-CI corresponds to the Formula of Universal Law. If that is on the right path, then following Kant's own model in the moral case, I am giving the General-CI formulation a certain pride of place in comparison to the other universal maxims of thinking. See Cohen, "Kant on the Ethics of Belief".

## 7.  What kind of normative epistemology follows from the General-CI?

So far, I have tried to find a place for the General-CI in Kant's division of the system of rational cognition. But what exactly is prescribed by the General-CI? What does it mean to say that we ought to universalize the ground of all our rational judgments?

According to Kant, whereas every judgment, whether practical, theoretical, or formal, has a "subjective ground," some judgments acquire "objective grounds" as well.[58] First, and on the practical side: as we saw, Kant thinks that in forming practical judgments we determine what ought to be done. This judgment always has a subjective *basis*. As Kant would put it, every deliberate action has a maxim., i.e., a "subjective principle of action". [59] My maxims are 'subjective' in that they determine what I ought to do *given* my own ends. [60] As he puts it, practical principles are "subjective, or *maxims*, when the condition [which make the imperative valid] is regarded by the subject as holding only for his will."[61] Now, the *subjective* practical cognition (i.e., to cognize *what ought to be done given my own ends*) amounts to *objective* practical cognition (i.e., to cognize *what ought to be done simpliciter)* when I cognize what I ought to do as a rational being per se.[62] As he puts it:

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[58] "Taking something to be true [*Das Fürwahrhalten*] is an occurrence in our understanding that may rest on objective grounds, but that also requires subjective causes in the mind of him who judges" (*CPR*, A820/B848.). In this passage, he uses the term "subjective causes." However, elsewhere he makes similar points in terms of "subjective grounds." For example, he often explains error in judgment in terms of a mismatch between subjective grounds and objective grounds of judgment (Ibid., A294/B350-51; Kant, *LL*, 9:53-54.).  For a comprehensive study, see Chignell, "Kant's Concepts of Justification."

[59] *MM*, 6:225. Kant does seem to hold that sometimes we act out of rote habit. In those cases, we do not act on the basis of a maxim. He thus holds that there is a task of learning to act on maxims, i.e., acting deliberately (Kant, "Lectures on Pedagogy (1803)," 9:480–1.).

[60] It is debatable whether Kant had a univocal conception of maxims (Timmermann, "Kant's Puzzling Ethics of Maxims"; Potter, "Maxims in Kant's Moral Philosophy"; Atwell, *Ends and Principles in Kant's Moral Thought*.), and the interpretative options about his conception of maxims are vast (Gressis, "Recent Work on Kantian Maxims I"; Gressis, "Recent Work on Kantian Maxims II."). What I present here is more sympathetic to the so-called Wolffian reading of Kant's conception of maxims (Kitcher, "What Is a Maxim?"; McCarty, "Maxims in Kant's Practical Philosophy."). While I will offer some textual evidence for this reading, it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend the Wolffian reading.

[61] Kant, *CPrR*, 5:19.

[62] *MM*, 6:225. Emphasis added. In the passage, Kant uses *erkennen* [knowledge]. As far as I can see, here, the notion of *practical knowledge* is one and the same as the notion of *objective practical cognition*.

> You must [...] first consider your action in terms of their subjective principles; but you can *know [erkennen]* whether this principle also holds objectively only in this way: that when your reason subjects it to the test of conceiving yourself as also giving universal law through it, it qualifies for such a giving of universal law.[63]

In short, in turning my subjective practical cognition into objective practical cognition, I need to make sure that my judgment's subjective ground (i.e., *what ought to be done given my own ends*) conforms to its objective ground (i.e., *what ought to be done given the ends of rational beings as such*). Thus, practical judgments are evaluable in terms of the relation between their subjective and objective grounds.

