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The Individualist? The autonomy of reason in Kant's philosophy and educational views

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Abstract Immanuel Kant is often viewed by educational theorists as an individualist, who put education on ''an individual track,'' paving the way for political liberal conceptions of education such as that of John Rawls. One can easily find evidence for such a view, in ''Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?',' as well as in his more metaphysical, moral inquiries. However, the place of reason in Kant's philosophy—what I call the ''autonomy of reason''—spells out a negative rather than positive conception of freedom, from which stems a less individualistic or political liberal education than many presume. I cite both well known and lesser known works in the essay to demonstrate that Kant defended universal freedom only as a means towards developing the ''autonomy of reason'', and I consider comparatively the education it entails with that spelled out by Rawls, despite the common conflation of the two.

Keywords Kant · Education · Philosophy · Rawls · Kantianism · Constructivism · Methodology · Epistemology · Public education · State · Liberalism

Introduction

Educational theorists today generally regard Immanuel Kant, if they discuss him at all, as an exemplar of individualistic political and educational movements. Most recently, Kantianism (if not Kant's own work) has been equated with an ''allegiance to the inviolability of the individual'' and a prioritization of personal autonomy (Johnston 2005, p. 210). Kant's enlightened person has been described as one who ''makes use of her own mind *without the direction of others* and who addresses 'in freedom' herself as moral person to a public'' (Masschelein 2004, p. 361). Often such accounts aim to contrast Kant's apparently egocentric methodology and individualistic politics with social constructivist

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views: ''Kant put education on an individualistic track, a track in which education became understood as an interaction between subjects'' rather than as a social process (Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2001, pp. 10–11). To be sure, evidence for this reading exists. ''Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?''' clearly sanctions the individual thinking ''for himself,'' unfettered by the chains of external forces (Kant 1970a). In his metaphysical, moral philosophy, a methodological individualism can be found in the inward-looking categorical imperative, which thinkers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Alisdair MacIntyre have found to be arrogantly—if not harmfully—egocentric (Nietzsche 1993, p. 118; MacIntyre 1967, p. 190).

Yet some political and anthropological scholars also note that much of Kant's later work grapples more critically with the nature of human freedom and the significance of one's being within society than might be immediately evident (Louden 2000; Munzel 1999). It follows even from ''What is Enlightenment?'' that Kant saw little value in *absolute* individual freedom. Rather, human freedom, even in the more metaphysical texts, can be viewed as a *prerequisite* of an epistemology I call here the ''autonomy of reason.'' In the theory of knowledge recognized by John Rawls and Onora O'Neill among others as Kantian constructivism, Kant argued (in *Critique of Pure Reason* in particular) that knowledge stems from social processes of critique. Because critical knowledge requires social interaction among relative equals, we must be granted (or grant each other) procedural, *practical* freedom (Rawls 1996; O'Neill 2003; Johnston 2005). This essentially negative rather than positive demand for freedom is the sense in which we should view the individual as prior to society in Kant's philosophy (Gray 1995). Thus, despite many recent claims regarding Kant (or Kantianism, which presumably refers at least in part to Kant's philosophy), I aim to show here that Kant should not be viewed as an individualist as the term is normally intended today: while he felt it was in the interest of society to grant people negative freedom to think and act ''freely,'' his defense of individual freedom did not extend to cases where individual and community interests differ.

The commonality of introducing Rawls' thought by way of Kant's in analytical writing (and Rawls' own frequent invocations of Kant) enable students to conflate Kant's views with more recent understandings of political liberalism that promote the sort of individualism that more socially oriented thinkers reasonably critique as unrealistic. Here I contrast Kant and Rawls' views particularly on education to flesh out their markedly different perspectives. Thus, while James Scott Johnston argues that both thinkers' ultimately procedural, practical orientations towards politics and society merit viewing Rawls' educational thought as Kantian (Johnston 2005), I find that Kant's prioritization of ''autonomous'' reason precludes a Rawlsian political liberal educational view wherein the liberal democratic state embodies its citizens' values sufficiently to provide them with an appropriate education. Indeed, in this context Kant emerges as more committed to the individual; yet this commitment stems from Kant's faith in the ''autonomy of reason'': a problematic concept Rawls ultimately had to reject, but from which follows a more socially-oriented conception of education.

