PURELY PRACTICAL REASON:

NORMATIVE EPISTEMOLOGY FROM LEIBNIZ TO MAIMON

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When Kant separated off the *Critique of Practical Reason* from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he did not solely isolate ethics from the rest of philosophy, he also drained theoretical philosophy of any practical element, anything involving reason's capacity to change and improve reality (including, I will argue, itself). What theoretical philosophy lost with the splitting of the first and second *Critiques* was any claim to normativity, to rules and so to an epistemic 'ought'. I contend, however, that in eighteenth-century German philosophy Kant is the exception, not the norm. Both before him (in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition) and after him (in Schiller and Maimon's work), epistemology is understood as thoroughly normative. Here reason is neither merely pure, nor merely practical, not even pure practical – it forms, instead, 'purely practical reason' which applies normative rules in every domain.

In this paper, therefore, I argue for the centrality of normative rules – what I dub, philosophy's ameliorative vocation – to both pre- and post-Kantian German epistemology. Philosophers such as Wolff, Mendelssohn, Schiller and Maimon understood themselves as changing the world, not merely understanding it: praxis, not contemplation, was their ideal (even in epistemology). This was an ameliorative philosophy that sets rules for the improvement of both itself and other forms of thought.

My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I focus on one element of the Leibniz-Wolffian project – its attempt to eliminate symbolic cognition – in order to substantiate my thesis. There is a pressing need for research on Leibniz-Wolffian thought: the more ingrained a philosophical prejudice, the more urgently it calls for reappraisal, and there is no prejudice in the history of philosophy stronger than that against the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition of German rationalism. A dearth of studies, of translations and of basic conceptual familiarity

with this period strongly suggests a need to attend to it.[1] It is, of course, Kant's three critiques which provide the justification for contemporary ignorance: we are too quick to accept that the transcendental turn inaugurated a radical sea-change in philosophical thought and so consigned eighteenth-century rationalism to oblivion. However, central to my argument – and this is its second step – is that the Leibniz-Wolffian conception of the theoretical philosopher as a prescriber of rules does not become obsolete with the onset of transcendental thought; it lives on – in transfigured form – in strands of post-Kantian philosophy. Schiller and Maimon, for example, still conceive of philosophy as an ameliorative enterprise. Even though the ameliorative self-understanding of the philosopher was particularly prominent in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition, it lived on after the transcendental turn. In this respect at least, Kant's Copernican revolution did not bring about an immediate paradigm shift; for his successors, this aspect of the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition was neither obsolete nor antiquated. Finally, the third step of my argument returns to Kant himself to begin a discussion of the place of normative rules in his epistemology. The scope of this paper prevents a thorough examination of this issue; instead, I give two preliminary suggestions as to why Kant seems to banish normativity from epistemology.

While, in what follows, I restrict my claims to eighteenth-century German philosophy, issues surrounding the relation of normativity to epistemology obviously have wider implications. On the one hand, the eighteenth-century project of setting rules for the amelioration of discourse forms part of the early modern obsession with method (a priori rules for the direction of the mind). Kant's uneasiness with this aspect of the German rationalist tradition is, then, a variant of his suspicions about *mathesis* in general. On the other

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[1] In the English-language literature, there are only three general studies on this period of any significance: L.W. Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969); D.E. Wellbery, *Lessing's* Laocoon*: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and F. C. Beiser, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Wolff's work has yet to be substantially translated and (with the exception of his *Reflections on Poetry*) Baumgarten's oeuvre is only just appearing in English, thanks to the efforts of John Hymers, see http://hymers.eu/dr_hymers/research_baumgarten.htm.

hand, interest in normative rules in theoretical philosophy has recently been revived as a component of virtue epistemology: epistemic facts, epistemic values and the epistemic 'ought' are ways of articulating obligations to improve one's knowing. Indeed, Zagzebski has drawn attention to early modern methodology precisely as a valuable precursor to contemporary virtue epistemology. She goes on to imply that further research into early modern epistemology will help shape current concerns.[2]

This paper passes through the philosophies of Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, Lessing, Schiller and Maimon, as well as Kant, in order to get at the role rules play in eighteenth-century German epistemology. As the length of this list suggests, my argument must remain preliminary – an overview of the conceptual territory which requires further exploration. I sketch the contours of a history of philosophy necessary to begin answering Zagzebski's call for historical research into normative epistemology.

1. Ameliorative Philosophy before Kant

To put it bluntly, German philosophers from Leibniz to Lessing did not delimit in advance what philosophy is capable of and not capable of. While they were keen to define what philosophy *ought* to become, they refused to determine what philosophy *is*. It is this failure to set limits which Kant finds so objectionable: for Kant, it reveals a wider tendency to disregard reality, to refuse to think the facts as they actually are.[3] However, the widespread tendency in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition to avoid defining philosophy in terms of what it *is*

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[2] L.T. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 168-9, 171.

[3] Kant's 'Discipline of Pure Reason' is the prime witness to this attitude. The phrase 'disregard of reality' is taken from B. Clack, 'Religious Belief and the Disregard of Reality' in J. Carlisle, J. Carter and D. Whistler (ed), *Moral Powers, Fragile Beliefs: Essays in Moral and Religious Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2011), 261-88.

(as opposed to what it could or ought to be) is precisely what makes possible the improvement of both philosophy itself and also other scientific and artistic discourses. In this first section, I will chart this concern for amelioration, first through the key concept of symbolic cognition, before turning explicitly to the idea of the philosopher as a bestower of rules; finally, I will give a more detailed case study of this type of approach in aesthetics.

1.1 Symbolic Cognition

I begin therefore by narrating the history of *symbolic cognition* in eighteenth-century Germany. This concept is particularly significant for my purposes because it presupposes that philosophy does not merely describe or justify experience, knowledge or reality, but transforms this experience, knowledge or reality for the better. The reason for this is that, as with many epistemological concepts, pre-Kantian philosophers interpreted symbolic cognition (or mediated knowledge) in a normative manner. In what follows, I am following Beiser who has recently drawn attention to one example of this process by which epistemology is normativised in his study of rationalist aesthetics in eighteenth-century Germany:

> As first formulated by Leibniz, [the principle of sufficient reason] states simply 'that nothing is without reason' (*nihil esse sine ratione*). Its chief application is to events in the natural world, in which case it means 'no effect is without a cause' (*nullum effectum esse absque causa*). But it is also applied to true beliefs or propositions, in which case it means that there is or should be sufficient evidence for their truth. It is in this latter sense that the principle is generally used in aesthetic rationalism. The rationalists understood it in a normative sense: that we *ought to* seek or have sufficient evidence for all our beliefs.[4]

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[4] Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 3-4.