Less well-known is Kant's distinction between the objective and subjective grounds of judgments in general. For instance, in the *Bloomberg* lectures, Kant states:

> All criteria of truth are either
>
> A. *internal* or
>
> B. *external*
>
> The former are *objective* criteria, which contain the ground for why something is really true or false. The others, however, [are] *subjective* criteria[,] which contain certain circumstances, by means of which one is in a position to make a supposition about the truth or the falsehood in a thing.[64]

As in the practical case, the subjective grounds determine how one ought to judge given the doxastic basis that is available to the agent. The objective grounds are objective in that they determine how one ought to judge as a rational being per se. Likewise, one's judgment is valid when one's subjective ground conforms to one's objective ground. For example, you may believe, on the basis of a peculiar feeling that cats are mammals. In that case, the subjective ground of your judgment is not the same as the objective ground of your judgment because your feeling is not the ground for why that proposition is true, nor is it connected to those grounds in the right way. Rather, biological facts and conventions are the real grounds for the truth of that proposition. Accordingly, had you formed the belief that cats are mammals on the basis of biological sciences (or, perhaps your teacher's testimony if it is con-

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[63] Ibid.

[64] *LL*, 24:87-88 (Bloomberg); see also Kant, *CPR*, A820/B848.

nected to the sciences in the right way), then your theoretical judgment would be warranted.[65]

These passages point to a general schema for what it takes to achieve objective cognition. It is precisely this schema that is formulated and prescribed by the General-CI. According to this schema, one and the same type of norm can ensure that one's subjective grounds of judgment conform to the objective grounds in all cases, i.e., in the case of theoretical, practical, and formal judgments alike. Namely, we can determine whether the ground of our judgment is *objective* by testing whether the ground of the judgment is *universalizable*. That is, we want to ensure that the subjective ground of our judgment conforms to the grounds of a judgment that any rational being in our position would endorse.

But is that informative at all? How can we determine whether the subjective grounds of our judgments are indeed universalizable?

In the first *Critique* and the *Lectures on Logic,* Kant sketches a general and to some extent systematic account of what it takes to universalize the ground of one's judgment in different domains, that is, he outlines a general normative epistemology. To be sure, his account remains at the programmatic level, and the details are sparse. Nonetheless, we do get the blueprints for an ambitious project that starts with an ideal theory of epistemic norms, and only then specifies its various instances. Here, I briefly outline the structure of his account.

Kant famously holds that *all* rational cognition, that is, practical, theoretical, and merely formal cognition, is governed by a set of universal and necessary rules under the heading of "pure general logic." Rules of pure general logic are formal, as we saw, because they do not take into account the nature of the *object* of cognition. Thus, formal logic, Kant insists, can function "as the principle for passing judgment on *all* use of the understanding in general, ... on its *correctness* in regard to mere form."[66] The principles of formal logic are thus universal and necessary.[67]

Since the General-CI imposes a universality constraint, and since rules of pure general logic are the absolutely universal constraints on cognition, we can

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[65] At least for empirical judgments, Kant explicitly sanctions the indirect reliance on objective grounds through testimony. See *LL*, 9:77-78 (Jäsche).
[66] Ibid., 9:15 (Jäsche); emphasis added.
[67] Ibid., 9:13-14.

interpret the General-CI as *firstly* imposing logical norms on all rational judgments. To deny this, is to say that one could universalize the ground of one's judgment (practical or otherwise) while violating a principle of formal logic. But it seems uncontroversial that any violation of principles of formal logic would amount to a contradiction in conception. We do not need to say that a contradiction in conception *just is* a logical contradiction. All we need to say is that logical contradictions entail a contradiction in conception. For example, in the practical case, when I know that my subjective practical judgment cannot be universalized insofar as *purely logical forms* go, I can infer that my practical judgment is not objective. Put differently, I do not *know* what I ought to do *simpliciter* if my judgment does not conform to the strictly universal norms of formal cognition.[68] In this sense, then, any universalizability test is at *first* (though not always ultimately) a test of formal logical consistently. Accordingly, for Kant, logical norms are the fundamental epistemic norms. He thus writes that formal logic can "be regarded as foundation for all the other sciences and as the propaedeutic to all use of the understanding."[69]

While the General-CI subjects all cognition to the absolutely universal principles of formal logic, it *also* imposes regulations that are only relatively universal, namely, (i) agent-relative principles, and (ii) object-relative principles.

