

## Kantian Humility and Randian Hubris?

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### 1. Introduction

When exploring a disagreement, it is best to start with a truth that all can agree on. Here is such a truth: None of us has visited the farthest regions of the universe. In fact, most humans have never even left the surface of the Earth; the few who have left, have gone no further than our moon. In spite of this limited range, humans seem comfortable—and may be unable to refrain from—making claims that range over the whole universe. As a branch of philosophy, metaphysics is devoted to doing just that. Yet, as widespread and entrenched as the practice is, it remains problematic. Were we to picture sea cucumbers never leaving the ocean floor yet confidently chatting about reality writ large, this problem might pop up more clearly. As it stands, philosophers routinely make sweeping claims about all there is, with hardly a hint of the hubris involved.

Compounding this hubris is the fact that many metaphysicians feel they can make such sweeping claims without consulting instruments like radio telescopes or particle accelerators. Argumentation alone, it is held, can yield the knowledge sought. Given that philosophers are humans and no human has first-hand evidence of everything, what could possibly license this confidence? For example, I feel 100% confident that, even in another galaxy, a sheet of printing paper would have a flipside. Were I to turn it over, I would see a surface, not a void. Since feeling right doesn't mean being right, what justifies this belief?

One response would be that all the sheets I have seen have a flipside, so others must be that way, too. However, appealing to a generalization from past observations would compel me to concoct a just-so story where, early in my personal history, I examined sheets of paper and somehow drew a conclusion about their double-sidedness. I doubt I ever performed anything resembling an inference, let alone an inductive one. Moreover, appealing to past observations would imply a probable conclusion that might fail to hold in a distant galaxy. If my

belief rested on such an inductive basis, I would be as confident about distant sheets of paper as I am about, say, extra-terrestrials being carbon-based, namely, less than 100% confident.

Yet, in contrast with defeasible speculations about extra-terrestrials, I cannot seriously entertain the idea that sheets of paper might lack a flipside. A more accurate account would therefore be to say that *I cannot imagine* a sheet of paper with only one surface—and that *neither can anyone else*. Crucially, this reason is no longer inductive. My belief about the double-sidedness of sheets must be true because its falsehood is simply un-thinkable. This is a decent justification, as far as it goes. Yet, does this un-thinkability reveal something about reality or the nature and limits of one's mind? Common sense affirms the former. However, what makes the situation tricky is that, were one to travel to a distant galaxy and find a double-sided sheet, both views would get confirmed. A proponent of the it-tells-us-something-about-the-world interpretation could say that reality is that way there, too, whereas a proponent of the it-tells-us-something-about-the-mind interpretation could say that, because we brought our mind to this new region of space, things naturally conformed to our requirements. Hence, empirical evidence cannot settle this particular philosophical debate. Anyone who fails to see this fails to understand the issue.

## 2. Deep Breaths Everyone

I have taken pains to motivate this philosophic issue without mentioning any philosophers because I want to stress that this is a genuine problem and *those who develop a particular answer to this problem are neither stupid nor evil*. Ordinarily, one would not need to make such a disclaimer. However, owing to the “uncompromisingly negative”<sup>1</sup> attitude that Ayn Rand had toward Immanuel Kant and the equally negative attitudes that most mainstream scholars now have toward Rand, the discussion is in bad shape.

This poor state of the discussion is unfortunate because it risks obscuring the many worthwhile things Rand had to say. When she writes that we cannot impugn human knowledge merely on account of the fact that “man is limited to a consciousness of a specific nature, which perceives by specific means and no others,”<sup>2</sup> she is saying

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<sup>1</sup> George V. Walsh, “Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,” *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000), pp. 69–103, quotation from p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1984 [1961]), p. 30.

something that epistemologists should pay attention to. Who are we, she argues, to hold that everything the mind grasps becomes unreliable precisely because it has come into contact with a mind? Such a view, Rand held, is gratuitous and unwarranted, since it advances its criticism of human knowledge from an extra-human vantage point that no critic could occupy.

