Mere Verstand

Enoch Yim

Abstract

In Kantian tradition, the possibility of knowledge is explained in terms of what it takes to make judgments about the representational contents. On this view, judgments are construed as the phases in the cognitive process during which the subject applies concepts to intuitions (or subsumes particulars under universals) whereas concepts (universals) are rules for synthesizing intuitions (particulars) into a representational content. Accordingly, what it is to know something is to have applied the right concepts to intuitions, i.e., have followed the appropriate rules in formulating representational contents. The question is then which concepts are the *right* ones. Within the framework Robert Brandom identifies as *Verstand*, concepts must be semantically settled in advance of being applied. In this essay, I will explore how it would be determined which concepts are the right ones in *Verstand* by drawing on Henry Allison's interpretation of Kant's theory of reflective judgment and Duncan Pritchard's defense of epistemic disjunctivism. Based on this exploration, I speculate that *Verstand* requires the idea of an ideal knower as the limit of cognitive agents in engaging in epistemic activities.

Introduction

In Kantian tradition, the possibility of knowledge is explained in terms of what it takes to

make judgments about the representational contents. On this view, judgments are construed as

the phases in the cognitive process during which the subject applies concepts to intuitions (or

subsumes particulars under universals) whereas concepts (universals) are rules for synthesizing

intuitions (particulars) into a representational content.[1] Accordingly, what it is to know

something is to have applied the right concepts to intuitions, i.e., have followed the appropriate

rules in formulating representational contents. The question is then which concepts are the *right*

---

[1] Jay Rosenberg, *Accessing Kant: A Relaxed Introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 91-7); David Landy, *Kant's Inferentialism: The Case Against Hume* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 121-2, 132-6; Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant and the Problem of Experience," *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 34, Nos. 1 & 2 (2006), 66-7.

ones. Within the framework Robert Brandom identifies as *Verstand*, concepts must be semantically settled in advance of being applied.[2] In this essay, I will explore how it would be determined which concepts are the right ones in *Verstand* by drawing on (§ 1) Henry Allison's interpretation of Kant's theory of reflective judgment and (§ 2) Duncan Pritchard's defense of epistemic disjunctivism. Based on this exploration, I speculate in § 3 that *Verstand* requires the idea of an ideal knower as the limit of cognitive agents in engaging in epistemic activities.

§ 1:   Reflective Judgment and Conceptual Determinateness

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant distinguishes between determinative and reflective judgment.[3] Whereas the former kind of judgment merely applies concepts that are already determined, the latter is that in which one acquires concepts from sense data (i.e., draws universals out of given particulars).[4] In the absence of any definite rule for synthesis, judgment in its reflective mode must figure out a way in which one can still unify, organize, or systemize the array of sense data, for otherwise no cognition (let alone knowledge) is possible. Since *Verstand* requires a way to determine (from sensorial intakes of objects) which concepts to apply in the first place, the process of reflective judgment must be its starting place.

The most natural way of construing how one might acquire concepts from sense data would be positing a process in which universals are drawn out by comparing similarities and differences among particulars. However, as Allison points out, this process as it is, is problematic, for sorting objects into, e.g., trees and non-trees based on the comparison of certain

---

[2] Robert B. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 88-90.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, originally published in 1790, 1793, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. by Paul Guyer (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5: 179-80.

[4] Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14-20.

features (possession of leaves, trunks, etc.) seems to presuppose what it is for some features to belong to trees, viz., the concept of tree.[5] If one seeks to avoid this circularity is by postulating that the similarities and differences are causally given as sense data (as the self-justifying piece of information), then he is vulnerable to committing the Myth of the Given.[6] Thus, the dilemma is that the abstraction process either is circular or commits the Myth of the Given.[7] The challenge here is then to give an account of how the comparison is possible without presupposing any concept, yet appeals to no mere causal impacts as its epistemic ground. One may attempt to meet the challenge by subscribing to John McDowell's perceptual conceptualism.[8] However, one drawback of this strategy is that conceptualism requires a considerable metaphysical presumption about the nature of objects—that the (sensorial intakes of) objects are conceptual. Thus, to yield a less controversial view, *Verstand* requires an interpretation of Kantian notion of reflective judgment that avoids the horns of the dilemma while refraining from conceptualism.

Based on his reading of Béatrice Longuenesse's analysis of Kant's theory of cognition, Allison explains that what differentiates comparisons of features that result in concepts from non-conceptual comparisons practiced by non-human animals (Humean customs or associations) is that the former processes are "directed from the beginning toward the detection of common features … by the implicit norm of universality."[9] That is, the process of conceptual comparison

---

[5] Ibid., 22.

