

I 'Kant' Believe It's Not Science!

An Exposition of the Metaphysician's Self-Abuse in the
Pursuit of Truth

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The investigation of truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, no one fails entirely, but every one says something true about the nature of things, and while individually they contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed. Therefore, since the truth seems to be like the proverbial door, which no one can fail to hit, in this way it is easy, but the fact that we can have a whole truth and not the particular part we aim at shows the difficulty of it.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 993^b 1 ff

Why is it so difficult to come to know the truth about something, or to come to know the particular part of the truth that one might be seeking? Part of the difficulty comes from not having a firm definition of truth to refer to, and to base the investigation on. The opening sentence of the excerpt from *Metaphysics* talks of the investigation of truth. The reader would be inclined to think that the investigation is about the nature of truth itself. But in the second sentence of the excerpt, Aristotle seems to use “truth” in two different senses. In the first clause of the sentence, “truth” names the object of the investigation of truth: “no one is able to attain the truth adequately”. However, in the second clause of the sentence, Aristotle uses “truth” to name the quality of investigation takes “nature” as its object: “everyone says something true about the nature of things”. What is the reader to make of the shift in Aristotle’s usage? What is he investigating: the nature of truth itself, or the nature of the truth of things? A third option: perhaps the investigation simultaneously explores truth as it is in itself, and as it is found in things. Further, perhaps Aristotle’s investigation amounts to simultaneous investigations because one needs to understand truth in itself in order to recognize the quality of truth in things. All that being said, my interest in the excerpt from the *Metaphysics* is purely as a showcase of the difficulty in trying to understand anything about truth. The heart of this project is to answer the question: “What is the nature of truth in the Kantian world of the *Critique of Pure Reason*?”

In order to conduct a successful investigation of the question at hand, it will be necessary to ground the investigation upon a firm, working definition of truth. For this project, the reader should understand truth as an account that effectively removes an investigator’s uncertainty or

doubt over a question. Accounts given in response to simple questions rely on familiar truths¹, that is to say, are grounded in experience. A simple question might be something like, “What color is the sky?”, to which the answer is: “Blue”. The sky really is blue in the answerer’s experience, so he sees it as such. His experience allays doubt or precludes uncertainty so far as it is at one with him—belongs (as we say) to him, and belongs to him together with others. So far, he has no motive not to rest in experience. In this case, and with questions of similar kind, experience suffices for truth.

If man only asks simple questions, truth would consist in the power of experience to dispel uncertainty. However, man, in his innate desire to know all things, also asks metaphysical questions—questions that pertain to the subject of being, causes, first principles, *etc.* In the face of metaphysical questions, the truthful account obtained through experience no longer suffices to achieve certainty or eradicate doubts.

The pursuit of a metaphysical question does not require a new definition of truth; rather, the acquisition of an account—by way of an answer—proves itself to be questionable, raises doubts and breeds uncertainty. Causal accounts that can be traced back to principles come through the faculty of cognition, which then leads to understanding. Accordingly, Immanuel Kant proposes to re-evaluate and substantiate more fully the faculty of cognition; his logical investigation aims to establish it as a science—a science of cognition and understanding².

Metaphysics, as Kant conceives it, fails to attain to science in that as it nears its end it becomes “stuck”. Kant notices a consistent trend in the field of metaphysics: the investigation outruns the capacity to account for itself and is thus unable to move forward *as* a science,

¹ Truth of acquaintance, common sense truth

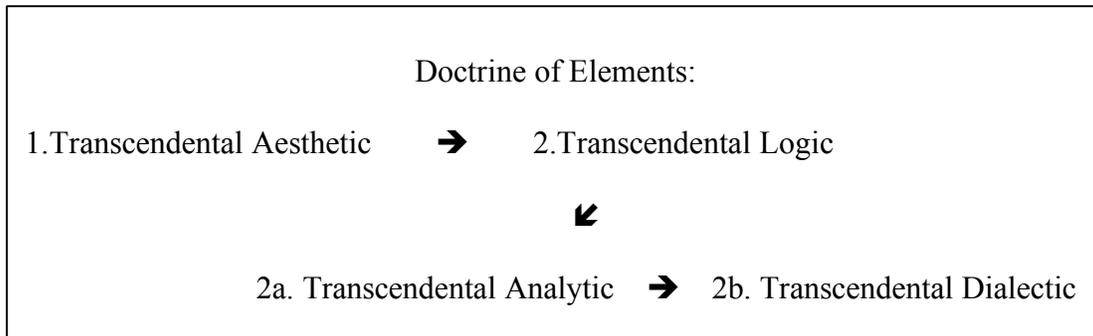
² This is to say, the *Critique of Pure Reason* does not immediately tackle any metaphysical questions.

because it is no longer grounded, and is merely “groping among mere concepts”, as Kant famously says (bxvii). In order to prevent the groping about of his own metaphysical investigation, Kant insures himself with logic. To him, logic is complete, perfect, and elegant. It is the first philosophical discipline that is most completely attuned to the form of a science. The boundaries of logic have never been violated, nor will they ever be violated, because logic proves only the rules of thinking, and does not aim to prove anything beyond itself. Logic, so understood, is self-contained.

