A Philosophical Journey

I want to thank

- Don, Anja and John for this conference. I’m deeply grateful, honored and moved.
- The NYU philosophy department, the New York Institute of Philosophy, FAS for this conference and for sixteen wonderful years (2004-2020) spent as a faculty member in the department.
- Especially Paul Boghossian, Chair at the time I accepted NYU’s offer, Dick Foley who was the Dean of the Faculty who together with Paul put together the offer (which included the support for this conference!). As we all know, but bears repeating, the philosophy department at NYU would not be what it is without Paul’s energy and vision and without Dick’s unwavering support. And also: without Don’s two terms as chair, followed by one term as associate chair to Paul. The dream team. Another dream team is coming, with Sharon and Sam.

Organizing this conference each year with Don and John, and then Anja when she joined the department, has been, each year, a high point of my life at NYU. Our conception of the conference was that it should not be narrowly focused on one author but rather, be topic oriented and span the whole history of modern philosophy to present times. That goal is wonderfully realized in this conference, the first one I did not contribute to organizing. Thank you all for this, and thank you to all the speakers and their commentators. I like to think that, with the contribution of you all, a conference such as this one is one of many ways in which we can resist the tendency to overspecialization and the atomization of the field of philosophy.

I also want to thank my former students, at NYU and at Princeton, many of whom are talking in this conference. And the students whom I helped supervise, coming from other
departments in the US or from much further away: Brazil, Germany, Italy, and of course, France.

- I began with thanking my colleagues in the NYU philosophy department, I also want to thank the colleagues and friends who welcomed me in the US (Paul Benacerraf and my colleagues at Princeton). And the colleagues and friends in the departments in which I started my career, in France: l’Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, l’Ecole Normale Supérieure, l’Université de Franche-Comté, l’Université de Clermont-Ferrand.

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I have entitled this talk “a philosophical journey.” As many of you know, my philosophical journey has also been geographical, including a major move from France to the US in 1993, when I was in mid-career (for someone who works on Kant, I am singularly non-Kantian in this way. He never left Königsberg!). What I want to focus on in this talk, however, is the specifically philosophical aspect of the journey. Of course I will, along the way, say a few things about the different contexts in which I developed as a philosopher. But the focus is on the doing philosophy, a learning which I am far from considering as finished, as far as I am concerned.

My story will be chronologically organized, but I hope it also clarifies the systematic connection between the questions I have been interested in and where I stand at this point in time, when I am only beginning to learn how to do philosophy.

1- From Marx and Lenin to Hegel to Kant

From 1969 to 1974 (yes, fifty years ago!), I was a student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. The primary function of the Ecole was, and still is, to offer training for the Agrégation
(the national post-graduate competitive exam selecting students from ENS and from the general pool of University students for teaching and research careers). In addition to preparing students for the agrégation, the senior faculty at the Ecole offer courses of their own choice, on their own research, and invite prestigious lecturers from other institutions. This is how I took courses from Claude Imbert, the original translator of Frege into French. From Jules Vuillemin, the author, among many other books, of an influential book on Russell as well as books on Kant’s philosophy of the natural sciences and on the posterity of Kant’s critical system in post-Kantian idealism and Heideggerian phenomenology. And from Gilles-Gaston Granger, a specialist of Wittgenstein and the philosophy of language, the first translator of the Tractus into French. Having been a math major in high school, I was especially interested in the philosophy of mathematics and the philosophy of natural sciences and that’s what I focused my exam work on. But for many of us, involved in political activism after 1968, the urgency was social change. Louis Althusser, one of the senior faculty members at the ENS, had recently published Pour Marx (1965), Lire le Capital (1968) and Lénine et la Philosophie (1968). The question of the conceptual framework of Marx’s social, political and economic thought was central to those works and directly related to questions we were exploring in the broader fields of epistemology and the philosophy of science. Another question was: what conception of history governed Marx’s and Lenin’s theses concerning the collapse of capitalism and the victory of socialism and eventually, communism? As is well known, Marx had proclaimed that his conception of history was inspired by Hegelian dialectic, but that his historical materialism had put Hegelian dialectic, which stood on its head (idealism) back on its feet (materialism).
Now, *pace* Marx’s own statements, Althusser’s provocative thesis was that Marx’s true philosophical ancestor was not Hegel, but Spinoza. Unlike Hegel, Spinoza was a naturalist not a spiritualist, unlike Hegel, Spinoza was a causal not a teleological determinist.

I decided to check for myself. After passing the agrégation (where one of the authors on the program was, as it happens, Spinoza), I started thinking about a topic for a PhD thesis which would allow me to explore the respective influencer of Hegel’s and Spinoza’s philosophical systems on Marx’s historical materialism. At the same time, I started in my first teaching position. Together with a group of my ENS classmates who passed the agrégation the same year I did, I left Paris for the North of France to teach philosophy to high school kids in the mining district. That was not a choice on our part, those were the only positions available at the time for freshly minted agrégés and Normaliens. But we fully embraced the challenge. Most of the kids we taught were children of miners (the coal mines in the North of France have all since closed). In many cases, their fathers had prematurely contracted severe lung disease (silicosis) from working in the coal mines or had died young as the result of the disease. In France, all high school students, whatever the track they are in (pre-professional or preparing for a college education), have to take classes in philosophy, on a nationally set program of basic notions but with, in addition, freedom left to the teacher to choose two classical texts in the history of philosophy. I chose to guide those high-school students through Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Theological-Political Tractatus*). They lapped it up. On my spare time, I read Hegel’s *Science of Logic* cover to cover.

