

I am very pleased to comment on Mr. Gurofsky's paper, which I find clear and well argued. The central thematic focus of the paper revolves around a thesis basic to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. This is, according to Strawson, the principle of significance. The warrant for this principle Strawson finds explicitly in a passage occurring in the "Transcendental Doctrine of the Power of Judgment (Analytic of Principles), 3rd chapter – On the Ground of the distinction of all object in general into *phenomena* and *noumena*" from (A239/B298):

"all concepts and with them all principles, however a priori they may be, are nevertheless related to empirical intuitions, i.e., to data for possible experience. Without this they have no objective validity at all, but are rather a mere play, whether it be with representations of the imagination or of the understanding."

It is worth noting that just after this passage, Kant supplies us with an example to clarify the meaning of this assertion. "Mathematics," he tells us in illustration, "fulfills this requirement by means of the construction of the figure, which is an appearance present to the sense (even though brought *a priori*). In the same science, the concept of magnitude seeks its standing and sense in number, but seeks this in turn in the fingers, in the beads of an abacus, or in strokes and points that are placed before our eyes" (A240/B299). I am tempted to ask at this stage whether or not acceptance of the principle of significance entails, then, acceptance of a corollary theory advanced by Kant in the Doctrine of Method (A713/B741), i.e, that mathematical cognition derives from the construction of <its> concepts? But this is a subordinate query, which I'd be happy to leave unsatisfied in favor of the two hermeneutical questions herein.

Gurofsky advances three arguments in the paper. First, he argues there is a substantive textual basis to assert that Kant accepted the principle of significance. Second, he argues against the claim that the principle of significance so articulated by Strawson (but which is

inescapably in Kant) entails the more modern (i.e., classical) theory of verificationism. And third, in a line of reasoning that follows explicitly from this second argument, he cautions that, "fear of anachronism is no basis on which to interpret away Kant's many emphatic commitments to the principle of significance" (9).

Both the first and the third argument lead me to ask if Mr. Gurofsky could speak more fully on the hermeneutic principle at work in this paper. He speaks disparagingly about the method of the patchwork-theoretic interpreter. This is especially important in the transition to his third argument cautioning against the fear of anachronism, since the anachronism charge stems from the lax application of hermeneutic principles evident in the reasoning substantiating Kant's verificationism. "Indeed," Gurofsky asserts in the last lines of his paper, "the very same fear should prompt us to interpret Kant neither through the lens of our own time nor through that of his forebears, but holistically and from within." So what does this mean? That is to say, what is it "to interpret Kant ... holistically and from within"?

As to the question of holism, I wish to note again that Strawson draws on text from Book II of the *Transcendental Analytic* in order to substantiate the importance of his principle. Indeed, Kant states in the opening lines of Book II that: "The analytic of principles will accordingly be *solely a canon for the power of judgment* that teaches it to apply to appearances the concepts of the understanding, which contain the condition for the rules *a priori*." (A132/B171 italics mine). I realize the brevity of the conference format requires concision. One cannot do everything in such a short amount of time, and Mr. Gurofsky has, indeed, done very much in the time allotted. So, I do not mean to insinuate a flaw of omission with the query I'm posing, here. Rather, I would like to hear Mr. Gurofsky clarify the scope and range of the holism

integral to his hermeneutic principle. We have seen, for instance, that the passage in Kant's text which warrants the principle of significance relates explicitly to the power of judgment and, most specifically, boundaries legitimating its application. My own view is that Kant's Third Critique adds much needed clarification to this principle and so is necessary to a full and adequate understanding of the boundaries that Kant is drawing here in the First Critique. Most important in this regard is Kant's amplification on distinction between regulative and determinative judgments in the Third Critique. However, and again this is not a criticism as such, all the substantiating texts to which Mr. Gurofsky refers occur in the First Critique. Thus, to specify my question, does the holistic approach you suggest restrict itself solely to the First Critique? Or does it, as I would suggest, require that you extend your interpretive gaze to Kant's other logical writings, even to the whole corpus of his critical writings? To what whole do you refer, actually?

