Recontextualizing Kant in a Seemingly Anti-Enlightenment Age

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Abstract

It has been said that much of modern philosophy lives in the shadow of Kant. Indeed, the modern, Enlightenment spirit of reason and critique owe much of their legacy to Kant. However, recent developments in misinformation, fake news, and information overload threaten to fatally challenge the entire Enlightenment project. Thus, in this paper, I use a Kantian understanding of Enlightenment to critique not only these recent anti-rational phenomena, but to examine their very foundations. In doing so, I draw upon the semiotic, communicative, and psychological work of Karl Otto Apel (and his reading of C. S. Pierce), Jurgen Habermas, and Gilles Deleuze. This paper argues that misinformation can be theorized as divorcing semiotic-linguistic concepts from their Kantian objects, while information overload presents a fundamentally novel challenge to the Kantian paradigm. In the end, a new communicative and public sphere of rationality is both pragmatically and theoretically necessary.

1. The Kantian Enlightenment's Status Quo

It appears simplistic that the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, in its nuance, profundity, and status as foundational to 'Modern Philosophy,' may be essentialized to a singularity. However, if there is a single 'red thread' that underlies Kant's philosophy, it is in its binding of notions previously thought incongruent. Whether it be in the ascription of frameworks of cognition to every epistemic claim, the granting of rationality and autonomy to every individual, or the connection between objects and the concepts that unite them, the driving agent behind much of Kant's critical philosophy is an active unity. Throughout the over two-hundred and fifty years since Kant's critical system, this active attitude has served as a basis for the modern enlightenment project which he so exalted, no matter how far it has strayed from Kant's work itself.

However, despite its influence, the Kantian attitude now faces significant threats born uniquely out of the digital age, intent on unseating its lofty post—misinformation, sensory overload, and 'false news.' I argue that such developments put the Kantian impetus to reason past natural ignorance such that humans become "more than machines"[1] at risk. And, as a result, regression into the hazards of fragmentation, dogmatism, and public intellectual submission become a very legitimate threat.

This paper seeks to investigate the instability of the modernist episteme in light of *Aufklärung* and the broader Kantian epistemic project. The goal is twofold: to situate this new digital 'irrationality' within the context of the Enlightenment, and to argue that the practice of Kantian critique offers a way out. Keeping with the ethos of *Sapere Aude*, one must now dare to go beyond Kant himself in an analysis of the 21st century's 'counter-Enlightenment.' In doing so, I incorporate the perspectives of Karl-Otto Apel's reading of C.S. Peirce, Jürgen Habermas, and Gilles Deleuze to the theoretical, practical and psychological domains.

In the end, I argue, through the case studies of misinformation and information overload, that for the Enlightenment epistemic project to function against new threats, our cognitive faculties must possess some *public* commonality such that knowledge may have a far-reaching, communicable synthetic *unity* (as between our objects and concepts). And, it is only the Kantian critical attitude which restores this rationality.

2. Semiotic Misinformation

I begin with misinformation and Kant's Transcendental categories. In Kantian terms, misinformation can be thought of as symbolically manipulating the *concepts* we employ and disjoining them from real *objects* of experience. By eschewing reality, misinformation thus attempts to force one beyond the possibility of experience in a sensible manifold. It thereby disregards the

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[1] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Hackett Publishing, 1983), 42..

categories' necessary apriority as detailed by Kant, for it is "by them alone that [one] can understand something in the manifold of intuition, that is, think an object in it."[2]

Furthermore, because the vessel by which contemporary misinformative processes operate is via language (and the various accompanying signs used to represent objects under concepts), misinformation attempts a semiotic deception. Misinformation frequently operates via digital media and its linguistic-semiotic (mis)representations of reality. Here I marshal Karl-Otto Apel's transcendental semiotics and his recontextualization of Kant's categories through C.S. Peirce's triadic transformation to analyze misinformation.

Apel reads Peirce as having performed his own transcendental move, but one of signs rather than metaphysical categories, namely the "...*three types of signs* parallel with the *three types of inferences* as illustrations of the *three universal categories*,"[3] where a sign is "something that stands for something in some respect or quality to an interpretant."[4] Thus, in both Kant and Peirce's transcendental deductions, the aim is a synthetic consistency (or unity) to all possible experience, with Peirce approaching the matter through language, which he believed to be entirely semiotic.[5] To Apel's Peirce, this makes transindividual semiotic unity the vantage point from which the experiences of objects are validated.[6] By asserting a connection here between Peirce and Kant, Apel incorporates language into the transcendental deduction's emphasis on the validation of long-term experience. These (linguistic) signs synthesize the representation of a quality to an interpretant (subject) across all possible experience.

In the context of misinformation, whereas misinformation divorces concepts from the objects of experience, this Apelian-Kantian project works directly contrary to misinformation through its requirement of verifying the symbols (or concepts) against the objects of experience. Whether it be in the manifold of sensible intuition or in semiotic representations of language, only unified, consistent objects that fit within the bounds of categories and signs may be held to be true.

