Tales of the Mighty Dead:
Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality

Part One: Talking With a Tradition

Chapter One: Contexts

1. <u>Kant and the shift from epistemology to semantics</u>

One of Kant's master ideas is that what distinguishes thinkers and agents from merely natural creatures is our susceptibility to certain kinds of *normative* appraisal. Judgements and actions essentially involve *commitments* as to how things are or are to be. Because they can be assessed according to their *correctness* (truth/error, success/failure), we are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for what we believe and do.

Kant makes a normative turn: a shift from the sort of ontological demarcation Descartes offers of selves as thinking beings, to a deontological demarcation of selves as loci of responsibility.   This move underwrites some of Kant's most characteristic claims. Thus the judgement appears for him as the minimal unit of experience, where the tradition he inherits had focused on the term (singular or general), because judgements are the smallest units for which we can take cognitive (justificatory) responsibility. Judgements have a subjective form, marked by the "I think" that can accompany all our representations, indicating who is responsible *for* or committed to the (correctness of the) judgement (the transcendental unity of apperception as a co-responsibility equivalence

class). And judgements have an objective form, the "object = X", indicating what the judgement makes the judger responsible *to* (for its correctness). For Kant, concepts are rules determining what one has committed oneself to by applying the concept in judging or acting—and so what would count as a reason entitling one to or justifying such a commitment. The key philosophical puzzles about concepts accordingly concern their Gültigkeit or Verbindlichkeit: their validity or bindingness, a kind of authority laying obligations on those who use them. Kant wants to understand what it is for the use of concepts to make us responsible, for the norms of correctness they embody to have a grip on us, and further to make us responsible *to* something (what we are thinking *about*), on which we thereby count as having a a intentional grasp.

Kant is the first thinker explicitly to take as his task the explanation of our character as *discursive* creatures in terms of our liability to various kinds of *normative* assessment. But when, in "Was ist Aufklärung?", he looks back at his predecessors, he finds this theme to have been the implicit organizing principle of a tradition. He sees the Enlightenment as announcing and promoting our emergence from the tutelage of childhood to the incipient autonomy of adolescence. And that coming of age is taking person-defining *responsibility* for our *endorsement* of even inherited attitudes, claims, and goals. Descartes' meditator practices a particularly pure, radical, and rigorous version of this project. But it is no less visible in the political tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, who teach us to see our political institutions as our creatures, as things we are responsible for and bound by in the way we are responsible for and bound by what we do and have done.

By showing us this common thread, Kant retrospectively rationally reconstructs a tradition, exhibiting it as having an implicit, practical unity. The unity first emerges as an explicit theoretical principle in his own work—work that has the shape it does only because of the understanding it embodies of the significance of the tradition it thereby comes to epitomize and in a certain sense to complete. That broad movement of thought encompasses another, more finely grained development. The Enlightenment understands the discursive in terms of *rational* commitments. The responsibility to which it calls us is ultimately answerability to the *reasons* we have for our judgements and actions. Those reasons are the only authority acknowledged as legitimate. As it shows up in Descartes, this concern has the effect of pushing into the foreground the topic of *knowledge*: true belief justified by reasons. The threat that sets the criteria of adequacy for accounts addressing this topic is epistemological skepticism: the worry that reasons genuinely justifying our beliefs are not to be had. Even if many of our beliefs are true, we might still not be able to fulfill the responsibility to justify them with reasons, which is required for us to count as knowers.

Kant digs deeper. He sees that the epistemological issue presupposes a semantic one. The Cartesian skeptic asks what reason we have to suppose that the world is as we represent it to be in thought. An inquiry into the conditions of *successful* representation is accordingly an appropriate road to a response. Kant takes as his initial focus *intentionality* rather than *knowledge*. He asks about the conditions of even *purported* representation. What makes it that our ideas so much as *seem* to point beyond

themselves, to something that they are *about*? The threat that sets the criteria of adequacy for accounts addressing this topic is *semantic* skepticism: a worry about the intelligibility of the very idea of representation. Kant thinks, further, that responding to this more radical form of skepticism, by explaining what it is for one thing to be about or purport to represent another, suffices to defuse the epistemological threat as well. The soft underbelly of epistemological skepticism is its implicit semantics. For Kant the aboutness characteristic of representings is a normative achievement. Representings answer for their correctness to how it is with what (thereby) counts as represented. To take one thing as representing another is to accord to the latter a certain kind of *authority* over the former, to see the representing as in a distinctive way *responsible* to what is represented. (On the practical side, the normative approach can be extended to intendings and what is intended.) Understanding discursivity is understanding this sort of normativity. That is the task that stands at the very center of Kant's philosophical undertakings.