I wholeheartedly agree. However, like all opinionated people who need to take a breath and do more homework, Rand should have made this point without deprecating figures she had not read (carefully) or learned only via secondary sources. A person whose temperament recoils from the demands of rigorous scholarship “should bow out of historical criticism.”<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Blue, Everywhere

Despite my disappointment with Rand, I can see where she comes from when criticizing Kant. Building on an example used by Leonard Peikoff,<sup>4</sup> I take the following to be the gist of her concern. Imagine that, when you look out at the world around you, all you see are blue things. You are not alone: everyone you talk to sees blue things as well. If it helps, picture everything spray painted with the deep blue hue patented and made famous by the artist Yves Klein. In the scenario I am contemplating, none of this is strange, since the world has been blue for as long as anyone can remember. Split an apple and it is blue inside. Ubiquitous blueness, one might say, is just the way things are.

One day, a philosopher pondering this makes a shocking suggestion: What if it is not *the world* that is blue, but rather *our inborn way of seeing* that is blue-tinted? This suggestion, while surprising, fits with the facts at hand. Anyone could confirm by observation that we indeed have a blue-tinted way of seeing. At the very least, it would not be unreasonable to gloss blue’s ubiquity in the manner suggested.

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<sup>3</sup> Randall R. Dipert, “Review Essay on David Kelley’s *The Evidence of the Senses: A Realist Theory of Perception*,” *Reason Papers* no. 12 (1987), p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Peikoff, “Immanuel Kant: Is Reality Knowable? Kant’s Revolutionary Hypothesis,” *History of Philosophy*, lesson 42, accessed online at: <https://courses.aynrand.org/campus-courses/history-of-philosophy/immanuel-kant-is-reality-knowable-kants-revolutionary-hypothesis>.

Rand's concern, I take it, is that interpreting blueness as a feature of our mind instantaneously transforms what was previously taken for granted into a mystery. Previously, nothing was more certain than our belief that apples are blue. However, once it is suggested that what is involved is a blue-tinted way of seeing, we are left wondering: What are apples *really* like? In one fell swoop, placing blueness in our minds converts many certitudes into doubts. "The world out there is blue" used to be a premise, but once we regard blue as the by-product of our blue-tinted way of seeing, "The world out there is blue" becomes a conclusion in need of justification. To say that apples are blue, you henceforth need a proof of the external world.

Most people are unable to craft such a proof, so most are dumbfounded. Until other philosophers concoct a viable account, everyone is free to speculate about the "true" color of things. One may not be able to prove one's preferred color scheme, but one cannot disprove it either. People are thus given the freedom to imagine anything about the portion of reality that forever escapes their access. One person might stick to the old-fashioned dogma that apples apart from our perceptions are International Klein Blue, but another person is free to insist that the real world is covered in multicolored polka dots. Scientists had spent centuries learning about the blue world, but now those gains can be discarded or demoted to a study of mere appearances.

The sense of mystery that this enables gains an increasing foothold in the culture, leading to all sorts of consequences, including religious revivals. Clearly, whoever triggered such vast changes with one simple argument must be clever and devious. Not to worry—an even more clever but honest philosopher boldly calls out this nonsense and safely returns the culture to the time when reality was our home, not something inherently out of reach.

This is a neat story, so it feels good to tell it. However, two features make Kant a questionable casting choice for the role of the devious philosopher. First, Kant distinguished sharply the "receptivity" of the senses whereby "an object is given to us"<sup>5</sup> from the "spontaneity" of the understanding. The "spontaneity" of the understanding contributes something to the transaction and this contribution is significant enough to ensure that what we experience from a first-person perspective likely differs in some way from the

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<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1781, 1787]), A50/B51.

original source materials. Even so, the world must supply the mind with contents, “for how else should the cognitive faculty be awakened into exercise if not through objects that stimulate our senses”?<sup>6</sup> Rand, however, says that Kant regarded “man’s concepts [as] only a delusion, but a collective delusion which no one has the power to escape.”<sup>7</sup> The consensus among those who have demonstrable command of both Rand’s and Kant’s writings is that “the explicit statements regarding reason and reality that Rand has attributed to Kant do not agree with Kant’s own characterization of his position.”<sup>8</sup> According to Kant, when the mind looks at the world, it does something, but it is not making stuff up, whole cloth.

This brings us to the second reason why Kant cannot be the bad guy of the Blue Fable. In that story, some folks conjectured that “the external world” might be covered in multicolored polka dots. Kant, however, is concerned only with basic structures that admit of no conceivable alternative. Try to think of an event without a prior moment, for example. You cannot. It is not that we have a bias in favor of this outcome. Rather, the “bias” is so fundamental that we cannot conceive of any alternative. My example above about the sheet of paper is thus much closer to what Kant was concerned with.