(i): Kant holds that the universal principles of formal logic may be specified in relation to the features of specific kinds of epistemic agents - this amounts to what he calls "applied logic." As Kant puts it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "[a] general logic [...] is called applied if it is directed to the rules of the use of the understanding under the subjective empirical conditions that psychology teaches us."[70] He cites "influence of the senses," "play of imagination", "the laws of memory", "the power of habit", "inclination", but also "the sources of prejudice" as examples of these empirical psychological conditions.

But presumably what psychology teaches us about human psychological constraints *in general* can be distinguished from what psychology would teach us about human psychological constrains in more specific circumstances. For example, what psychology traches us about the sources of prejudice in general can be distin-

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[68] Although, the fact that my subjective practical judgment is logically consistent is not sufficient for it being an objective practical judgment.

[69] Kant, *LL*, 9:13.

[70] *CPR*, A53/B77.

guished from what psychology teaches us about the sources of prejudice in scientific communities. Thus, as I see it, Kant's conception of applied logic allows for different levels of concretization, although he does not make this point explicit. At the most fundamental level, we may specify the principles of pure general logic for *finite agents*, that is agents with finite memory, attention span, perceptual capacities, and so on. Kant himself talks about a *general* applied logic, which we can identify with an applied logic for finite agents. However, in principle, Kant's basic idea of an applied logic seems to have no lower bound on how concrete it may become: we may consider an applied logic for finite agents in general, but also applied logics for humans, for specialists, for people living under different social conditions, and so on.[71]

In short, a move from pure general logic to an applied logic is a move from absolutely universal constrains (that apply to rational agents as such) to constraints that are universal only relative to a kind of agent.

**(ii)**: Kant maintains that principles of pure general logic may also be specified by regarding "the difference of the *objects* to which it may be directed"; this is what he calls a "particular" logic.[72] He adds, "[t]he logic of the particular use of the understanding contains the rules for correctly thinking about a certain kind of objects." What we get from the latter, he tells us, is "the organon of this or that science."[73]

As we have seen, for Kant, the most fundamental division among objects of cognition is a division between practical and theoretical objects. But again, the idea of particular logics seems to allow different levels of concretization, too. On this account, we can thus think about rules of thinking that govern the study of physical objects, others that govern the study of social entities, and so on.

To be sure, for Kant, the distinction between different particular logics concerns epistemic norms that govern different scientific practices. But what interests us here is this: for him, epistemic norms that govern specific scientific fields are in some sense *derived* from the rules of pure general logic. Thus, again, we can unpack

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[71] Again, Kant does not speak of different levels of concretization explicitly. But his basic idea of *applying* logic by considering a set of psychological constraints (e.g., for human agents in general) implies the possibility of further degrees of application. In other words, given Kant's manner of introducing the notion of an applied logic, if there are more concrete psychologies, then there *must* be more applied logics.

[72] Kant, *CPR*, A52/B76; emphasis added.

[73] Ibid., A52/B76.

the claim that, for Kant, the rules of formal cognition are *formal epistemic* rules. They are the rules from which other epistemic rules can be derived. As we had indicated before, the derivation in question is not a simple deductive derivation: we do not deduce the epistemic norms of social sciences from the rules of pure general logic. Rather, it is a derivation in the sense that the 'organon of this or that science' are determined by way of considering the rules of pure general logic in relation to a given type of object.

Finally, although Kant does not explicitly endorse this, it is worth noting that, in principle, further mixing of applied and particular logics can give us applied particular epistemic rules: e.g., rules that govern the activities of specialists in thinking about social objects vs. rules that govern the activities of non-specialists in the same domain.



