Autonomy and Idealism in and after Kant

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Regardless of one’s particular philosophical interests and convictions, it is evident that the notion of autonomy is an important one. However, agreement about the nature of autonomy and about what it requires has proven elusive in contemporary discussions. In *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy* Karl Ameriks addresses this impasse by going back to the historical roots of this notion in Kant and arguing that many contemporary conceptions of autonomy are based on misunderstandings of Kant’s position, misunderstandings that first arose in his immediate successors, Reinhold, Fichte, and Hegel. However, Ameriks does not aim merely to set the historical record straight; he wants to suggest that Kant’s actual position on autonomy is much more attractive philosophically than either what he refers to as “pure Kantian” conceptions (such as those developed by Rawls and his students, who have “purified” Kant’s position by extracting what they take to be its essential core from extraneous historical details that contaminate it) or positions that are similar in basic respects to those of Rorty, Taylor, Larmore, and other post-Kantians. That Ameriks is able to combine remarkable sensitivity toward an extremely broad range of obscure texts with striking clarity and philosophical sophistication in evaluating the positions and arguments laid bare by his exegetical analyses makes his book an extraordinarily rich contribution to our contemporary philosophical landscape.

I begin my discussion by presenting Ameriks’s interpretation of Kant as it contrasts with other familiar interpretations. I then portray his interpretation of how Reinhold, Fichte, and Hegel reacted to Kant as well as his critical evaluation of these reactions. Finally, I discuss three controversial issues that

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1 Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. All quotations from this work will be cited according to the relevant page number in parentheses.

2 At times, Ameriks suggests merely that he is “aiming primarily at simply making room for more of a dialectical balance in our own era, so that the feverish interest in autonomy in the reigning liberal consensus—as well as the suspicion of this notion in other camps—does not block out the full range of options that deserve to be heard” (p. 269).
are raised by Ameriks’s discussion concerning i) what is essential to Kant’s philosophy, ii) autonomy, and iii) idealism.

I. Ameriks’s “Modest” Kant

Since Ameriks aims to defend Kant against post-Kantians and “pure Kantians” alike, it is crucial that he be clear up front about what he takes Kant’s position to be. His main strategy is to identify a “modest” Kantian position by jettisoning Kant’s more extravagant and “unnecessary” remarks, in the hope that it can appear much more attractive when compared to that of his more “radical” followers and successors. Ameriks’s “modest” Kant can be displayed in its barest essentials by means of a four-fold framework. (1) The fundamental assumption of Kant’s theoretical philosophy is neither self-consciousness nor private sense data nor even subjective representations to which we have immediate or privileged access, but rather experience (“Erfahrung”), understood as putatively warranted judgments (whether true or not). (2) Kant develops a series of transcendental arguments showing that experience is possible only if fundamental principles involving space, time, and the categories (e.g., the Analogies of Experience) are true. (3) However, Kant argues that since these principles hold only for appearances, not things in themselves, they require a distinctive metaphysical position called Transcendental Idealism. (4) Finally, one crucial implication of Transcendental Idealism is that it makes room for the possibility of autonomy, since only its distinction between phenomena (or appearances) and noumena (or things in themselves) can restrict the scope of determinism to the phenomenal world and thereby allow for the possibility of autonomy and hence morality in the noumenal realm.

This four-fold structure can also be used to illustrate how Ameriks’s interpretation of Kant diverges from other well-known interpretations. Since Kant starts with the fact that we have experience and then tries to establish non-trivial principles as following from this assumption, his procedure is regressive rather than progressive. As a result, Ameriks holds (e.g., contrary to Strawson and Henrich) that Kant’s primary goal is not to refute a (Cartesian or Humean) skeptic who would cast doubt on our knowledge of the external world. Ameriks also takes this starting point to entail that Kant’s position is unlike both (Berkeley’s and van Cleve’s) phenomenalism and the representationalist position Rorty attributes to him. Though Kant does talk of representations and sometimes suggests that appearances are “nothing more than representations,” his arguments hinge, according to Ameriks, on shared judgments of a particular kind, namely those that have propositional structure and that have justification backing them up.