I taught high school for four years while working on my dissertation. The title I had concocted for that dissertation was “Lenin and the materialist reversal of Hegelian Dialectic.”
As most of you probably do not know (why should you?), during his exile in Switzerland between the two Russian revolutions, Lenin studied Hegel’s *Science of Logic* and filled several notebooks on it, which were later published. So, I started studying those notebooks, as well as Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. I even learnt Russian to read Lenin’s notebooks in the original language. It’s during those years that I first met Rolf-Peter Horstmann – or rather, we did not meet, but we later established that we had both been present in the same place, namely, at a conference of the International Hegel Society (Hegel-Gesellschaft) in Lisbon in 1976 (my very first Hegel conference. I was 25 and several years away from completing my PhD thesis). That Lisbon conference was held shortly after the Portuguese revolution (the 1974 “révolution des oeillets,” “the carnation revolution”) that toppled the dictatorial regime of Caetano. A high point of the conference was when one of the insurgent officers who had participated in the revolution presented a paper in which he defended the thesis that the Portuguese revolution was Hegelian in spirit. As for me, I presented a paper on Lenin’s notebooks on Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. It wasn’t long after that memorable conference, however, that I realized there was not much good philosophy to be gained from Lenin’s notebooks, and I switched the topic of my dissertation to “Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics. A Study of the Doctrine of Essence in the *Science of Logic*.”

In 1978, I was offered Princeton University’s Jane Eliza Proctor fellowship to be a visiting scholar for the academic year 1979-80. So, it’s in Princeton that I finished my dissertation on Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, meanwhile becoming acquainted with the department: I was a bemused auditor at David Lewis and Saul Kripke’s legendary seminar on “possible worlds,” and I attended Dick Jeffrey’s logic course. I don’t remember getting to know Margaret Wilson at that
time, even though she was then, and had been for years, the unequaled specialist in early modern philosophy as well the only female faculty member in the philosophy department at Princeton. Nor did I at that time get to know Paul Benacerraf, who was away from Princeton for the one and only year of his decades long presence in that department. I did get to know Paul Boghossian as a graduate student. That was the beginning of a long friendship and admiration (at least on my part), continuing to this day.

It’s during that year in Princeton that I was able to read a good deal of the German secondary literature on Hegel and German Idealism – Firestone library beats any library I had experienced or have, to this day, experienced in France, including the libraries of the ENS and the Sorbonne. That’s where, among other discoveries, I read Dieter Henrich’s Hegels Logik der Reflexion, which reinforced my conviction that the concept of “reflection,” inspired from Kant’s concept but also in opposition to Kant’s concept, is central to the Science of Logic and especially its second book, the Logic of Essence on which I was focusing my investigation. In addition, studying other central concepts of the Logic of Essence (e.g., the concept of “ground” and its relation to “conditions,” the concept of contradiction, and the modal concepts: possibility, actuality and necessity) led me to two convictions. First, Althusser and his colleagues had it wrong about the structure of Hegel’s Science of Logic and therefore about just what Marx owed to Hegel. Second, just as important as the downstream relation of Hegel to Marx, which had been the motivation of my reading the Science of Logic in the first place, was the upstream relation of Hegel to Kant.

My reading of Hegel in Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics has been dubbed a “Kantian” reading. It is true that I claimed it is impossible to understand any of the moves Hegel makes,
especially in the Doctrine of Essence, without reading them in light of Kant’s transcendental logic. But I also pointed out, in the conclusion of the PhD thesis [which became my 1981 book *Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics,*] that to take the full measure of Hegel’s transformation of Kant’s conception of thinking and its relation to reality, one needed to move beyond the Doctrine of Essence (which, on Hegel’s own avowal, is the part of the *Science of Logic* which is closest to Kant’s transcendental logic) to the logic of the Concept, in which Hegel’s own “speculative logic” takes its full development, against Kant’s “transcendental logic.” But studying the Doctrine of the Concept was not part of the project of the PhD dissertation. I thought it would be the project for the next book. So, after successfully defending my PhD upon my return from Princeton, I embarked on the next book: a study of Hegel’s “Subjective Logic or Doctrine of the Concept” in the *Science of Logic.* It’s in that third book that Hegel’s view of the identity of thinking and being comes into full view and the meaning of Hegel’s system can be fully assessed.

