

Linda A. W. Brakel, M.D.\*

**'Unusual' human experiences:  
Kant, Freud and an associationist law**

**Abstract**

Kant famously held that there are 12 categories of understanding necessary to ground human experience, where human experience can be taken to include the perception of objects 'objectively' and the ordinary daily rationality of mature adults. There are however other 'unusual' human experiences, most notably dream and hallucinatory states, and much of the thinking of the very young, all of which seem to be grounded by some other organizing principle, prior to the categories. I want to make a case that this principle is an associationist one; and further that such an associationist principle is prior to and transcendently necessary for the categories to operate. Since Kant himself held this, although not so famously, the purpose of this paper is not to refute Kant. Rather it is to demonstrate that experiences organized by the associationist law vs. experiences organized by the categories map very well onto the two types of mentation posited by Freud-the 'primary processes' and the 'secondary processes' respectively. Discovering this mapping can help psychoanalytic theory by providing some convergent support for its posits; and it can make vivid a lesser known piece of Kantian philosophy of mind as it is instantiated by observations made everyday as a practical consequence of psychoanalytic theory.

**Introduction**

A transcendental argument is 'one that contends that the proposition it is out to establish represents a necessary precondition of a kind of self awareness we

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\* Address for correspondence: Linda A.W. Brakel, M.D., 525 Third St., Ann Arbor, Michigan 48103, USA. Email: brakel@umich.edu

human beings cannot fail to possess.’ (David Hills, personal communication) Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787) famously argues that the 12 categories of understanding provide the principle of combination transcendently necessary for transforming the countless inputs to our multi-modal sensory systems into any conscious understanding, any knowledge of objects, and even any conscious experience. According to Kant, ‘All synthesis...even that which renders perception possible, is subject to the categories; and since experience is knowledge by means of connected perceptions, the categories are conditions of the possibility of experience...’ (B161: 171). Associationism is another possible combinatory principle-but it is one that Kant argued could not ground human experience.

In this brief paper I want to make a case for an associationist law that is necessary prior to the categories. Put another way, I want to claim that the transcendently necessary categories are themselves dependent upon earlier association-based organizations. Interestingly, as I will discuss below, Kant himself would have little disagreement with this. Instead, a possible point of contention concerns Kant’s use of the term ‘human experience’. For Kant only category-based mentation, yielding knowledge and perception of objects as we know them, constitutes truly human experience. While I think a case can be made for some sorts of human experience based on associationist organization, particularly that seen in dreams, hallucinations, and the thinking of very young children, it is clear that Kant meant normal, typical mature human experience, hence I am not arguing with Kant on this issue.

Why then is it important to highlight the necessity of an associationist law upon which the categories depend? Because this will allow a Freudian posit central to psychoanalysis that there are two very differently organized types of mental processes, the ‘primary processes’ and the ‘secondary processes’, to be grounded in Kantian philosophy of mind.

### **The primary processes and the secondary processes**

By 1900 Freud had clearly delineated two types of mentation. He termed our more familiar everyday rational sort of thinking ‘secondary process’ mentation. Secondary processes consist of mechanisms, states, and contents that constitute much of what we experience consciously as our ordinary rationality. Kant’s categories of experience can readily be seen to be necessary for secondary process rational thinking (Brakel, 1984, 1994) insofar as the secondary processes are tensed (i.e., they are about events in specific real time: past, present, or future), reality tested, and admit of no contradictions. Freud’s ‘primary processes’ on the other hand, although still mental and contentful, lack one or more of these

hallmarks of the rational. They are tenseless in that they involve no conception of the past or future—they are always about an 'unexamined present'. With primary process mentation there is no reality testing—no considerations of truth and falsity, in other words distinctions cannot be made among what is, what may be possible, and what cannot be. Finally, the primary processes tolerate contradictions. (Brakel, in press). Clearly, synthesis according to the Kantian categories does not occur in this sort of mentation. Consequently something quite different from our usual conscious experience and even our usual knowledge of objects as determinate objects results. Freud held that the primary process is operative in very young children, in dream and hallucinatory states, and as an ever-present unconscious influence on mature thinkers. Although once someone has reached maturity it is hard to find a pure-culture example of the primary processes, as our rational, secondary process, category based processes are always engaged in attempting to re-interpret in order to understand, let me present a psychiatric example where there is much evidence of primary process thinking.