My second query addresses the interiority imperative in the hermeneutic principle cited already, i.e., the demand "to interpret Kant ... holistically and *from within*." When considering the entailment of verificationism question, Gurofsky leaves out of his analysis an explication of the schema of the imagination, which one would expect given the interiority imperative integral to his hermeneutic principle. However, the transcendental schema plays a fundamentally important bridging role in Kant's philosophy, and its bridging function seriously destabilizes any verificationist interpretation of his critical philosophy, I believe. True, it is a fundamental thesis of Kant that "the pure concepts of the understanding can never be of transcendental, but always only of empirical use, and that the principles of pure understanding can be related to objects of the senses only in relation to the general conditions of a possible experience, but

never to things in general" (B303). However, the pure concepts are not applied directly to the material of sensation or, to be more precise, appearances. Rather,

The principles of pure understanding, whether they are a priori constitutive (like the mathematical principles) or merely regulative (like the dynamical principles), contain nothing but only the pure schema, as it were, for possible experience; this has its unity only from the synthetic unity that the understanding originally and from itself imparts to the synthesis of the imagination in relation to apperception, and in relation to and agreement with which the appearances, as data for possible cognition, must already stand a priori" (A236/B296)

So, in short, if we look carefully from within Kant's critical philosophy, does not the mediating representation of the transcendental schema, this third thing which is neither category nor appearance, fundamentally undermine any verificationist interpretation of his critical philosophy?

In conclusion, first, what is the scope or range of the holism integral to the hermeneutical principle you advance herein? Second, following the interiority imperative of this hermeneutic principle, does not Kant's analysis of the necessity of the transcendental schema, i.e., this "third thing" between category and appearance, undermine any verificationist interpretation of his critical philosophy? Thank you for your fine paper, and I look forward to hearing what you have to say.

Kant's Principle of Significance

1.

In *The Bounds of Sense*, P. F. Strawson ascribes to Kant what he calls the “principle of significance” (Strawson 1966, 16), on which “there can be no legitimate, or even meaningful, employment of ideas or concepts which does not relate them to empirical or experiential conditions of their application” (16). That Kant subscribed to anything like such a principle is, however, now widely doubted. Of course, Strawson was already aware that there appears to be a major tension between the principle and various important Kantian commitments. (Addressing that tension is beyond the scope of this paper, though I have some ideas about how to go about that that I would be happy to discuss in the Q&A.) But beyond that, the principle has come under suspicion of being positivistic, which many regard as objectionable for two reasons. First, Barry Stroud has argued that the principle is or presupposes a dogmatic verificationism that cannot withstand philosophical scrutiny.¹ And second, many scholars have suggested that the ‘discovery’ of the principle in Kant is really nothing more than an anachronistic projection of twentieth-century positivistic prejudices. **On the contrary**, I argue that (1) **the textual case** for Kant’s acceptance of the principle of significance is powerful, (2) the principle’s identity with or entailment of **verificationism** and consequent dubiety are **unsubstantiated**, and (3) the **worry about anachronism** has a highly equivocal significance and cannot justify reading the principle out of Kant. Indeed, that worry has a dialectical force: It compels us **to interpret Kant from within; yet if we do so**, his acceptance of the **principle of significance is inescapable**. Though making the principle consistent with the rest of Kant’s Critical philosophy presents major challenges, recent transcendent-metaphysically inclined interpreters have made their task too easy, and less interesting, by pretending that the case for the principle is artificially weak.

¹ Beginning with his 1968, and continued through a number of papers collected in his 2000c.

2.

There are two *prima facie* distinguishable elements to the principle of significance as Strawson states it. One is that concepts (including Kantian Ideas, which are concepts of reason (A299/B356)) that do not relate in the right way to experience lack a *use*, the other that such concepts lack a *meaning*. One might think obvious that for a concept to lack a use is just for it to lack a meaning, and vice versa. But in any case, passages in the first *Critique* that seem to commit Kant to both elements of Strawson's principle are plentiful, and there are even some that explicitly assert an equivalence between (lack of) use and (lack of) meaning.