**Pure General Logic [= formal logic]**

*From strictly universal and <u>absolutely necessary</u> to*

Object relative  (relative necessity)          Agent relative (non-strict universality)

**Particular Logic**                                         **Applied Logic**

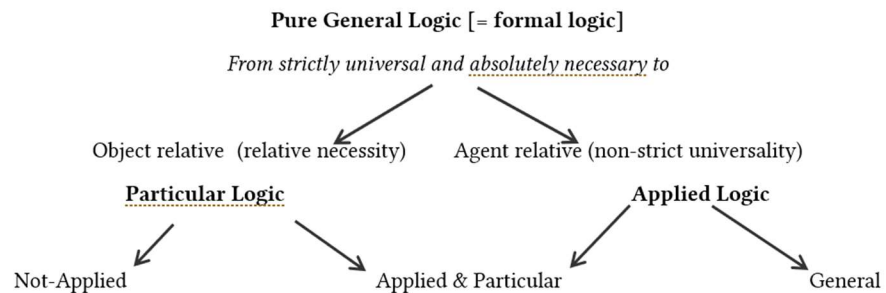Not-Applied                    Applied & Particular                        General

Figure 2: Division of Normative Epistemic Norms

In all these cases, the basic normative structure remains the same: Kant envisions a relationship between a system of absolutely universal laws and a system of relatively universal laws (see figure 2). The relatively universal laws provide the objective ground of a judgment in specific circumstances *because* they are applications of the absolutely universal law. In this sense, the normative structure of Kant's normative epistemology mirrors the more familiar structure of his ethics. This does not escape Kant's own attention:

> What I call applied logic [...] is thus a representation of the understanding and the rules of its necessary use *in concreto*, namely under the contingent conditions of the subject [...]. [G]eneral and pure logic is related to it as pure morality, which contains merely the necessary moral laws [...] in general, is related to the doctrine of virtue proper, which assesses these laws under the hindrances of the feelings, inclinations, and passions to which human beings are more or less subject.[74]

Note that the purported analogy between Kant's logical norms of cognition and normative ethics is a similarity of the *normative structure*. Given my proposal to identify Kant's logical norms of cognition (pure, transcendental, applied, and particular) with his normative epistemology, then we should read the above passage as making a point about the normative structure of epistemic rules. The claim is *not* that we know theoretical, practical, and formal facts in just the same way. Rather, the claim is that, for Kant, the *norms* that govern the pursuit of knowledge and understanding in theoretical, practical, and formal domains have a similar organization to norms of ethics: there are purely universal norms which ground and govern the particular and applied norms.

To sum up. A complete Kantian normative epistemology would contain: (a) purely formal epistemic rules, (b) purely formal epistemic rules as related to objects in general [transcendental logic], (c) object-relative rules which consider the rules of *(a)* under conditions of cognizing different kinds of objects, and (d) agent-relative rules which consider the application of rules of *(a)*, *(b),* or *(c)* to different kind of agents. For Kant, all these rules are derivable from the common principle of reason, the General-CI, in that they all instantiate a single procedure: they answer whether the subjective ground of a judgment can become objective *by asking* whether the subjective ground can be universalized. Kant does hold that we must first consider our judgment by thinking about absolute conditions of universalizability. He thus starts with an extremely ideal stance. However, since he thinks there *are* applied and particular logics, we can conclude that, in his view, pathological beings like us are also subject to relative universalizability conditions. In this way, for Kant, our ordinary first-order normative epistemology is just a concretization of (what he

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[74] Ibid., A54-55/B78-79.

calls) formal logic. Again, the point is *not* that our ordinary first-order normative epistemology can be analytically deduced from our norms of pure general logic. Rather, the claim is that, for Kant, our first-order normative epistemological rules can be *derived* by way of considering the formal logic rules *given* a relation to objects. Indeed, the all-important epistemological task of Kant's critical philosophy is to show how this derivation is possible and what shape it must take.[75] However, what remains true and what is being underscored here is Kant's other claim that the epistemic rules that govern our cognition of objects are not given to us through some kind of intellectual intuition but are in some sense derived from the purely logical rules of cognition.[76]

## 8. The General-CI states a categorical obligation

In section 6, I argued that the General-CI is a fundamental *epistemic* principle. In section 7, I explained what normative epistemology would look like if we accepted that claim. In this section, I explain why the General-CI has the force of an obligation.