### **A case with primary processes much in evidence**

What follows was reported to me in 1976 by a person during an hallucinatory state. A psychotic patient, Mrs. M, screamed with pain and shouted, 'The delivery of the head and shoulders is killing me.' as she tried to forcefully push a hard plastic bottle of 'Head and Shoulders' shampoo against her pelvis. At the time of this hallucination Mrs. M was 55 years old. She was the mother of several grown children all of whom she had delivered normally decades before. But just prior to this hospitalization Mrs. M experienced what probably was the most potent cause of the acute exacerbation of her chronic psychotic condition—she had been told of an advanced gynecological malignancy that would require surgery. Her hallucination was a contentful (representational) mental event. Although not in accord with organization by the categories, Mrs. M was experiencing *something*, her mental faculties were actively representing *something*. If the above is correct, an organizational principle better able to account for the content is needed. An associationist principle of combination would work; and it would work for some of the very same reasons (to be elaborated in the section below) that Kant found associationism unsuitable to ground mature and normal human experience. Mrs. M's associative connections, as Kant foresaw, were idiosyncratic, not necessarily consistent, and certainly not generalisable even within the context of her psychosis. Under the Kantian categories no such object-like entity, like the funny 'object' conjoining the name of the shampoo with past representations of delivering the heads and shoulders of her newborns, would be formed. Under the Kantian categories the pain of childbirth long past could not be conflated

with and combined in one representation along with current tumor pain and the pain self-inflicted with a hard plastic item. Indeed after finally responding to an anti-psychotic medication, Mrs. M herself no longer made such combinations; her mental contents returned to organization by the categories.

### **Kant's negative argument**

Interestingly as we shall see below, it is Kant's case *against* an associationist law as a grounding for normal and mature mental experience that leads us to the case *for* an associationist law both as grounding 'unusual' human experiences (e.g., those in dreams, hallucinations and young children's thoughts); and as being necessary for the later operation of the category based principles of synthesis.

Kant was looking for a principle whereby combinations of sensory inputs and part representations are combined determinately according to spatio-temporal contiguity. The law of associations is a natural candidate, but one Kant dismissed contending that this principle allowed representations to be placed '...in any order... [which] would not lead to any determinate connection of them, but only to accidental collocations' (A121). Kitcher (1992) elaborates Kant's view:

The law of association...links cognitive states related by spatiotemporal contiguity.

So, for example, it would connect cognitive states produced by striking matches and [those representing] flames and cognitive states produced by observing different parts of telephones. Only in the second case, however, do *we* [my emphasis] unite those cognitive states in the representation of an object. [But] The law of association operates in the same way in all cases and so could not explain how we achieve different types of representations.. .spatiotemporal contiguity is too promiscuous (79).

And indeed one can see that associative connections are not only promiscuous but idiosyncratic too. Remember the funny 'objects' of Mrs. M when she was hallucinating; they were put together owing to connections with very specialized meanings to her. But one need not be hallucinating. I am assuming neither Kitcher nor I hallucinate when we have cognitive states produced by striking matches. But maybe my most prominent associative connection to striking matches will be different from Kitcher's. For example, for me now striking a match will be immediately associated with a sulfur smell. For that matter maybe today I will spatially align telephone parts with telephone tables, tomorrow temporally unite telephone parts with telephone rings, and next week spatiotemporally connect telephone parts with telephone books. Some rather unwieldy funny 'objects' could result from combining representations this way. And indeed this was one of Kant's

most important worries. Because associationist law could yield these funny subjective 'objects', instead of single determinate objects spatio-temporally aligned, Kant considered the associationist law unconstrained and incapable of delivering the determinate combinations he sought.

Having dismissed the laws of association as the a priori organizing principle of combination, Kant needs an alternative. And he seeks '...a relation [of representations] which is *objectively valid*, and so distinguished from a relation of the same representations that would have only subjective validity, as when they are connected by the laws of association' (B142). For Kant 'objectively valid' of course cannot mean representing the thing-in-itself, a realm of which human cognizers can have no knowledge. Instead Kant wants his a priori principle to produce a determinate organization of representations as '...they are combined in the object, no matter what the state of the subject might be' (B142). Thus the combinatory principle he seeks must be actively applied in order to achieve the object representations we ordinarily and objectively are capable of experiencing.

### **Kant's positive argument**

The clearest statement of Kant's positive argument for the existence of an associative law and then its priority to organization by the categories comes in the work published between the two editions of the *Critique, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783). Regarding the existence of an associative law, Lewis Beck White in his editor's introduction to the Bobbs-Merrill 1950 edition of the *Prolegomena* paraphrases a segment of sections 14-38 thus: 'Our representations... are organized through the 'association of ideas', giving rise to 'judgments of perception' which are valid for us only individually, or [they are organized] by the understanding, giving rise to perfectly universal (nonpersonal) 'judgments of experience' which are valid for all minds...' (xvi). Beck continues (in a footnote): "What is it that makes our experience...[an experience of the] knowledge of *objects*?" The answer is: 'Its conformity to rules which are not rules of private association, but rules of synthesis...' Kant's own words in Section 18 (46) demonstrate the priority of these private subjective associative organizations: 'All of our judgments are at first merely judgments of perception: they hold only for us (that is for our subject), and we do not until afterward give them a new reference (to an object) and desire that they should always hold good for us and in the same way for everybody else...' In other words, first there are representations as they go together for me; and then there are representations as they go together 'objectively' irrespective of how they might be put together idiosyncratically by me.