Beiser describes how principles usually applied to the world are turned reflexively back onto the beliefs and discourses by which we talk about the world. Descriptive facts about reality are transformed into normative rules for our knowledge. The principle of sufficient reason thus becomes a second-order rule regulating how we should think. Whereas, as a result of this process, the principle of sufficient reason is here held up as a principle for knowing that is to be recommended, symbolic cognition is a form of thought which ought to be eliminated.[5]

Christian Wolff distinguishes between symbolic and intuitive cognition as follows,

It should be noted that words are the basis of a special type of cognition which we call symbolic cognition. For we represent things to ourselves either themselves or through words or other signs. The first type of cognition is called *intuitive* cognition, the second is symbolic cognition.[6]

Intuitive knowledge has a long history prior to Wolff and appears here in its traditional guise, possessing three essential properties: it is *immediate*, for cognition is intuitive when the mind has direct access to its object; it is knowledge of *particulars*, for what is known are real objects in the world, not ideal and universal concepts; it is *indubitable*: since the mind accesses the object directly, there is no room for error.[7] Intuitive cognition is immediate, indubitable knowledge that grasps things as they actually are, without aid from artificial conventions, and as such it is the ideal to which man aspires. There is, however, Wolff insists, a second, inferior mode of gaining knowledge which is dependent on the sign rather than the thing itself – symbolic cognition. In opposition to intuitive cognition, symbolic cognition is *mediated* (through the sign); it knows *universals* (concepts rather than particular

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[5] I am of course not claiming that either the denigration of symbolic cognition or the more general interpretation of principles in a normative manner is new to post-Leibnizian philosophy (very similar modes of thinking are present in late Scholasticism, for example; see K. Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the age of Ockham* (Leiden: Brill, 1988) and R. Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)); however, I am contending that the extent to which these normative principles orient Leibniz-Wolffian epistemology is worthy of study.

[6] C. Wolff, *Vernuenftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (Halle, 1720), §316. Where no English citation is given, translations are my own.

[7] See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K. Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1929), A320/B376-7; J. Hintikka, 'On Kant's Notion of Intuition (*Anschauung*)' in *The First Critique: Reflections on Kant's* Critique of Pure Reason, ed. T. Penelhum and J.J. MacIntosh (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1969), 40-1.

objects) and is *prone to error* (as I explain below). Symbolic cognition is a mediated knowledge which depends upon the conventions of language or other social constructs (like mathematical signs, pictures or authority) in order to reach the truth.

Symbolic cognition is thus knowledge by means of signs. Wolff defines the sign as 'what we call an entity from which another entity, either present or future or past, is known.'[8] The sign is the vehicle which the mind passes through on the way to the thing itself, when that thing cannot be immediate intuited. It is a means to an end. Symbolic cognition is therefore attenuated knowledge, distanced from what is known by the mediation of the sign. On the one hand, this distance can be an advantage in allowing the subject to gain knowledge of what is not immediately present to her, and it is for this reason that most human knowledge in its current state is symbolic. On the other hand, it is precisely this distance which is the source of error. Intuition is indubitable because it is immediately connected to its object which appears before the mind's eye in its full splendour; in such conditions, there is no possibility of misjudgement. It is only when such splendour is dimmed by an intermediary (which, moreover, could easily be mistaken for the thing itself) that error becomes possible. Moses Mendelssohn writes, for example, that in symbolic cognition the 'powers of the mind are deceived since they frequently forget the signs and believe themselves to be catching sight of the subject matter itself.'[9] Signs generate error. Wolff and those that follow him therefore stand firmly within a philosophical heritage which privileges intuition over mediated knowledge.

Therefore – and this is crucial for what follows – as well as being descriptive, this distinction between intuitive and symbolic cognition is also normative. It is not the case that Wolff and his followers are merely analysing the current state of human knowledge, they are

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[8] C. Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. J. Ecole *et al* (Hildesheim: George Olms, 1963), II.3, §956; translated in Wellbery, *Lessing's* Laocoon, 25.

[9] M. Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. D.O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 178.

also making claims about how knowledge *ought* to be. They therefore (as we shall see) formulate rules to achieve this end. While symbolic cognition exists at present, it does not possess any intrinsic value. *It should be eliminated* – and the philosophers in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition saw their task precisely in terms of the elimination of symbolic cognition and the consequent attainment of the ideal of pure intuition. This is what I intend to describe with the term 'amelioration': pre-Kantian German philosophers were not content merely to describe what is; they attempted to bring about what ought to be. They set about improving knowledge by means of the philosophical rule: 'turn all symbolic cognition into intuitive cognition!'

1.2 Rules

The elimination of all symbolic cognition, it was claimed, would put man in possession of an infallible and universal science; knowledge would be immediately of the things themselves, unmediated by the sign, and yet not limited to the finitely perceptible. Man would gain God's infinite and indubitable power of perception. More concretely, language – and the linguistic sign in particular – was usually considered the site on which this conversion or elimination should occur, for it is the sign that separates symbolic from intuitive cognition. The imperative for the Wolffians therefore became to dissolve the sign without destroying science. The ideal was self-negating or transparent language – a system of signs which allows the mind to behold the thing itself as if it were an intuition. [**Spinoza is an uneasy ancestor to this view, as an anonymous reviewer of this paper pointed out. On the one hand, the *more geometrico* seems to offer an example of precisely such an ideal language; however, on the other hand, he consigns mathematics to merely fictional status in Letter 12. See**]

In order to bring about this ideal, the philosopher's first concern was to provide rules for the benefit of future sciences, arts and philosophies. Those who follow the rules would succeed in transforming symbolic into intuitive cognition. Hence, at the centre of Leibniz-Wolffian epistemology stand prescriptive rules for the amelioration of discourses. Wolff defines a rule as 'a proposition specifying a determination that conforms to reason'[10] – or, as Beiser paraphrases this definition, 'a proposition laying down the reason for a practice' which therefore 'involve[s] concepts of what an object ought to be.'[11] Immediately, the normative and practical import of these rules is made apparent. The philosopher is concerned with improving discourses, not describing or justifying them – and sets of rules compose a practical epistemology that makes this ameliorative process possible. And yet the legacy of this aspect of Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy is not a happy one: as Beiser writes, 'Perhaps no aspect of the rationalist tradition has more discredited it in the eyes of posterity than its emphasis on rules.'[12] In regard to the sciences and to philosophy itself (although not in regard to the arts on which Beiser focuses), the basis for this dismissive attitude is the supposed failure of rule-givers to pay attention to the conditions which prevent discourses from instantiating these rules – obsessed with what ought to be, they become blind to what actually exists and the reasons why it exists.[13] There is, of course, much truth to this concern; however, far from invalidating any recourse to rules, it merely insists upon their appropriate, realistic application.

