Reply to George Walsh

Rethinking Rand and Kant

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George Walsh (2000) admirably articulates just what is at issue between Rand and Kant in metaphysics. Though I largely agree with his remarks, I think it would be helpful to formulate them in a slightly different fashion.

First, much of the disagreement between Kant and Rand hinges on simple terminological misunderstanding. Rand ([1966–67] 1979) broadly distinguishes between human perceptual capacities and conceptual capacities (5–23); at times, she seems to use the term "reason" to include both, as a synonym for our epistemic capacities generally (1982, 76). At other times, the use is restricted to our conceptual capacities—for example, concept formation, inference, theory construction, etc. (1982, 75). When Rand reads that Kant wishes to restrict reason to make room for faith, she tends to read him in either of these two ways. Either Kant wants to hobble our conceptual capacities in particular, or our epistemic capacities generally. Either construal suffices to inspire her disapproval (1961, 31–34; [1966–67] 1979, 107–10).

I take it that Walsh and I agree that this is a serious misunderstanding of Kant's use of the term "reason" when writing of legitimate restriction. Clearly, Kant (1781) has no objection to the sort of reliance on our senses typical of empirical research (and he would object to their employment in more pedestrian settings only insofar as they suggested conclusions at odds with our best empirical research, e.g., that the earth does not move). Furthermore, Kant has no objection to the use of our conceptual capacities as employed in empirical research; as Walsh so admirably emphasizes, Kant's concerns are in large measure driven by a desire to vindicate Newto-

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nian mechanics, the Kantian exemplar sine qua non of empirical research.

No, what Kant wishes to block is the pursuit of rationalistic metaphysics of the sort characterized in the modern era by Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Christian Wolff. When referring to rationalist metaphysics, Kant speaks of "pure reason," our conceptual capacities, our theoretical projects untempered and unchecked by adequate connections to empirical testing. Kant does not have the option of simply dismissing all substantive a priori claims as "sophistry and illusion" as Hume ([1777] 1977) did. Hume allows for non-substantive claims, for these rest on "relations of ideas," arguably the same sorts of claims Kant would call "analytic a priori." This is because he believed that there were some substantive a priori claims that were obviously legitimate (those of Euclidean geometry) and some that, while not obviously legitimate, were indispensable if we are to be able to do Newtonian mechanics at all (for example, the claim that all empirical events have an empirical cause). So a proper epistemology would provide us with a means by which we can sort out which a priori claims are legitimate and which ones were not.

It is tempting at this juncture to say that this makes Kant far more congenial to Rand's concerns than she seems to have realized, and leave matters at that. For like Kant as thus far characterized, Rand too wishes to restrict our cognitive concerns to the empirical domain and block rationalistic, allegedly a priori flights of fancy, while leaving "reason" untrammeled within that restriction. Indeed, some have argued (e.g., Strawson), that talk of "restriction" is out of place here, as it misleadingly suggests that Kant thought there was some domain we were being restricted from. Indeed, Strawson (1966), Bennett (1966, 1974) and, in a different sense, Allison (1983), are all correct in claiming that there is considerable warrant for reading Kant as a kind of empiricist, insisting that the good exercise of our cognitive capacities ties them properly to empirical meaning and empirical testing, rather than reading him as a kind of skeptic, forever barring us from a real but inaccessible domain.

However, I think matters are not so simple, for two reasons. First, it is not at all clear that Rand doesn't want something more

from her epistemology than the right to be a good empiricist. If we follow the argument of Peikoff's article on the analytic-synthetic distinction (1967), bearing in mind Kripke's (1972) own account of the distinctions we ought to make between necessary and contingent, and a priori and a posteriori, it appears that Rand (or perhaps only Peikoff) holds the remarkable view not merely that all true claims are a posteriori, but that all true claims are both necessary and a posteriori. This puts Rand in a rather unusual position vis-a-vis the tradition, since most empiricists have held the view that a posteriori claims are all contingent. The notion that all true claims, when properly understood, are seen to be necessary truths, is, however, a common view among rationalists. Until we have a clearer notion of Rand's theory of concepts, propositions and truth (and the latter two would have to be further developed based on hints from Rand's corpus, since she only treated the theory of concepts at length), it is difficult to say whether she ought to resist Kant's attack on rationalist metaphysics or not. That she clearly deplored most rationalist conclusions is another matter.