The Autonomy of Reason

It would not be hard to derive different ideas about freedom and autonomy from Kant's writing than I do here, particularly as his outlook changed over time. He concedes in his early defenses of universal human rights his changed view: ''There was a time when...I despised the common man who knows nothing. Rousseau set me right. This pretended

superiority vanished and I learned to respect humanity. I should consider myself far more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that one consideration alone gives worth to all others, namely to establish the rights of man'' (Kant 1960, 20:44). Initially holding more elitist views, Kant gradually realized the significance of one's experience to his knowledge or scholarly achievement and how the ''common laborer'' could know what scholars knew under more equivalent conditions. This interest in experience extended to anthropological and educational considerations, which he developed most fully toward the end of his life.

Recognizing the necessity of social interaction for knowledge production, Kant argued in *Critique of Pure Reason* that human knowledge can be tentatively confirmed or negated only through processes of public submission and critique. Embodying the argument, he regarded his reader as a fellow collaborator in the text who ''must naturally have a strong inducement to cooperate with the present author'' to erect ''a complete and solid edifice of metaphysical science'' (Kant 1993, Axvii). This task could be completed ''with little labour, if it is united, in a short time; so that nothing will be left to future generations except the task of illustrating and applying it *didactically*'' (Kant 1993, Axx). Devising a body of knowledge worthy of transmission is for Kant here a collaborative social service to contemporary and future society. With some sympathy for David Hume's skepticism toward scientific law, Kant emphasizes knowledge's practical purpose in defending its reconstruction.

> although we had proposed to build for ourselves a tower which should reach to heaven, the supply of materials sufficed merely for a habitation, which was spacious enough for all terrestrial purposes, and high enough to enable us to survey the level plain of experience, but that the bold undertaking designed necessarily failed for want of materials... as we have had sufficient warning not to venture blindly upon a design which may be found to transcend our natural powers, while, at the same time, we cannot give up the intention of erecting a secure abode, we must proportion our design to the material which is presented to us, and which is, at the same time, sufficient for all our wants (Kant 1993, A707/B535).

The critical work of vindicating knowledge requires that individuals review knowledge claims independently or freely despite the elitist attitudes towards knowledge prevalent at that time. Departing from the more dogmatic views, Kant defends ''autonomous reason'' as most valuable; this more democratic than elite epistemology ultimately necessitates the individual right to free speech.

> Reason must subject itself, in all its undertakings, to criticism, and cannot limit the freedom of such criticism by prohibitions, without harming itself and incurring a damaging suspicion. There is nothing, however useful, however sacred it may be, that can claim exemption from the searching examination of this supreme tribunal, which has no respect for persons. The very existence of reason depends upon this freedom; for the voice of reason is not that of a dictatorial and despotic power, it is rather like the vote of citizens of a free state, every member of which must have the privilege of giving expression to his doubts... (Kant 1993, A738/B766)

Reason is regarded here as autonomous rather than as ruled by a group in society; it depends on it being able to ''to take charge of its own interests, which are advanced as much by its limitation, as by its extension of its views, and which always suffer by the interference of foreign powers forcing it, against its natural tendencies, to bend to certain preconceived designs'' (Kant 1993, A744/B772). Reason is autonomous, therefore, to the extent that people are free or able to engage in critical interaction with each other, and

while neither the freedom nor the ability was seen by Kant to be widespread, Kant worked to justify viewing common men as free and equal both metaphysically and politically. While not justifying his view of freedom in *Critique of Pure Reason*, he does note in the text that this sort of freedom ‘‘forms part of the native rights of human reason, which recognizes no other judge than the universal reason of humanity; and as this reason is the source of all progress and improvement, such a privilege is to be held sacred and inviolable’’ (Kant 1993, A752/B780).