When Peikoff explained Kant’s ideas by saying that “Man is born with blue spectacles taped to his eyes,” his audience chuckled, because they had already decided—in advance of study—that this was silly. Peikoff<sup>9</sup> eventually rephrased the Kantian idea more accurately: “By the way the human mind is built, it must necessarily creatively synthesize the material provided by the noumenal world in such a way that in the phenomenal world he will always encounter a regular sequence of events.” One is entitled to disagree with that claim (if one understands it). Yet, those who want to defend an alternative have work to do. Specifically, in order to say that we all draw a conclusion about the pervasive presence of causality by observing causal events,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., B1.

<sup>7</sup> Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Fred D. Miller, Jr., “Comments on George Walsh, ‘Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,’” *Objectivity* 3, no. 1 (2001), p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Peikoff, “Immanuel Kant: Is Reality Knowable? Kant’s Revolutionary Hypothesis.”

one must explain why we are incapable of imagining—even as a hypothesis—an uncaused event. The people in the blue world are able to speculate about a non-blue world. We can't even get that far.

#### 4. Miller's Juxtaposition

Rand charges Kant with advocating a pernicious, unjustified form of skepticism. Maybe a case can be made that Kant commits the mistake(s) Rand charges him with, but Rand never made that case. Fred Miller has perhaps come closest to vindicating Rand's criticisms of Kant. Miller contrasts two arguments.<sup>10</sup> The first is a *modus ponens*:

1. The mind can know reality only if it has no determinate nature of its own.
2. The mind can know reality.
3. Therefore, the mind has no determinate nature of its own.

Rand would have presumably recoiled from this conclusion, but her philosophical hero, Aristotle, endorses this argument. In *De Anima*,<sup>11</sup> Aristotle argues that because there is a portion of the mind that can be informed (literally, "receive a form") by whatever it encounters, this portion of the mind has a disposition or power to become all things. Consider "dekcwueqcvud." You have never encountered this string of letters before. Even so, your mind had no trouble handling it, precisely because its "passive" portion has no bias toward any particular content. Hence, as Miller explains, "For Aristotle the mind or intellect is a pure capacity to know."<sup>12</sup>

Miller takes this to mean that, for Aristotle, "consciousness lacks identity" (Rand's preferred phrase), which is impossible, on Rand's view. We might nevertheless find a way to align Aristotle's position with Rand's by saying that the determinate nature of consciousness is precisely to lack a determinate nature. An organ that adapts to anything on the spot would be the ultimate evolutionary

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<sup>10</sup> Miller, "Comments on George Walsh, 'Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,'" pp. 29–30.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul and Other Psychological Works*, trans. Fred D. Miller, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 417a.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, "Comments on George Walsh, 'Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,'" p. 30.

adaptation, explaining why we rapidly rose to the top of the food chain. Whatever one thinks of this suggestion, Kant would reject it. His whole epistemological project consists in trying to capture the basic structure that minds must impose on the deliverances of the senses in order for those deliverances to be intelligible. Whereas “[t]he early modern empiricist tradition had depicted the mind as a blank slate awaiting experience . . . Kant added elements of rationalism to depict the mind as a chest of drawers awaiting experience.”<sup>13</sup>

Kant proposes twelve categories that the mind cannot escape, including conceiving of events as having a prior cause, as unfolding in time, and so forth. Like the one-sided sheet of paper, thoughts that deviate from these basic requirements are unthinkable. Hence, according to Miller, we may ascribe to Kant the following *modus tollens*:

1. The mind can know reality only if it has no determinate nature of its own.
2. The mind has a determinate nature of its own.
3. Therefore, the mind cannot know reality.

One does not have to accept Kant’s particular table of categories to accept this argument’s second premise (and thus the conclusion). Charles Sanders Peirce, for example, thought he could reduce Kant’s twelve categories to three.<sup>14</sup> There is thus room for reasonable disagreement. However, few philosophers after Kant would say that the mind is a completely blank slate.