[6] Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, originally published in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 1 (University of Minnesota Press, 1956), republished with an introduction by Richard Rorty and a study guide by Robert Brandom (Harvard University Press, 1997); John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994, 1996), 7-8.

[7] I think that there is a difference between Wilfrid Sellars' and John McDowell's conception of the Myth of the Given. As I understand them, Sellars focused on the tension between atomism and holism whereas McDowell saw it as the issue about the origin or ground of discursive rules. Accordingly, the version of the Myth of the Given that I am positing as a problem for *Verstand* in this essay is the one as conceived by McDowell.

[8] McDowell, Lecture I & II.

[9] Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste*, 24.

is accompanied with the predilection to identify patterns that are universal (or at least capable of serving as a sample for other arrays of sense data), which is supposedly missing in non-human animals. This predilection rests on the presupposition that, Allison writes, "there is something 'universal in itself' encoded, as it were, in our experience," without which "the process of reflection would never get off the ground."[10] This presupposition or principle by which reflective judgment operates is what Kant calls the 'purposiveness of nature,' which "signifies the contingent agreement of the order of nature with our cognitive needs and capacities."[11] In other words, what confers normative significance to otherwise merely causal impacts of objects (via receptivity) is the condition that it is necessary *for us* to "look upon nature [i.e., the totality of causal stimuli] *as if* it had been designed with our cognitive interests in mind[.]"[12] It is only on this presupposition can we engage in epistemic activities as cognitive agents.

If the concepts that emerge from comparisons of features are rooted in the purposiveness of nature, i.e., our normative attitude towards the causal impacts of objects, rather than the causal impacts themselves, there is a sense in which *Verstand* could avoid both the circularity and the Myth of the Given. The circularity is avoided because the transcendental order in which the normative predilection proceeds in carving out underlying patterns in nature establishes that the concepts were *discovered* rather than presupposed. In this way, there is no circularity in drawing universals out of particulars. Yet, this does not have one recoil to the Myth of the Given because the normative significance of sense data is conferred by the way we are oriented towards them rather than their causal impacts. Differently put, objects strike us as forming configurations or

---

[10] Ibid., 28.
[11] Henry E. Allison, "Reflective Judgment and the Application of Logic to Nature: Kant's Deduction of the Principle of Purposiveness as an Answer to Hume," *Essays on Kant* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), 2.
[12] Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste*, 30.

patterns (which are to be discovered by us) in our immediate contact with them, and there is no sense in speaking of reality beyond this way we are oriented towards them—so to say, in Early Wittgensteinian spirit, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."[13]

While it undercuts the problem of both the circularity and the Myth of the Given, Kant's theory of reflective judgment as interpreted by Allison does not subscribe to conceptualism. Whereas McDowell's presumption about the nature of (sensorial intakes of) objects or intuitions as having conceptual contents is metaphysical, *Allisonian* Kant's commitment to the presumption is regulative. The purposiveness (or systematicity) of nature provides a methodological principle for our interactions with the causal impacts of objects. At most, it serves as a guide for what to make of otherwise brute stimuli, leaving the nature of objects as *noumenal*.[14]

§ 2:   Underdetermination and Epistemic Disjunctivism

The account of conceptual determinateness developed above still faces the problem of underdetermination. For it is one thing to say that there is a ground for treating objects as the source of conceptual determinateness and another thing to say that there can only be one way for concepts to be determined by the objects. For knowledge to be possible, there cannot be multiple competing concepts or inferential patterns. Whatever the criterion may be, there must be a reason to accept one set of patterns over the others. For instance, if I judge that the necktie is blue while the others judge instead that the necktie is green or grue, one of us must be wrong, for otherwise there is nothing certain about why I *should* go with my pattern rather than the other ones.

---

[13] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C. K. Ogden, originally published in 1922 (Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), Proposition 7.

[14] The notion of *noumenon* has a negative connotation in contemporary philosophy. But I think that its language-game has a function in *Verstand*. Since what this function may be is beyond the scope of our discussion, I will only briefly remark on what the function of the notion of *noumenon* may be in § 3.