This trajectory of Enlightenment philosophizing about the discursive—from concern with knowledge to concern with intentionality, so from epistemology to semantics—like that about the normative, also culminates in Kant's distinctive problematic. But there is a temptation to take it that Kant is the *first* to address the semantic issue. That temptation is encouraged by the empiricists' relative lack of attention to the problem of understanding representational purport, as opposed to that of justifying our hopes and beliefs regarding our representational success. (Hume is a prime example.) Again, the failure to appreciate and address the normative character of

knowledge involved in both justification and intentionality is what led Kant to claim that "the celebrated Mr. Locke" produced only a "physiology of the understanding". Nonetheless, there is good reason to think of the semantic concerns as in fact coeval with the epistemological ones, and of Kant here, as elsewhere, as explicitly thematizing concerns that had been all along implicit in the Enlightenment philosophical tradition. At least Kant's rationalist precursors during the early modern period were already usefully engaged in an enterprise that might be called "the metaphysics of intentionality".

2. **Descartes and the shift from resemblance to representation**

The need philosophers such as Spinoza and Leibniz felt to tell a story of this sort developed under quite specific circumstances. Ancient and medieval hylomorphic theories understood the relation between appearance and reality–between how things seem or are taken to be, and how they are–as in the favored case one of the sharing of a form. That is to say that it was understood in terms of *resemblance*: the sort of partial sharing of properties (e.g. shape, color) that is one way pictures can be related to what they are pictures of. The scientific revolution required a different, much more general model. The reality Copernicus discerned—a rotating Earth and a stationary Sun—did not at all resemble the familiar appearance of a stationary Earth and a revolving Sun. Galileo found that he could get the best mathematical (for him this meant geometrical) grip on the motions of ordinary objects by using lengths of lines to represent periods of time, and the areas of triangles to stand for speeds. In each case he was exploiting relations not happily thought of in terms of resemblance. And Descartes' mathematical physics

represented the extended physical world (after Galileo, sensibly thought of as geometrical in its motions as well as its spatial extent) by algebraic equations. Again, the equations of circles and lines ($x^2+y^2=1$, ax +by =c) do not at all *resemble* the geometrical figures they describe. [1]

Descartes sees that a more abstract notion is required to make sense of these relations. Something can evidently represent something else in the sense of being a sign of it without sharing the properties (even formal ones) required for resemblance. The master idea of the theory of knowledge in the period initiated by Descartes was, accordingly, to be that of *representation*. Descartes himself divided the world into two kinds of things: mental things, whose nature it is to represent, and physical things, which could only be represented. But what is it for something to be a representing in the relevant sense? (Words and pictures in books are not.) What is it to be a representation *for* or *to* someone? What makes someone's rabbit-idea so much as *seem* to be about rabbits? (I'll argue below that the form of this question that mattered for Spinoza and Leibniz was a broadly functionalist one: what is it to take, treat, or use one thing *as* a representation of another?) Descartes himself is not very explicit about how such representational purport should be understood. Indeed, he often allows himself to appeal to the very scholastic, ultimately nonexplanatory vocabulary of formal and objective existence of things that according to his basic insight needs to be overcome. In spite of such backsliding on the semantic issue, and in spite of his giving pride of place to the project of showing that things could be in reality as appearance represented them to be, that is, concern with the conditions of the *success* of representation, rather than with what

representational content or purport consists in, Descartes nonetheless put on the table a wholly novel semantic idea that was to be critical for the subsequent tradition.

For the model of the relation between representing and represented—and so the model for the relation between appearance and reality, and therefore for that between mind and body—that drives and structures his philosophic thought is drawn from his discoveries in analytic geometry. Geometry, the study of the mathematical laws governing extension, could, thanks to Galileo, be seen to encompass not just shapes, but their motions. Identifying the physical with what is so governed, Descartes then could see a paradigm of the discursive representation of the physical (the extended) in the relation between an algebraic equation and the geometrical figure it determines. But, as he also saw, the capacity of a string of symbols to represent a determinate extended figure is wholly a creature of its place in a *system* of such symbols, *all* the suitable expressions of which can be correlated with figures in such a way that differences in which symbols occur at various places in the algebraic expressions correspond to differences in the geometrical properties of the correlated figures. What makes it possible for an equation such as "$x^2+y^2=1$" to represent a circle is that there is a *global isomorphism*, a structure preserving mapping, from the system of equations to that of geometrical figures. (The development and exploitation of that mapping had, of course, been the basis of the young Descartes' epoch-making mathematical achievements.)