Kant stresses that since our minds *must* see experiences as having prior causes, we are bound to detect causality everywhere. Rand, however, wants to locate this pervasive causality in mind-independent reality. She writes that “[a]ll the countless forms, motions, combinations and dissolutions of elements within the universe—from a floating speck of dust to the formation of a galaxy to the emergence of life—are caused and determined by the identities of the elements

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<sup>13</sup> Marc Champagne, “Kantian Schemata: A Critique Consistent with the Critique,” *Philosophical Investigations* 41, no. 4 (2018), p. 436.

<sup>14</sup> See Marc Champagne, “Some Convergences and Divergences in the Realism of Charles Peirce and Ayn Rand,” *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006), pp. 19–39.

involved.”<sup>15</sup> Kant would regard this as inconclusive, since we wouldn’t be able to see the world otherwise. An uncaused event is not just rare to the point of never being found. Rather, like a sheet of printing paper without a flipside, it wouldn’t be cognizable even if it were found. The onus is thus on the advocate of an inductive account to show what a counter-example to his generalization would look like. To admit that such a counter-example is unintelligible is to admit a stalemate with the it-tells-us-something-about-the-mind account.

### 5. Not Every Doubt Leads to Skepticism

Looking at the arguments juxtaposed by Miller, I think that Rand’s stance consists in rejecting the conditional that acts as a major premise in both arguments. She rejects the assumption that “any knowledge acquired by a *process* of consciousness is necessarily subjective and cannot correspond to the facts of reality, since it is ‘*processed knowledge*.’”<sup>16</sup> Yet, even if one succeeded in showing that Rand’s stance is preferable to Kant’s, much more work than Rand has done is needed to make this case.

In *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, Rand imagines an astronaut suddenly stranded on some far-off world who wonders, “How can you know whether [your instruments] will work in a different world?” This is a legitimate epistemological question. Yet, Rand immediately cherry-picks a skeptical response and adds: “You turn away from the instruments.”<sup>17</sup> Such a choice makes for captivating storytelling, but it conveniently overlooks more prosaic responses, notably, “You devise a test to find out.”

Rand wants to defend the idea that “My beliefs correspond to reality,” imagines a rival who contends that “My beliefs do not correspond to reality,” finds the latter suggestion manifestly preposterous, and then immediately rejects that imagined rival. Absent from her account, then, are more plausible possibilities, such as “My beliefs correspond to reality *for now*” or “*Most* of my beliefs correspond to reality but surely some *don’t*, yet I am often in no

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<sup>15</sup> Ayn Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1985), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, expanded 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Meridian, 1990), p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 1.



position to tell which.” The former is ridiculed by Rand, while the latter never gets a mention.

Rand deploys a subjective/intrinsic/objective distinction in her discussions of concepts<sup>18</sup> and values,<sup>19</sup> so the story of the stranded astronaut would have been a great opportunity to show how we “can be both fallibilistic and antiskeptical.”<sup>20</sup> As accustomed as we have become to skepticism, there is no valid inference from the recognition that we *might* be in error to the conclusion that we *are* in error. In fact, almost everything worthwhile happens between the extremes of “I cannot know anything” and “I know it all.” Rand, however, needs her opponents (like Kant) to claim “I cannot know anything,” even if this means turning those opponents into imaginary ones. I thus agree with Roger Bissell that “Rand and Peikoff and others seem to have lost sight of much of the clarifying power of Rand’s original distinction (known familiarly as the ‘trichotomy’) between the intrinsic, objective, and subjective.”<sup>21</sup>

To appreciate why careful scholarship matters, imagine that Kant was the arch-subjectivist that Rand made him out to be. An Objectivist—David Kelley,<sup>22</sup> say—could counter Kant’s subjectivism by insisting that one’s consciousness is in “a relation to something outside me, and so it is experience and not fiction, sense and not imagination.” The only problem is that *Kant* wrote this objectivist-sounding reply.<sup>23</sup> Assuming that we have already established what the good and bad positions are, Kant’s role as the bad guy is questionable.

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<sup>18</sup> Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Ayn Rand, “What Is Capitalism?” in Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet, 1970), pp. 21–22.

<sup>20</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 152.