Philosophical rules, I have argued, are applied in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition to both philosophy itself and other arts and sciences. One must, therefore, distinguish between these two types of rule: the internal, self-reflexive rule for the amelioration of philosophical

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[10] Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke*, II.3, 406.
[11] Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 13-4.
[12] Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 11.
[13] In the aesthetic domain, rules supposedly conflict with artistic creativity and the non-conceptual nature of the artwork.

discourse and the external rule for the amelioration of other discourses. In other words, Leibniz-Wolffian epistemology did not merely give rules for the improvement of pure, theoretical knowledge (along the lines of early modern methodology), but also gave rules for technical forms of knowing (the know-how required for crafts and activities). The amelioration of 'applied' knowledge is a central ambition of these philosophers. Indeed, in Leibniz-Wolffian epistemology, the very hierarchy between theoretical contemplation and practical know-how begins to break down, for the philosopher's relation to both is identical: she sets rules for the amelioration of discourse – whatever the discourse. Philosophy is *practical* in every domain. Application or praxis is not an afterthought, but the very essence of what it is to do epistemology.

An illuminating example of a rule philosophy applies to itself is Leibniz' *ars characteristica* (and all the projects for a universal language that followed in its wake). In particular, it illuminates how epistemic rules relate back to the overarching imperative to transform symbolic cognition into intuition. For Leibniz, the symbolisation and subsequent mathematicisation of natural language – 'a kind of alphabet of human thoughts'[14] – will overcome the disadvantages inherent in symbolic cognition. By following the rules of this calculus, philosophers soon 'shall have as certain knowledge of God and the mind as we now have of figures and numbers.'[15] This method is therefore a means to 'perfect the human mind'[16] and it does so by eliminating the possibility of error. This is not obvious: the *ars characteristica* still employs signs; however, Leibniz argues that the very order and simplicity of the signs used transforms this artificial language into the very rationalist ideal of a self-negating, transparent language. He writes,

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[14] G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. Leroy E. Loemker (2nd ed. Dodrecht: Kluwer, 1969), 222.
[15] Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 166.
[16] Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 166.

No one should fear that the contemplation of characters will lead us away from the things themselves; on the contrary, it leads us into the interior of things… Since the analysis of concepts thus corresponds exactly to the analysis of a character, we need merely to see the characters in order to have adequate notions brought to our mind freely and without effort. We can hope for no greater aid than this in the perfection of the mind.[17]

The key phrase is 'without effort': whereas the arbitrary sign erects a barrier between mind and world which cognition has to break down, Leibnizian characters bring the world 'adequately' into the mind. It is *as if* there were no mediation at all. Symbolic cognition is putatively transformed into intuition, hence there is no possibility of misjudgement. The *ars characteristica* perfects language to the point that it no longer acts like language. What is more, Wolff later interprets this aspect of the *ars characteristica* precisely in terms of the normative requirement to transform symbolism into intuition: 'By virtue of the *ars characteristica combinatoria* symbolic cognition is converted as it were into an intuitive cognition, even in those cases where a distinct intuitive cognition cannot ordinarily be attained.'[18]

1.3 Poetics

The *ars characteristica* is therefore an example of the rules by which philosophers legislate in their own domain. In this next section, I consider the way in which Leibniz-Wolffian philosophers prescribed rules to other disciplines – in particular, to poets. The normative interpretation of symbolic cognition plays an identical role – the only difference is the type of knowing it now regulates.

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[17] Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 193.
[18] Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke,* II.5, §312; translated in Wellbery, *Lessing's* Laocoon, 40.

Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy distinguishes between clear and distinct ideas.[19] Clear ideas provide the subject with the certainty of *what* something is without however being able to explain *why* it is.[20] In consequence, they are associated with empirical sense data.[21] Through the senses, one can perceive an object, represent it correctly and judge it correctly, but one cannot answer the question *why* it is so. Clarity – as defined by Leibniz – is inferior to distinctness, a stage on the way to science. However, as the eighteenth century progressed, there developed an increasing curiosity in clear ideas for their own sake. It was this impetus to treat empirical ideas on their own terms which ultimately led Baumgarten in the mid-eighteenth century to the formulation of *aesthetics*. It was Baumgarten's self-imposed task in his *Aesthetics* and *Reflections on Poetry* to formulate a 'science of perception'[22] to isolate empirical ideas from scientific ones and analyse them in their own right. There thus emerged a field of philosophy proper to the sensible, which possessed a criterion of perfection separate from science proper – beauty. Aesthetics is therefore a branch of epistemology: the science of intuited clear ideas; and beauty is the most perfect clear idea, independent of any relationship to distinctness.[23] Clarity here obtains autonomy.

As this idea of perfection already implies, once again philosophers were not concerned merely with describing our sensible ideas, but with ameliorating them, with formulating the rules and principles by which empirical cognition can be perfected. Beauty or perfect sensuous presentation was the end towards which pre-Kantian aestheticians laboured: 'The end of aesthetics is the perfection of sensuous cognition which, however, as such is

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[19] The *locus classicus* is Leibniz' *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §24 (*Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 318-9).
[20] It is extremely significant that the examples Leibniz uses to illustrate clear ideas are artworks, for clarity later becomes the domain of aesthetic judgments (*Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 318-9).
[21] See, for instance, A.G. Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, ed. and trans. K.A. Brenner and W.B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 38.
[22] Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, 78. On this interpretation of Baumgarten's significance, see Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 149-55.
[23] See Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, 42; Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 172.

beauty.'[24] Aesthetics was governed by the epistemic rule: 'transform imperfect, clear ideas into beautiful ones!'

This is most evident with respect to the problematic status poetry held in this new discipline of aesthetics. Poetics was such a popular topic for philosophers in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition (from Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry* to Lessing's *Laocoön*) precisely because the need to reconcile poetry with aesthetic theory was so pressing. In short, for Baumgarten and his followers, aesthetics makes a paradox out of poetry. On the one hand, poetry is art; its perfection is beauty, and thus it should be presented in clear ideas gained intuitively from the sensible world. On the other hand, however, poetry is language; it is composed of signs – of distinct ideas gained by symbolic cognition. This is the paradox of poetry: it is both beautiful and conceptual at the same time.[25] The role of the aesthetician is to solve this paradox, to show how poetry can find a place within aesthetics – to show that language can after all be beautiful. And once again this takes the form of an ameliorative imperative: the role of the aesthetician is to provide the rules which demonstrate how 'symbolic cognition could be transformed back through poetry into intuitive cognition.'[26] Poetry – like philosophy generally – must rid itself of signs (and so symbolic cognition) for the sake of clear and intuitive beauty. The aesthetician must demonstrate the possibility of transforming what is distinct, intellectual and symbolic into something intuitive; to negate the sign for a direct sensible relation to the thing itself. The very same imperative I located in regard to Leibniz-Wolffian epistemology as a whole is here deployed within poetics. Again, we see that Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy is not merely descriptive, but also normative ('symbolic cognition *ought* to be eliminated'), and this normativity is a central part of the

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[24] A.G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1750), 6; translated in D.O. Dahlstrom, 'Editor's Introduction' to M. Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xiv.
[25] See Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, 52-3.
[26] M. Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. G.B. Mendelssohn (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1843), IV, 348-9; translated in Wellbery, *Lessing's* Laocoon, 73.

epistemological project. As Gottsched put it, 'Everything comes down to a science of rules.'[27] Just as in general the philosopher gives rules for improving knowledge, so too she gives rules to make poetry beautiful.