Now in the Introduction to the Doctrine of the Concept, the first thing you encounter is Hegel’s praise of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of the Categories in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and Hegel’s praise of what he calls Kant’s “highest discovery”: that there are synthetic a priori judgments. However, Hegel’s glowing praise immediately turns into a lamentation: Kant has not been true to his own discovery. Instead, says Hegel, Kant fell back into a psychologistic conception of judgment and ignored the true meaning of his own discovery. I thought I would make a short detour through Kant’s theory of judgment and then come back to

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1 Hegel’s *Science of Logic* is divided into two parts: the “Objective Logic” and the “Subjective Logic, or Doctrine of the Concept.” The “Objective Logic” has two books: Book 1, “Being”, Book 2, “The Doctrine of Essence.” It is in Book 2 that “Reflection” appears, clearly influenced by Kant’s notion of “reflection” but also departing from it.
Hegel, better equipped to understand what exactly was the nature of Hegel’s break away from Kant, how Hegel justified the break, and how this might or might not help clarify Marx’s relation to Hegel.

The detour turned out not to be short at all, as I will explain in a moment. But first I want to say one last word about the fate of Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics. It was published in French in 1981. Two decades later, in 2003, CUP suggested that the book be translated into English. After some hesitation, I accepted CUP’s generous offer but asked that two chapters be added, both stemming from papers I had written more than a decade after the original PhD. One of the chapters was developed from a paper I presented at the wonderful conference organized by Sally Sedgwick at Dartmouth in 1995. The conference proceedings became the volume edited by Sally: The Reception of Kant’s Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling and Hegel (Cambridge, 2000). The other chapter was developed from a presentation on Hegel’s theory of judgment I gave in France just before accepting Princeton’s offer to join the philosophy department. Both chapters were thus written after I had written my Kant and the Capacity to Judge. I had a much better sense than I had at the time of writing the first four chapters, of where and why Hegel broke away from what he calls Kant’s “subjective idealism” and developed, against Kant, his own view of the identity of thinking and being or what he calls his “absolute idealism.” After being translated into English with some revisions and those two added chapters (which I would now strongly recommend to read before the first four chapters) the book was translated back from English into a second French edition. So, the writing of the book crossed the ocean several times.
I have continued to think about Hegel. But after the first few years following my PhD, where I thought I would go on and write on Hegel’s Subjective Logic and indeed, on the whole *Science of Logic*, Kant has been more central to my philosophical concerns. That’s the next part of my story. After Hegel on thinking, being, and the dialectical method, Kant on judgment or more precisely, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*.

2- Kant

After defending my PhD dissertation on Hegel upon my return from Princeton, for two years I was a lecturer at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Then I was offered a position as an assistant professor at the Université de Franche-Comté; and in 1985, as a Maître de Conferences – which at that time was roughly the equivalent of an associate professor -- at the Université de Clermont-Ferrand, where I stayed for eight wonderful years. It is during my time at Besançon and then Clermont, from 1983 to 1991, that I wrote what became the book *Kant et le Pouvoir de Juger*, published in French in 1993 and, in an expanded English translation in 1998, as *Kant and the Capacity to Judge. Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason*.

I had not planned to spend that much time on Kant. I thought I would write an introductory chapter on Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, figure out what was Hegel’s beef with Kant, and move on to Hegel’s “Subjective Logic or Doctrine of the Concept.” Well, that’s not what happened. I plunged into the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories: the so-called A edition (1781), and the B edition (1787). And in the B edition, I came upon the title of section 19: “The logical form of all judgments consists in the unity of the apperception of the
concepts contained therein.” And I asked myself: but what is the logical form of a judgment, for Kant? The question is rather important because Kant claims to establish his table of the “categories” or the a priori concepts of the understanding under which all objects of cognition fall (or so Kant argues) – he plans to establish that table according to the “leading thread,” namely in exact parallel to, a table of elementary logical forms, or functions, of judgment. So, if we do not understand what a logical form, or function, of judgment is for Kant, then we cannot understand the “leading thread,” nor can we understand Kant’s argument in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories. Nor can we understand (I maintain) the next Chapter of the *Critique*, in which Kant claims to provide proofs of a set of priori principles that are supposed to result from the application of a prior concepts of the understanding to the objects of experience. Nor can we understand the next part (the Transcendental Dialectic), in which Kant explains the illusions human reason is prone to when it ignores the limitation of the categories to objects given to our sensibility or receptive capacity, thus leading to the errors of rationalist metaphysics when it misapplies the categories. If you miss the first fold, you’re done: you’ll miss every following fold as well.

I obviously cannot summarize the argument of a four hundred pages book (even longer in its original typescript). I just want to point out, without developing them, two important systematic results that follow from considering, as Kant recommends we should do, the nature and the role of the logical forms of judgment in cognition as a guide to understanding the role of the categories.

And first, a preliminary caveat: the logical forms of judgment under consideration are modelled on traditional Aristotelian logic, reinterpreted by the early modern logic of ideas and
limited to its most elementary core: the subordination of concepts in categorical judgments. In a judgment of the form ‘S is P’, the subject-concept falls under the predicate-concept and thereby, every (or some, or one) of the objects X falling under the subject-concept falls under the predicate concept. It is not a propositional logic or a first-order quantificational logic in our sense. It is supposed to capture the ways in which an understanding such as ours is able to sift through the information it receives through sensibility and to recognize that individual objects fall under concepts, themselves combined in judgments, themselves concatenated in inferential patterns, thus generating the systematic unity of knowledge.