Second, though Walsh is quite correct in stressing that Kant's "idealism" is a product of elaborate argument and not a simple inference from the fact that consciousness has a determinate character, I think that adequate appreciation for how that argument proceeds suffices to show that Kant simply cannot be understood as a peculiar kind of empiricist. The argument, briefly, is that we have a priori knowledge that every region of physical space, including those we have not yet become acquainted with, will obey Euclidean geometry.

Furthermore, we have reasons to believe that attempts to reduce space (and time) to mere relations among physical objects à la Leibniz fail, leaving us saddled with the idea of space as an entity existing over and above the things in it. Yet, there is something intolerable about the idea of an entity that pervades the universe, has no causal powers of its own, and that can be known a priori. All these perplexities dissolve if we regard space (and time) as a kind of formal framework we impose on our sensations. (It must be our sensations, rather than mind-independent items of some sort, on which we impose this

form, because presumably the mind can impose a mental form only on something that is itself mental, as sensations are). This argument has several seemingly happy consequences. First, it dissolves the Cartesian and Lockean problem of how our sensory states can be known to correspond to the physical world, since physical objects are, in a sense, made of sensations, and hence directly perceivable. It explains how there can be a priori knowledge of the physical world as well: if we are doing the forming of physical objects according to some fixed pattern, we can know what recipe we follow before investigating the products as they emerge from the cognitive oven, so to speak. (All cookies will be gingerbread man shaped because that's the cookie cutter we are using). However, it is precisely this account of the mind's object constructing activities that, for better or worse, moves Kant far beyond the pale of the ordinary empiricist.

First, the data the sensations provide us with must come from somewhere, and this somewhere cannot be, as on the Cartesian account, from the physical objects. On pain of rendering incomprehensible why we all largely agree in our empirical beliefs, something that the formal agreement in geometrical belief cannot suffice to explain, there must be a common data source. Given the Kantian account of the physical world, this data source must be supra-physical. Second, if we are to avoid an incomprehensible bootstrapping, the faculties we possess that impose spatiotemporal form on our sensations cannot themselves be faculties we possess qua physical beings in nature. The constructing self must also be supra-physical.

Lest there be any doubt that Kant really believes that there is such a supra-physical domain, consider the most important use to which Kant puts his metaphysics: the free will/determinism problem. Kant's solution is that the moral agent, which must be free in order to be subject to moral judgment, cannot be free if merely physical. But Kantian metaphysics has shown that the constructing subject, and at least some other items (the data source), cannot be physical. If the constructing subject were identical to the moral agent, then morality is saved from the bugbear of determinism. However, this use of the distinction between the empirical world and what lies "beyond" it only makes sense if we take that distinction fairly literally.

Those Kant scholars who wish to save Kant from himself by transforming him into a mere empiricist deprive him of one of his most important achievements, in his own view. And this use of the supra-physical domain appears in depth or in passing in every single one of Kant's works after the first *Critique*, including the first *Critique* itself, where it is featured prominently as the "Third Antinomy." Fortunately, Kant's argument need not detain us. Post-Einstein, very few now accept that we know the geometry of physical space a priori; very few would agree that space lacks any causal powers. Thus, much of the motivation for Kant's view as I've characterized it dissolves.