It is worth exploring one concrete example of a rule aestheticians formulated for the conversion of symbolic into intuitive poetry. This rule makes recourse to natural sign theory, and reads in short: 'convert arbitrary signs into natural ones!' The natural sign is a linguistic symbol which does not exhibit the disadvantages of symbolic cognition, but rather putatively gives rise to intuitive cognition (just like Leibniz's *ars characteristica*). Natural signs seem to do the impossible (they are both beautiful and linguistic) and for this reason become one end aestheticians prescribe to poets.

Mendelssohn's distinction between arbitrary and natural signs reads thus,

> The signs by means of which an object is expressed can be either natural or arbitrary. They are natural if the combination of the sign with the subject matter signified is grounded in the very properties of what is designated… Those signs, on the other hand, that by their very nature have nothing in common with the designated subject matter, but that have nonetheless been arbitrarily assumed as signs for it, are called "arbitrary".[28]

The difference rests on the type of connection between sign and referent: arbitrary signs have a merely conventional relationship instituted by the free choice of the subject. Almost all language for eighteenth-century philosophers was arbitrary and such arbitrariness gave rise to the very epistemological errors explored earlier in regard to symbolic cognition. Hence Wolff defines the arbitrary sign as follows,

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[27] J.C. Gottsched, *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. P.M. Mitchell (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), II, 4; translated in Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 93. Beiser writes of Gottsched's aesthetic work in this vein, 'It was not simply a theoretical treatise about the principles of poetry but also a practical manual about how to write good verse.' (88).
[28] Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 177-8.

> We also have the practice of bringing two entities together as we please – entities which otherwise would not come together – and making one the sign of the other. Such signs are called *arbitrary* signs… Words belong among the arbitrary signs: for that a word and an idea are present together at the same time or that one of the two follows upon the other rests on our free choice.[29]

Since the sign does not resemble its referent, its referent cannot be truly perceived from the sign alone. Due to its conventional nature, the sign obscures what it marks; it can thus give rise to error.[30] Such is language's fundamental limitation: it often leaves the mind stranded at the level of signs without access to the thing it should be cognising. In this way, science is impeded.

With natural signs, however, there is an *objective* reason for the choice of sign: the sign is naturally grounded in the thing itself.[31] Mendelssohn's example is onomatopoeia: 'A poet frequently makes use of words and syllables whose natural sound has a similarity with the designated subject matter.'[32] Such onomatopoeic sounds are natural signs, because there is a natural connection between their own being and that of the referent. This is not a connection dreamed up and imposed by the subject, but one objectively already there, pre-existing the subject (who merely discovers and articulates it). Natural signs follow naturally from their referent and so avoid the pitfalls of symbolic cognition. The natural sign is not an intermediary which obscures the referent and thus needs to be concealed; it is an epistemological aid rather than a hindrance. Through natural signs, Mendelssohn claims, 'one enjoys the advantage of providing an essential and non-arbitrary designation for discovering and grasping the truth.'[33] Natural signs facilitate intuitive knowledge.

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[29] Wolff, *Vernuenftige Gedancken*, §294; translated in Wellbery, *Lessing's* Laocoon, 18-9. The emphasis on free choice keeps the Leibniz-Wolffian conception of the arbitrary sign distinct from Saussurean variants.

[30] See Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 272-3.

[31] See T. Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. C. Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 129.

[32] Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 181.

[33] Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 265.

Natural signs are, then, one solution to the paradox of poetry, one means to make poetry beautiful and eliminate symbolic cognition. Thus, Meier proposes the following rule, 'All arbitrary signs must imitate natural signs to as great a degree as possible if they are to be truly beautiful'[34] and Lessing famously contends in his 'Letter to Nicolai', 'Poetry must endeavour absolutely to elevate its arbitrary signs into natural ones.'[35] The problem, however, is that there are so few examples of natural signs; those often seized upon include onomatopoeia (see above), emotional cries[36], dramatic performances[37] and metaphors[38]. The scarcity of examples meant that to convert arbitrary signs into natural ones (and so to convert symbolic cognition into intuition) poets must, the aestheticians prescribe, cultivate metaphors, onomatopoeia, cries and drama as intensely as possible.

2. Ameliorative Philosophy after Kant

The image of the philosopher as a prescriber of rules and the normative interpretation of symbolic cognition did not die out and became obsolete in the wake of the publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. The transcendental turn was not revolutionary in this respect: post-Kantian philosophers transfigure these concepts, rather than eliminate them. In order to demonstrate this in what follows, I give two examples of the persistence of the ameliorative paradigm for philosophising: first, in the rules Schiller sets to the poet in his

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[34] G.F. Meier, *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* (Halle, 1748), §521; translated in Wellbery, *Lessing's* Laocoon, 81.

[35] G.E. Lessing, 'Letter to Nicolai, 26th May 1769,' trans. J.P. Crick, in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Wincklemann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe*, ed. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 134.

[36] Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 177.

[37] Lessing, 'Letter to Nicolai', 134.

[38] Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, 67-8.

Kallias Briefe; second, in the re-emergence of a normative interpretation of symbolic cognition in Maimon's *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*.

2.1 Schiller

Schiller's aesthetic output of the early 1790s is usually (and rightly) considered Kantian in inspiration. From the moment he first read the *Critique of Judgment* in Spring 1791, Schiller professed himself a disciple of Kant. However, it is equally important to stress that during the 1770s he was educated in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition. Recognition of this fact is significant for our understanding of post-Kantian aesthetics more broadly: if the Schlegels, Schelling, Hölderlin and Hegel were all influenced by Schiller, then what he bequeathed them is (to some extent) a concern with pre-Kantian problems. A metamorphosed Leibniz-Wolffian tradition lives on through Schiller and his heirs.