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* he argued that our shared sense of what is right and wrong reflects the ultimate ‘‘autonomy of reason’’ and is best represented by the categorical imperative, ‘‘act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law’’ (Kant 1898a). That one can act against one’s better (higher) judgment, disregarding the categorical imperative, indicates that human freedom exists prior to reason. In the end, however, this reasoning proved unsatisfactory for Kant; he analytically (rather than metaphysically) deduces from the categorical imperative his sense of freedom. After defending the conception here (as well as in *Critique of Practical Reason*; 1898b), he contends that reason faces the ‘‘greatest perplexity,’’ as human freedom seems to be derived from moral law. Ultimately he disregards the metaphysical grounding of the concept in his political defenses, ‘‘prompting Rawls) also to rely more on constructivism in practical reasoning (Johnston 2005, p. 215).

Kant argues then that to follow the categorical imperative as one should, one must be made free of external influences and constraints. Thus, the categorical imperative (act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law) also requires categorical obedience to the liberal principle, ‘‘act so that you treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only’’ (Kant 1898a). This imperative *against* the positive freedom to act without regard for others must be considered when reading ‘‘What is Enlightenment?’’, which is often regarded as Kant’s most passionate defense of universal human freedom. The text aims to defend men (not necessarily women) from popular or despotic rule and to not allow any to rule over each other or autonomous reason.

Without the right and capability to speak freely, Kant argues here, one is doomed to heteronomy and easily swayed by unreasoned, individual ‘‘knowledge’’ stemming from selfish or impassioned self interest or by the chains of the prevailing dogma. Adam Smith’s invisible hand may be embodied in Rawls’ political liberal conception of today’s plethora of diverse values somehow ultimately complementing each other, but Kant proposed instead that differing perspectives might melt under free collaboration into a single schema of moral and practical knowledge. Thus, Kant would have one not simply rule himself, but commit instead to the autonomy of reason arising out of the deliberation of the larger community of which he is one part.

> The reason Kant attaches importance to ‘‘public’’ uses of reason is rather that these alone are not premised on accepting some rationally ungrounded—‘‘alien’’ authorities. Hence they alone are full uses of reason, and ‘‘private’’ uses of reason are to be understood as defective, deprived or privatus, rather than as sheltered or secluded. Hence the essay points away from a conception of ‘‘public’’ reason that is characteristic of public life both under enlightened despotism and in bureaucratized modern states, toward a quite different conception of what fully reasoned communication would be...
>
> ...Autonomy, as Kant understands it, is not merely self-assertion or independence, but rather thinking or acting on principles that defer to no ungrounded ‘‘authority,’’

> hence on principles all can follow...He does not reject the view that the Enlightenment is the movement of reason. Rather he recasts and deepens this conventional view by showing that reason, correctly understood, is the principle of thinking and acting on principles all can freely adopt. (O'Neill 1992, pp. 289–299)

The idea that any society could come to autonomous reason which can justly rule all is reasonably seen as idealistic today; Nietzsche's critique of the related notion that one's subjective perspective might be applied as a standard to all is also justifiable. Yet it is important to bear in mind that the autonomy of reason sanctions equal opportunities for free speech and public criticism among the educated; Kant uses this schema to justify the establishment of more widespread rights to political engagement and self-rule over monarchy. The egocentrism some regard as inherent of certain liberal perspectives today was hardly predictable in Kant's time, and to the extent that subjective standards were likely to prevail, Kant actually sought a moderation of such tendencies, particularly in his educational thinking.

To be sure, one can more fairly accuse Kantianism of being utopian. Kant himself concedes his faith, rather than knowledge of both freedom and progress in his writings. In *The Contest of the Faculties* Kant also considers whether public education can be a means toward progress: we need to pass down knowledge and enable common people's capacities to freely engage in socially just rule, yet Kant was also wary of heteronomy as a plausible result of social influence. He concludes here that education cannot serve progress as "in so far as *human beings* can themselves accomplish anything or anything can be expected of them, it can only be through their negative wisdom in furthering their own ends" (1970b). Yet, in the same year, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* was also published, in which he discusses the uses of education, presumably for individual and social progress. His later considerations of education we know from his lectures also more seriously treat education as a means to progress.