And now, here are the two promised systematic results.

The first concerns the role of reflection in the first Critique. Kant notoriously introduces, in the third Critique, the Critique of the Power of Judgment, a distinction between the judgments he calls “determining” and those he calls “reflecting.” In the first, the power of judgment functions, as it were, “top down”: having general concepts and looking for objects that fall under those concepts. In the second, the power of judgment functions “bottom up”: from intuiting individual objects to forming general concepts under which the objects might fall. The first Critique focuses on determining judgments: from categories to objects. The third Critique focuses on reflecting judgments: from particular objects to concepts. Now, examining in the first Critique, the role of logical functions of judgments as the leading thread to the categories, made salient the implicit role of reflecting judgment (reflecting objects under concepts) even in the first Critique and thus made salient the unity between the arguments of the first and third Critique. That claim generated a good deal of excitement. There is still a great deal to explore in
that direction. Hannah Ginsborg’s work and especially her book *The Normativity of Nature*, has been, for me and for many others, a tremendous source of further thinking on these issues.

The second systematic result is the role of imagination, explicit and prominent in Kant’s argument in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories and in his argument for the System of Principles of the first *Critique*. The whole third part of my book, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, was devoted to the way in which the effort to reflect under concepts combined in logical forms of judgment captures, as it were, the exercise of the imagination. I argued that it is in light of that role that one can understand, in turn, the determinative, top-down, direction of judging and therefore the role of the categories.

I submitted *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* as my Thèse pour le Doctorat d’Etat in October 1991 and defended it in January 1992 in front of a jury (a committee) of five distinguished academic scholars. The “Grand Amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne” was packed. The defense lasted six hours. It was an intense discussion and a lot of fun. After the defense, I returned to Clermont and I planned to apply to a full professorship as soon as one became available.

But in the meantime, something else happened. On a sunny afternoon in Clermont-Ferrand, I received a phone call. “Bonjour, vous ne me connaissez pas. Je m’appelle Paul Benacerraf.” “Good afternoon. You do not know me. My name is Paul Benacerraf.” Paul was calling to offer me a position at Princeton.

For half a second I thought it was a joke. But the doubt lasted for just half a second. The details were real enough. A visiting associate professorship, followed by an associate professorship without tenure for three years, followed, if all went well, by being put up for tenure with promotion to a full professorship. Princeton was taking a gamble on me, just as I
would be taking a gamble by accepting what was offered. After discussing with colleagues and friends, I accepted the offer. If things did not work out, I had a secure position in France, since I was agrégée, although I might be losing several years of a possible promotion to a full professorship.

To make a long story short: things did work out. I did get tenured and promoted ahead of the allotted time. Princeton proved to be the best possible environment for my work. It had a very strong ancient philosophy program: John Cooper, Sarah Broadie and Alexander Nehamas. Alexander’s vast culture and breadth of interests in addition to his distinguished work in ancient philosophy and his personal generosity, made him, for years to come, an invaluable colleague and friend.

In early modern philosophy, Princeton had Margaret Wilson – fair minded, elegant in all her attitudes and actions, unyieldingly committed to the causes she stood for: the importance of the history of philosophy, the importance of having women in the profession, and on a more personal level and as a very real engagement, the protection of animals and the environment. Margaret was a very reserved person and had a wicked sense of humor. Expressions of excessive emotion were not welcome. We became close friends. Other faculty members I especially enjoyed discussing with were Bas Van Fraassen, Harry Frankfurt, with whom the conversation was constant and with whom I also played music! Dick Moran, with whom I overlapped for only two years before he left for Harvard. But we stayed fast friends and I still learn immensely from my discussions with him. Gideon Rosen, already an example to us all, of exceptional integrity and intelligence. Sean Kelly, with whom I taught a memorable Heidegger seminar. Sarah Buss, Gopal Sreenivasan. The kindness and hospitality of David and Steffi Lewis,
and Dick and Edie Jeffrey, knew no bounds. Last but not least, I enjoyed the generosity and severe mentoring of Paul Benacerraf, who led the department with rigor and the appropriate dose of irony, prefacing his messages to the department before each department meetings with a citation of Chairman Mao’s Little Red Book which always stood on his desk ready to be mined for words of wisdom, proffered tongue in cheek and laced with, again, the appropriate dose of irony.

My first sabbatical from Princeton, in 1995-96, was spent partly in Berlin, where Rolf Horstmann organized a seminar of prominent Kant specialists to discuss Kant and the Capacity to Judge as I labored through the revision of its translation from French to English. That was a terrifying and incredibly formative experience: German professors do not mince words when they disagree with you or find something unclear. But at the end of that year, the translation was ready, and submitted to Princeton University Press. It came out in 1998 and was followed by a wealth of discussions, disagreements, arguments and counter-arguments, to which I owe my next book: Kant on the Human Standpoint, which appeared in 2005. It contains, among many other discussions, some of my discussions with Michael Friedman, which were unsparing and illuminating.