Hence, in a number of passages in his post-1791 oeuvre, Schiller describes problems with the idea of poetic language in a manner that resembles Baumgarten, Mendelssohn and Lessing far more than Kant. Here, Schiller resurrects the spectre of the paradox of poetry. Overall, there are three fundamental problems, Schiller suggests, with predicating beauty of pieces of writing and so of reconciling poetics with aesthetics. The first is the *conceptual* nature of language. Language is a mediated, universal mode of communication – in other words, it gives rise to symbolic cognition. It is therefore ill-suited to expressing the sensible particularity required of a truly aesthetic product. Schiller writes in the *Kallias Briefe*:

> The poet's medium is *words*; abstract signs for types and species but never for individuals… This is the very problem. Words as well as the conditional and connecting laws are very general things which do not serve as signs to *one* but to an

infinite number of individuals… The poet has no other means than the artistic *construction of the universal* to depict the particular.[39]

The poet − limited to a linguistic medium − is immediately handicapped in her ability to produce beauty. Whereas linguistic symbols are universals, beautiful works of art must operate intuitively and so in the domain of the particular. Such is Schiller's restatement of the paradox of poetry − and it is, I think, self-evidently derivative of pre-Kantian formulations. As Schiller goes on to put it, 'The *nature* of the medium, which the poet helps himself to, is thus made up of "the tendency to universalise" and thus conflicts with the descriptions (which is its task) of the individual.'[40] The generality of its medium contradicts the specificity of the poem's purpose.

Second (and again this is a Schillerian version of the pre-Kantian paradox of poetry), language is *arbitrary* and such arbitrariness prohibits it from becoming a beautiful artwork. In the *Aesthetic Letters* Schiller even goes so far as to concede the impossibility of beautiful poetry because of this limitation:

Even the most successful poem partakes more of the arbitrary and casual play of the imagination, as the medium through which it works, than the inner lawfulness of the truly beautiful really permits.[41]

He is less bold in the *Kallias Briefe*, however, where he merely indicates that 'there is some difficulty in the mere *formal* similarity between words and things. The thing and its expression in words are connected only contingently and arbitrarily (a few cases notwithstanding), merely related by agreement.'[42] Again, we saw the very same problem emerge for Baumgarten and his followers; it led to the rule: 'convert arbitrary signs into natural ones!' − as it will do for Schiller in turn.

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[39] F. Schiller, 'Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner,' trans. S. Bird-Pollan, in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J.M Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 181-2.
[40] Schiller, 'Kallias', 182.
[41] F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 155.
[42] Schiller, 'Kallias', 181-2.

Third – and here Schiller moves away from his reliance on Leibniz-Wolffian aesthetics – language is *too particular*. Poetry cannot leave its content in a sufficient state of productive indeterminability; instead, it is forced to *overdetermine* what it talks about. For example, Schiller writes,

> The composer and the landscape painter achieve [beauty] only through the form of their presentation and merely attune the mind to a certain way of feeling… They leave up to the listeners and spectators how to give it content. The poet by contrast… provides content for each symbol of the imagination and so gives to it a more determinate direction. However, he should not forget that his meddling in this business has its limits… He should not anticipate the imagination of his readers. Every complete determination is here felt as a troublesome barrier.[43]

Again, language seems an unpromising medium in which to produce beauty – this time because language determines too much. In Kantian terminology, it stimulates judgment to operate in a determinate rather than reflective manner. As this suggests, Schiller here stands closer to Kant than Baumgarten, although broader changes in poetic taste could also be responsible for this shift.[44] Nonetheless, Schiller still uses this problem with poetry in a very traditional manner to emphasise its exceptional status as an art form, and thus the difficulty of reconciling it with beauty. Schiller, that is, uses language's tendency to overdetermine as cumulative evidence for the paradox of poetry.

Not only, however, does Schiller reinvent the paradox of poetry, one of the solutions he gives to this paradox is also appropriated from the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition – natural

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[43] F. Schiller, *Über Matthissons Gedichte* in *Werke Nationalausgabe*, ed. J. Petersen *et al* (Weimar: Böhlaus, 1958), XXII, 273-4.

[44] The relation of this formulation of the problem to the previous two suggests a cultural shift in the paradigm for art: while the previous two posit painting (and so an iconic relation between sign and referent) as the ideal for poetry (as was common in Enlightenment aesthetics), this third formulation is different: the underdetermined formalism of music is now the exemplar to which poetry aspires. See Abrams' account of the cultural shift from *ut pictura poesis* to *ut musica* (*The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1958), 50-1, 90-4).

signs. Schiller reclaims the distinction between arbitrary and natural signs as a means of prescribing rules for the creation of beautiful poetry. In so doing, he does not merely reclaim its descriptive dimension, but also its normativity. In other words, Schiller too insists on the rule, 'convert arbitrary signs into natural ones!' He therefore recaptures something of philosophy's ameliorative vocation. Hence, even though the epistemological basis for this rule is absent, there remains a version of the rule itself, which implicitly presupposes such a practical, normative epistemology.

In the *Kallias Briefe*, for example, Schiller reiterates Leibniz-Wolffian anti-discursive sentiment. Linguistic signs are the problem and need to be eliminated; the sign must be destroyed:

> An object may thus only be *freely depicted* if the nature of the depicted object has not suffered from the nature of the depicting matter. The nature of the medium or the matter must thus be completely vanquished.[45]

He continues, 'The object to be depicted must step forth freely and victoriously from the depicting object in spite of all the chains of language.'[46] The poet's means of depiction or the forms he works in – language – are the very problem which stops poetry from attaining beauty.

In Schiller's 1795 *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, this normative demand to destroy language is further embedded in a teleological genealogy. Both ancient and modern poetry are found wanting, so only a poet of the future will be able to finally overcome the limitations of the linguistic sign, overcome the paradox of poetry and make poetry beautiful. That is, instead of prescribing rules to contemporary poets for this end, as pre-Kantian aestheticians had done, Schiller invokes a genius-to-come. He writes,

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[45] Schiller, 'Kallias', 179.
[46] Schiller, 'Kallias', 182-3.

> If to the [moderns] the sign remains forever heterogeneous and alien to the thing signified, to the [future poet] language springs as by some inner necessity out of thought and is so at one with it that even beneath the corporeal frame the spirit appears as if laid bare. It is precisely this mode of expression in which the sign disappears in the thing signified.[47]

The poet of the future will invent a new kind of language in order to ensure her poetry is beautiful. In such future language, sign and referent will not remain 'forever heterogeneous and alien', but fuse together as one. The referent is absorbed into the sign. Although such a conception of language anticipates the romantic symbol, its most obvious precedent is the natural sign. At present, sign and referent are disconnected, in the future they will be one – such is Schiller's version of the pre-Kantian rule, 'convert arbitrary signs into natural ones!' Schiller maps such amelioration onto history: the future will be an improvement on the present, since beautiful poetry will then be possible.