Kant on Education

In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant suggests that anthropological knowledge can inform education for the individual acquisition of autonomous reason. Kant offers negative instruction—several things *not* to do—to "aid the cultivation of character":

a) Not to speak an untruth intentionally...
b) not to dissemble...
c) not to break one's legitimate promise...
d) not to join the company of evil-minded people...
e) not to pay attention to slander.... (Frierson, 2003, p. 64)

Despite his concerns with heteronomy, it seems clear that Kant sees a form of education as useful here. Among other aims, the text considers anthropological knowledge about enculturation processes to optimize personal autonomy. While humans should be viewed "as ends in themselves," the need for formal training is acknowledged by Kant, and *On Education* further considers the extent to which freedom seems to somewhat paradoxically depend upon socialization.

Many edited collections and guides to Kant omit his anthropological and educational work, perhaps because it is incoherent for he who is often viewed today as the great, impassioned defender of human freedom to elaborate on social processes indicating our

essential lack of autonomy. This is not terribly difficult to understand when one considers the place of the autonomy of reason in his thought and the prioritization of what we might call peer reviewed knowledge to just rule in Kant's theorizing: we (paradoxically) depend on each other to live ''freely'' in Kant's sense of the term. Still, sections of the text can be counter intuitive: how can we make sense of the man who argued that one must ''have the courage to use your own reason,'' when he notes education's importance, for instance, to children growing accustomed ''to sitting still and doing exactly as they are told'' (Kant 2003, p. 3)?

Many question the authenticity of the text, which is less clear and systematic than most of his writing. For English readers this may be an editorial dilemma; as Lewis White Beck notes of the single translation ''there is, in this miserable volume, no word of identification or explanation...We are not told what it is a translation of, and the added notes are mostly uninstructive. The numbered paragraphs are rearranged, we are told; but we are not told from what they are rearranged. This book is an example of how translations ought not be made and published'' (Beck 1978, pp. 192–193). It has also been suggested and many feel that its source, *Immanuel Kant über die Pädagogik*, was actually written by Kant's teaching assistant Friedrich Theodor Rink from his lectures on the philosophy of education.

In any case, conjectural evidence for most its statements can be found in Kant's other writings (Beck 1978, pp. 193–194) while the tendency, on the other hand, to read selectively from Kant's admittedly broad, relatively diverse canon—as an epistemologist, ethicist, legal scholar, or otherwise—is well known (Gehrke 2002). While Kant's or Kantian educational thought is often deduced from his other writings, *On Education* must be considered as a source of Kantian educational philosophy (''philosophy'' understood broadly here). Reading this text further confirms freedom's function in vindicating knowledge in Kant's thought: in cultivating an independence or individuality of thought specifically for a greater—that is, more widespread—good.

The significance of individual freedom emerges immediately in the text as Kant wrote against state influence over education, in vivid contrast to Rawls' later work sanctioning a state education on political conceptions (Rawls 2001). Kant argued that a certain academic subculture should guide education as the continuous revision of and enculturation to the social processes inherent of vindicating knowledge: ''all culture begins with the individual, one man gradually influencing others. It is only through the efforts of people of broader views, who take an interest in the universal good, and who are capable of entertaining the idea of a better condition of things in the future, that the gradual progress of human nature towards its goal is possible'' (Kant 2003, p. 17). He argued that education must also be financially and ideologically free from the state, as the imposition of the latter's interests could hinder humanity in its primary duty toward further developing autonomous reason: ''if only the financial authorities were not so anxious to calculate beforehand the interests which any sums spent for this purpose might bear for the treasury'' (Kant 2003, p. 17). Unlike Rawls, Kant had little faith in the state's values reflecting those of its citizenry; he observed (as many of us interested in education today do) the state's possibly harmful influence in determining funding criteria or policies for education.

Specifying that any culture or group should influence personal development seems to diminish the importance of autonomous reason in Kant's account, unless we view that culture as he hopefully did: as one committed foremost to universal reason. Kant felt that education should enable people's natural capabilities to find autonomous reason and become personally free. Education therefore involves *guidance* rather than instruction in Kant's account. We cannot give instruction, because our reasoning is also in a state of progress; future generations will discover truths unavailable to us today. Kant wrote, as

early as in *Critique of Pure Reason*, that teachers should not try to induct students into one system of reasoning, even if it were vindicated. Instead, they can only effect their students' reason by supporting their ''thorough training in the critical investigation of pure reason....the student ought to examine the assertions made on both sides of speculative questions step by step, and to test them'' (Kant 1993, A755/B783). We cannot instill reason in others; we can only encourage and allow them to critique reason autonomously.