All of this was very joyful. And yet, there was a dark shadow over my time at Princeton. In 1998, Margaret Wilson was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer, which had metastasized to the lungs. She learned at one stroke that she had cancer and that she had only a few months to live. She met the ordeal with her usual grace, steadfastness, and no-nonsense attitude. With her husband, Emmett, she devoted the few months she had left to travelling to far away parts of the world to visit wild animals. I especially remember her wonderful stories about the sea
turtles in the gulf of Mexico and the penguins in Antarctica. But during those precious few months she also completed the collection of essays that appeared posthumously, Ideas and Mechanism. She had been editing the volume until the very last day.

A year or two after we lost Margaret, the department asked me to lead the search to fill a senior position in early modern philosophy. We were very fortunate to be able to convince Dan Garber, the uncontested king at Chicago, to join us. Having Dan as a colleague has been one of the highlights of my final years at Princeton. I remember with special fondness two joint enterprises. The first was undertaken in 2002-2003, when Jerry Schneewind was the Laurence Rockefeller Visiting Professor of Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching at the University Center for Human Values. One of the tasks attached to his honorific professorship, was to organize a conference, and he enrolled Dan and me in that venture. The conference was entitled: “Teaching the New Histories of Philosophy.” Its goal was to take stock of the newly developed awareness, in anglophone history of philosophy, of the importance of understanding philosophers of the past in their own historical context and of taking into account, in analyzing their arguments, the conceptual and logical tools they had at their disposal. This in turn gave new salience to a related question: just what is the role of the history of philosophy in a philosophy department? What is the relation of philosophy to its own history?

The question was raised again when Dan and I organized, in the spring of 2004, a smaller conference entitled “Kant and the Early Moderns.” Dan gets the credit for coming up with the concept of that conference: for each session, a Kant specialist would expound Kant’s view of an early modern figure; and a specialist of said early modern figure would respond, showing how
wrong Kant had been. It was a lot of fun and was followed by the volume developed from the conference: *Kant and the Early Moderns*.

That was 2004. By then, I had accepted an offer from NYU. Before considering this new path of my journey, I want to say a word of the extraordinary group of graduate students I advised over the decade I spent at Princeton: Scott Jenkins, who was in more ways than one a pioneer, writing at Princeton a dissertation on “Self-Consciousness and Agency in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit.*” David Martin, who planned to write on Fichte, but sadly, had to leave the program for health reasons. Jasper Reid, who wrote a dissertation on early modern immaterialism, focusing especially on the Cambridge Platonists and, at a time where not that many scholars thought about the importance of women in early modern philosophy, had a special interest in and fondness for Anne Conway. Anja Jauernig, who needs no presentation, especially after the recent publication of her new book, *The World according to Kant*. Nick Stang, who, the very first time I met him, at the welcome party for new graduate students in the “tower room” of the Princeton philosophy department, announced, in his usual resolute tone, that he wanted to work on Kant’s theory of modality. He certainly did that, with great success, witness his 2016 *Kant’s Modal Metaphysics*. Also Catherine Diehl, a student in the comp.lit department who wrote a dissertation on intensive magnitudes in Leibniz and Kant and then went on to obtain a second PhD at the Humboldt University in Berlin under the supervision of Tobias Rosefeldt, in contemporary analytic metaphysics. I also had remarkable visiting students, among whom Dina Emundts, working on what was to become her dissertation of the Opus Postumum, later published by De Gruyter; and Stefanie Grüne, whose dissertation

During my final few years at Princeton, I had started teaching courses outside the fields of classical German philosophy and recent continental philosophy, which had been my main assignments when I first arrived at Princeton. In addition to those assignments, I taught junior and senior seminars on topics spanning the history of philosophy and contemporary analytic philosophy, especially on a topic on which I had become aware of a striking convergence and contrast between Kant’s views and those of contemporary analytic philosophers of language and mind such as Gareth Evans, John McDowell, Quassim Cassam, John Perry, Sydney Shoemaker, Tyler Burge, Christopher Peacocke and Richard Moran: the topic of self-consciousness, the unity of consciousness, rationality, and their respective relation to our use of the first person pronoun and what Dick calls “first-person authority.” Around these questions, I started writing topic-oriented rather than author-oriented papers on those issues. This occupied the bulk of the next phase of my work, to which I now turn.

### 3. Self-Consciousness and the First Person

Going back to discussions around *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* and *Kant on the Human Standpoint*, it was clear that I needed to say more about what Kant meant by “transcendental unity of apperception” and the role of the first-person pronoun ‘I’ in the proposition “I think.” The turning point for me was reading Quassim Cassam’s 1997 book, *Self and World*, on the occasion of my visit to Oxford in the fall of 2000 during a sabbatical leave from Princeton. Cassam’s book mounts a tightly argued challenge to Kant’s claim that “consciousness of oneself
as subject” is not and cannot be (according to Kant) consciousness of oneself as an object. What Kant means by “consciousness of oneself as subject” is the specific kind of self-consciousness expressed in the proposition ‘I think.’ That self-consciousness, as I understand it, is the consciousness of being engaged in an ongoing act of thinking one takes to be one’s own.