How do I know that the necktie is blue and not green or grue? On what ground could I argue that other judgments or applications of alternative concepts are wrong? That is, as Pritchard puts it, which perception is the *good* case? If we assume that both the good and the bad cases of perception share the same sense data or "possess … the same degree of reflectively accessible rational support for their beliefs[,]"[15] there is no way one can distinguish between the good and the bad cases *in respect to* (our sensorial intakes of) the objects. If so, then, although *Verstand* could hold that concepts originate from objects, it cannot hold as well that objects determine which among competing concepts are the right ones; nothing about the causal stimuli forces one to accept one inferential pattern over the others. Thus, to solve the problem of underdetermination, *Verstand* must reject the view that good and bad cases of perception share the same kind of rational support.

One way *Verstand* could manage to reject the view in concern would be by endorsing epistemic disjunctivism as defended by Pritchard. In *Epistemic Angst*, Pritchard considers and refutes three objections to disjunctivism.[16] Of the three, I will examine Pritchard's response to the third objection because this one is relevant to our discussion. According to Pritchard, disjunctivists would accept that the good cases are indistinguishable from the bad cases to the subject *even if* the sense data (or rational supports) in each cases are different in kind. Thus, the objection is that, if one cannot distinguish between the good and the bad cases, (even if the rational supports in each cases are different in kind) he cannot know which way of perceiving the objects is right (i.e., which concepts or inferential patterns are appropriate). In response, Pritchard argues that there is a sense in which one can know the differences between competing

---

[15] Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 124.
[16] Ibid., 127-32.

cases (thus, determine which way of perceiving should be endorsed) without being able to distinguish between them. For instance, and this is Pritchard's own example, someone might tell me that I am seeing a cleverly disguised mule while I think that I see a zebra in a zoo. Here, even if we assume that the rational supports involved in each of the "mule" and the "zebra" case are different in kind, they are indistinguishable to my zoologically untrained eyes. Nevertheless, I can hold onto the belief that what I am seeing is a zebra because this belief is more plausible than its competing ones, given that the label indicates that the animal is a zebra, that the zoo would want to avoid legal troubles for mispresenting the animals, etc. Therefore, although I cannot distinguish between or discriminate the two competing cases, there is a good reason for me to— as Pritchard puts it—*favor* one case over the other, based on which I can determine which way of perceiving to endorse.[17]

One may object that this way of *favoring* certain perceptual cases over the others does not refer to the sense data as the rational support, but to coherency among beliefs. However, that sense data (or objects) should be able to provide rational supports to perceptual judgments does not mean that rational supports should *always* come from them; that we sometimes appeal to coherency among beliefs as the evidence for our perception is compatible with that there are also situations when it is appropriate to appeal to what we see. The main point of Pritchard's response above is that, should the situation in which competing cases are indistinguishable arise, there still is a sense in which one can differentiate the cases without being able to distinguish them.

What is more central to his response is, however, that what we see serves as the prima facie evidence for our judgments *until* there is a good reason to suspect their accuracy. Pritchard distinguishes between rationally and irrationally motivated error possibility. If someone tells me

---

[17] Ibid., 132-3.

that the zoo was caught being dishonest to their visitors in the past or I am inside a store where lights can be controlled, I have a good reason to suspect my judgment about the animal or the color of the necktie. Such error possibilities are rationally motivated because their motivations, if legitimate, override my endorsement of what (I think) I see. In such situations, it is not enough to appeal to sense data as the rational supports. In contrast, merely suggesting in the spirit of Cartesian evil demon that I could be unconditionally wrong about what I see is not rationally motivated. Given that perception is where we start in interacting with the world, Pritchard seems to argue, how things appear to us has the priority in forming our beliefs unless there is a good reason to suspect it. To just doubt our senses *tout court* would be to doubt the way the world *qua* world first appears to us, and it is unnatural to talk about how the world appears to us (including its error possibility) without also accepting as the null hypothesis the initial way the world appears to us. Against *bare* error possibilities, then, we can appeal to what we see (how objects initially appear to us) in judging how things are. Thus, in determining which concepts one should apply, the way objects first strike us as (e.g., that the animal is a zebra, that the necktie is blue, that the organism is a tree, etc.) has the priority.