Earlier, I noted that the General-CI resembles Kant's Universal-Law formulation of the Categorical Imperative. While that is evidently true, there are also important differences between the two formulations. Most noticeably, the General-CI is not expressed in the form of an imperative. So, one may worry that, after all, the General-CI does not state an unconditional *obligation*.

But the non-imperative form of the General-CI is only on the surface. First, in the original text, the General-CI is introduced as a footnote to explain the meaning of an imperative, namely:

> Accept what appears to you most worthy of belief after careful and sincere examination, whether of facts or rational grounds; only do not dispute that prerogative of reason which makes it the highest good on earth, the prerogative of being the final touchstone of truth.[77]

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[75] Ibid., A154.
[76] Ibid., A79-08/B105.
[77] "What Is Orientation in Thinking? (1786)," 8:146.

In order to clarify what he means by this imperative, Kant offers his formulation of the General-CI as we have seen it. That indicates that the General-CI is a re-description of this imperative in an evaluative form.

Second, Kant's remarks about how to employ the General-CI further proves that he thinks of that principle as a prescription that one should follow, but may fail to follow. He explains the role of the General-CI in the following way:

> This test is one that everyone can apply to himself; and with this examination he will see superstition and enthusiasm disappear, even if he falls far short of having the information to refute them on objective grounds.[78]

That the General-CI gives us a test that we could apply to ourselves to *correct* our judgments implies that we can fail at conforming to the General-CI. For example, when I form a racist judgment that such-and-such marginalized people are lazy, I take something to be true given a subjective ground, i.e., given my prejudice. But the General-CI requires that any judgment ought to be considered as a possible judgment of rational beings as such. Kant's claim is that judgments of prejudice cannot be so universalized. He thus thinks that were we to test our judgments of prejudice via a universalizability procedure, we would come to see that we ought to abandon any such judgment. That is to say, we are not by default conforming to the General-CI. Conforming to the General-CI is an epistemic achievement that we must strive for.

To be sure, an ideal rational agent would always conform to the General-CI. To echo Kant's remarks about the "holy will" in the *Groundwork*, we could say: an ideal cognizer would form its judgments "in conformity with" the General-CI, "since of itself, by its subjective constitution, it can be determined only through the representation of" the universalizable ground of judgment (be it theoretical or practical).[79] But, clearly, we are not such ideal cognizers, because we are influenced by subjective empirical conditions. On Kant's account, as the above passage suggests, if we did not fail with respect to the General-CI, we would not be subject to "superstition and enthusiasm." Thus, for us, the General-CI is an "imperative" or a prescription.

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[78] Ibid., 8:146f.
[79] *Groundwork*, 4:414.

Now, by supposition, a non-practical rational being is not subject to the Categorical Imperative. But insofar as a non-practical rational being is a cognitive being, she makes both theoretical and logical judgments. In virtue of making these judgments, she is subject to the General-CI, that is, an objective unconditional epistemic principle which she may or may not conform to. She is thus conscious of a categorical epistemic *obligation*. This obligation is categorical because it is unconditional. And its categorical status does not come from a moral categorical demand, because by a supposition which we shared with Kitcher and the epistemic-moralists, the non-practical rational being is not subject to moral demands. Therefore, for Kant, there are categorical epistemic obligations *per se*. Kant thus endorses the *independence* thesis of epistemicism; i.e., were a rational agent not bound by any moral obligations, she would still be bound by epistemic obligations.

At this point, one may worry that in his writings, Kant reserves the term "duty" [*Pflicht*] for practical obligations. Moreover, he explicitly defines the term "imperative" as the form of practical judgments.[80] So, how are we licensed to talk about an epistemic categorical imperative and epistemic duties?