Even though Ameriks does not have space in such a comprehensive study to explain the details of Kant’s particular transcendental arguments, he never-
theless contends that “the heart of Kant’s achievement” is that he opens up for philosophy the crucial role of providing “a systematic articulation of the sphere of conceptual frameworks that mediate between the extremely informal [common sensical] and the highly formal [scientific] levels of judgment within our complex objective picture of the world” (p. 60). That is, philosophy ought not attempt to reduce the manifest image of common sense to the scientific image of the exact sciences (e.g., scientism) or to refine a specifically philosophical ontology that would compete with scientific entities (as repeatedly occurred in classical modern systematic metaphysics, such as Leibniz’s monadology). Nor should it drop the demand that we be able to form a single, coherent set of justified beliefs about the world (due to skepticism). Rather, according to Ameriks, philosophy can “bridge the extremes of common and scientific judgments, while also implying similar, though looser structures within each of the spheres of common and scientific judgments themselves” (ibid.). While Ameriks retains a central role for philosophy both between and within the domains of the manifest and scientific image, he does not require that philosophy’s concepts and principles be a priori in any strong sense, since Kant may have gone “overboard” in maintaining the “unrevisability and extraordinary range of content of his particular transcendental claims” (ibid.). Instead, Ameriks repeatedly expresses sympathy with “a more flexible and historical notion of ‘the a priori’… [which requires only] some kind of formal constraints for knowledge” (p. 59), a view explicitly developed in recent years by Michael Friedman and Philip Kitcher.

Although Ameriks devotes relatively little direct attention in this book to explaining either the meaning or the arguments that Kant provides for Transcendental Idealism, what is most distinctive about his interpretation is his distinction between “short” and “long” arguments to idealism.3 “Short” arguments are based solely on the general notion of representation or consciousness (or on the distinction between activity and passivity), as opposed to “long” arguments, which rely on Kant’s specific notion of human spatio-temporal forms of intuition (as contrasted with discursive forms of thinking objects, i.e., categories). As we shall see, this distinction and the different versions of idealism that follow from the various arguments it allows provide a guiding thread for much of Ameriks’s discussion of Reinhold, Fichte, and Hegel.

Autonomy is not subject to detailed philosophical analysis of the sort that one might expect in a book bearing this title.4 However, given that Reinhold, Fichte, and Hegel are in broad agreement with Kant’s general position

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4 Ameriks acknowledges this omission in a footnote (p. 4).
on the issue of autonomy—autonomy, rationality, and morality are all intimately related—one can surmise that such an analysis does not comprise Ameriks’s most pressing concern. Still, Ameriks does indicate how his interpretation of Kant’s notion of autonomy differs from that held by most “pure Kantians,” who interpret autonomy non-metaphysically, whether in terms of how we must think of ourselves (namely as deliberating agents that act as if we were free, in the face of what science dictates) or in terms of laws that we construct for ourselves (e.g., by “committing” ourselves to ends or by implicitly or hypothetically agreeing to universal principles) such that no complaint about external coercion could ever arise. By contrast, Ameriks holds that Kant is “committed not to an escape from metaphysics altogether but rather to some fairly substantive but very limited metaphysical claims about our rational essence as practical and theoretical beings” (p. 17).

One of Ameriks’s arguments against such non-metaphysical, “pure Kantian” conceptions is that since the laws of morality are not limited to human beings but rather extend to any rational being whatsoever (including angels and God, should such holy wills exist), the laws cannot stem entirely from a process of consensus formation performed by any particular set of human beings at any given time. The problem of scope is linked, however, to a further objection. If autonomy were based on what human beings in fact choose, or even would choose under idealized circumstances (as stipulated in an “original position”), the strict necessity (or normativity) that is inherent in Kant’s notion of self-legislation would, Ameriks suggests, be sacrificed. To account for strict necessity, one must appeal to something that is “independent not only of spatiotemporal beings (and thus of all humanity) but even of finite persons as such” (p. 13), that is, to what we would naturally describe as metaphysical conditions. Specifically, Ameriks interprets Kant’s practical philosophy as committed to the idea that our essential nature is “sheer rationality” so that moral laws can “come from something ‘in’ us, even if it is not only in us” (p. 14). Finally, while Ameriks stresses, as an interpretive point, that (the Critical) Kant was deeply committed to a metaphysical requirement of absolute (libertarian) freedom, he repeatedly suggests, from his own evaluative standpoint, that “Kant might have been mistaken about the metaphysics that his own ethical theory requires” (p. 19) and that compatibilism represents a more attractive and common-sensical solution to the problem of free will and determinism.