Schiller therefore resurrects the paradox of poetry; he reattaches it to an ameliorative process of transforming arbitrary signs into natural ones, and so hands these pre-Kantian modes of thought down to his Romantic and Idealist heirs.

2.2 Maimon

Salomon Maimon, like Schiller, has a foot in both camps. He is a post-Kantian philosopher who takes pre-Kantian traditions seriously. Yet, while critics have been tempted to treat Schiller's aesthetics as a reduction of critical thought back into dogmatism[48], the same cannot so easily be done of Maimon. In other words, Maimon, takes to heart the paradigm-

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[47] F. Schiller, 'On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,' trans. J.A. Elias, in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe*, ed. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 187.

[48] In the spirit of Friedrich Schlegel's comment that Schiller has 'not digested Kant and now suffer[s] indigestion and colic.' (Quoted in Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 88). For a contemporary reading along these lines, see E. Schaper, 'Schiller's Kant: A Chapter in the History of Creative Misunderstanding' in *Studies in Kant's Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 99-117.

shift that philosophy underwent on the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. It is for this reason Kant wrote on encountering Maimon's 1790 *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* for the first time,

> Just a glance at it was enough to make me recognise its excellence, and not only that none of my opponents had understood me and the principle question as well as Maimon, but also that only a few people possess such an acute mind for such profound investigations.[49]

This is not to say that Maimon is a promulgator of Kantianism or even that he could not more happily be described as a Leibnizian than a Kantian. It is rather to say that Maimon's philosophy is a concerted effort to, on the one hand, understand and make sense of the transcendental standpoint, but also, on the other hand, to subject Kantian philosophy to an intense testing against the philosophical tradition. Maimon both explains and interrogates Kant's thought – and this interrogation is geared towards clarifying Kant's relation to pre-Kantian philosophers.

With these general comments in mind, I turn to the fate of symbolic cognition in Maimon's philosophy which provides the clue to the fate of normative epistemology therein. Unsurprisingly given such comments, symbolic cognition is central to Maimon's project. Indeed, so prevalent is its role in Maimon's philosophy that for the purposes of this paper I am only able to concentrate on its significance in his earliest work, *Essay on Transcendental Idealism*. Not only does the term 'symbolic cognition' regularly occur in the body of the text, Maimon devotes an entire appendix to it, entitled 'On Symbolic Cognition and Philosophical Language'. It is to this appendix I turn first.

The appendix begins with the unequivocal assertion, 'Symbolic cognition is of great importance' (*ETP* 139), and Maimon goes on to construct a theory of symbolic cognition

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[49] Kant, 'Letter to Herz, 26/05/1789', quoted in S. Maimon, *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, trans. N. Midgley *et al* (London: Continuum, 2010), 230-1. Throughout this section, Maimon's *Essay* will be cited in the text with the abbreviation, *ETP*.

closely dependent on his Leibniz-Wolffian predecessors: he quotes Wolff and Baumgarten's definitions, as well as providing a traditional account of its advantages and disadvantages (*ETP* 139). Maimon even suggests that the question of symbolic cognition stands at the very heart of philosophical endeavour (even if he mimics the Prefaces of the first *Critique* to make this point):

> I venture to claim that the insoluble difficulties and important disputes in the sciences have arisen from a lack of insight into the nature of symbolic cognition, and hence that these difficulties can be overcome and these disputes resolved merely by setting down the limits of use of symbolic cognition. (*ETP* 139)

Yet, even here, Maimon surreptitiously and subtly alters the idea of symbolic cognition. As we have seen, for Wolff and his successors, symbolic cognition is knowledge of an object through the intermediary of a sign. For Maimon, however, symbolic cognition is knowledge of a sign *instead of* an object. He argues that since 'signs are signs only because they lead to the representation of things' (*ETP* 140), then insofar as we know these signs *as* representing things, there is little difference between such symbolic cognition and intuitive cognition. Of course, this is precisely what philosophers in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition would reject, for to know a thing via its sign is to know it in a mediated manner. Nonetheless, Maimon continues that pure symbolic cognition – symbolic cognition that is opposed to intuitive cognition – must occur when 'only the representation of the sign is present, without the representation of the thing' (*ETP* 141). Symbolic cognition is cognition of the sign *in itself* (to the extent that it does not refer). Maimon's conception is therefore much stronger than Wolff's or Baumgarten's, for Maimonian symbolic cognition does not have every sign as its object, only those signs whose referent is inaccessible intuitively.

While the above can be considered a debate within the parameters set by the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition, three pages into the appendix there occurs a sharp change in direction. Maimon begins to interpret symbolic cognition through the lens of transcendental philosophy.

More specifically, he reads the intuitive/symbolic dichotomy onto Kant's distinction between the matter and form of experience. That is, at this juncture, Maimon, on the one hand, makes explicitly clear his dissatisfaction with traditional Leibniz-Wolffian discourse about symbolic cognition: it determines symbolic cognition 'merely by means of a subjective ground… [it] does not determine an object' (*ETP* 141). And, on the other hand, he introduces Kantian terminology to overcome this dissatisfaction:

> An object of cognition is a unity that is thought by the understanding in the manifold; the manifold is the given, or the matter; but the unity is the form that connects the matter of the manifold. (*ETP* 141)

Maimon continues by claiming that matter (the manifold and forms of intuition) and form (categories and concepts, i.e. forms of the understanding) can only be experienced on the condition that they are synthesised in an object: 'In this way we are in a position to have intuitive cognition not only of the object, but also, in and through this object, to have intuitive cognition of its matter in itself and its form in itself' (*ETP* 142). When I experience a table, I experience the form and matter that constitute the table. However, Maimon is insistent, 'This is the only way we can ever have intuitive cognition of the form' (*ETP* 142). I cannot intuit the form of the table (the categories and concepts which structure it) *as* form independently of the matter of experience. This does not mean that forms do not exist outside of their synthesis with matter; rather, insofar as a philosopher is aware of forms in themselves, she cognises them *symbolically*:

> In this case therefore we find ourselves forced to think of something of which we have no intuitive cognition as a real object, so that we can represent it only by means of signs, and hence it comprises an object of symbolic cognition. (*ETP* 142)

Forms of the understanding exist, yet are inaccessible to intuition; therefore, they are objects of symbolic cognition. The whole transcendental machinery of the understanding is solely cognisable symbolically. That is, since these forms so crucial to the transcendental

philosopher's enterprise are merely known as signs, transcendental philosophy – at some of its most crucial moments – becomes sign manipulation. Hence, Maimon speaks of philosophy as a 'universal grammar' (*ETP* 154) or a 'calculus' (*ETP* 147) in the tradition of Leibniz's *ars characteristica*.