<sup>21</sup> Roger E. Bissell, “Ayn Rand and ‘The Objective’: A Closer Look at the Intrinsic-Objective-Subjective Trichotomy,” *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 9, no. 1 (2007), p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> David Kelley, *The Evidence of the Senses: A Realist Theory of Perception* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. Bx1; see also Fred Seddon, “On Kelley on Kant,” *Reason Papers* no. 19 (Fall 1994), p. 85.

Rand hyperbolically claims that “[o]n every fundamental issue, Kant’s philosophy is the exact opposite of Objectivism.”<sup>24</sup> Anyone willing to put in the work can confirm that this is demonstrably untrue.<sup>25</sup>

## 6. Metaphilosophies to Match Personalities

I suggest that the core difference between Kant and Rand is not metaphysical or epistemological, but metaphilosophical. It comes down to a single question about questions: Must philosophy have the answer to *everything*? Rand frequently made room for scientific questions that philosophy cannot answer,<sup>26</sup> but I know of no *philosophical* question that she deemed unanswerable (by anyone in any field). For instance, she always spoke of the problem of induction as if it awaited a resolution, but it is unclear what, if anything, underpinned this optimism. Any justification of induction seems destined to be circular and go beyond what we strictly perceive. Kant, by contrast, explicitly made room for philosophical questions that philosophy cannot answer (and in fact credits the problem of induction with jolting him out of his dogmatic optimism).

We can dispute which questions philosophy cannot answer. However, I am only concerned with the more basic contrast between having “all” the answers and having “less-than-all” the answers. I think that, at root, Rand is offended by the suggestion that philosophy and philosophical knowledge may have limits. If this is correct, then all the other technical disagreements (about space, time, synthetic *a priori* judgments, and so on) are merely an outgrowth of this low-resolution picture about philosophical knowledge and its scope.

One could define philosophy as being capable of answering everything. One can even adopt the fancy label “metaphysics” to make such a power sound more plausible. Yet, our ability to imagine a discipline with explanatory access to all of reality without remainder doesn’t mean that such a discipline is possible or feasible. Since humans are ignorant in many respects, it would be surprising if this ignorance suddenly vanished merely on account of meeting, discussing, and swapping texts. Philosophers may be smarter than sea cucumbers at the bottom of the ocean floor, but no amount of erudite

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<sup>24</sup> Ayn Rand, “Brief Summary,” *The Objectivist* 10, no. 9 (1971), p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Seddon, “On Kelley on Kant,” p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, pp. 189 and 289.

chit chat about the outer reaches of the universe actually gets us there. Metaphysicians who talk about reality thus lack first-hand acquaintance with most of what they talk about. When Kant engaged in metaphysics from his home in Königsberg, he had the wherewithal to recognize that he was engaging in a tendentious activity. Rand showed no such self-awareness.

Accepting that philosophy does not have *all* the answers is not equivalent to saying that philosophy can have *no* answers. We tend to draw needlessly strong inferences when we are flustered. Calibrating back to something more sensible, it is obvious that a claim like “Don’t put *all* the harissa in the dish” does not entail “Put *no* harissa in the dish.” Similarly, we can acknowledge that philosophy has limits, while rejecting the view that it is impotent.

Cataloguing the “main differences between Rand and Kant,” Walsh explains how “Rand maintains that this world of spatio-temporally and causally related entities is exhaustive of all reality and known to be exhaustive, whereas Kant maintains that another reality, teleologically ordered and exempt from space and time and causality is at least *thinkable*, although not *knowable*.”<sup>27</sup> The ill-chosen expression “another reality”—which Kant never uses—makes Kant’s stance seem needlessly mystical. We know that there exist wavelengths beyond what our organs for vision can detect and we have devised instruments to prove this. Just as the bookends of the visible spectrum are not the bookends of the electromagnetic spectrum, the bookends of the electromagnetic spectrum might not be the bookends of “the reality spectrum” (to coin a felicitous expression). Hence, what is involved in the Kantian stance is not “another” reality but rather *more* reality. Using Euler diagrams, we can picture the circle of human knowledge as fitting entirely within the larger circle of reality. Nothing in such a picture imperils our knowledge of and dealings with the medium-sized dry goods<sup>28</sup> that we know and love. However, to suppose that there is a flush fit between the two circles, without even a thin crescent exceeding our knowledge, is hubristic.

