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On Kant's Critique of a *Cognitio Symbolica*

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1. Symbolic vs. intuitive cognition: Kant's starting point in Leibnizian epistemology

1) Leibniz, "Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis" (1684; transl. 1989, p. 25)

"And so when I think about a chiliagon, that is, a polygon with a thousand equal sides, I don't always consider the nature of a side, or of equality, or of thousandfoldedness [...], but [...] use these words [like chiliagon] (whose sense appears only obscurely and imperfectly to the mind) in place of the ideas I have of these things [...]. I usually call such thinking, which is found both in algebra and in arithmetic and, indeed, almost everywhere, *blind* or *symbolic*. And indeed, when a notion is very complex, we cannot consider all of its component notions at the same time. When we can, or indeed insofar as we can, I call cognition *intuitive*."

2) Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, Der Welt Und der Seele des Menschen, Auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (1722, *Deutsche Metaphysik*)

„§ 316. Es ist nemlich zu mercken, daß die Worte der Grund von einer besonderen Art der Erkenntnis sind, welche wir die *figürliche* nennen. Denn wir stellen uns die Sache entweder selbst, oder durch Wörter, oder andere Zeichen vor. Z.E. wenn ich an einen Menschen gedencke, der abwesend ist u. mir sein Bild gleichsam vor Augen schwebet; so stelle ich mir seine Person selbst vor. Wenn ich mir aber von der Tugend diese Worte gedencke; sie sey eine Fertigkeit seine Handlungen nach dem Gesetze der Natur einzurichten; so stelle ich mir die Tugend durch Worte vor. Die erste Erkenntnis wird die *anschauende Erkenntnis* genennet: die andere ist die *figürliche Erkenntnis*.“

2. Kant's farewell to "empty thoughts" and "blind intuitions"

3) Kant, *Inaugural Dissertation*,

"§10. There is (for man) no *intuition* of what belongs to the understanding, but only a *symbolic cognition*; and thinking is only possible for us by means of universal concepts in the abstract, not by means of a singular concept in the concrete. For all our intuition is bound to a certain principle of form, and it is only under this form that anything can be *apprehended* by the mind immediately or as *singular*, and not merely conceived discursively by means of general concepts. But this formal principle of our intuition (space and time) is the condition under which something can be the object of our senses. Accordingly, this formal principle, as the condition of sensitive cognition, is not a means to intellectual intuition." (2:396)

4) "Moreover, since it is only through the senses that all the matter of our cognition is given, the noumenon as such cannot be conceived by means of representations drawn from sensations. Thus, the concept of the intelligible as such is devoid of all that is *given* in human intuition. The *intuition*, namely, of our mind is always *passive*. It is, accordingly, only possible in so far as it is possible for something to affect our sense." (2:396-97)

5) Lambert, letter to Kant, October 13, 1770,

"Our symbolic cognition is a thing halfway between sensing and actually pure thinking [*ein Mittelding zwischen dem empfinden und wirklichen reinen Denken*]. If we proceed correctly in the delineation of the simple and the manner of our composition, we thereby get reliable rules for producing designations of compounds that are so complex that we cannot review them again [*wir sie nicht mehr überdenken können*] but can nevertheless be sure that the designation represents the truth. No one has yet formed himself a clear representation of all the members of an infinite series, and no

one is going to do so in the future. But we are able to do arithmetic with such series, to give their sum, and so on, by virtue of the laws of *symbolic* cognition. We thus extend ourselves far beyond the borders of our real thinking [*wirklichen Denkens*]. The sign V-1 represents an unthinkable non-thing. And yet it can be used very well in finding theorems. What are usually regarded as specimens of the pure understanding can be viewed most of the time as specimens of symbolic cognition.” (10:109-110)

3. Discursive vs. symbolic cognition: the Critical Kant

6) Kant, *Metaphysik Pölitz*, Mitte 1770er, Cambridge transl. modified,

“The *faculty of correlation* [*Gegenbildung*] is the faculty of characteristic [*Vermögen der Charakteristik*]. Characteristic is the *Gegenbild* of another thing. *Gegenbild* is the means for producing the image of the other thing. Thus, words are *Gegenbilder* of objects for conceiving representations of the object. Because it [the *Gegenbild*] represents images, it therefore belongs to sensibility, although the images do not come through the influence of objects but come out of ourselves; but with respect to form it still belongs to sensibility. [...]

Regarding the faculty of *Gegenbildung* or *Facultate characteristic* we must note something in yet more detail: a representation which serves as a means of reproduction by association is a *symbol* (*symbolum*).[*] Most of the symbolic representations occur with the cognition of God. These are altogether by analogy (*per analogiam*), i.e., through an agreement of the relationships; [...]