Organization of the *Critique*

In the next portion of the essay, I hope to outline to my diligent reader the phases of the argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and their importance to the coherence of the work as a whole. It is important to understand the form of the argument itself, before one can engage with it. Each section of the *Critique* responds to arguments given in previous sections, so it is especially important to understand the form and phases of the argument in this case. The reader should note that this project intends to give Kant the benefit of the doubt, and operate on the assumption that his arguments are in fact firmly grounded, *i.e.*, thoroughly substantiated. I will not pretend to be capable of offering a critique of Kant: the intent of this section—and of most of the essay—is to highlight critical points in the argument’s development.

Before delving into the key components of the argument, it may be helpful to present the reader with a visual map of the *Critique*. The *Critique* is divided into two main sections: the Doctrine of Elements, and the Doctrine of Methods (not pictured).



The Doctrine of Elements is the division of the *Critique* in which Kant lays out his theory on the possibility of *a priori*³ cognitions, and the validity and soundness of their contributions to the faculty of understanding. In this section Kant attempts to ground metaphysics as a science. The other division—the Doctrine of Methods—is much less technical than the previous, and is really just the philosophical musings of Kant on the bearing of his theory on the world, as it was understood before him.

1. The Transcendental Aesthetic is the first logical step in Kant’s argument. In the Aesthetic, he claims that space and time are forms of our sensibility, and are intuitions that we can have *a priori* knowledge of. In short, what Kant is doing in the Aesthetic is laying out the laws for all possible experience. Although this section is incredibly short in comparison to its counterpart, the Transcendental Logic, it is a very important step in the argument, as it lays the groundwork for the rest of the Doctrine of Elements.

2. In regard to the Transcendental Logic, it is worth mentioning that prior to Kant, no logician or metaphysician had ever distinguished plain old general logic from transcendental logic. For this reason alone, the Transcendental Logic is quite novel. While Kant does not necessarily invent a new logic (as he borrows from the structure and processes of general logic), he does describe a new application for logic that is transcendental in nature (hence the name).

³ “Before experience” and, hence, *independently* from experience.

How does Kant understand and use the term ‘transcendental’? This is a tricky question, because I don’t always read him as using it in the same sense. Most commonly Kant uses “transcendental” to denote a kind of knowledge, not of an object, but of the nature of an *a priori* cognition of an object. But in some instances I read him using “transcendental” as a synonym for “transcendent”—something that is transcendent is always unknowable. In the *Critique*, it is often left to the reader to determine how a term is being used in any particular instance, because Kant will often give the term both a strict and broad interpretation. As demonstrated with the term “transcendental”, the two interpretations are more likely than not to be very different. But I digress . . .

2a. The first section of the Transcendental Logic is the Transcendental Analytic. In it, Kant asserts that synthetic *a priori* principles cannot arise outside of experience.⁴ Kant also describes which possible *a priori* contributions to the understanding are valid, as in: which *a priori* propositions do not violate the boundaries of experience. The Analytic is the proverbial ‘final nail’ in pure reason’s coffin because Kant shows synthetic *a priori* propositions contribute absolutely nothing to the understanding.

2b. The second section—the Transcendental Dialectic—explains the ramifications for pure reason in light of the discovery made in the Analytic. In this section, Kant concludes that any metaphysics that exceeds the boundaries of experience will collapse on itself because reason brings concepts to the understanding that do not correspond with any evidence from sensibility. Kant also addresses the nature of human reason, and why it forever tries to extend understanding and cognition beyond the boundaries of possible experience. Generally speaking, the task of the

⁴ I am sympathetic to the reader who might be confused why Kant would make such an assertion; especially considering that *a priori* translates to “before experience”. I would only encourage my reader to keep reading, as this confusing point will be revisited.

Transcendental Logic, taken as a whole, is to decide on the possibility, nature, and limits of *a priori* knowledge.