## **The necessity of a prior associationist synthetic principle**

In order to demonstrate the necessity of a prior associationist principle let us first return briefly to Mrs. M's story. Mrs. M, while she was hallucinating, seemed to be actively experiencing and representing something, although the mental contents did not seem to be organized in accord with the categories. Instead the organizational principle better able to account for the content was some sort of actively applied associationist law. But how about after the hallucination, what was the nature of Mrs. M's experience then?

Mrs. M became more and more agitated and more so as we increased the medication. This paradoxical reaction required that we switch her to a different anti-psychotic agent. (Cameron & Wimer-Brakel, 1979.) Once this medication had reached an adequate level in her system, she calmed down. Also, and rather more abruptly than is typical for such patients, she stopped hallucinating and immediately ceased her activities with the shampoo bottle. Soon she talked coherently about her children, her tumor, her upcoming surgery, and even the need to shampoo her hair. She also could remember part of her hallucination, particularly how she conflated the long past pain of giving birth with the current pains of her tumor and that of the 'Head and Shoulders' shampoo bottle as she ground it against her pelvis. At this point any Kantian (anyone really) would have characterized Mrs. M's experiences of these objects as good examples of ordinary human experiences of objects. After responding to the medication she once again could recognize representations '...as they are combined in the object, no matter what the state the subject might be' (B142).

## **Kant's negative account plus his positive account of associative principle plus a realization**

When Kant's negative account of an associative principle as a ground for human experience is taken in conjunction with his positive account of an associative principle of combination preceding categorical synthesis, we have almost all that is needed for an argument for an associationist law necessarily preceding synthesis by the categories. Once we add a realization arising from the case of Mrs. M, we can indeed make this argument. Here is the realization: some version of the striking transition in the case of Mrs. M, as she goes from hallucination to a normal wakeful state, must have taken place in all of us at a time early in our development before ordinary objects could be differentiated or picked out as such. This must be the case if Kant is correct that synthesis by the categories is a combinatory principle

in which a determinate organization of representations puts them together as ‘...they are combined in the object, no matter what the state of the subject might be’ (B142). Because Kant here implies that for a subject to be able to combine representations as they are in the object no matter what his/her subjective state, this subject on earlier occasions and in less mature states, must have put together representations in a fashion such that the subject’s own subjective state often did matter. Stated simply, this reading of B142 suggests that subjects can not put things together as they are combined in the object without having had subjectively organized prior combinations to serve as contrastive ground.

This account squares well not only with psychoanalytic theory about the primary processes, but with recent formulations in cognitive neuroscience regarding development of the capacity for categorizing objects. For example Edelman (1987) states, ‘...at the time of an evolved organisms first confrontation with its world, most macroscopic things and events do not, in general, come in well arranged categories’ (24). He then asks, ‘Given...the absence of immutable categories of things, how do we know what an object is?’ (26). For Edelman the initially ‘unlabelled world’ (7) is one in which organisms (including humans) must make certain ‘...overall ‘object distinction’ (not necessarily veridical...’ (257); such that ‘...categorization of objects...are according to the particular set of salencies, cues, and contexts presented at some time and in some sequence’ (p.260). The proposed account is also in line with the observations of very young humans by developmental psychologists. Those children who are not yet able to perform the object-recognizing tasks that the experimenters have in mind, presumably are young humans for whom sensory inputs from various modalities do not yield representations immediately fitted together to form coherent, consistent, repeatable ‘objective’ objects of experience from the adult perspective. (Spelke, 1983; Gentner, 1988; .Smith, 1989.) Instead cognitive neuroscientists and developmental psychologists recognize that various representations are actively put together seemingly associatively and certainly subjectively, idiosyncratically, and differently on different occasions, perhaps with different funny ‘objects’ resulting. Indeed, it is a developmental accomplishment to experience objects objectively. This requires that they be distinguished not only from a background of non-objects and not-relevant objects, but also from highly individual subjectively relevant objects.

## **Conclusion**

If Kant’s transcendental argument for synthesis by the categories is sound, so is the proposition that prior combination by an associative law is transcendently necessary. This is the case because synthesis by the categories is dependent upon an earlier

associative organization. While this may break no new philosophical ground, in highlighting this less than famous aspect of Kant's philosophy of mind, 'unusual' human experiences like dreams, hallucinations, and the mentation of the very young, can be shown to be grounded by an associative organizational principle. This has important implications for psychoanalysis. These 'unusual' human experiences are of course familiar to psychoanalysts in practice. Moreover, they have been characterized in psychoanalytic theory as consisting of primary process mentation, a type of mentation posited by Freud as distinct from our ordinary waking rationality. The grounding of these types of 'unusual' human experiences within the framework of Kant's philosophy of mind is welcome for psychoanalysis because psychoanalytic theory, like other theories, can ever benefit from convergent support from outside its own domain of posits and assumptions. Equally important, aspects of Kant's philosophy of mind, the categories famously necessary for rational human experience, and the heretofore less famous but prior associationist organizations necessary for the 'unusual' human experiences that precede, have been given clear validation in Freud's theory of mind and in psychoanalytic observations.

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