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5 The mere fact that I myself have chosen to act in a certain way—whether or not my decision was based on desires and whether or not I have perfect knowledge of those desires—does not immediately justify that I ought to act in that way, even if it might explain why I might believe that I should act in that way and even be motivated to act in that way.
II. Reinhold, Fichte, and Hegel

Ameriks uses this same four-fold structure in his interpretation and evaluation of the philosophies of Reinhold, Fichte, and Hegel, who, despite their many differences, all “radicalize the notion of autonomy by suggesting a philosophical program that uses the bare notion of human thought as such as a sufficient foundation for determining the basic structures of all meaningful reality” (pp. 267-268). As noted above, Reinhold shares with Kant a basic commitment to autonomy, but he employs very different means to this end. Reinhold’s starting point diverges from Kant’s because he begins with a principle of consciousness, which describes the structure that any conscious state must have and thus applies to a single, generic faculty of representation as such. According to Ameriks, this contrasts with Kant’s starting point, because experience, qua cognition, constitutes only a specific subset of our conscious states, a subset that can be defined only by presupposing “an irreducible plurality of concepts and faculties of mind” (p. 171). Reinhold’s justification for his starting point is that its alleged immediate certainty, lack of ambiguity, and popularity can serve as the foundation for the systematic derivation of all other knowledge, including reflexive knowledge of the process by which this very knowledge is obtained (making his system bounded and unified in a strong sense that Kant occasionally asserts, but never explicitly demonstrates for his own system).

However, Ameriks argues that the idealistic position Reinhold derives from this principle runs into serious difficulties as a result. First, because things in themselves are defined as things that exist independently of consciousness, his principle of consciousness entails that they cannot be represented as such. Second, even if they could somehow be represented, because Reinhold argues for idealism from a generic principle of consciousness, every object of consciousness would have to be ideal, including, absurdly, things in themselves such as God. Kant’s version of idealism is preferable, according to Ameriks, because its distinction between categories and intuitions allows us to represent things in themselves (if only problematically by means of the unschematized categories or from a practical standpoint), even if we cannot have any specific knowledge of them (since we have neither sensible nor intellectual intuition of them and thus no insight into the particular features that individuate them).

Fichte adopts many of Reinhold’s revisions to Kant’s philosophy, but “radicalizes” Reinhold’s position even further by consistently stressing “the primacy of the practical,” which Ameriks interprets in terms of an exclusively moral perspective. Though Fichte shares Reinhold’s interest in start-

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It is a testament to the richness of Ameriks’s book that although he provides a detailed exegetical case for interpreting Fichte’s primacy of the practical in moral terms, he also devotes considerable attention to discussing how Fichte’s reconceptualization of the
ing with a single principle from which all else would follow (and thus accepts Reinhold’s strong demands for certainty, unity, systematicity, and reflexivity), he rejects Reinhold’s characterization of this principle in terms of *theoretical representations*. For starters, Fichte, who was heavily influenced by Schulze’s *Aenesidemus*, does not think that Reinhold actually refutes skepticism from a theoretical standpoint, because he ends up assuming, instead of proving, the causal influence of external objects. However, “what really bothers Fichte about such ‘representationism’ is not the pure theoretical scandal of solipsism, the lack of a sure reply to radical skepticism, but rather the moral emptiness that he sees attached to the position, the lack of meaning that taints images as mere images … within us” (pp. 173-174). For, as part of the empirical causal nexus, they leave no room for our absolute freedom. As a result, Fichte replaces Reinhold’s principle of consciousness, which he describes as a “Tatsache” (fact), with a *Tathandlung*, an activity, or striving, that, by opposing subject to object, is supposed to make possible both theoretical representations and practical freedom.