Again, I think this issue concerns only the surface of the text and is merely verbal. First of all, Kant also frequently uses the language of oughts [*Sollen*] for non-practical judgments.[81] Second, although he reserves the term "imperative" for practical judgments, he frequently uses the language of "prescribing" [*vorschreiben*] in relation to non-practical judgments.[82]

Finally, and most importantly, we can consider Kant's *concept* of duty as an imperative. In the *Groundwork*, commenting on why the moral law is an imperative for human beings, he writes:

> All imperatives are expressed by an *ought* and indicate by this the relation of an objective law of reason to a will that by its subjective constitution is not necessarily determined by it (a necessitation).[83]

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[80] *LL*, 9:86-87 (Jäsche).
[81] To name a few examples: Ibid., 9:14; 9:792; *CPR*, A135/B174-175. Also see R-1627 from 1790's.
[82] *CPR*, B163; A135/B175.
[83] Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:413.

The idea is simple enough: a law *l* states an obligation for an agent *S* just in case (a) *l* states an objective law of reason for rational beings, and (b) *S* may fail to conform to *l* because of their subjective constitution. Both conditions are satisfied by the General-CI.

(a): The General-CI, Kant notes, is a "*strictly* universal principle for the use of reason."[84] For Kant, a principle is strictly universal just in case it is a principle that is valid for rational beings as such, and it is in that sense objective.[85] Thus, for Kant, the General-CI is an objective law of reason.

(b): Kant's hypothesis of non-practical rational beings is *not* a hypothesis about perfect rational beings. Therefore, the subjective constitution of a non-practical rational being may get in the way of them forming judgments on subjective grounds that are at the same time universalizable. In other words, we could have an *applied* logic for non-practical rational beings. That is to say, the subjective conditions of a non-practical rational being may "hinder or promote" their conformity to the objective law. Therefore, the General-CI does not necessarily determine the judgments of a non-practical rational being.

Sometimes terminological choices do not reflect deep philosophical commitments. This seems to be a case of that. Although Kant reserves the term *Pflicht* for moral duties, he seems to be committed to the idea that the General-CI states an unconditional epistemic duty.

## 9.   A final step towards epistemicism

So far, I have argued that, for Kant, epistemic obligations have normative independence: i.e., they are binding even if nothing else was at stake. But as I have indicated, epistemicism makes a further claim about normative absoluteness, namely, that epistemic norms are binding no matter what else is at stake. To see what is being added consider the following analogy. Someone who thinks pleasure is intrinsically valuable could hold that the end of pursuing pleasure is valuable even if nothing else was at stake. However, they are not thereby committed to the claim that the pleasure-promoting norms are binding when they conflict with moral, le-

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[84] "What Is Orientation in Thinking? (1786)," 8:146.; emphasis added.
[85] Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:408.

gal, etc. obligations. Normative independence concerns intrinsic bindingness of a norm, but here were are concerns with their absolute normative validity.

There are two arguments for why Kant must accept the normative absoluteness of epistemic obligations.

First, a negative argument. Suppose epistemic obligations were not normatively absolute. In particular, suppose it were true that according to Kant, epistemic obligations could be undercut (or "silenced") by moral obligations. In that case, it would not be the case that epistemic obligations are binding no matter what else is at stake. Now, consider how Kant would model the practical deliberation of the agent in a situation where moral obligations are binding, but epistemic obligations are not. The agent forms a maxim. In order to determine whether the course of action is morally permissible, she must examine whether the subjective ground of her action (i.e., the maxim) conforms to the objective grounds (i.e., the moral law). For Kant, to say that an agent is bound by moral obligations means that she is bound by an obligation to universalize the ground of her practical judgment. However, as I discussed in sections 6 and 7, this universalization norm is just a special instance of an epistemic obligation to universalize the subjective grounds of judgment in general. But if I derive an obligation $l2$ from an obligation $l1$, then $l2$ is binding only if $l1$ is binding. Hence, the norm to universalize the ground of my practical judgment is binding only if the epistemic norm to universalize the ground of judgments in general (i.e., General-CI) is binding. But by supposition, we are in a situation where epistemic obligations are not binding while moral obligations are. Thus, we are imagining a situation where an agent is both bound by moral obligations and she is not. This is absurd. Hence, epistemic obligations must have normative absoluteness. Nothing, not even our moral obligations, can undercut our fundamental epistemic obligations.

