

TRANSCENDENTAL SEMANTICS EXTENDED: COMMENTS ON LOPARIC

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As I thought through the theoretical part [of “The Limits of Sense and Reason”], considering its whole scope and the reciprocal relations of all its parts, I noticed that I still lacked something essential, something that in my long metaphysical studies I, as well as others, had failed to pay attention to and that, in fact, constitutes the key to the whole secret of hitherto still obscure metaphysics. I asked myself: What is the ground of the reference (*Beziehung*) of that in us which we call “representation” (“*Vorstellung*”) to the object? (10:129-130)

In “The Problems of Pure Reason and Transcendental Semantics,” Zeljko Loparic argues that we not only can but should interpret Kant’s transcendental idealism as *transcendental semantics*, and then he also provides some specific examples of this approach to Kant-interpretation. What I would like to do in these brief comments is, first, to sketch and motivate the very idea of a semantic interpretation of Kant’s transcendental idealism, and then second, to raise two pairs of friendly questions about the extension of the semantic interpretation to Kant’s *ethics* in particular, as a way of inviting Professor Loparic to elaborate some of his basic claims further.

I

As all readers of the *Critique of Pure Reason* know, the uniquely Kantian philosophical problem to which transcendental idealism is supposed to be the uniquely Kantian and adequate philosophical solution is summed up in the question: “How are synthetic a priori judgments possible?” (A10/B19). But both the problem and the proposed solution can be interpreted in at least two quite different ways.

The first interpretation is *metaphysical*, and correspondingly Kant’s question means: “What must the nature of the the world be if synthetic a priori judgments are to be true?” Then transcendental idealism is all about how the world that rational humans cognize through our senses must conform to the non-empirical structure of our minds. Here the distinction between appearances (or phenomena) and things-in-themselves (or noumena) is front and center.

The second way is *epistemological*, and correspondingly Kant’s question means: “How can we have true, justified synthetic a priori beliefs?” Then transcendental idealism is all about how rational humans justify our beliefs about the world we cognize through our senses, by

means of transcendental arguments against Cartesian and Humean skepticism. Here the notion of a transcendental deduction is front and center.

Classical approaches to Kant-interpretation tend to be either metaphysical or epistemological. But in the last two decades, a new approach has emerged that is explicitly *semantic*.¹ The semantic interpretation claims that right from Kant's famous letter to Marcus Herz in 1772 (10:129-135)—partially cited as the epigraph for these comments—through the two editions of the first *Critique* in 1781 and 1787, Kant's fundamental concern was with understanding how our conscious representations of objects (or what we would now call our “cognitions” or “intentional states”) are possible, and in particular how the meaningfulness and truth of the propositional contents of synthetic a priori judgments are possible. These are the problems to which Kant's theory of transcendental idealism in the first *Critique*, which I will dub his *transcendental cognitive semantics*, is the solution.

How does Kant's transcendental cognitive semantics solve the problem of the possibility of synthetic a priori propositions? The basic solution has four parts:

- (1) that a proposition is meaningful (or “objectively valid”) if and only if its constituent concepts either apply directly to objects given in sensory intuition or are necessary conditions for the application of first-order empirical concepts to objects given in sensory intuition;
- (2) that a proposition is synthetic if and only if it is consistently deniable and its meaningfulness and truth are determined by our sensory intuition;
- (3) that a proposition is a priori if and only if it is necessary and its truth-conditions are underdetermined by its sensory verification-conditions;

and finally

- (4) that a proposition is synthetic a priori if and only if it is consistently deniable and its meaningfulness and truth are determined by our necessary a priori subjective forms of sensory intuition together with the other conditions for the possibility of experience (i.e., the schematized categories and the original synthetic unity of apperception)—or

¹ In addition to Professor Loparic's work, examples of this new approach include Béatrice Longuenesse's *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998), my *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), Longuenesse's *Kant on the Human Standpoint* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), and my *Kant, Science, and Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford Univ. Press, 2006).

otherwise put, that a proposition is synthetic a priori if and only if it is true in every humanly experienceable possible world, and never false otherwise, precisely because it is an “empty thought” (*Denken ohne inhalt sind leer* [A51/B75]) and thus a truth-value gap (i.e., neither true nor false) in every logically possible world not conforming to the conditions for the possibility of human experience.²

If this line of interpretation is correct, then Kant’s fundamental concern with our conscious representation of objects (or our cognitive intentionality), with propositional content and its meaningfulness, and with truth, is logically prior to and presupposed by both his metaphysical and epistemological concerns. Indeed, on the semantic interpretation, the brilliance and uniqueness of Kant’s Critical philosophy consists *precisely* in the fact that he is proposing to solve the basic problems of metaphysics and epistemology by pursuing—for the the first time in the history of philosophy—an explicitly semantic theory of their foundations, i.e., transcendental idealism.

II

Professor Loparic briefly describes how the semantic interpretation can be applied to the first Antinomy of Pure Reason and the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. He also describes how it can be extended beyond the basic theoretical framework of the first *Critique* to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and to the post-Critical ethical, aesthetic, and teleological writings—including of course the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*—from 1788 into the 1790s.