Two consequences of this model are of particular significance for the metaphysics of intentionality as pursued by Descartes' successors. First is a *holist* point: in order to

understand representation, one must look at the whole structured system of representings. The traditional notion of form, and so of the features underwriting a resemblance, is local and atomistic. It concerns only the intrinsic properties the item itself. By contrast, the representational properties of an item, on Descartes' model, depend on how the whole system of representings maps onto what is representable. One cannot determine the representational purport or potential of a representing item by considering just that one item. Second, as a result, the first step in understanding the relation between a representing and what it represents is to consider the relation between that representing and other representings. The vertical relations between thoughts and things depend crucially on the horizontal relations between thoughts and thoughts.

3. Rationalism and functionalism

The development of this structural idea, which remains inchoate in Descartes' thought, is one of the ties that binds Spinoza and Leibniz to Descartes in the tradition of rationalism. Spinoza's idea that each individual thing is at once a mode of the attribute of thought and a mode of the attribute of extension is not, I claim, supposed to define the relations between representing ideas and represented things, since we can represent things outside our bodies. In fact the relation between the attributes provides only the metaphysical background and raw materials for an elaborate, multilayered account of the relations among modes that makes some of them intelligible as representations of others.

In telling that story, Spinoza introduces a new mode of explanation—one that, while building on the mechanical, moves decisively beyond it. He starts atomistically, with modes that are, or correspond to, the simplest bodies ("corpora simplicissima"). He then considers larger totalities that are formed from them, in virtue of the causal and inferential relations they stand in to one another (depending upon which attribute we consider them under). All this is available to the kind of understanding he calls "Ratio", which permits us to discern and apply the laws of nature in empirical science and the laws of thought in logic. But he takes it that crucial features of the universe—in particular, the intentionality by which thoughts point beyond themselves, purporting to represent other things—are not in principle intelligible in these terms. Grasping and explaining these features requires moving to a new, higher sort of understanding: "Scientia Intuitiva." It is characteristic of this sort of understanding that it moves *down* from the relational wholes discerned by the exercise of Ratio, to consider the *roles played* or *contributions made* by smaller wholes in the context of those larger ones. Ultimately, what matters is the maximal whole that is *Deus sive Natura*. But along the way, we discover that the representational purport of an idea depends on the boundaries of the mind we assess it with respect to. Spinoza here describes a kind of rational and causal *functionalism*. That mode of explanation is addressed in the first instance to the organic, but its ultimate target is the intentional. It depends on an essentially *holistic* top-down individuational principle that works on the results of the atomistic, bottom-up accounts available at the level of Ratio. This additional functionalist step is the essential move in Spinoza's metaphysical account of the intentionality of thought.[2]

Leibniz's mature account of what has to be true of something for it to count as a state of conscious awareness of something is also holist, because broadly functionalist. He, too, starts with a sort of semantic primitive. For Spinoza it was the possibility of one mode showing up in two attributes. For Leibniz, each perception has as an intrinsic property (one it would have in every possible world) its *expressive range*: the range of attributes (themselves ultimately compounded out of perceptions) whose occurrence can be inferred from the existence of that perception alone. This expressive relation is ubiquitous in a Leibnizian world, applying to the inorganic, as well as the organic and intentional. The challenge Leibniz addresses in his semantic theorizing is to account for apperception, and eventually for distinct ideas, in terms of that primitive notion of expression, which holds even for unconscious perceptions. His answer is that perceptions acquire more than the atomistic significance of their intrinsic expressive range because perceptions joined in a single monad can function to underwrite *multipremise* inferences. Notoriously, all the perceptions of any single monad suffice to determine the whole world it inhabits—though that expressive labor is divided among individual perceptions very differently in different kinds of monads. Taking the essential role that *memory* plays in consciousness as his leading idea, Leibniz accounts for various sorts of awareness in terms of the role that individual perceptions play in the *developmental sequences* generated when sets of perceptions give rise to other, subsequent such sets. Distinctness of ideas, at the high end of the great epistemological chain of being, is understood in terms of *recognition*, when one state of affairs outside the monad is represented by two different apperceptive chains of perceptions within the same monad. Thus Leibniz's strategy for explaining higher order intentional capacities is to appeal to the significance

perceptions acquire in the context of other perceptions, to which they are joined either in a temporal progression or in being perceptions by a single monad. It is a functionalist, holist explanatory strategy.[3]