The need for intellectual coherence and systematic clarity in communicating knowledge, two things threatened by false news's inconsistency and inaccuracy, is recognized by Gilles Deleuze in his retrospective on the Kantian project, as he aligns with Kant in claiming that "Knowledge implies a common sense, without which it would not be communicable and could not claim universality,"[7] further stating the need for the faculties to "harmonize with one

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[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A81/B107.

[3] Karl-Otto Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (Routledge, 2023), 84-85.

[4] Apel, *Transformation of Philosophy*, 85.

[5] Charles S Pierce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1868): 141.

[6] Apel, *Transformation of Philosophy*, 83.

[7] Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 21.

another."[8] The goal of false news is to disrupt the understanding's ability to rationally reach knowledge about the sensible world through its misrepresentation of empirical reality. By considering the harmony between the faculties of sensibility, reason, and the understanding required for knowledge as defined by Kant and recontextualized by Deleuze, one clarifies the positive aspect of the critique of Enlightenment philosophy and the need for reason's sustained use in acquiring knowledge.

3. Information Overload

However, *misinformation* is not the only contemporary development. Having recontextualized the Transcendental Logic into a triadic semiotics, I turn my attention to *information overload*. Information overload, in presenting such wildly extravagant amounts of (irrational) information, challenges Kant's vision of conducting philosophy "before the public of the 'people,' [so as] to encourage it in the use of its own reason."[9] It is the sheer quantity of information that isolates individuals from their own reason and renders genuine philosophical acts difficult. Specifically, overload works in two ways: 1) by clouding rationality in the public sphere and 2) by obstructing individual practical reason.

The first of these extracts from the *public sphere* its communicative and common rationality. For Kant, individuals express reason as a speech act aimed at a communicative end; Enlightenment becomes a *public* procedure. In information overload, then, is a reversal of Kant's reversal of "the principle [that authority, not truth, makes law]."[10] Instead, in its place is an authoritative and deliberate overwhelming of sensations, which takes precedence over communication. Herein lies the prescience of Jürgen Habermas's revitalization of practical reason in the public sphere, as it halts the undoing of Kant. In depicting the Enlightenment as an ongoing project, Habermas simultaneously ends the removal of rationality from the public sphere and acts affirmatively towards the basic proposition of *Sapere Aude:* that individuals may use reason to better reach a mutually intelligible truth. Instead of abandoning the possibility of public rationality or rationally acquired knowledge and submitting communication to irrational overflows of information, Habermas makes a fundamentally Kantian move and affirms that "...there is, on the side of persons who behave rationally, a willingness to expose themselves to criticism, and, if necessary, to properly participate in argumentation."[11] In forming a rearguard that enables individuals to communicate their ideas despite an overload of stimuli that puts communicability in doubt,

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[8] Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy,* 21.

[9] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (The MIT Press, 1991), 105.

[10] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 103.

[11] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1989), 18.

Habermas underlies the universality of the rational expression of ideas: reason in public communication will always pragmatically triumph.

Secondly, information overload acts as a counterpoint to reason's use in practical matters by creating such a tremendous amount of sensuous content that individuals become disoriented in their attempts to judge, and therefore to reason. Here, the need for a return to Kant becomes evident, as he elucidates the proper writ of reason in providing intellectual orientation. Just as the senses are used in physical orientation, Kant asserts "...reason's need, as a subjective ground for presupposing and assuming something which reason may not presume to know through objective grounds, and consequently for orienting itself in thinking."[12] Reason alone acts as that which can provide grounds for assuming concepts when lacking the presence of an object of possible experience. After again scrutinizing reason from the Kantian perspective, its practical use extends into the digital age as well; in the increasingly large internet information sphere, reason is the principal manner by which adherence to sensible intuition and the avoidance of being swept away in a 'tide of information' are possible. The understanding's orientation through reason is its sense of direction; pure reason, which does not lend itself to supersensible forms of intuition, creates the possibility for accurate subjective assumptions.

4. Conclusion

The increasingly pervasive nature of misinformation, information overload, and 'fake news' target humanity's "emergence from [its] self-imposed immaturity,"[13] aiming to revert humanity's source of understanding to an anti-rational "lack of resolve and courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance."[14] The question now, following this dense philosophical defense, is of the immediate value of adhering to Kant and his vision of rationality in a digital age that seems increasingly irrational. This is only exacerbated if, arguably, the vices of misinformation, information overload, and false news arose due to inherent inadequacies of the Enlightenment project. However, despite these developments, it is *only* through the unifying Kantian critical *attitude*, or liberated use of reason, that one can counter the current vices of deintellectualization. It is only through *individual* critique that Kant's first question regarding reason of "What can I know?"[15] can be reclaimed, whose mere possibility of answering has been recently cast into doubt.

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[12] Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 137.
[13] Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 41.
[14] Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 41.
[15] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A805/B833.

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