Some of the strongest textual support comes from the Phenomena and Noumena chapter of the first *Critique* (both A and B); the following is only a representative portion. Kant writes that “only the empirical use” of concepts (that is, their use in relation to possible experience) “can occur at all” (A239/B298), and consequently that the categories “can *never* be of *transcendental* but always only of *empirical* use” (A246/B303). Even abstract concepts must be “*made sensible*”, that is, *related proximately or ultimately to sensible intuition* (its object or its form) and thereby shown to have a use in relation to possible experience, “because otherwise the concept[s] would remain (as we say) *without sense* [*Sinn*], i.e., without signification [*Bedeutung*]” (A240/B299).² Repeatedly, Kant emphasizes that *what is at stake in the question of putatively transcendent uses of concepts is their Sinn and Bedeutung*: A concept that is not used empirically cannot be given an object and hence “has no sense [*Sinn*] and is completely empty of content” (A239/B298); the categories must take appearances as “their sole objects”, or else “all signification [*Bedeutung*]” is lost (A241/B300); a category is “a way [...] of combining the manifold [that] signifies [*bedeutet*] nothing whatever if the intuition wherein alone this

² Whether or not Kant had the resources to distinguish Fregean sense and reference, Kant certainly does not use *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* to draw Frege's or any other technical distinction. His use of both terms there is emphatic (the rhetorical device of *synonymia*)

manifold can be given is not added” (B306). Against that, some may observe that in *Phenomena* and *Noumena*, Kant leaves room for “transcendental signification”. But that is nothing more than the bare thought of “the unity of thought of a manifold as such” (A247/B304) or “the logical function for bringing the manifold under a concept” (A245), which is so barren as to preclude not merely the *determination* of an object, as some have held, but even *application* to an object or *thinking* an object—which is precisely why categories, be their transcendental signification what it may, “cannot have transcendental use” and “have no use whatsoever when separated from all sensibility” (A248/B305).

But remarks along the foregoing lines are not confined to *Phenomena* and *Noumena*. In the B Deduction, Kant claims that “[s]olely *our* sensible and empirical intuition can provide [the categories] with meaning [*Sinn*] and significance [*Bedeutung*]” (B148-9). In the Schematism, Kant purports to have shown in the A (!) Deduction “that concepts are quite impossible, and cannot have any signification [*Bedeutung*], unless an object is given for the concepts themselves or at least for the elements of which they consist”, and infers, quite remarkably, that consequently concepts “cannot at all concern things in themselves” (A139/B178). He also there claims that specifically sensible schemata are “the true and sole conditions for providing” categories with “*signification* [*Bedeutung*]”, and consequently that “the categories have, in the end, no other use than a possible empirical one” (A146/B185). In *On the Supreme Principle of All Synthetic Judgments*, Kant writes that the presentations of space and time must ultimately relate to objects of experience or else “have no signification [*Bedeutung*]”, and then immediately states that “thus it is, without distinction, with all concepts whatsoever” (A156/B195). In the *Postulates*, Kant observes that the principles of modality “are restrictions of all the categories to merely empirical use, and do not admit and allow transcendental use of the categories”

(A219/B266). In the A Paralogisms, Kant purports to have shown in the Analytic that “pure categories [...] have no objective signification [*Bedeutung*] in themselves, i.e., if they are not based on an intuition to whose manifold they can be applied as functions of synthetic unity” (A348-9). In the Antinomies, Kant declares himself to have shown repeatedly that there is “no transcendental use of pure concepts either of understanding or of reason” (A515/B543). Later in the Dialectic, Kant claims that the transcendental, i.e., rational, principle “for making an inference from the contingent to a cause” does have signification [*Bedeutung*], but “only in the world of sense”; “outside this world it has no meaning [*Sinn*] at all” (A609/B637).

Those are only a sample of Kant’s remarks that seem to testify to his acceptance of something strongly resembling the principle of significance. They seem recalcitrant to being read in any other way. For what is the claim, e.g., that “only the empirical use [of concepts, i.e., their use in relation to possible experience] can occur at all” (A239/B298) on pain of otherwise having “no sense [*Sinn*]” (A239/B298) or being “without signification [*Bedeutung*]” (A240/B299) if not the claim that “there can be no legitimate, or even meaningful, employment of ideas or concepts which does not relate them to empirical or experiential conditions of their application” (Strawson 1966, 16)? I have not even mentioned the many other Kantian commitments that are difficult to justify or even to make sense of unless Kant accepted the principle, such as his claim that the principles of understanding, just insofar as they “contain nothing but, as it were, the pure schema for possible experience” and thus “the basis for the possibility of experience”, are “the source of *all* truth” (A236-7/B297; my emphasis), or his claim, notwithstanding some recent commentators,³ that “speculative *knowledge* [*Wissen*] proper cannot concern any object at all other than an object of experience” (A471/B499).