4. **Rationalism and inferentialism**

Another tradition defining strand of early modern rationalism comes to explicit expression in Leibniz as well. It is a conception of conceptual content as consisting in role in reasoning. The fundamental concept of the dominant and characteristic understanding of cognitive contentfulness in the period initiated by Descartes is of course *representation*. Rationalists such as Spinoza and Leibniz accepted the central role of the concept of representation in explaining human cognitive activity. But they were much more concerned than Descartes to offer explicit, detailed metaphysical accounts of what it is for one thing to represent another. The primitives they appealed to are *inferential* relations: facts about what is a reason for what. They were explicitly concerned, in a way that Descartes was not, to be able to explain what it is for something to be understood, taken, treated, or employed *as* a representing *by* the subject: what it is for it to be a representing *to* or *for* that subject (to be "tanquam rem", as if of things, as Descartes puts it). Their big idea was that the way in which representings point beyond themselves to something represented is to be understood in terms of *inferential* relations among representings. States and acts acquire conceptual content by being caught up in inferences, as premises and conclusions.

Spinoza did not appreciate the normative character of the order and connection of ideas that Kant and Hegel would insist upon (under the heading of 'necessity', Notwendigkeit, which for them means what happens according to a *rule*). But for him the inferential relations that order and connect ideas mirror the causal relations that order and connect things. And it is in terms of functional role with respect to those inferential-causal relations that he seeks to explain intentional, that is, representational phenomena. Leibniz's semantic primitive, the association with each perception (modification of a monad) an expressive range, is a kind of inferential potential. His paradigm is the way in which one can make inferences from facts about a map ("There is a blue wavy line between the two black dots,") to facts about the terrain it maps ("One must cross a river to go from Berlin to Leipzig,"). In fact, this inferential story is what Leibniz makes of the structural isomorphism that underwrites Cartesian analytic geometry. Leibniz, the great gradualist, nonetheless insists against the empiricists that there is a sharp line to be drawn between percepts and concepts. Whereas the preconceptual content of mere perceptions is a matter of inferential conclusions that can be drawn from non-inferential facts about them (as in the map example), the conceptual content of concepts is a matter of the inferential relations among them. For him the holistic character of conceptual content takes the form of an *inferential* holism, because the *functionalism* about the intentional that underwrites it is a *rational* functionalism. What gives a perception the significance of an apperceiving *that* things are thus and so is its role in reasoning.

Thus a big divide within Enlightenment epistemology concerns the relative explanatory priority accorded to the concepts of representation and inference. The

British empiricists were more puzzled than Descartes about representational purport: the property of so much as *seeming* to be *about* something. But they were clear in seeking to derive inferential relations from the contents of representings, rather than the other way around. In this regard they belong to the still-dominant tradition that reads inferential correctnesses off from representational correctnesses, which are assumed to be antecedently intelligible. That is why Hume could take for granted the contents of his individual representings, but worry about how they could possibly underwrite the correctness of inductive inferences. The post-Cartesian rationalists, the claim is, give rise to a tradition based on a complementary semantically reductive order of explanation. (So Kant, picking up the thread from this tradition, will come to see their involvement in counterfactually robust inferences as essential to empirical representations having the contents that they do.) These *inferentialists* seek to define representational properties in terms of inferential ones, which must accordingly be capable of being understood antecedently. They start with a notion of content as determining what is a *reason* for what, and understand truth and representation as features of ideas that are not only manifested in, but actually *consist* in their role in reasoning.

From this vantage point, the division of pre-Kantian philosophers into representationalists and inferentialists appears as the deepest structure underlying the traditional division of them into empiricists and rationalists. Leibniz uses the notion of inference or reasoning to draw a sharp line between conceptual representation and merely perceptual representation. This makes it possible for him to build up an *account* of what conceptual awareness consists in. Being aware of some external thing—in the sense of

applying a concept to it, so as to be able to reason about it—is for the rationalists an achievement that has a distinctive sort of structure. But it requires that one *already* have a concept available to classify something under, in order to be aware of it in this sense. And that raises the question of how those conceptual capacities are acquired. The holism required by construing concepts as nodes in a network of reasons puts further constraints on a story about concept acquisition. By contrast, for the empiricist representationalists, awareness is an atomistic, primitive capacity of purported representation. Concepts are understood to be acquired by abstraction from exercises of the basic capacity for preconceptual awareness.