But what does Fichte’s primacy of the practical mean at this level? It could mean that the theoretical and the practical are “fully equiprimordial” in the sense that there is “no consciousness without conscience” (as Breazeale suggests), but one could also develop it along more radical lines by suggesting that the I is “not originally and fundamentally a cognitive standpoint at all” (as Wood argues). Ameriks finds both suggestions implausible. The former idea neglects the very possibility at issue, namely that there could be moral skeptics who deny the existence of conscience in the first place without obviously relinquishing their status as cognitive beings, and Ameriks rejects the latter idea because it seems to be a prerequisite of acting in concrete ways that we have at least some minimal theoretical knowledge of what our situation in the world is.

It comes as no surprise that the emphasis Fichte places on the practical with regard to both the proper starting point of philosophy and the arguments that build on this starting point, inevitably extends to what follows from them, namely his position on idealism. Under the influence of Jacobi, Fichte rejects things in themselves altogether, thereby eliminating in one fell swoop both the incoherence that Reinhold’s account of things in themselves faces and the threat of skepticism, since no things in themselves exist to which our representations might or might not correspond and since he takes his funda-

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active nature of pure *theoretical* reason in terms of the spontaneity of subjectivity has led contemporary scholars to “follow a much more indirect strategy that exploits a broader notion of the practical” (p. 196, fn. 10). In the course of this discussion as a whole, he treats a broad range of secondary literature by leading scholars such as Dieter Henrich, Manfred Frank, Frederick Neuhouser, Henry Allison, Robert Pippin, Wayne Martin, Daniel Breazeale, Alain Perrinjaquet, Allen Wood, Andrew Brook, Dieter Sturma, Peter Strawson, C.T. Powell, and Patricia Kitcher.
mental starting point to establish with absolute certainty the existence of freedom. In line with this Fichte argues that everything must be ideal, because in the fundamental Tathandlung the I that posits everything else (i.e., the non-I) is itself ideal. However, Ameriks stresses that Fichte’s position is problematic. First, it is unclear exactly how one should understand either i) the I that does the positing of the non-I, or ii) the nature of its positing, since i) the I cannot be any conscious empirical subject (given that the I is supposed to “precede perception” (p. 182)) and ii) positing cannot be understood causally (since the I would then absurdly have to cause itself and would be part of the mechanistic causal order and not free). Second, even if such issues can be sorted out, one can still question Fichte’s claim that the ideality of the I necessarily entails the ideality of what it posits.

Finally, while Kant and Fichte agree about several fundamental roles that practical reason should play in a comprehensive philosophical system (e.g., explaining the basic sources and goals of what is valuable), they disagree, Ameriks contends, about whether practical reason has priority in terms of philosophical method, a disagreement that leads to “the essence, and the essential weakness, of Fichte’s position” (p. 183). While Kant holds that theoretical philosophy must first establish the possibility of morality if morality is not to be an utter illusion, Fichte maintains that one should start with a conception of the self as a moral agent, which both obviates the need to take seriously the possibility that freedom is an illusion, and establishes the existence of the external world. As Ameriks recapitulates: “If one accepts morality as absolute, one already makes a commitment to freedom; one can then argue, as Fichte does, that it is this commitment in turn that properly leads one to ‘posit’ (i.e., seriously intend as actual) the world beyond representations that theoretical philosophy cannot in any case deliver” (p. 192). Ameriks criticizes this position on the Kantian grounds that even if one grants a fundamental or immediate activity (positing or striving), there is no way of being certain that such an activity is absolutely free unless one has previously established that it is not completely determined by causes external to it, something that only theoretical philosophy can achieve (and that Kant can accomplish with Transcendental Idealism). In short, in light of the threat of determinism posed by science, philosophy must provide an explanation of how morality is possible. Yet Kant will argue that morality is possible only if Transcendental Idealism’s distinction between things in themselves and appearances can be maintained. This distinction can, in turn, hold up only if one distinguishes between spatio-temporal forms of intuitions and discursive forms of thought, rather than treating all representations as if they were on a par with each other. Accordingly, several of the most basic issues that separate Kant’s and Fichte’s positions ultimately hinge on whether or not one should accept the radical, methodological primacy of the practical. Since
Ameriks thinks that the primacy of the practical is untenable, he concludes that Kant’s position is ultimately preferable.