Though Walsh does not explicitly discuss Kant's ethics or his influence beyond describing Rand's view of them, a few brief remarks may be in order. Rand repeatedly accused Kant of a type of intuitionism in which "feeling" substitutes for argument and evidence. Defenders of Kant insist that this is a mistake, stressing Kant's formalism. Here, I believe Rand's and Kant's defenders are speaking past each other; but ceasing to do so is not necessarily to Kant's advantage. Rand's objection contains an important truth. For Kant (1788), the dictates of what we might call "folk morality" are not even being called into question; Kant takes the task of moral theory to be, not to discover new moral truths or revise incorrect old ones, but to rationally reconstruct what we all already know to be true. In this respect, Kant's ethics and Kant's metaphysics parallel, for Kant never seriously entertains the question of whether Newton's mechanics can be right; rather he rationally reconstructs it on transcendental foundations. Though Kant does not himself speak this way, if he were party to current debates in analytic ethics, he would agree with countless theorists in claiming that the test of a moral theory rests, ultimately, on its conformity to our "intuitions." Absent some deeper account of what an intuition is or where it comes from, it would not be unfair to say that the fundamental data for moral theorizing for such theorists is "what feels morally compelling."

Now Kant does offer a theory designed to explain and ultimately justify our moral intuitions: his account of practical agency, and the formal constraints on good practical reasoning. However, at the level, not of testing our actions for their moral worth, but of testing

our moral theorizing for adequacy, it is not clear that Rand is far wrong. For if it turned out that Kant's categorical imperative yielded moral judgments wildly at variance with the deliverances of folk morality, Kant would presumably be compelled to reject his theory for not squaring with our intuitions. By contrast, intuitions play no comparable role in Rand's (or, for example, Spinoza's) moral theory. The desiderata of good moral theory are elsewhere, and if a theory satisfies those desiderata, for Rand, while conflicting with our moral intuitions, so much the worse for our moral intuitions.

As for Rand's objection that Kant's is an ethic of duty that forces the self to submit to an irrational alien command, defenders of Kant insist that Kant's ethic is an ethic of respect for reason and the individual. More rarely, defenders of Kant will point out that Kant includes one's own self, if out of nothing more than consistency, on the list of items worthy of one's supreme respect. Here again, I think that Rand's distortions conceal an important insight. Rather than focus on Kant's attractive conclusions, we must examine how they are arrived at.

Briefly, Kant holds, though this is not immediately obvious, a Humean or preference-satisfaction account of rational action.[1] Robinson Crusoe, absent Friday, would never have a reason for doing anything other than that he wanted to or that doing so was instrumental towards helping him succeed at something else he wanted to do. But there are formal constraints even on Crusoe—he cannot prefer X to Y and Y to X at the same time and in the same respect, for example. Once Friday enters the scene, a new question emerges: we now have two systems of preferences rather than one. It may be a truth of practical reason that preferences ought to be satisfied and choices ought to be conducive to the satisfaction of preferences. But whose? Should Crusoe's actions conduce to the satisfaction of only Crusoe's preferences? Or should Crusoe's preferences conduce to the satisfaction of all preferences indifferently? I believe that the underlying argument of Kant's ethics is that Crusoe has no reason to act to satisfy his own preferences as opposed to acting to satisfy Friday's preferences; to privilege Crusoe's own preferences merely because they are his is arbitrary. Reason commands that Crusoe

"respect" Friday in this sense, as long as he respects himself, by seeing that Crusoe is no longer anything special on the island. The categorical imperative commands us to sacrifice the notion that my desires should matter to me simply because they are mine. It is precisely this foundation in preferences instead of objective value, and the associated shift from agent-relativity to agent-neutrality that I believe troubled Rand (while inspiring Kant). As she puts it:

> I base men's equal rights on a much deeper premise and issue than either [the Golden Rule or the Kantian categorical imperative]—and, therefore, these two rules are irrelevant to my ethics. I do not regard them as necessarily antagonistic to my ethics, but as irrelevant and unimportant by reason of their ambiguity and superficiality.
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> You state the best criticism of these two rules when you say that they are "content-less." With this, I agree emphatically. They tell us nothing about moral values nor what values men should choose nor what a man should wish for himself and others. At best, these two rules are popular generalizations illustrating one aspect or consequence of the principle of objectivity or justice. I would agree with these two rules (on the popular level) only if they were translated to mean: "Do not wish, seek or advocate contradictions"—and then only if they were regarded as derivatives or consequences of deeper, antecedent moral premises, not as fundamental principles or definitions of moral action.
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> If, however, these two rules are advocated as ethical primaries—then I am emphatically opposed to them. In their literal wording, both rules advocate ethical subjectivism, with one's wish as the standard of moral value; both declare, in effect, that one may do anything one wishes, provided one is willing to universalize one's wish. (Rand 1997, 557–58)