It directly follows from this second extension that Kant’s metaphysics of morals is nothing more and nothing less than *transcendental moral semantics*. More precisely then, Professor Loparic is telling us

- (1) that Kant’s ethics is a general theory of *moral judgments*;
- (2) that ethical principles are *synthetic a priori* moral judgments;
- (3) that the problem of the metaphysics of morals is summed up in the question, “How are synthetic a priori moral judgments possible?”;

and

- (4) that transcendental idealism provides a philosophically adequate transcendental-semantic solution to this problem.

² For details and textual citations, see Hanna, *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy*, chs. 4-5.

I am very sympathetic to these four claims, but I do have two further pairs of questions about the specific details and overall structure of Kant's transcendental moral semantics.

Professor Loparic makes the very intriguing suggestion that there is

a significant difference between Kant's theory of "sense and meaning" of natural and moral *a priori* concepts: whereas the former are interpreted based on the objects of experience, the latter refers to freely executable actions accessible only in an experience that, as it serves as the grounds for moral anthropology, could also be called moral. (p. 12)

Now one way of reading this suggestion about the difference between Kant's transcendental *cognitive* semantics in the first *Critique* and Kant's transcendental *moral* semantics in his ethical writings is that whereas schematized pure concepts of the understanding apply to all and only the objects of human experience, by contrast moral pure concepts (e.g., those having to do with universalizability, permissibility, obligation, responsibility, absolute ends-in-themselves or persons, autonomy, moral community, and so-on) apply to all and only the freely-willed acts of finite desiring persons, or rational animals, including of course rational human animals. But if this reading is correct, then since synthetic a priori moral judgments are going to be cognitively constructed out of these moral pure concepts, the relation that synthetic a priori moral judgments will bear to the items to which those judgments apply is not going to be the correspondence relation of *necessary truth*, but instead some other quite different sort of relation.

One possibility is that we think of synthetic a priori moral judgments as universal a priori moral *principles*, and then it is the relation of *consistent incorporability in all possible maxims*, such that synthetic a priori moral judgments apply to freely-willed acts if and only if they they can be consistently incorporated in all possible maxims of those acts by finite desiring persons. If this is roughly correct, then it has implications for very idea of "freely executable actions" as the items to which moral pure concepts apply. I have interpreted these as the freely-willed acts of finite desiring persons. But then it seems to me that in order to make any progress in transcendental moral semantics, we will have to have adequately solved the problem of freedom of the will as Kant understood it: How is freedom (whether transcendental freedom, practical freedom, or autonomy) possible in a deterministic natural world? Now let us suppose for a moment that Kant's resolution of the Third Antinomy of Pure Reason in the first *Critique* (A444-451/B472-479, A532-558/B560-586) together with Kant's theory of "the fact of reason" in the second *Critique* (5: 31) suffices for this purpose. Then I am not clear about the systematic status of transcendental moral semantics. So my first pair of questions is:

Will transcendental moral semantics presuppose the adequate solution of a problem of transcendental *cognitive* semantics, namely the problem of free will? If so, then how does this conform to Kant's thesis of the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason (5: 120-121)?³

My second pair of questions has to do with how the extension of transcendental semantics to Kant's ethics will affect the overall shape of Kant's theory of judgment.⁴ Obviously, what makes possible the extension of transcendental semantics from the cognitive or theoretical domain to the volitional or practical domain, is the fact that for Kant all rational psychological activity is centered in *judgments* of various kinds. For Kant rational animals—including of course all rational human animals—are essentially *judging animals*. So if Kant's ethics is at bottom a theory of moral judgments, then we will need to know in precisely what sense morality is all about judgments. It seems to me that the most obvious way of doing this is to identify an act of moral judgment with an act of practical reasoning, and then in turn to identify an act of practical reasoning with an act of the "power of choice" or *Willkür*. If that is correct, then moral judgments are in fact nothing more and nothing less than the *basic acts of volition* carried out by finite desiring persons or rational animals. So my second question is:

Is the transcendental semantics of moral judgment in fact the same as a theory of moral intentional action? If so, then is Kant's transcendental semantics in general the same as the transcendental theory of *theoretical intentionality* (cognition) and *practical intentionality* (volition)?

If the answer to both of these questions is yes, then it looks to me as if those of us who interpret Kant's transcendental idealism as transcendental semantics are in a very good position to account for the unity of theoretical and practical reason in Kant's Critical philosophy as *the unity of the power of judgment* in rational animals, or finite persons, which is also the same as the unity of our capacity for theoretical intentionality, practical intentionality, social intentionality, political intentionality, aesthetic intentionality, emotional intentionality, and so on, each of which is intrinsically constrained and governed by universal a priori normative principles.

³ One possible answer is that Kant's theoretical solution to the problem of free will is in effect reverse-engineered to fit the demands of practical reason.

⁴ See R. Hanna, "Kant's Theory of Judgment," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2004 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2004/entries/kant-judgment/>>.