<div align="center">§ 3: The Virtue of Ideal Knower</div>

Here is the summary of the account of conceptual determinateness in *Verstand* as refined so far. Kantian reflective judgment can serve as through which objects normatively constrain our concept acquisition because it confers normative significance to the causal impacts of the objects in virtue of the purposiveness of nature, the regulative principle that it is necessary for us to treat arrays of particulars as operating on underlying universal patterns to be discovered. The initial way those arrays of particulars strike us as such has the priority in determining the rules by

which we construct (or picture) their configurations. Should any reasonable doubt about our judgments arise, the score can be settled by examining their coherency with other beliefs we have. Here lies the last hurdle for *Verstand* to overcome, which is the question of *when* one can stop the investigation of determining which concepts are the right ones. The initial appearance as the null hypothesis may put an end to one's investigation. But this end is temporary. The initial appearance is always open to questions, and they function as a base camp rather than the finish-line. (To exploit the metaphor, it is also open for one to move around the base camp as needed.) Given that there is a philosophical ground to suppose (in defense of *Verstand*) that (sensorial intakes of) objects *can* determine concepts, we are still to make sense of what it takes for objects to settle conceptual determinateness (i.e., what it is for us to confer normative significance to a specific case of causal stimuli) *once and for all*.

My response to the last hurdle would be largely sketchy. In a nutshell, I speculate that *Verstand* (as articulated here) requires the idea of an ideal knower as the limit of cognitive agents in engaging in epistemic activities. The way this speculation answers the question of when one can stop the epistemic investigation is rather negative. In short, I contend, one can never (at least in practice) stop in his search for the right concepts. The motivation for this argument is inherent in the way disjunctivism solves the problem of underdetermination. The initial appearance yields the prima facie determination of concepts. The condition for accepting its prima facie determination as the ground of normative constraint is that there is not yet a reason to doubt its authority, to the extent of which one is justified in accepting what he thinks he is seeing as reflecting reality. Yet, nothing about this way our judgments are normatively constrained by the objects guarantees that we will not run into any counter-evidence in future. These unknown variables (as long as they remain undetected) cannot present themselves as rationally motivated

error possibilities. However, the apparent absence of any rationally motivated error possibility by no means vindicates the *current* determination of concepts as the final one. This lack of any conclusive determination arises from the fact that we are epistemically fallible in virtue of being cognitive agents. As cognitive agents, we are normatively constrained by objects, for to be so is what it means to be oriented towards the world in such a way. In turn, this relational condition *necessitates* that we are to constantly revise the particular orientations we happen to occupy if the world demands us to. Meanwhile, we cannot predict when and how the world will make that demand because it is by definition *unknown*.

So, what should we make of our epistemic orientation towards the world in *Verstand* if the framework itself requires us to never put a stop to our investigation? If concepts can never be conclusively determined (for us), yet it is in respect to conclusive determination our conferring of normative significance to objects constitutes our orientation towards the world (in which we are to be normatively constrained by it), what sustains our participation in the space of reasons in the manner of *Verstand*? The cornerstone of this framework, I think, is the idea that we are to ever approach the state in which concepts are conclusively determined for us—more specifically, the virtue of endlessly working ourselves to reach the state of an ideal knower. Here, the "ideal knower" is a figure for which the concepts are determined once and for all so that the way he perceives the world (i.e., the way the arrays of particulars strike him as thus configured) reflects reality. It is in respect to this state as the objective does *Verstand* hold authority over us (and thereby enable us to engage in epistemic activities *in the way construed within this framework*). Likewise, in order to sustain the authority or legitimacy of its own framework, *Verstand* requires its practitioners to uphold the idea of an ideal knower and sets it as its first principle the virtue of working oneself to reach the state of such a figure. (And, I think, the function of the notion, or

language-game, of *noumenon* is to ensure that this virtue is valued. In some sense, *Verstand* as an epistemic framework is a kind of moral outlook.) To put it poetically, *Verstand* is in one way or another an aspiration to overcome our fallible nature as cognitive agents through the Myth of Logos, the faith that obedience to reason will transform us into *epistemic saints*.

References

Allison, Henry E. *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

———. "Reflective Judgment and the Application of Logic to Nature: Kant's Deduction of the Principle of Purposiveness as an Answer to Hume." *Essays on Kant*. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012.

Brandom, Robert B. *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

Ginsborg, Hannah. "Kant and the Problem of Experience." *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 34, Nos. 1 & 2, 59-106. 2006.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, originally published in 1790, 1793, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. by Paul Guyer. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Landy, David. *Kant's Inferentialism: The Case Against Hume*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

McDowell, John. *Mind and World*. Harvard University Press, 1994, 1995.

Pritchard, Duncan. *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*. Princeton University Press, 2016.

Rosenberg, Jay. *Accessing Kant: A Relaxed Introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Sellars, Wilfrid. *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, originally published in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 1. University of Minnesota Press, 1956, republished with an introduction by Richard Rorty and a study guide by Robert Brandom. Harvard University Press, 1997.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C. K. Ogden, originally published in 1922. Dover Publications, Inc., 1999.