

Logical form and rational norms in Kant and the Tractatus

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Suppose I believe that MacBeth is ambitious, and that if he is ambitious, then he is cunning. If I nevertheless believe that MacBeth is not cunning, then within certain limits, I am *rationaly at fault* for believing logically incompatible propositions. But if I am at fault, then I must be able to recognize that such belief is defective—I must be *competent* with *norms that forbid logically incompatible beliefs*. In virtue of what do I have such competence?

The answer I give stands in the influential tradition of what I call “logical essentialism.” Essentialism claims grasping the logical form of a proposition is essential to thinking that proposition. Thus inasmuch as logical form reveals logical incompatibilities, competence with logical norms comes with the capacity to think. My essentialism differs from that of its main exponents, Kant and the Tractarian Wittgenstein, in rejecting the assumption that logical form reveals incompatibilities because it *reflects internal structural features of propositions* that *explain* those incompatibilities.

To explain competence under this assumption, Kant and the *Tractatus* presume that in thinking a proposition, we have some sort of *knowledge of logical form*. Such knowledge, however, is as vexing as logical competence itself. Because such knowledge is not explained, this answer begs the question of logical competence.

This problem manifests directly in Kant’s explanation of logical form. Logical form derives from *rules* by which we must join representations in judgment. These rules determine which judgments are incompatible. Because in judging we *appeal* to these rules, Kant appears able to explain competence with logical norms: I am aware, within certain limits, of what a rule permits when I appeal to it. But this requires knowledge of the rules to which one appeals in judgment, and the nature of such knowledge is as vexing as that of logical competence.

On one level, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* offers a different viewpoint. Grasping logical form is not *a step one takes* in order to think. Thinking itself *is* grasping logical form, for a proposition has logical form insofar as it facilitates our picturing how the world might be. So the *Tractatus* is an advance from Kant, for one needs no knowledge in order to grasp logical form. From the perspective the *Tractatus* affords, logical competence needs no explanation. But what the *Tractatus* obviates from theory it assumes in method, for in order to achieve that perspective, we must discern what has logical form from what lacks it (nonsense). This unexplained capacity for discernment is similar in kind to Kant’s knowledge of rules, and suffers from similar problems.

The view I advocate eliminates *any* explanatory role for logical form. Logical form is not an internal feature of propositions that accounts for logical incompatibilities. Instead, logical form *regiments* relationships of *rational compatibility* among propositions: we indicate that, and how, some thoughts are incompatible by assigning them a certain logical form. But to say these relationships of compatibility need explanation is a mistake, since that presumes one can ask what makes a reason a reason. Logical competence is then easily explained, for to give thoughts logical form just is to declare their compatibility conditions. The resultant view is, however, still essentialist, since grasp of logical form *is* required for thought, but only insofar as assigning compatibility relationships is an essential part of thinking.