Would Rand accept this picture? She would certainly admit that there are things we presently do not know. “You cannot arbitrarily restrict the facts of nature to your current level of knowledge,” she

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<sup>27</sup> Walsh, “Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,” p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> John L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 8.

writes.<sup>29</sup> Amen. However, what is at stake is not contingent ignorance, but rather the idea that there are things we shall *never* and *could never* know, *owing to the structure of our minds*. She was ostensibly hostile to this idea.

As Dana Andreicut explains, “[f]or Rand the answer to these puzzles is simple. . . . Limits to our knowledge? There are none. Kant, on the other hand, would argue that . . . we are severely limited in our ultimate knowledge of reality.”<sup>30</sup> The “severely” added by Andreicut is irrelevant. If the reality spectrum or Euler circle extends farther than what we know, as Kantian humility suggests, then it is pointless to speculate by how far it extends. The idea that reality extends beyond what we can fathom requires one to stay silent about what that extra portion might contain. Some fear that conceding this much will somehow lead to “an orgy of mystic fantasy.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, despite the speculative excesses of some (including Kant), remaining silent about what is beyond our ken does not turn one into a mystic. For, “[e]ven if we suppose that the conditional ‘If x is mystical, then x is ineffable’ is true, there is no valid inference from that premise to the conclusion ‘If x is ineffable, then x is mystical.’ It takes a biconditional to license that inference, but we have no reason whatsoever to endorse an equivalence between ineffability and mysticism.”<sup>32</sup>

I have argued that reason cannot capture or explain everything<sup>33</sup> and defended the view that, when things go right, the red apple we see is red.<sup>34</sup> Such realism does not get a free pass and actually

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<sup>29</sup> Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 303.

<sup>30</sup> Dana Andreicut, “Kant and Rand on Rationality and Reality,” *Philosophy Now* no. 101 (2014), p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Leonard Peikoff, *The Ominous Parallels: The End of Freedom in America* (New York: Meridian, 1982), p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> Marc Champagne, “Consciousness and the Philosophy of Signs: A New Précis,” *The American Journal of Semiotics* 35, nos. 3–4 (2019), p. 450.

<sup>33</sup> Marc Champagne, “Just Do It: Schopenhauer and Peirce on the Immediacy of Agency,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2014), pp. 209–32; and Marc Champagne, “Don’t Be an Ass: Rational Choice and Its Limits,” *Reason Papers* 37, no. 1 (2015), pp. 137–47.

<sup>34</sup> Marc Champagne, *Consciousness and the Philosophy of Signs* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), p. 73.

has quite a bit of work to do, especially if we want to avoid the familiar traps that result from construing perception solely in causal terms. Likewise, I have argued that epistemological and ethical objectivity is possible,<sup>35</sup> making advances in both Objectivist<sup>36</sup> and Kantian<sup>37</sup> scholarship. We can acknowledge both our knowledge and our ignorance, without converting one into the other.

Surely, the burden of proof is on whoever would claim that philosophy's explanatory powers know no bounds. The "less-than-all" side, by contrast, only needs to put forward a single unanswerable question to successfully make its case. It needn't be an unanswerable question *simpliciter*, but it can be a question unanswerable *by philosophy*. Art, for example, might succeed where philosophy fails. Rand's novels show that art can convey admirable conduct better than theory ever could. Judgment—which is the application of a principle—cannot be reduced to a rule (on pain of regress), but it can be powerfully exemplified by narrative fiction.

Moreover, the limitation(s) inherent in philosophical knowledge might be caused not by some elusive answer, but by some ill-considered question. It could be that philosophy is capable of meeting all the demands of ordinary life, but that philosophers emboldened by this success cannot help but go a step further and ask one or more illicit question(s). I might, for example, puzzle over why there is something instead of nothing. A resolution of such puzzlement might be difficult to reach not because of some shortcoming in our conceptual faculties, but precisely because our faculties are so potent that they allow us to conceive problems for which we couldn't possibly conceive a solution. In such a case, unqualified confidence in philosophical argumentation would be misplaced.

Kant held that "questions of metaphysics [...] such as whether the universe as a whole has a cause, are not capable of being answered,

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<sup>35</sup> Marc Champagne, "Experience and Life as Ever-Present Constraints on Knowledge," *Metaphilosophy* 46, no. 2 (2015), pp. 235–45.