A cognition of the understanding which is indirectly intellectual (*indirecte intellectual*) and is cognized through the understanding, but is produced through an analogy of sensible cognition, is a symbolic cognition which contrasts with the logical cognition just as the intuitive contrasts with the discursive. [...W]here intuition is not immediately given to us, there we must help ourselves by analogy (*per analogiam*) with symbolic cognition. We can also say: cognition is symbolic where the object is cognized in the sign; but with discursive cognition the signs are not symbols (*Symbola*), because I do not cognize the object in the sign but rather the sign produces only the representation of the object for me. E.g., the word table is not a symbol, but rather only a means for producing the representation of the understanding through association.” (28:237-238)

[*Variant]: “a representation that serves as a means for reproduction by association is a character; but a representation that serves as a means to intellectuality [*Intellectualitaet*] is a symbol. Words by themselves do not have any understanding, but merely serve to produce other representations by association, and these are characters [*Characterere*]. By contrast there are means to intellection, and these are symbols.” (28:1471)

7) *Anthropology*, “On the faculty of using signs” (*Bezeichnungsvermögen; Facultas signatrix*)”,

“Shapes [*Gestalten*] of things (intuitions), so far as they serve only as means of representation through concepts, are *symbols*; and cognition through them is called symbolic or *figurative* (*speciosa*). – *Characters* are not yet symbols; for they can also be mere mediate (indirect) signs which in themselves signify nothing, but only signify something through association with intuitions and then leading through them to concepts. [The Rostock manuscript H adds here: like the words of a language, which are meaningless sounds for the ear of a stranger, but just because of this also lead to more definite concepts.] Therefore, *symbolic* cognition must not be opposed to *intuitive* but to *discursive* cognition, in which the character accompanies the concept merely as guardian (*custos*), in order to reproduce the concept when the occasion arises. [...] Symbols are merely means that understanding uses to provide the concept with meaning through the presentation of an object for it. But they are only indirect means, owing to an *analogy* with certain intuitions to which the concept can be applied.” (§ 38, 7:191)

8) *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 59,

“All *hypotyposis* (presentation, *subjecto sub adspectum*), as making something sensible, is of one of two kinds: either *schematic*, where to a concept grasped by the understanding the corresponding intuition is given a priori; or *symbolic*, where to a concept which only reason can think, and to which

no sensible intuition can be adequate, an intuition is attributed with which the power of judgment proceeds in a way merely analogous to that which it observes in schematization, i.e., it is merely the rule of this procedure, not of the intuition itself, and thus merely the form of the reflection, not the content, which corresponds to the concept.

The use of the word *symbolic* in contrast to the *intuitive* kind of representation has, of course, been accepted by recent logicians, but this is a distorted and incorrect use of the word: for the symbolic is merely a species of the intuitive. The latter, namely (the intuitive), can be divided into the *schematic* and the *symbolic* kinds of representation. Both are hypotyposes, i.e., presentations (*exhibitiones*) not mere *characterizations*, i.e., designations of the concepts by means of accompanying sensible signs, which contain nothing at all belonging to the intuition of the object, but only serve them, in accordance with the laws of association of the imagination, and hence in a subjective regard, as a means of reproduction; such things are either words, or visible (algebraic, even mimetic) signs, as mere *expressions* for concepts.*

* The intuitive in cognition must be contrasted to the discursive (not the symbolic). Now the former is either *schematic*, by means of *demonstration*, or *symbolic*, as a representation based on mere *analogy*.

All intuitions that are ascribed to concepts *a priori* are thus either *schemata* or *symbols*, the first of which contain direct, the second indirect presentations of the concept. The first do this demonstratively, the second by means of an analogy (for which empirical intuitions are also employed), in which the power of judgment performs a double task, first applying the concept to the object of a sensible intuition, and then, second, applying the mere rule of reflection on that intuition to an entirely different object, of which the first is only the symbol." (5:351-52)

Kant's taxonomy of possible "kinds of representation" (*Vorstellungsarten*) [but see also "Stufenleiter" passage at KrV A 320/B 376],

(1) *discursive* ("mere *characterizations*, i.e., designations of the concepts by means of accompanying sensible signs", 5:352): characters (in natural languages, but also in algebra) are used as "mere mediate (indirect) signs which in themselves signify nothing" (7:191), and hence, are insufficient to demonstrate the objective reality of the concepts involved, but help "to reproduce the concept when the occasion arises" (ibid.) by prompting the appropriate intuitions to be synthesized in the concept, or

(2) *intuitive*: intuitions are used "to demonstrate the reality of our concepts" (5:351), either of

(2.1) *empirical* concepts where we give *examples*, or

(2.2; ["hypotyposes, i.e., presentations (*exhibitiones*)"]) *pure* concepts which are either

(2.2.1) *pure sensible* concepts (e.g., triangle), where demonstration of their objective reality is *schematic*, and the schema may lead to an image because it "signifies a rule of the synthesis of the [pure a priori; A 142/B 181] imagination with regard to pure shapes in space" (A 141/B180), or

(2.2.2) *pure concepts of the understanding*, where demonstration of their objective reality is *schematic*, and the schema is "the pure synthesis, in accord with a rule of unity according to concepts in general, which the category expresses" (A 142/B 181), and "concerns the determination of the inner sense in general, in accordance with conditions of its form (time) in regard to all representations, insofar as these are to be connected together a priori in one concept in accord with the unity of apperception" (ibid.), or

(2.2.3) *pure concepts of practical reason*, or ideas, where demonstration of their objective reality is *symbolic* ("schematism by analogy"; 20:332), and the symbols are "indirect presentations of the concept", accomplished "by means of an analogy (for which empirical intuitions are also employed)" (5:352)