What Kant means by “consciousness of oneself as an object,” on the other hand, is the introspective consciousness the thinker has of the sequence of mental states in her own mind. It can be a sequence of episodes of thinking – “I thought it was raining and now I realize it is not” – or of perceptual states – “A moment ago I saw my neighbor cross the street and now I hear the bell ring” – or a sequence of perceptual states, episodes of thinking and emotional states – “I see my beloved appear at the door then I realize he will be staying for a while then I have a surge of joy” – and so on. In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant defends the view that being conscious of such sequences as determine sequences (such that I am able to locate each episode in time), depends on the consciousness of the objective sequence of states in bodies outside me, among which the states of my own body. In contrast, consciousness of oneself in the act of thinking, Kant claims, is not the consciousness of such a sequence and so, not consciousness of oneself as an object in the world. In thinking, one’s attention is directed at what one is thinking about (a state of affairs in the world, the steps of a proof, and so on). It is not directed at one’s own mental states, much less at one’s own body. And yet, as a background humming, as it were, accompanying our object-directed consciousness (consciousness of the abstract or concrete objects I am thinking about), there is an implicit consciousness of being, oneself, thinking about those objects at which one’s attention is directed.
Against Kant, Cassam maintained that “intuitive awareness of oneself as an object, indeed a physical object, is a necessary condition of self-consciousness” (SW p. 25). His thesis is closely related to the position defended by Gareth Evans in *The Varieties of Reference*, according to which “Our ‘I-Ideas’ are Ideas of bearers of physical no less than mental properties” (VR, p. 224), even when ‘I’ is used in the self-ascription of mental properties. Cassam notes that his own position is even closer to the position defended by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*, according to which there is no self-consciousness whatsoever, including self-consciousness of the Cartesian “Cogito, sum” variety, without consciousness of one’s own body (*Phen.Perc.*, II, 1: “Le Cogito.”) [NB there are many questions I am leaving out here, most centrally: just what does each of those thinkers mean by self-consciousness, “I-thought”, “awareness of oneself,” and so on? Here I am just trying to lay out the kinds of questions that were raised from a variety of standpoints and methodologies, all in the vicinity of my own interrogation about unity of consciousness, self-consciousness, and “I think” for Kant].

As Chris Peacocke notes in his 2016 book *The Mirror of the World*, it is a fascinating fact that, on the issue of self-consciousness and self-reference, one finds material for a rich dialogue between traditions that otherwise have tended to rarely cross paths. Beyond the differences in methods, there is undeniably a convergence of questions and insofar as there are disagreements in the responses to those questions, the lines of discord span the different traditions and methods commonly called “continental” and “analytic” philosophy. So, for instance, I suggest you may find Merleau-Ponty, Cassam, Ginsborg, Evans, on one side; and you may find Kant, Burge (I’m thinking of his extraordinary paper, “Reason and the First Person”),
Peacocke (*The Mirror of the World*) but also many chapters on self-reference and the first-person pronoun in earlier work), and myself (in the Kant books and in my discussion of Cassam’s view) on the other. That was a reason for me to look more closely into the matter. And of course, overarching all this is the question introduced by Lichtenberg and taken up by Wittgenstein and Anscombe: is the first-person pronoun a referring expression at all?

Now, unlike contemporary discussions, Kant’s discussion of ‘I’ in ‘I think’ is not conducted in the context of a theory of reference or self-reference. Rather, it is conducted in the context of a discussion of the forms of rational thinking and the way those forms condition our capacity to cognize independently existing objects and develop knowledge of those objects. In that regard, I claim that Kant has a descendant who is at least as important as are proponents of recent theories of reference and self-reference. That descendant is Sigmund Freud and his characterization of what he calls “the ego,” “das Ich.” That claim has, unsurprisingly, caused many eyebrows to be raised, at worst in horror or at best in astonishment. But the fact is, in his 1923 essay, *The Ego and the Id*, Freud defines what he calls “ego” as an “organization of mental processes,” governed by the reality principle and elementary logical rules. This can be read, I submit, as a naturalized version of Kant’s “transcendental unity of apperception” or perhaps rather, the “empirical unity of apperception” which, Kant says, results from the former under given empirical conditions. Here I mean the adjective “naturalized” in a very minimal sense. What I mean is that Freud opens a path to accounting for the human mind’s rational capacities by appealing to the developmental history of individuals belonging exclusively to the natural world (and social worlds that develop within the natural world) rather than to an otherworldly realm of pure intelligences. Kant, in contrast, took the appeal to a purely intelligible world in
which we exist as pure intelligences, to be required as a condition for explaining the irreducibility of our rational, normative capacities to the causal order of nature.