However, while this is certainly evidence of the persistence of the concept of symbolic cognition in a transcendental framework, it is not yet evidence of its normative interpretation in Maimon's philosophy. For pre-Kantian philosophers, lest we forget, symbolic cognition was invoked only as something that must be eliminated – it 'ought not' to exist. For Maimon, however, symbolic cognition is fundamental to our very ability to philosophise. Eliminate symbolic cognition and transcendental philosophy becomes impossible. Therefore, symbolic cognition does possess value for the philosopher and there is no reason why she would desire to eliminate it (precisely the opposite in fact). The world would no longer be a better place without symbolic cognition and because of this the ameliorative background to the intuitive/symbolic dichotomy seems to have been lost in Maimon's philosophy.

Yet, this is not the whole story, for elsewhere in his *Essay on Transcendental Idealism* Maimon gives reasons why symbolic cognition in fact retains links with the amelioration of discourse. The key to this additional element of Maimon's account is to be found in his creative reinterpretation of the transcendental deduction. The transcendental deduction is of course meant by Kant to answer the question, *quid juris?* – that is, with what right does experience lay claim to objective (universal and necessary) properties. Maimon, however, reinterprets *quid juris?* as a question of whether symbolic forms can be made intuitive. He writes,

> Concepts can precede the intuition, in which case they are merely symbolic, and their objective reality is problematic. So the question *quid juris?* is relevant to these concepts, i.e. whether or not these symbolic concepts can also be made intuitive and thereby obtain objective reality. (*ETP* 30)

Categories of the understanding are one kind of symbolic form, as we have seen. The question of whether these categories necessarily and universally structure experience (Kant's question in the first *Critique*) participates in a more general question of whether symbolic forms of experience can ever be accessed intuitively. In other words, can the unities underlying thought come to expression in intuition?[50] In other words, it is only through processes of amelioration (the transformation of symbolic into intuitive cognition) that concepts can be accessed intuitively and so 'obtain objective reality'. Of course, in the rest of the *Essay*, Maimon spends much more time spelling out what this epistemological amelioration could mean and prescribing the concrete rules to bring it about; however, the basis of his return to the normative interpretation of symbolic cognition is to be found in the quotation above.

So Maimon's simultaneously drags pre-Kantian language across the transcendental threshold and reinterprets Kantian thought in terms of pre-Kantian conceptual structures. Moreover, in consequence, the ameliorative vocation for philosophy which was so central to the pre-Kantian employment of symbolic cognition now reappears reinserted into a transcendental framework. Maimon translates the Kantian requirement for the categories to

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[50] The vocabulary of 'symbolic concepts being made intuitive' is very similar to terminology Kant also uses. Kant always portrays *Darstellungen* (for example) as structures of thought which must attain objective reality, which must themselves be expressed in intuition in order for experience to be possible. *On the Progress of Metaphysics* includes a section entitled, 'How to Confer Objective Reality on the Pure Concepts of Understanding and Reason', in which Kant writes, 'To represent a pure concept of the understanding as thinkable in an object of possible experience is to confer objective reality upon it and in general to present it. Where we are unable to achieve this, the concept is empty, i.e. it suffices for no knowledge.' (I. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, ed. H. Allison and P. Heath, trans. G. Hatfield *et al* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20:279.) Maimon mirrors this vocabulary through the lens of symbolic cognition. So, just as for Kant *Darstellungen* need to attain objective reality and express themselves in a corresponding intuition for experience to be possible, so too do symbolic forms need to attain objective reality and so become intuitive for experience to be possible.

attain objective reality into the pre-Kantian 'demand that a merely symbolic concept be made intuitive' (*ETP* 35). As such, Maimon's recovery of symbolic cognition is not merely descriptive, it plays a transformative role as well: symbolic cognition should be eliminated. Normativity stands at the heart of his epistemology.

3. Kant and Descriptive Philosophy

If the above puts to rest the idea that normative epistemology is dead after Kant, it gives rise to pressing questions concerning Kant's own relation to the ameliorative tradition. There is no room in this paper for a full discussion of the fate of theoretical philosophy's ameliorative vocation in Kant's oeuvre; in what follows, I merely wish to sketch two indications why Kant's philosophy is difficult to reconcile with this conception of philosophy.[51] Instead, I provisionally conclude, Kant's theoretical project is for the most part descriptive – an epistemology which understands its role less in terms of providing rules for the improvement of knowing than in terms of justifying an already existing state of affairs. Kant's whole enterprise is orientated to the delimitation of philosophy's capacities: a definition of philosophy that sets limits on what it *can* achieve in light of what it now achieves. Such limitations prohibit any future amelioration on the part of theoretical philosophy.

3.1 Transcendental Arguments

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[51] A full discussion would at least add considerations of Kant's rejection of purpose in aesthetics, prohibition of the mathematical ideal in the 'Discipline of Pure Reason' and introduction of regulative principles, as well as the recent normative interpretations of his philosophy by Brandom and McDowell.

The first indication of Kant's distance from an ameliorative paradigm is to be found in his characterisation of transcendental arguments. Kant shifts philosophy's focus away from experience itself to the conditions of experience and hence away from *evaluating* that experience to *legitimating* it. He writes, 'I entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as the mode of our knowledge of objects insofar as this mode of knowledge is to be possible a priori.'[52] Transcendental philosophy neglects the task of cognising objects in favour of cognising the conditions of such first-order cognition; in so doing, it not only assumes that there *is* such first-order cognition, but also – and this is what is crucial – that there *should be*.[53]

The structure of transcendental arguments makes this second assumption clear. Their premise is always an experiential fact ('X') from which certain conditions are shown to be necessary, leading to the conclusion: 'If X, then conditions A and B necessarily hold.' The very point of the experiential fact is that it is to be so uncontroversial (experience of temporal succession, for example) as to be putatively indubitable. However, of course, this indubitability is not argued for, but rather assumed. From Maimon through to Stroud, this has been a recurrent objection against transcendental arguments: namely that they take experience for granted – and to this extent beg the question.[54] What is more, transcendental philosophers also ascribe certain properties to this experience: it does not, for example, exist in flux, but is stable enough to be referred to as a discrete and determinable 'fact'. It is also neutral or value-free – that is, the philosopher is debarred from asking whether inquiry into the conditions of X *is worth* being pursued. The value of X is bracketed.

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[52] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A11-2/B25.

[53] The sense of this 'should' or 'ought' is, I contend, a variant of the epistemic 'ought' resurrected by virtue epistemologists. Insofar as humans are bound by the cognitive ideal to know or experience as adequately as possible, they are motivated by this 'ought'.

[54] See Maimon, *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, 42-3; B. Stroud, 'Transcendental Arguments' in *Journal of Philosophy* 65.9 (1968): 241-56.