Second, a positive argument. In section 2, I noted that Kant identifies categorical imperatives with imperatives to pursue our objective ends, i.e., ends that we must pursue in virtue of our rational nature alone. As I argued in sections 6 and 7, Kant identifies a hierarchical normative structure for principles of rational cognition. Now, to say that we must treat our "rational nature" as an objective end seems to entail that we must treat principles of rationality as being normatively absolute, i.e.,

norms of rationality are binding for us no matter what else is at stake. If my arguments in sections 6 to 8 were on the right tracks, then the supreme principle of the system of rational cognition is the General-CI. The General-CI is an epistemic obligation. Hence, to treat rational nature as an objective end entails treating formal epistemic obligations as ones which are binding no matter what else is at stake. Hence, for Kant, epistemic obligations must have normative validity absolutely.

## 10. Objections and replies

In this section, I will reply to three possible objections to my claim that, according to Kant, rational agents are subject to epistemic obligations prior to being subject to moral obligations.

*First,* let's consider the most obvious worry: Kant insists over and over that it is "impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will." [86] It seems that on my reading, it is quite possible to think of something else as good without limitation, namely a cognizer who conforms to epistemic rules. Am I attributing an inconsistency to Kant?

This would be a problem only if, for Kant, the notion of a good will was independent from the notion of good epistemic agency. That is, this would be a problem only if there was a gap between an agent who acts out of good will and an agent who is epistemically flawed. On my reading, Kant denies the possibility of such an agent: for him, having a good will just is a form of good epistemic agency. Of course, there are agents who act in mere conformity with the moral law, but they fail to practically judge that doing so is their duty.[87] Such agents do not exemplify a good will. An agent exemplifies the good will only if they act in conformity with the moral law, but more importantly, also on the basis of the rational cognition of their duty. To put the same point differently, for Kant, an agent with a good will is necessarily and essentially an agent who makes the right practical judgment. Now, if *epistemic=theoretical* thesis is false, then for Kant, to make the right practical judgment just is an epistemic achievement. So, Kant can uphold epistemicism

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[86] Ibid., 4:392.
[87] They may theoretically judge that doing so is their duty. But an agent *practically* judges that $x$ ought to be done for the sake of $y$ only if her judgments causes her in the right way to do $x$ for the sake of $y$. That is, practical judgment proper is causally efficacious.

and also hold that the good will is the only thing that is good without limitation, because having a good will just is an epistemic achievement – though, as it turns out, Kant holds that this kind of *practical* epistemic achievement is the highest form of epistemic achievement. Of course, non-Kantians who accept epistemicism may not accept that a kind of practical judgment represents the highest form of all epistemic achievements. But that is beside the point. It is enough to show that Kant's view is consistent by noting that one *may* accept epistemicism, and also the thesis that the highest form of epistemic achievement is captured by a form of cognitive achievement in one's practical judgment.

*Second*, and relatedly, Kant famously held that if there is a conflict between the requirements of "pure practical reason" and the claims of "speculative" or "theoretical" reason, the former must have the upper hand. He writes:

> [I]n the union of pure speculative and pure practical reason in our cognition, the latter has primacy, assuming that this union is not *contingent* and discretionary but based in a priori reason itself and therefore *necessary*.[88]

If this is the case, how can I attribute the view to Kant that epistemic obligations have a primacy over moral obligations?