Whereas Ameriks focuses on the positive views of Reinhold and Fichte, his discussion of Hegel concerns only Hegel’s criticisms of Kant’s position and arguments, not Hegel’s own positive view. Even if Hegel’s absolute idealism introduces many new developments not present, even in inchoate form, in Reinhold’s and Fichte’s positions, he still proceeds from “a conception of the base, development, boundary, and ultimate goal of philosophy that agrees with Reinhold’s and Fichte’s most fundamental departures from Kant” (p. 340). For the sake of certainty, unity, and systematicity, one must, so Hegel thinks, begin with an absolutely certain starting point, the I (though no longer understood in either representationalist or practical terms), and then derive space, time, and the categories alike with absolute necessity, resulting in an all-encompassing (absolute) idealism. Due to these fundamental similarities, we are already familiar with many of Ameriks’s most fundamental points and with the way that he wants to respond to Hegel’s system. However, Ameriks also discusses several novel issues. For example, he distinguishes between whether Kant’s starting point depends on the conditions that must be met for representations to be mine (the possessive relation of representations to consciousness) or for representations to amount to knowledge (an epistemic relation). He also considers Hegel’s famous objection that Kant’s model of knowledge distorts our depiction of the world by presupposing either active tools (e.g., the categories) or a passive medium (forms of intuition). Ameriks suggests that Kant does not presuppose, but rather argues for the categories and forms of intuition, and that Hegel places excessive weight on a mere analogy between tools or media and knowledge (an analogy Kant nowhere endorses).

Ameriks concludes by presenting and responding to three of Hegel’s famous criticisms of Kantian morality. First, while Ameriks agrees with Hegel that Kant’s commitment to libertarian freedom in the noumenal realm is unjustified, the problem is not the very idea of things in themselves, “an obscure, otherworldly, and unacceptable metaphysics” (p. 310), but rather Kant’s view that autonomy (as rational self-determination) cannot occur in the phenomenal world. Second, Hegel’s charge that Kant’s Categorical Imperative lacks all content is justified if one excludes reference to all empirical matters, but such an exclusion is “manifestly unfair” (p. 313). While Ameriks appreciates Hegel’s emphasis on our social and historical context, he does not think that Hegel has anything more to appeal to in refuting relativism than Kantian considerations about the ultimate value of humanity as an end in itself and as a member of a kingdom of ends. Finally, Ameriks considers in detail Hegel’s charge that Kant cannot account for either moral motivation or motivation by values that fall outside of the normal scope of duty.
(such as particular attachments to individuals and social values). Here Ameriks argues that Kant’s emphasis on respect as an a priori feeling (by means of which the noumenal self influences its phenomenal actions) is compatible with a thoroughly naturalistic moral psychology, since respect need not be considered the sufficient motivation for moral action and can thus be supplemented by other motivating feelings. Thus, Ameriks concludes that Hegel’s most important original criticisms are by no means fatal to Kant’s philosophy.

III. The Essential Kant, Autonomy, and Idealism

This brief summary of just some of the main theses of Ameriks’s discussion provides ample evidence to infer that his interpretation of Kant and several prominent post-Kantians tells an extremely sophisticated and detailed grand narrative of the period, one that is historically focused but still directly relevant to our contemporary philosophical situation (as illustrated by his extensive discussion with secondary literature on the topic). Moreover, there is a great deal in his account that one can agree with wholeheartedly. At the same time, there are a few finer points where there could still be room for clarification of substantive issues or disagreement, even among the sympathetic-minded. A first point concerns his interpretation of the “essential” Kant. While it is understandable that one might want to minimize the content that is essential to Kant’s position so as to reduce the size of the target he presents to his opponents (a desire shared by those he labels “pure” Kantians), one must be mindful not to go too far in this direction. Specifically, while there are convincing historical and philosophical reasons for believing that Kant’s primary intent neither is nor must be to refute the skeptic, the idea that philosophy’s primary task is to mediate between conflicting “scientific” and “manifest” images may not be an essential feature of Kant’s philosophical project (even if it is a significant philosophical option today, representing one salient dimension of Sellars’s important legacy). Moreover, if the notion of the a priori is relativized so that the mediation project has no fixed points, one could lose one’s grip on what is supposed to be distinctively Kantian, rather than, say, Humean (especially if one recalls Hume’s complex attitude in the Treatise toward the stability of different philosophical perspectives that one might adopt on various occasions). For example, it becomes unclear how to understand what a transcendental argument is supposed to be if one can appeal only to the notion of an unspecified “formal” condition of experience. One could still rely on Transcendental Idealism as the ultimate fallback candidate for what is to count as distinctively Kantian, but if one accepts compatibilism in the way that Ameriks does, then Kant’s primary philosophical motivation for a doctrine that immediately strikes many as highly
counter-intuitive has been abandoned, and the danger of having nothing distinctly Kantian on the table looms large.