Experience is a value-free datum. In other words, the question, 'what are the necessary conditions of X?', not only takes for granted that there is X, but further that there *should be* X and so it takes for granted that the philosopher should accept the continued existence of X. Indeed, the whole point of a transcendental argument is to justify this experience *as what is*.[55] We glimpse here the in-built *conservatism* of transcendental philosophy: its task is to justify the already-accepted status quo by revealing what makes it possible. The transcendental philosopher recognises why what is is; in theoretical philosophy at least, she has no truck with *what ought to be*. Kant's philosophy, in this respect, excludes the possibility of normative rules: the world is to be described, not altered.

3.2 The Fate of Symbolic Cognition in Kant's Philosophy

The second indication of the priority given to description above amelioration can be discerned from the fate of symbolic cognition in Kant's critical works. Galland-Szymkowiak summarises as follows,

> Between Leibniz's *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas* (1684) and Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), the meaning of the *symbol* was radically transformed. From a mere arbitrary sign which is conventionally substituted for an idea, the symbol became intuitive presentation… Kant consciously (and in a historically decisive manner) announces a rupture from the meaning attributed to the symbol by the Leibniz-Wolffian school.[56]

The whole idea of a 'symbol' undergoes a revolution in Kant's critical philosophy. Kant transforms symbols into *perceptual Darstellungen* and, in so doing, purposefully attacks the very idea of symbolic cognition. He states categorically, 'The intuitive in cognition must be

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[55] Even when it comes to the conditions of experience themselves, the transcendental philosopher's task is to recognise – rather than change – them. There is an analogy here with phenomenology: both forms of philosophising must accept experience as a given without evaluating it.
[56] M. Galland-Szymkowiak, 'Le changement de sens du symbole entre Leibniz et Kant' in *Revue Germanique Internationale* 4 (2006): 73.

contrasted with the discursive (not the symbolic). The former is… *symbolic*.'[57] In consequence, symbolic cognition as understood by pre-Kantian philosophers is no more. While of course Kant's mutation of the symbol into an analogic *Darstellung* of the supersensible was profoundly productive for much later thought[58], there is no mistaking its polemic intent in respect to his predecessors.

In §59 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant turns on its head the Leibniz-Wolffian distinction between symbolic and intuitive cognition. The major epistemological principle resides now *not* in the 'contrast [of] symbolic with intuitive *Darstellung*', but rather in the fact that *symbols are a form of intuitive knowledge*, and so 'must be contrasted with the discursive'. Kant writes,

> The more recent logicians [in the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition] have come to use the word *symbolic* in another sense that is wrong and runs counter to the meaning of the word. They use it to contrast symbolic with *intuitive* presentation. For the latter (the intuitive) can be divided into *schematic* and *symbolic* presentation: both are hypotyposes, i.e. *Darstellungen*, not mere *characterizations*, i.e. designations of concepts by accompanying sensible signs.[59]

Kant here wages a battle on two fronts: on the one hand, he redefines the symbol (as intuitive) in a way that thoroughly distances it from its Leibniz-Wolffian heritage; on the other hand, he consigns discursive mediation to the role of mere characterisation. Such mediation, he contends, has nothing to do with knowledge:

> Signs contain nothing whatever that belongs to the intuition of the object; their point is the subjective one of serving as a means for reproducing concepts… They are

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[57] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 5:352.
[58] See (for example) my forthcoming book, *Schelling's Theory of Symbolic Language: Forming the System of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[59] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 5:351-2.

either words, or visible (algebraic or even mimetic) signs, and they merely *express*

concepts.[60]

Signs are subjective, arbitrary aids for communicating concepts – a role of no philosophical importance. The sign has nothing to do with epistemology, but is solely a device for communicating already processed philosophical thought; therefore, there is no such thing as knowledge gained solely through discourse according to Kant. In this passage from the third *Critique*, symbolic cognition disappears from philosophy.

Indeed, this is also the implication of the famous dictum from the first *Critique*, concepts without intuitions are 'empty'.[61] Symbolic cognition had been premised on the possibility of knowing things without intuiting them; Kant counters that only what can be intuited can be known; therefore, *there is only intuitive cognition*. Symbolic cognition is not cognition; it can provide no sort of experience. While, it is true, Kant still holds open the possibility of employing 'empty signs' for thinking (and so permits 'symbolic thinking'), symbolism and *knowledge* remain opposed.[62] Ultimately, rather than man's finitude being marked by his dependence on the sign as the Leibniz-Wolffian tradition contended, for Kant man's finitude is due to his dependence on sensible intuition.

In a way, Kant here completes the Leibniz-Wolffian project: rather than philosophy's being beholden to the rule to eliminate symbolic cognition in the future, according to Kant philosophy can now claim that there is no symbolic cognition – it can redescribe knowledge so that symbolic cognition no longer exists. In Kantian philosophy, the Leibniz-Wolffian

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[60] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 5:352.

[61] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A51/B75.

[62] Kant's comments on algebra (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A717/B745) seem, on first sight, to contradict this analysis: 'In algebra by means of a symbolic construction, just as in geometry by means of an ostensive construction, we succeed in arriving at results which discursive knowledge would never have reached by means of mere concepts'. The meaning of this passage is controversial; however, the most plausible view (L. Shabel, 'Kant on the "Symbolic Construction" of Mathematical Concepts' in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 29.4 (1998): 589-621) is that Kant is not here suggesting that one can construct by means of signs and so attain knowledge through them, rather the signs are always substitutes for spatial or temporal intuitions to which they must be reduced for construction to take place (see Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-70*, 2:278; *Critique of Judgment*, 5:352). That is, there is no knowledge through signs alone.

ideal is realised. Yet, in the process, a vital element of the Leibniz-Wolffian conception of philosophy is lost – its ameliorative vocation. If epistemology has been perfected and symbolic cognition has always already been eliminated, then the normativity central to Leibniz-Wolffian epistemology disappears: there is nothing to be improved. This is one symptom, I contend, of Kant's shift to a descriptive philosophical method that justifies the status quo and legitimates what is. The elimination of symbolic cognition has already taken place, rather than being in the process of taking place.

Conclusion

When it comes to normative epistemology, Kant's Copernican Revolution is not the final word. There remain strong lines of continuity between pre- and post-Kantian German philosophy. Maimon and Schiller reintroduce an ameliorative imperative according to which philosophy labours to improve discourse; more specifically, theoretical philosophy is not only concerned with what is, but also with *what should be*. Philosophy can improve our knowledge and prescribing rules for the elimination of symbolic cognition is part of that ameliorative process, for pre- and post-Kantians alike. In sum, epistemology applies rules, for it consists first and foremost in the praxis of ameliorating knowledge of all types.

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