Kant therefore argued that parents and instructors should raise serious questions for children to answer to the best of their abilities so that they become prepared to independently find autonomous reason: ''we should try to draw out their own ideas, founded on reason, rather than introduce such ideas into their minds. The Socratic method should form then, the rule for the catechetical method. True it is slow, and it is difficult to manage so that in drawing ideas out of one child the others shall also learn something'' (Kant 2003, p. 81). Despite the challenges involved, young people must understand what reasoning implicates, rather than passively absorb potentially dogmatic information in Kant's view.

Kant did feel that we should guide students toward some apparently vindicated ethical views, what Rawls might call political conceptions, such as that we live in a state of progress. Yet social facts must not be sent down before them as permanent structures. We must not, for instance, allow young people to learn the extent of social inequality too quickly lest they grow to assume it natural to have servants when actually ''inequality of man is an institution that has arisen on account of one man striving to get an advantage over another'' (Kant 2003, p. 119). This might seem, at first glance, to contradict the negative educational advice ''not to dissemble'' from *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. However, the contradiction is alleviated as Kant did not support *instruction* regarding a just social contract that does not actually exist. Rather, he would provide young people the means to envision the apparent ''truth'' that humans are fundamentally free, bound only by autonomous reason.

Closely related is Kant's suggestion that young people learn of the duty of generosity, but not of an ''absolute obligation'' of benevolence. Kant reasons that people should not seek to resolve social inequalities because of (or through) their passionate, heteronomous misuse of reason, but from their sense of autonomous reason as ''people, indeed, become hard-hearted, where once they were pitiful, because they have so often been deceived (2006, p. 104). This reflects Kant's view that we do have a moral duty to rectify social injustice and inequality which is knowable through reason.

These views notably contrast with Rawls' political liberalism presuming and then teaching of social systems viewed in the main (in the political conception) as capable of justifying or correcting for large scale inequality (Rawls 2001) and with the Protestant liberalism (common today in the United States, for instance) wherein each is said to earn accordingly to his or her merit. Kant would view teaching these conceptions as state-centric, while Rawls' ''Kantian'' constructivism might be seen as more compatible with developing democratic citizenship as it is popularly viewed today (something more or less inconceivable in Kant's time). A cause of this difference is surely that Rawls approaches education as if he was already in his ideal society organized according to his liberal values, while Kant's urgings stem from his contemporary circumstances. Of course, both are ideals given that neither Kant's universal private education nor Rawls' political liberal society were or are actualities. However, Kant's endorsement of his educational plan (private education for all) is also given with much more humility and less certainty then are the educational implications Rawls draws from his political liberal theory.

Indeed, he defends his educational views with far less conviction then he does the idea that education is a thoroughly perplexing social practice.

> Man's duty is to improve himself... Upon reflection we shall find this very difficult. Hence the greatest and most difficult problem to which man can devote himself is the problem of education. For insight depends on education, and education in its turn depends on insight. It follows therefore that education can only advance by slow degrees, and a true conception of the method of education can only arise when one generation transmits to the next its stores of experience and knowledge, each generation adding something to its own before transmitting them to the following. What vast culture and experience does not this conception presuppose? It could only be arrived at at a late state, and we ourselves have not fully realized this conception (Kant 2003, pp. 11–12).

Kant actively endorsed educational innovation in such a perplexing state, defending ''experiments'' like the research-oriented Philanthropin Institute in Dessau (Munzel 1999; Beck 1978).

> People imagine, indeed, that experiments in education are unnecessary, and that we can judge by our reason whether anything is good or not. This is a great mistake, and experience tells us that the results of an experiment are often entirely different from what we expected. Thus we see that, since we must be guided by experiments, no one generation can set forth a complete scheme of education. (Kant 2003, pp. 22–23)

This echoes Kant's comments on progress more generally in (1970c) ''On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice'.''