Though a full treatment of these issues would require lengthier discussion, I would suggest that what is essential to Kant’s theoretical philosophy is the idea that one should attempt to identify necessary and a priori conditions on the possibility of experience, where experience is understood not merely generically as any sort of warranted judgments (e.g., as endorsed by common sense), but rather in a slightly richer, but still relatively uncontroversial sense as warranted judgments about a single, spatio-temporal world. Not only is this suggestion consistent with Kant’s repeated emphasis on the unity of experience (which pertains to the unity that our representations must have in order to belong to a single consciousness and to the content that they represent), but it also makes sense of the structure of some of Kant’s most central arguments. For example, it suggests that the Analogies of Experience attempt to reveal substance, causality, and mutual interaction as necessary and a priori conditions for knowledge of objects belonging to a single temporal world, since the temporal unity of the world presupposes that each state of all enduring objects we could know must be related to the states of every other such object by relations of simultaneity or succession (which is possible, so these arguments contend, only if substances stand in causal relations of mutual interaction). It is perhaps not false to say that such arguments could mediate in some sense between judgments of common sense and scientific claims (since the claims of both common sense and science presuppose a single, temporally unified world). However, the “mediation” model suggests that these arguments provide insight into why apparently contrasting claims about one and the same world could both be true without being reducible to each other, insight I do not find prominent in such arguments. I think it much more illuminating to say that these arguments establish the necessity of substance, causality, and mutual interaction regardless of what kind of experience (e.g., scientific or common sense) is at issue, as long as it is experience of a single spatio-temporal world. That would reveal just how fundamental to experience these conditions are, which would also support an intuitive sense in which these conditions could be labeled a priori.

Second, concerning the issue of autonomy, while I am not myself tempted by the anti-metaphysical, constructivist position developed so forcefully and eloquently by many “pure” Kantians, one must acknowledge that providing

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7 It is true that Kant does highlight an apparent contrast between certain cosmological claims (e.g., freedom and determinism) and views resolving this conflict as an essential task of philosophy. However, Kant’s resolution of such conflict occurs by distinguishing between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, a move that he does not invoke to resolve the apparent tension that arises when one claims that the world consists of both everyday objects, such as tables and chairs, and the unobservable entities posited by science, such as neutrons, protons, and the like.
explicit arguments against their position that do not beg the question by making hidden metaphysical assumptions is neither a small nor an easy task. Further, even if one could refute the anti-metaphysical, constructivist account of autonomy, one would still be left with the formidable task of developing one’s own metaphysical account. While it may be attractive to move beyond particular empirical subjects (of the sort that Berkeley’s phenomenalism relied on) as too contingent, simply referring to the “sheer rationality” of our nature is not satisfying as an ultimate account. If the autonomous (or, in theoretical contexts, transcendental) self cannot be identified with any particular empirical subject, does that entail that there is a general, non-empirical self that transcends me and all other empirical subjects? If one suggests rather that there is something in us that still transcends our empirical nature, one must wonder how to explain such transcendence without falling back into a Platonic model of having particular empirical subjects somehow participating in eternal, general forms. Further, in the course of responding to this issue, it would be desirable if one could make room for spontaneity in addition to (or as an element of) sheer rationality, since one of the most powerful attractions of autonomy is the idea not merely that any external law would coerce us, but also that we actively legislate it to ourselves. Yet capturing the precise sense in which we are spontaneous in acting autonomously could prove difficult. Constructivists may find that they cannot do so without appealing to the very metaphysical entities they hope to eschew, while metaphysicians face the difficulty of explaining how this kind