In 2006-2007, I was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin. I used that year to draft several papers connecting the work I had begun to do on three related areas: 1) the analysis of the first-person concept and pronoun in contemporary philosophy of language and mind, 2) Kant’s transcendental philosophy, and 3) Freud’s metapsychology. The papers were well received, which made me hopeful that I would soon be in a position to develop a book length study, relying on those related but very different methods to address the question of our uses of the first-person pronoun. But there was one more hurdle to navigate. I had, until then, mostly focused my analysis of Kant’s ‘I think’ on the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories and on Kant’s discussion of personal identity in the “third paralogism of pure reason,” in the Transcendental Dialectic. But I had yet to take into consideration the whole chapter on the Paralogisms, where Kant discusses the metaphysics of the soul defended by German rationalist schools of metaphysics. That whole chapter (not just the third Paralogism) is relevant to a discussion of Kant’s distinction between consciousness of oneself “as subject” and consciousness of oneself “as an object.”

As it turned out, this was the hardest part of the book to write. Kant’s text, in the Paralogisms, is fiendishly difficult. I was greatly helped, in my struggle with it, by Karl Ameriks’s pioneering book, Kant’s Theory of Mind. But it took several years and two more leaves, supported by the American Academy in Berlin and the National Humanities Center in North Carolina, before my analysis of Kant’s ‘I think’ in the Transcendental Deduction and in the Paralogisms of Pure Reason were developed to my satisfaction and became the second part of
the book that appeared in 2017: *I, Me, Mine. Back to Kant, and Back again*. This being Kant and this being philosophy, like the rest of the book this central part has elicited a good deal of discussions and objections, as it should. The discussions continue (as exemplified in both Hannah’s and Pat’s talks today, for which I am grateful).

The whole book owes an enormous amount to the conditions NYU offered me to develop my work, and to many graduate students I have worked with while at NYU. Karl Schafer, who developed a dissertation on perception and emotion in Hume and Kant; Colin Marshall on Kant’s metaphysics of the self; Hsueh Qu and Jonny Cottrell, for whom I was serving on committees chaired by Don on Hume’s epistemology and philosophy of mind; Nick Riggle, on aesthetic experience and the self; Chris Prodoehl, on “aesthetic ideation and the artistic mind.” Chris was also my research assistant for both the 2017 *I, Me, Mine. Back to Kant and Back Again*; and for the 2019 *The First Person in Cognition and Morality* (my Spinoza Lectures at the University of Amsterdam). Colin had been my assistant for the second Kant book, which would be a much lesser book without his vigilant attention to detail. And David Martin, at Princeton, was my research assistant for the first Kant book. I have been fortunate to work with such remarkable graduate students. I also want to mention, among the visitors from abroad, Marilia-Espirito Santo and Luciano Codato, from Brazil. also from Brazil, who came a few years later as a visiting fellow. Luciano was working on Kant’s theory of judgment in the first *Critique* and he took on the mammoth initiative to supervise the translation of *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* (from its original French version: *Kant et le Pouvoir de Juger*) into Portuguese.

I was also tremendously helped by a number of events organized at NYU. For lack of time, I will only name a few and not go into any details. The very first conference on Issues in Modern
Philosophy, Don, John and I organized, in the fall of 2004, was on “Self-consciousness and personal identity.” Shortly after, Don and I ran a version of the mind and language seminar that was relating the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy, on the theme of self-consciousness and the first person. I must also mention the Columbia/NYU seminar Chris Peacocke and I ran (in 2008?), on (take a deep breath) “Consciousness, perception, intentionality, and action. Kant and contemporary philosophy.”

Equally inspiring were the events organized by Dale Jamieson in the context of the environmental studies program and the animal initiative at NYU. For instance, a panel Chris Korsgaard on Kant on duties to animals, several years before the publication of Chris’s 2018 book *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to Other Animals*. The panel include Tom Nagel, Dale Jamieson and myself with Chris responding. Another eye-opening event was the workshop on “Animals in Anthropology” in which Dale had asked me to comment on a paper by the well-known French anthropologist, Philippe Descola: “All Kinds of Humans, All Kinds of Animals.”