Though she also insisted that ethics enjoined non-coercive relations

with others, her reasons were, on her view, thoroughly agent-relative, and thus non-self-sacrificing. Though there is an element of the universalization strategy to secure non-coercive relations between agents, Rand primarily relied on (1) appeals to extrinsic long-term, enlightened self-interest, and (2) Platonic-Aristotelian claims about the intrinsic costs to the self stemming from immoral actions, given human nature and what is objectively valuable for it. Whether she was successful in either of these lines is an open question.

Finally, the question of influence. Borges (1964) comments that "every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (201); Rand's remarks on Kant's influence seem far more plausible today than they did at the time she wrote. However, I still think that she misidentified her targets. The rise of totalitarianism, whether of left or right varieties, arguably owes something to the influence of Hegel and Marx, though one must be quite cautious in assigning responsibility. (This is a vastly more complex question than most writers, whether defending or attacking Hegel and Marx, realize). What is clear, however, is that those features of Hegel's and Marx's thought that bear the closest conceptual connection to their alleged offspring, bear little or no connection to Kant's views. Kant, despite his misguided enthusiasm for the French Revolution, was no Promethean communitarian. Hegel and Marx were. Their Prometheanism ought not to have troubled Rand, given her own Prometheanism. Their communitarianism flowed, most recently, from Herder, whom Kant reviled, and more distantly, from, of all people, Aristotle (albeit that aspect of Aristotle to which Rand was least sympathetic). Kant's legacy must be sought elsewhere.

Interestingly, that legacy is not too far to find. We see countless traces of the "mind imposes form on its contents and thus creates a world" notion throughout post-Marxist (so called post-modernist) left-wing thought. The most obvious and influential example is Michel Foucault (1972). The Randian objection that Kantianism views reality as a social construction, a collective delusion, is a view one scarcely ever heard in academia in her lifetime. Today, it is the conventional wisdom on countless subjects, most notably, "gender." It may be a misunderstanding, but it is clearly Kant who is being misunderstood, and not anyone else.

If one wishes to avoid the frightful implications of norms as mind-dependent (or language-dependent) social constructions, one may turn instead to Rawls' (1971) liberalism, which, explicitly inspired by Kant, enshrines agent-neutral norms as rational because they are those that would be chosen under a "veil of ignorance," a thought experiment in which the connection between my interests or preferences, and my own choices and policies is severed by preventing me from knowing who I am. Unsurprisingly, the norms that emerge from such a thought experiment prove to be incapable of making sense of my own moral interest in the products of my own activities; they lead to the justification of rules defining private property as the means to the satisfaction of the preferences of the least well off. Lest one conclude too quickly that Rawls has failed to articulate the authentically Kantian position, one should read what Kant has to say about charity as a duty: it too, like the rules governing private property, is supposed to flow from the agent-neutralizing move. Though she did not know Foucault, Rand knew Rawls (1982, 131–44). What Rand did not know was that Rawls would become *the* liberal theorist of the second half of the twentieth century.

Walsh's discussion helpfully begins the discussion of Rand's relationship to Kant by urging us to go to Kant, and Kant scholarship, for the truth about Kant, instead of to her often distorted and polemical characterizations. For this, all practitioners of Rand studies are in his debt. However, oftentimes, the interesting truth about a figure like Rand only emerges after a patient exercise of charitable interpretation. My suggestion is that if we interpret her with the same charity with which Kant has often been interpreted, the result may prove that she had more insight into the underlying structure of Kant's thought than may have at first sight seemed to be the case.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion, see Roger J. Sullivan's "The nature of human action" and "Prudence: taking care of our own interest" in Sullivan 1989.

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