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8 Even if one shares Ameriks’s intuitions that without metaphysics such a position will inevitably encounter problems of scope and that it cannot capture the full force of normativity the moral law would have if it were grounded in metaphysical conditions, one must acknowledge that the “pure” Kantians have proven extremely resourceful in devising ever-more sophisticated versions of their view that can appear to counter such doubts. To cite just one example, O’Neill builds a modal (rather than an idealizing or hypothetical) element into her view such that I act autonomously only if the principle I act on is one that a plurality of agents can act on. Since O’Neill focuses on the mere possibility of acting in a certain way rather than on whether we would act in that way under certain conditions, she can seem to take the force out of Ameriks’s objection that the contingency implicitly embedded in construction procedures must weaken the normativity of the moral law. While Ameriks could counter that the modal element in O’Neill’s account is metaphysical, she could respond that such a minimal metaphysical element ought to be uncontroversial, even among “pure Kantians.” (See Onora O’Neill’s Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and William Fitzpatrick’s and my “O’Neill and Korsgaard on the Construction of Normativity,” The Journal of Value Inquiry 36 (2002) 349-367.) Only extended engagement with the various versions of constructivism on offer could, I think, settle this issue.

9 I believe that it is primarily (though not exclusively) the difficulty of this task that made constructivism appealing to many philosophers today, especially to those ethicists who wanted to get on with the business of normative ethics without getting bogged down in the seemingly endless metaphysical debates that Kant himself complained about so bitterly.
of activity, which would seem to require particular individuals, is consistent with the general constraints of rationality.10

Finally, Ameriks’s treatment of the issue of idealism is, I think, especially important. As an interpretive aid that draws attention to the differences between consciousness in general and specific kinds of representations in particular, his distinction between long and short arguments is extremely illuminating. For one, it makes clear how it is possible for Kant that we have the cognitive means to represent things in themselves (e.g., God, freedom, and the immortality of our soul) as things that exist independently of us, even if a different kind of representation (intuitions) is required for us to have knowledge (of things that are not things in themselves but rather “mere” appearances). Further, Reinhold does seem to use a short argument to idealism based solely on consciousness per se (even if consciousness is essentially judgmental in form for him, just as it is for Kant), and if Fichte’s or Hegel’s versions of idealism are not structurally similar, then Ameriks is calling in a targeted way for clarification of the foundation of their views.

However, agreement on these exegetical points does not immediately establish either what kind of argument for idealism might be most appealing at the level of philosophical evaluation or, correspondingly, what brand of idealism can ultimately be supported. As we have seen, the basic contrast Ameriks draws between Kant and his immediate successors stems from whether the ideality of an object is supposed to follow from some feature of intuition or rather from the fact that it is represented by us at all.11 But this general contrast can play out in several different kinds of argument for idealism. Since Ameriks does not specify what particular feature of intuitions is supposed to entail the ideality of the objects they represent, it is not immediately evident why representations other than intuition might not also have that feature. Is ideality supposed to follow from i) the singularity of the objects intuitions refer to, ii) the way in which they refer to their objects immediately, iii) the fact that particular objects can be given to us only by means of them, iv) the fact that we can sensibly represent objects only through them, v) the fact that they grant us conscious access to objects, or vi) the indexical perspective or subjective point of view that they provide toward objects, etc.? While the singularity, immediacy, receptivity, and sen-

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11 Ameriks does not discuss in any detail the possibility that what divides Kant’s and at least Hegel’s (and perhaps also Fichte’s) understandings of idealism is not the distinction between spatio-temporal intuition and generic representation, but rather different understandings of what a “representation” or “idea” is supposed to be. (E.g., Hegel may understand “idea” or “reason” as entities that are much less subjective than even Ameriks’s non-phenomenalist Kant does.)
sual aspects of intuitions are specific to them, the fact that they allow conscious access to objects from an essentially indexical perspective or subjective point of view are not, which, in turn, allows that idealism could follow from features that pertain to representation as such.