The problem of making intelligible the possibility of acquiring concepts was not soluble within the framework of pre-Kantian rationalism. The appeal to innateness was a desperate measure that neither stemmed from the roots of the rationalist vision nor carried conviction. It amounted to giving up the explanatory enterprise at this point. Kant's singling out of the judgement as the unit of cognitive responsibility, commitment, and authority, and hence of normatively significant *awareness*, reinforced the bright line the rationalists had drawn between conceptual and nonconceptual representations. And his understanding of theoretical (as well as practical) responsibility and authority as a matter of liability to *rational* assessment—i.e. assessment as to the *reasons* one has for making a judgement or producing an action—supported and developed their *inferential* criterion of demarcation for the conceptual. However, Kant also did not offer a convincing account of concept acquisition: of how it is possible to come into the space of reasons and (so) concepts. He did, however, introduce the thought that—as I put the

point above—what matters to begin with is the normative grip concepts have on us, not our grip on them. (This is the move to thinking in Kantian categories of necessity, rather than Cartesian categories of certainty.) That is, the key thing is to understand how concepts let us bind or commit ourselves. This is the idea that opened up the possibility of a resolution of the problem of concept acquisition in the rationalist tradition.

5. __Hegel and pragmatism__

Such a resolution required another move as well. What is needed is one of the most basic Hegelian emendations to Kant's normative rationalism: an understanding of normative statuses such as commitment, responsibility, and authority as *social* achievements. Hegel construes having bound oneself by applying a concept as occupying a certain sort of social position, having a certain sort of social standing. The issue of concept acquisition then becomes transformed into the question of what one must do in order to count as having undertaken a particular conceptually (inferentially) articulated commitment, or claimed a particular conceptually articulated authority. For each individual coming into language, learning to engage in discursive practices, the concepts are always already available. The transition from not being able to produce a performance with that sort of social significance to being able to do so does not seem mysterious in the way that acquiring concepts had seemed to be according to Leibniz's story. (Problems remained concerning how to understand the *determinateness* of the conceptual content of such commitments, but that is a further issue.[4]) For this is a change that can take place largely outside the individual—as scratching a signature onto a piece

of paper can either have no legal significance or be the undertaking of a contractual obligation to pay the bank a certain sum of money every month for thirty years, depending only on whether it is performed one day before, or one day after the author's twenty first birthday and consequent automatic achievement of legal majority.[5] Of course, the question of how the concepts themselves develop in the linguistic community then becomes paramount.

Hegel's idea is that understanding the normative character of intentional states as conceptually contentful requires adding another dimension to the functionalism about intentionality that was already characteristic of the rationalist tradition. Only a *social* functionalism, he thinks, can accommodate Kant's normative insight. Leibniz had broken the Spinozist parallelism of the inferential and the causal-developmental order, treating these as independently varying factors in his metaphysical account of conscious awareness of external bodies. Hegel adds a third dimension to his account, besides the inferential and the normative: the social. As for Leibniz the functional significance of a perception depends not only on its inferential expressive range and what other perceptions precede and succeed it, but also on the other contemporaneous perceptions of its monad, so for Hegel the content of a commitment depends functionally not only on its inferential connections and role in an expressive developmental sequence, but also on the commitments acknowledged and attributed by other members of the same community. Understanding the intentional content of a belief or intention requires considering its role with respect to all three dimensions. This social dimension of Hegel's functionalism, and the holism that inevitably goes with it, is picked up both by the early Heidegger and the

later Wittgenstein. Indeed, in all three of these figures we find functionalism about

intentionality taking the form of *semantic pragmatism*: the view that the content

expressed by linguistic expressions must be understood in terms of the *use* of those

expressions. While retaining this bit of the rationalist tradition, Heidegger and

Wittgenstein (like the classical American pragmatists) do not subscribe to the

inferentialist strand. Sellars, however, reunites all of the classical elements once more.

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[1]   I am indebted to my former colleague John Haugeland for this way of telling the story.

See Chapter One of his *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea* (MIT Press; Bradford;

1985).

[2]   This story is told in Chapter Four: "Adequacy and the Individuation of Ideas in

Spinoza's *Ethics*".

[3]   This story is told in Chapter Five: "Leibniz and Degrees of Perception".

[4]   This story is told in Chapter Seven: "Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism".

[5]   I discuss this sort of change in connection with Sellars' resolution of the rationalists'

difficulties, in my Study Guide to his classic "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"

(Harvard University Press, 1997).