³ Watkins and Willaschek (unpublished), among others.

Undoubtedly, many interpretive difficulties arise from taking those remarks at face value. Yet the striking placidity with which commentators nowadays play them down⁴ belies the magnitude of the interpretive task required to make philosophical sense of them and the corresponding magnitude of interpretive defeat implicit in simply declining to take them seriously. The method of a patchwork-theoretic interpreter, with which I ordinarily do not sympathize, is in the present case preferable in its frank recognition of the difficulty, even if it is ultimately “defeatist” (Abela 2002, 256).

3.

Against all that, a predictable objection will be that all the remarks I have canvassed above, and the many similar ones scattered throughout the Critical corpus that I have neglected, are actually *not* evidence of Kant’s commitment to anything like Strawson’s principle of significance but can *seem* to be so only because of latent positivistic interpretive bias. Kenneth Westphal claims that “Strawson’s (1966) interpretation of Kant marks the confluence of neo-Kantianism and positivist verificationism” (2004, 42), and Frederick Beiser warns that “we should beware of making Kant seem relevant at the cost of historical accuracy”, namely by making Kant “more scrubbed and sanitary for [our] more positivistic age” (2006, 589). Likewise, Patrick Kain notes with approval that what he views as “excessively positivistic interpretations” and even “appropriations” of Kant’s philosophy are on the wane (2010, 211). Yet where Strawson uses ‘positivism’ and related terms in *The Bounds of Sense*, it is only to contrast a positivistic account of geometry with Kant’s own, which Strawson does not suggest violates the principle of significance (1966, 277-81). So why suspect the principle of significance of positivism?

⁴ E.g., Chignell 2010, 179; Allais 2015, 212-13.

One important basis of the association of Strawson's principle with positivism is surely Stroud's famous 1968 article on transcendental arguments (2000b). Such arguments, he suggests, must either rely on a dogmatically assumed 'verification principle' that actually makes them superfluous or else be so weak as only to instruct us about our thought or experience construed merely subjectively, quite apart from how things are beyond that thought or experience (2000b, 23-4). The result of Stroud's intervention has been to cement the thoughts, first, that if Kant really does endorse the principle of significance, then he must be a verificationist (hence a positivist), and second, that for verificationism to enter Kant's strategy at any point is for that strategy to be dogmatic or a failure.

Yet however Strawson may use the principle of significance in his own philosophy, the principle by itself, just as Strawson purports to find it in Kant, neither is nor entails verificationism. That can be brought out in two ways. First, Stroud takes verificationism to make possible a quite flatfooted anti-skeptical procedure, on which when one encounters a (skeptical) doubt about our ability to know the truth-value of some proposition, one *first* discerns that the proposition is meaningful and *then* concludes that, it being meaningful, no such doubt is possible (2000a, 162). Now certainly it would be a disaster for Kant's project if he relied on or enabled such a procedure. But the principle of significance neither says nor entails that the meaningfulness of concepts and judgments (or, indeed, their meaning) can be settled in advance of reflection on their bearing on reality—rather than as a part of that very reflection. It merely says that only where thought bears on reality in the right way, i.e., by relating to possible experience or its objects, is thought meaningful. So the principle cannot by itself enable Stroud's envisioned flatfooted anti-skeptical procedure. And since, indeed, nothing in Kant's Critical philosophy (certainly nothing that Stroud points to) would, when coupled with the principle of

significance, license such a procedure, Kant's endorsement of the principle and his use of it to explain why certain transcendent thoughts are out of bounds would be neither obviously dogmatic nor, by Stroud's lights, verificationistic.⁵

Second, verificationism as classically conceived has been committed to (1) the rejection of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgments, (2) the rejection of the possibility of recognition-transcendent truths, and (3) commitment to various reduction-programs. But the principle of significance requires none of that: (1) A synthetic *a priori* principle of pure understanding, such as the second Analogy, can be related to experiential conditions of its application—namely, by being shown to characterize a condition of the possibility of experience at all. (2) That there are rational beings on other worlds can be true even if, contingently, we will never be able to confirm it (say, because of immense distances between worlds and limits to possible technological advancement before the universe collapses), so long as those other rational beings stand in the community of causal influence that, per the third Analogy, constitutes possible experience.⁶ And (3) that all meaningful thoughts must relate in the right way to experiential conditions of their application is not itself a claim about what meaningful thoughts *mean* and hence has no immediate reductionistic consequences.