In light of this ambiguity, Ameriks’s objections to the post-Kantians’ arguments for idealism can appear to be inconclusive. For example, Reinhold’s argument for idealism asserts that any object we represent must be ideal because the fact that something is being represented by us at all cannot be entirely due to the object itself. Instead, there must be some *subjective form of representation*, some general feature that allows an object to be referred to a subject, one for which we are at least partly responsible. The issues here concern i) how the form of representation modifies the content of the object represented so that this content is *different* from how the object is “in itself” and ii) what justification Reinhold has for thinking that it must be modified in this way. Ameriks holds that “it still seems *possible* that the forms through which we represent things *correspond* precisely to the forms of things in themselves, where ‘in itself’ can mean (as it should, if it is not to become a trivial notion) ‘in its intrinsic character’ and not simply *by definition* ‘not representable’” (p. 132). As a result, he concludes that Reinhold’s argument ultimately rests “on a substantive but not warranted claim that things are modified in character by us simply because we are involved in some action with them” (p. 133).

However, one could respond to this objection by insisting that every representation is not only had by a subject, but also from that particular subject’s perspective or point of view. The idea of a perspective or point of view need not be interpreted as an empty placeholder with no content (a mere “logical I”), but could rather be viewed as necessarily modifying the content of the representations. While one might think here in terms of scientific or practical (i.e., deliberative) standpoints (which different people could share), one might go so far as to make content relative to individuals so that no two individuals would have exactly the same representation of any object. Such a response might also be viewed as fitting in naturally with the Kantian point that human cognitive abilities are limited and hence do not reach to things in themselves. For it can allow that the perspective that is essential to our representations of objects affects the content of these representations and that these perspectives could admit of varying degrees (with the divine perspective representing the highest possible standpoint). Moreover, this kind of argument for idealism is suggestive of a different kind of idealism, namely one that can be characterized as epistemological, methodological, or anti-realist. Granted, this move goes against the metaphysical interpretation of Kant that Ameriks urges, since on his reading Kant is committed to the ontological claim that things in themselves exist independently of us and our representa-
tions of them, even if our only access to them would be through such representations. Yet however much one might agree with his interpretation of Kant, Ameriks has not presented any argument for the necessity of metaphysics and for the incoherence of purely “epistemological” versions of idealism.

Further, post-Kantians could charge that this move also makes available the resources with which to respond to some of Ameriks’s other main objections. For example, interpreters of Fichte’s doctrine of self-positing suggest that the I should be understood not as a thing that acts, but rather as the activity of self-positing itself so that there is no need to invoke a noumenal self for the conscious states that it posits. Ameriks holds that one can address the issue independently of “any invocation of noumenal grounds … [by determining] whether it is true [a] that ‘what does not exist for itself is not an I’ and [b] that this I cannot have any kind of ground outside itself” (p. 254). When considered in this light, he suggests that “both claims [a and b] are mysterious and appear to conflate epistemic and metaphysical issues … [for] it may be true that the conception of any ground that the self actually invokes to explain itself must be part of the self’s epistemic state; but this hardly means that such a ground … could not exist on its own and have an effect on us” (pp. 254-255). However, if Ameriks has no decisive philosophical argument against epistemological idealism, defenders of Fichte could reasonably be opposed to the very idea of a thing that could exist on its own and have causal effects on us. Moreover, a similar issue may be involved in Fichte’s argument for autonomy. When Ameriks objects that this argument fails to account for the possibility that something we are not aware of might cause this activity (rather than it freely positing itself), defenders of Fichte would themselves object that Ameriks’s counter-example presupposes a metaphysical understanding of things in themselves, an understanding that they do not share.

If these reflections are correct, it turns out that the fate of autonomy, with which Ameriks is concerned, ultimately depends on the fate of idealism, since the shape that autonomy can have (in this context) is determined largely by features that distinguish different arguments for and types of idealism. We would all be fortunate if this issue were decided on the contemporary scene by means of clear and compelling arguments. However, the many significant virtues of Ameriks’s treatment of the issue of autonomy in Kant and his successors reveal that there is just as much reason to think that a careful investigation of their views on this topic would be equally promising.12

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