Back to *I, Me, Mine, Back to Kant and Back Again*. The central part, on Kant, is the one I am most satisfied with. The two book-ends – Part 1, on contemporary analyses of the first person; and Part 3, on Freud on the first person – less so. I need a more systematic understanding of Wittgenstein’s analysis of ‘I,’ from the *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*. And I need a better orientation into the intricacies of Freud’s view of the mind. On the latter, when preparing the book I taught several seminars on Freud. In the first iteration, Sam Scheffler and David Velleman kindly accepted to discuss a chapter of their own published work. We discussed chapter 5 of Sam’s 1991 book, *Human Morality*: “Reason, Psychology, and the Authority of Morality.” That chapter remains, for me, a model of its kind. We also discussed a
chapter 6 of David’s 2006 book, *Self to Self*, “A rational super-ego,” which itself takes its inspiration from Sam’s discussion. In the third iteration of the seminar (which I had entitled: “Consciousness and what is unconscious in Kant and Freud”) I greatly benefitted from the presence of Dave Chalmers and, for the part on Freud, of Claudia Passos. The seminar was followed by a workshop in which we discussed the work of two neuroscientists who are also psychoanalysts: Mark Solms, from the University of Cape Town; and Cristina Alberini, our own colleague at NYU, where she is professor of neural science and directs a research lab on the molecular mechanisms of long term memory. She has edited a book on “Memory Reconsolidation” in which she contributed two chapters, one on the biology of memory reconsolidation. And the other (the co-authored Chapter 14) is entitled “Memory reconsolidation, trace reassociation, and the Freudian unconscious.” She gave us a fascinating presentation in the workshop. Also notable was the contribution of Paolo Pecere, who was moderating the final round table between Mark Solms, Cristina Alberini, and their commentators – Susanna Siegel, of Harvard, and Mathieu Arminjon, a historian of science from the University of Geneva. Professor Pecere’s most recent book is *Soul, Mind and Brain: from Descartes to Cognitive Science. A Critical History*, in which he has devoted a chapter to the 19th century school of “Physiological Kantianism.” Paolo acknowledges, in that book, his debt to Gary Hatfield’s 1990 MIT book: *The Natural and the Normative. Theories of Spatial Perception from Kant to Helmholtz*. I concur with Pecere in my admiration for Gary’s book.

Which gets me to the title of this conference: “Nature, Mind, Freedom.” As someone who has spent decades thinking about Kant’s philosophy, you might think that the proper order in the title of a conference related to my work, would be: “Mind, Nature, Freedom.” From the
formal features of the mind to the lawlike structure of nature to the conceptual space left for
metaphysical freedom by Kant’s distinction between the natural, merely phenomenal world,
and the noumenal world of self-determining, pure intelligences. The idea behind the reverse
order: from nature to mind to freedom is related to what motivated my exploration of the path
from Kant to Freud: the effort to give its full due to Kant’s conception of the normative
capacities of our minds, both in cognition and in agency, including the universalist ambitions of
Kant’s characterization of the highest principle of morality – while considering ourselves as
belonging to no other world than the world of empirical objects, among which human beings,
organized in human societies. The trickiest part, of course, is reformulating the concept of
freedom. My suggestion is that we also find resources in Freud for such a reformulation. My
discussions with Allen Wood have helped me get a clearer view of the complexities of both
Kant’s and Freud’s view. I look forward to continuing those discussions.

Lo and behold, this takes me back to themes from the Hegel of my youth. For the concept
of freedom – metaphysical freedom, social/political freedom, personal freedom -- is the central
concept of Hegel’s system. I have voiced earlier in this presentation my skepticism about
Hegel’s presentation of the development of Being as teleologically oriented toward the
realization of freedom. My skepticism still holds and motivates focusing on Kant’s legacy in the
direction of Helmholtz and Freud rather than Schelling and Hegel. But I am truly grateful for
the opportunity to revisit Hegel’s metaphysics, philosophy of history and social philosophy with
two of the talented graduate students whose dissertation I am currently advising: Caroline
Bowman is writing on Hegel’s concept of social freedom; and Daniel Brinkerhoff Young, under
the primary supervision of Daniel Viehoff, is writing on Marx’s concept of alienation, looking for
its sources in Hegel’s political philosophy and Kant’s practical philosophy and analyzing its influence on contemporary liberation movements. I am also fortunate to work with Banafsheh Beizaei on Kant’s distinction between appearances and things in themselves, serving on the dissertation committee chaired by Anja Jauernig. And to work with Sophie Côte on the role of relations to others in the constitution of the self, serving on the committee chaired by David Velleman.

Thank you for your patience in listening to my story. I wish I had general lessons to offer. But I don’t. One of the beauties of a life in philosophy is that, while being all about sharing thoughts and arguments with others, not allowing others to hold on to unjustified ideas and not being allowed by them to hold on to one’s own, unjustified ideas – despite all that, every path is singular, every philosophical journey is singular. Moreover, I am painfully aware that my generation is a privileged one, in which we were allowed to err, as I did, and take our time to come to the formulation of questions we could hold on to and explore with the philosophical tools we only gradually acquired. Such a path is much more difficult today, for reasons both internal and external to philosophy. So, what I would recommend to the generation of young philosophers can be summarized in a few all too general rules: try to work on questions you truly believe are important, not questions that are the safe fad of the day. Don’t strategize too much. Never give up. And to borrow my dear friend Harry Frankfurt’s words concluding the preface to the volume *Necessity, Volition and Love*: “keep [your] eye on the ball.”
I hope it gives you a small idea of how many debts I have incurred along the way. Philosophy is like that. There are many different ways of doing philosophy. Many different methods and many different traditions. But one common feature is: if its philosophy, rather than, say, mystic inspiration or an accountant’s calculation, you don’t do it alone. You are always talking to others, and they’d better respond. You won’t leave them alone with their dumb ideas, and they won’t leave you alone with your dumb ideas. That’s a pretty good deal.

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