<sup>36</sup> Marc Champagne, "My Life Gives the Moral Landscape Its Relief," in *Sam Harris: Critical Responses*, ed. Sandra L. Woien (Chicago, IL: Carus Books, 2023), pp. 17–38.

<sup>37</sup> Champagne, "Kantian Schemata: A Critique Consistent with the *Critique*," pp. 436–45.

even though they may validly be asked. Rand . . . treats all valid metaphysical questions as being equally answerable.”<sup>38</sup> Kant could have argued for his humility in a hand-wavy way since, even in advance of argumentation, the odds clearly favor a humbler stance. To his credit, he took a risk and tried to pinpoint *which* questions fall outside the remit of philosophers. For instance, we cannot help but conceive of events as having a prior cause, but we can accept neither a regress nor an uncaused first cause. How to understand this predicament is a genuine conundrum that won’t go away with un-argued dismissals.

To be clear, having hubris does not automatically mean that one is wrong. It cannot be held as a reproach against Rand that she had an assertive personality and cared ardently about what she said. However, if what one says is to count as more than chutzpah, then one has to back it up. In the end, Rand never gives any non-circular reasons for why we should share her optimism about metaphysics and philosophy generally. If all one ever has in one’s crosshairs are self-defeating we-cannot-know-anything stances, then victory seems assured. What complicates such simplistic set-ups, however, is that Kant never adopts a we-cannot-know-anything stance. Historically, few philosophers have. Despite this, Rand countered hyperbole with hyperbole. In so doing, she developed a view of philosophy that promises more than it can possibly deliver. She positioned herself as a champion of reason, but she was unaware of how unreasonable it is to ascribe to reason an unrestricted scope.

We humans are humans to the same degree that sea cucumbers are sea cucumbers. Our species differs from other species in important ways, but none of us has visited the farthest regions of the universe. Human ignorance thus comes in (at least) two varieties: the kind we can hope to overcome and the kind we can never hope to overcome. All it takes to instantiate Kantian humility is a belief that the latter kind is not an empty set.

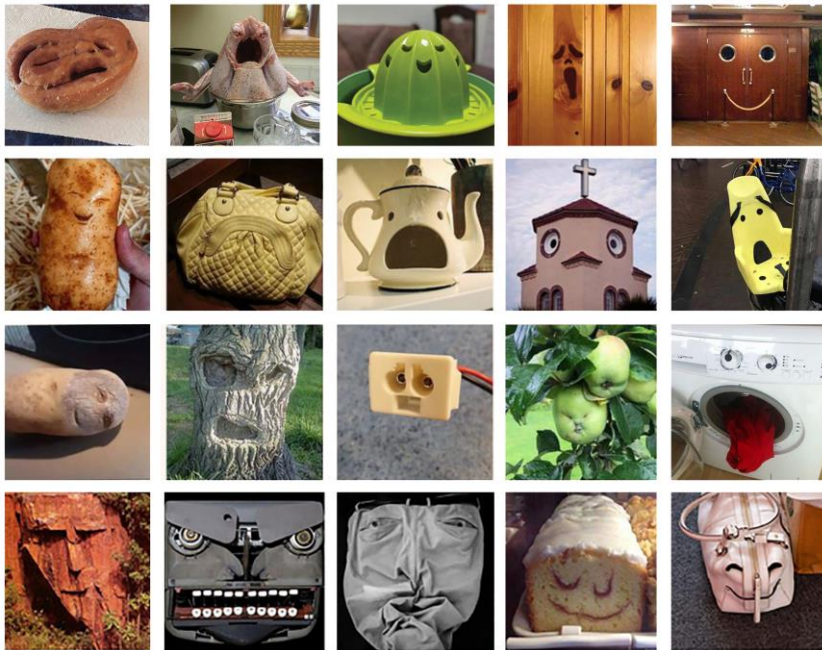
### **7. Face It, Our Mind Structures Perception**

In Section 3, I gave Rand her steel-man moment and did my best to show that her criticism of Kant is not unreasonable. So, in a spirit of parity, let me portray Kantian humility in a favorable light. Kant argued that the human mind automatically structures perception. Now, we can repeat the mantra that “man is being a volitional

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<sup>38</sup> Walsh, “Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,” p. 76.

consciousness”<sup>39</sup> all we want, but this will not alter our seeing faces in figure 1.<sup>40</sup>



When I showed this image to my four-year-old son, he asked, “Who is the teacup who is alive?” If philosophers are not going to consult instruments like radio telescopes or particle accelerators, then we must at least pay attention to experience as it occurs. To be sure, we adults can tell ourselves that these aren’t really faces. We would of course be right. Nevertheless, like my son, I cannot help but see these things as faces—and, truth be told, neither can anyone else. Denying this primordial fact only to fit neatly with a simplistic vision of objectivity is dishonest and thus not objective. We may take comfort in

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<sup>39</sup> Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 120.