⁵ Stroud thinks that Kant can non-dogmatically endorse the principle of significance only at the expense of accepting transcendental idealism, which Stroud conceives of as a subjective idealism of construction or projection (2000a, 161-2). He is wrong so to conceive it, but herein I do not dispute Stroud on all fronts.

⁶ When giving an earlier iteration of this paper, an audience member objected that Ayer, for one, accepts the possibility of verification-transcendent truths of just the sort to which my example belongs while maintaining the compatibility thereof with verificationism. Now first, that strikes me as somewhat *ad hoc* on the verificationist's part, and here I am tempted to follow Abela (2002, 233-44) in arguing that the point at which the verificationist has liberalized their position enough to avoid all the objectionable consequences is just the point at which it ceases to be verificationism. But second, the *ultimate ground* of Ayer's liberalism about a case like my example is a conception of idealized observability, whereas for Kant, the *ultimate ground* is belonging to the causal community that constitutes possible experience (A225-6/B272-4), though Kant accepts that the latter entails the former.

4.

Yet the immense impact of Stroud's work is not the only basis of suspicion that the principle of significance is not really in Kant but only in the positivism-tinged spectacles of the Kant-interpreter. Clearly, there is at least some family resemblance between the principle and verificationism, especially insofar as both belong to larger projects of limiting the pretensions of transcendent metaphysics. Now that should not surprise us after the work of scholars like Alberto Coffa (1991) and Robert Hanna (2001), which shows that the logical positivists themselves, like Strawson, were influenced by what they took Kant to be saying, however far that may be from what Kant really meant. But one may suspect that the family resemblance between Strawson's principle and classical verificationism is most plausibly explained by Strawson's having grown up in positivism and not by anything genuinely in Kant. If that is right, then the putative 'discovery' of the principle of significance in Kant is just anachronism.

Suspicion of anachronism is, I suspect, more or less explicitly present in the minds of many commentators, including Westphal, Kain and Beiser. The latter voices the suspicion sharply when he writes that "We learn little from past thinkers when we make them caricatures of ourselves", and that his aim in reading resolutely transcendent-metaphysical commitments into Kant is to "restore the historical integrity of Kant's doctrine against those who would dismantle it for the sake of their own philosophical agenda" (2006, 590).⁷

I agree that Kant interpreters should be wary of anachronism. But the anachronism of projection of the present onto the past is not the only kind. Evidently our interpretive conception remains under the control of present dogmas if, overly fearful of reading them into Kant, we systematically ignore or downplay key Kantian commitments. And equally anachronistic is to

⁷ In fairness to Beiser, he may not mean to exclude taking Kant's anti-metaphysical impulses, including the principle of significance, equally seriously, though his rhetoric is suggestive in that direction.

project onto Kant the doctrines and methods of his predecessors or even contemporaries and thereby to arm oneself in advance with an artificially low expectation of how novel his philosophy could really be.

To be sure, Kant is steeped in the rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolf, and many elements of his vocabulary and central concerns of his problematic are recognizably inherited or developed from his engagement with that tradition. Yet the logical force of those facts is that of a *clue*, not a *determinant*. That is, the inherited vocabulary and concerns should undoubtedly prompt us to take seriously the question, ‘Just how deep do the continuities between Kant and his forebears really run?’ But they do not by themselves settle that question: That Kant uses terms and retains concerns from a preceding tradition does not at all entail fundamental continuity of doctrine or method with that tradition except given very loaded assumptions about the limits of philosophical creativity.

And if that is right, then fear of anachronism is no basis on which to interpret away Kant’s many emphatic commitments to the principle of significance. Indeed, the very same fear should prompt us to interpret Kant neither through the lens of our own time nor through that of his forebears, but holistically and from within. That, of course, is no easy task, and it is undeniable that reconciling the principle with Kant’s transcendent-metaphysical impulses poses an intimidating and probably still unmet challenge. It may be that meeting the challenge is impossible, and that, in the long run, a defeatist, patchwork interpretive orientation will prevail. I have tried to argue only that we must face the challenge squarely rather than letting ourselves off the interpretive hook.

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