> If we now ask what means there are of maintaining and indeed accelerating this constant progress towards a better state, we soon realise that the success of this immeasurably long undertaking will depend not so much upon what *we* do (e.g. the education we impart to younger generations) and upon what methods *we* use to further it; it will rather depend upon what human *nature* may do in and through us, to *compel* us to follow a course which we should not readily adopt by choice. (Kant 1970c).

As Kant felt justified in believing in progress and human freedom without being able to provide clear metaphysical proofs for them, he supports education without being certain how exactly it might enhance people's reason and freedom. In a sense, he simple assumes that education enables personal autonomy and might enhance social progress.

> Kant does believe that efficacious moral education is education that somehow cuts through the surface causal network in order to effect the grounding of character. How this process works is something human beings cannot fully understand; we cannot know intelligible character, nor can we ever know with certainty that our attempts to shape and influence it are effective. But we can assume that such efforts may succeed, and, indeed, this assumption is a necessary supposition of any program of moral education. (Louden 2000, p. 59)

Kant's educational thought is untidy regardless of *On Education's* authorship, which may partly explain why he never published a more final and systematic statement on education. Nonetheless, one can glean from various writings an attitude toward education marked less by individualism then by a concern with forwarding the autonomy of reason. Kant viewed education as enabling human free speech, a prerequisite to vindicating autonomous reason. A Kantian education invoking Kant's views would then be less concerned with learning of the sorts of individual rights—to ownership, for instance—then would a Rawlsian political

liberal education, and would involve enculturation into a very different philosophy of individualism.

To summarize, while Rawls would sanction students learning chiefly the contemporary political conceptions under which they develop as (political liberal) citizens, Kant would engage children more in constructing and reconstructing the imperatives shaping their society. While Rawls writes in *Justice as Fairness* that education should move young people away from their particular perspectives in the ''political'' sense, to attitudes that foster the popular state values, including that inequalities in society are justifiable (2001), Kant would use education for intellectual progress, preparing students to speak critically regarding truth and values Rawls has held are outside the domain of political or educational discourse. Drawing a line between thin and thick values that others find tricky to coherently trace in diverse societies, Rawls is certainly justified in giving up Kant's metaphysical dream, which even Kant himself was unable to compellingly put forward. Yet what emerges from his constructivism can be described as Kantian only in a simplistic sense.

Conclusion

Kant's complexity often warrants our dividing his work into familiar contemporary categories—epistemology, ethics, anthropology, and the like—yet educational theorizing relies on connecting these broad strands together in a compelling but coherent way. I have argued here that Kant viewed knowledge as a collective, ongoing endeavor, dependent upon participants' abilities to behave as free standing individuals in order to productively work together to vindicate knowledge. The metaphysical significance of Kant's view of freedom may be essentially contested; still his political, epistemological, and ethical or moral writings, as well as his educational ones, reflect *practical freedom* as a requirement for establishing the autonomy of reason under which we can all live well. As a social contract based on universal reason has been largely given up on today, we more often refer to state constitutions and the values they imply. Rawls' political liberalism represents an earnest attempt at constructing reason out of prevalent values given the difficulties typical of employing deeper subjective conceptions in philosophically or culturally diverse settings.

Rawls' departure from Kant's metaphysics, however, signals certain differences in the educational views of the two thinkers. Without a foundation justifying human freedom—which is what the autonomy of reason in a sense is—the concept of freedom becomes opened up to support modern individualism, the idea that one has positive freedoms *despite* society, which is distant from the context in which Kant theorized. The significance of social interdependency in the service of universal reason gives way to social interdependence in a thin, political sense; Rawls' ''Kantian'' education becomes more concerned with learning duties and rights as productive to maintaining the state. A properly conceived Kantian education, however, would not educate students on thin popular attitudes exclusive of deeper, more critical considerations; ''What is Enlightenment?'' makes clear that freedom is more than the right to personal gain in Kant's account. While Kant is reasonably highlighted in our thinking today as a defender of human rights and liberal republicanism, his sense of individualism and of freedom are in some respects drastically at odds with those we associate with liberalism today, and his educational theory reflects a greater, if inappropriately idealistic, commitment to social collaboration than can be recognized from a more selectively liberal reading.

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