<sup>40</sup> Adapted from Susan G. Wardle, Sanika Paranjape, Jessica Taubert, and Chris I. Baker, “Illusory Faces Are More Likely to Be Perceived as Male than Female,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 5 (2022), e2117413119.

calling our overactive face-detection an “illusion,” but it nevertheless remains our starting place in perception. (Objectivists defend free will precisely on those grounds.) There are thus meaningful philosophical conversations to be had on the topic.

An Objectivist at peace with the idea that “man is limited to a consciousness of a specific nature, which perceives by specific means and no others,”<sup>41</sup> shouldn’t be troubled by the idea that we leave a bit of ourselves in everything we see. You want to avoid subjectivism, but you also want to avoid intrinsicism. Indeed, I suggested above that Rand rejects the *modus ponens* mapped out by Miller, because she rejects the first premise in both arguments of Miller’s juxtaposition. She disagrees that “The mind can know reality only if it has no determinate nature of its own.” Like it or not, faces matter more than mere matter to a human mind, so face-like motifs are foregrounded wherever they are found. We rapidly rose to the top of the food chain in part by detecting other people’s faces immediately and without effort, even if that produces false positives. No one is in charge of this. Rand says that “volition begins with the first syllogism,”<sup>42</sup> but spotting a face is no syllogism (and vastly predates deliberate reasoning in our psychological development). To refuse to acknowledge the contribution of such subpersonal processes would be both unscientific and unrealistic, for this is how the world presents itself. If it is wrong to find human knowledge wanting on account of an extra-human vantage point that no critic could occupy, then it is equally wrong to advance defenses of human knowledge from an extra-human vantage point that no defender could occupy.

## 8. Conclusion

We can unpack Kantian humility narrowly, as an epistemological claim about our ignorance of “things in themselves.”<sup>43</sup> Rand was concerned only with this narrow epistemological claim, which irked her to no end. Yet, given that “Kant does not ask ‘How is experience possible?’” but instead asks “How is metaphysics possible

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<sup>41</sup> Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).



as science?”<sup>44</sup> it is more accurate to unpack Kantian humility more broadly, as a metaphilosophical claim about the scope of philosophical knowledge. How deep into reality can philosophical inquiry penetrate? Not all the way, Kant answered.

We thus loop back to the truth we started with: None of us has visited the farthest regions of the universe. I am collaborating with like-minded members of my species to incrementally reduce my ignorance. Yet, even if I knew all I could know—which I don’t—all I can know is not all there is.

Importantly, Kant’s arguments that the reality spectrum exceeds us can be detached from his arguments that put free will and the soul in the excess portion.<sup>45</sup> This detachability lets us clarify what exactly Kant is guilty of. If Rand and others want to criticize Kant for claiming to know what he has explicitly defined as unknowable, then count me among the critics. The unknown is not a blank check for acquiring philosophical goods that one could otherwise never justify. If, however, Rand and others want to criticize Kant for claiming that reality extends farther than our minds, then count me on the side of Kant. Objectivists tend to wobble between these two criticisms, only one of which is defensible. If and when that wobbling stops, I will be in a position to state which side I am on. Appeal to ignorance is a fallacy, but ignorance isn’t.

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<sup>44</sup> Frode Kjosavik, “Kant on Method and Evidence in Metaphysics,” in *Metametaphysics and the Sciences: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Frode Kjosavik and Camilla Serck-Hanssen (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 28. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B22.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen R. C. Hicks, “Does Kant Have a Place in Classical Liberalism?” *Cato Unbound: A Journal of Debate*, October 2016, accessed online at: <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2016/10/17/stephen-r-c-hicks/does-kant-have-place-classical-liberalism/>.