Again, my view is puzzling only if we assume the *epistemic=theoretical* thesis. On that assumption, it sounds like I am claiming that, for Kant, principles of theoretical reason have a primacy over principles of practical reason. But the following claims are compatible: (i) Kant holds that the supreme principle of epistemic obligation has a primacy over the supreme principle of practical reason, and (ii) Kant holds that the supreme principle of practical reason has a primacy over all principles of theoretical reason. These two claims are compatible because the formal principles of reason have a primacy over the practical principles of reason, and formal principles are epistemic.

*Third,* one may worry that my reading of Kant's view of normativity opens him up to some versions of the "empty-formalism" objection.[89] Roughly, according this line of attack on Kantian moral theory, Kant's categorical imperative is *merely* a formal

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[88] Kant, *CPrR*, 5:121.
[89] Sedgwick, *Hegel's Critique of Kant*; Stern, *Kantian Ethics*, chap. 8.

principle, and as such does not help us determine the content of our moral obligations and practical judgments. In response to this charge, recent commentators have argued that Kant does not limit himself to merely formal considerations in characterizing the Categorical Imperative.[90]

As I see it, my reading of Kant should not make a difference to this debate. First, consider the case of epistemic obligations that govern *theoretical* judgments. It is plausible to say that one could specify a complete set of formal epistemic norms for theoretical judgments that determines, e.g., how one ought to change one's credence given the evidence, and yet say nothing about what credence one should have with respect to a specific belief. It is one thing to determine the norms of theoretical inquiry and their structure, another thing to determine how they should be applied to specific circumstances. Now, one thing that is being suggested in this paper is that, for Kant, moral norms are a species of the formal epistemic norms that govern judgments per se. Hence, we can expect a similar structure: it is one thing to determine the norms and their structure, and another thing to say how they can be applied to specific contexts. To be sure, this leaves the door open for the empty formalism objection if Kant cannot explain how we must take the further step of mapping purely formal norms to specific circumstances. But I do not think that my account makes that story any less or more plausible.

## 11. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that, for Kant, formal epistemic obligations have normative validity absolutely and independently from any other kind of obligation. My argument turned on what I take to be a fundamental ambiguity in the literature on Kant's theory of epistemic normativity, namely that Kant's conception of the category of *epistemic* norms, epistemic rules, etc. does not match our contemporary conception of the term in a straightforward way. For one thing, unlike much of the contemporary literature, it seems clear that Kant would not contrast practical norms with epistemic norms. But moreover, if I have been on the right track, Kant's conception of epistemic norms also includes logical norms. Indeed, I have argued that for Kant, in some sense, all epistemic norms are derived from norms of formal

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[90] For example, see Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment"; Wood, "Unsociable Sociability." Though, I'm sympathetic to worries raised by Theunissen, "Kant's Commitment to Metaphysics of Morals."

logic. Put differently, normative epistemology is an extended study of logic where we apply logical norms to different kinds of agents and specify different kinds of objects of cognition. To be sure, Kant denies that these latter epistemic norms can simply be deduced from formal logical norms. But he seems to hold that they are derived from it in that they are particularization or applications of those rules.

Yet, I have also argued that, for Kant, the normativity of both theoretical and practical rules must be traced back to the normativity of formal epistemic rules. As we saw, on Kant's account, our purely formal epistemic rules are identical with the rules of pure general logic. Thus, on my reading of Kant, the normativity for both practical and theoretical rules must be traced back to the normativity of pure general logic. But this verdict faces a lively debate about the normative status of rules of pure general logic in Kant's philosophy. My approach to this debate has been indirect, and, admittedly, I have opened up the possibility of locating an inconsistency in Kant's views. As Clinton Tolley has forcefully argued, there might be a gap between Kant's alleged commitment to the normativity of logic and his view that rules of pure general logic are constitutive rules of thinking. I leave this question open for future engagement with the topic. [91] But at least, if I am right, I have shown the following: So much, and perhaps all of Kant's theory of normativity, hangs on his views about the normativity of logic.[92]

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