Now that the reader is more familiarly acquainted with the logical moves of the overarching argument of the *Critique*, let us address the argument itself.

Experience

Among the things that set Kant apart from his predecessors, one of the more decisive is his beginning premise. Whereas it was historically assumed that cognition conforms to objects, Kant assumes the opposite, namely, that the objects conform to our cognition. It is a much more difficult problem to discover how it is possible to know something *a priori* about an object if our cognition conforms to it. Why is it more difficult? The answer lies in **experience**.

In the first case, where the cognition conforms to the object, any attempt to find out something about the object *a priori* fails because the subsequent concepts that reason brings to cognition in an attempt to extend it are not verified or grounded on anything. These unjustified and empty concepts are literally pulled out of thin air by reason. Science practiced in this way gets ‘stuck’ because nothing can be added to the imprint left on our metaphorical wax tablets⁵ by sensation. In cases where cognition conforms to the object, what you feel (through sensations) is what you get. Experience’s involvement in the cognitive process is limited to ‘imprinting our wax tablets’ which our understanding will then study.

Kant is the first philosopher to consider experience as an involved element in the cognitive process. For him, “there is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with

⁵ Recall Plato’s *Theatetus*: “Now I want you to suppose...that we have in our souls a block of wax... We make impressions upon this of everything we wish to remember...we hold the wax under our perceptions and thoughts and take a stamp from them...” (191d ff)

experience” (B1). Experience initiates the cognitive process through stimulation of the senses, which, in turn, produces representations of objects. Experience and cognition are not isolated processes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In fact, Kant considers experience a kind of cognition that requires the understanding. In the case where the object conforms to our cognition, it is easier to posit the possibility of knowing something *a priori* about an object because the concepts that reason brings to cognition will actually be grounded in something other than itself. Concepts have a foundation; that foundation is experience.

Some readers might be finding it problematic to accept experience as a foundation for knowledge due to a philosophic tradition according to which the senses are not to be trusted and philosophers question the very nature and content of experience. But these concerns are all non-questions for Kant. Experiences are real. It is enough for him to accept the reality of his experiences because of the very fact that he exists, and that his experiences belong to him. In this sense, experience is grounded.

Kant asserts that all experiences, since they are a kind of cognition, must be law-governed, and that this law is given through concepts that are *a priori*. So when Kant speaks of objects conforming to cognition, he is referring to conforming to these concepts. Kant never gives a formal definition of concept, but it is important to designate a working definition, since concepts come to play a crucial role in the investigation. In fact, the investigation and the function of cognition are impossible without concepts. For the time being, let us postulate a concept simply as a representation that unites objects together. The concept tree, for example, unites all trees, and does not refer to just one particular tree. Further, a concept is something that we—as cognizing beings—bring to experience, as opposed to something that is given to us through experience.

Kant's treatment of concepts is crucial in the *Critique* because one of the criticisms of his predecessors is that they pursue the object through formal concepts and principles of understanding, and by doing so, they effectively curtail the contribution of the sensible and empirical content of the object itself. The concepts are 'once removed' from the object. Kant spends a significant portion of the *Critique* arguing the point that, independently of an appeal to experience, the concepts of understanding are empty and do not give rise to any substantive knowledge. Knowledge requires the cooperation of both sensibility and understanding.

Metaphysics that utilizes formal concepts cannot stand up as a science because it will be discovered that there is not a real and justified way to connect the concept to the object. Whereas other philosophers just sort of assume the '*a priority*' of concepts in order to bridge the gap between reason and the object, Kant exposes the emptiness of such a relationship, and shows that experience is necessary to tie down concepts.

Distinction Between Analytic and Synthetic Judgments

Kant draws a distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments by making reference to the relationship between subject and predicate. In analytic judgments, the connection between the subject A and the predicate B is through identity. The predicate does not add anything to the subject that is not already assumed through it, nor does it bring anything new into a relationship with the subject. Kant explains:

if I say 'All bodies are extended,' then this is an analytic judgment. For I do not need to go beyond the concept that I combine with the body in order to find that extension is connected with it, but rather I need only to analyze the concept, i.e., become conscious of the manifold that I always think it in, in order to encounter the predicate therein, it is therefore an analytic judgment (B11).

Although Kant's example is properly analytic, I think it is a bad example because it is not totally clear and straightforward. A clearer example of an analytic judgment, I think, is something like, "All bachelors are unmarried." In this example, the predicate is known to belong to the subject by the very definition of a bachelor. Analytic judgments are therefore also known as judgments of clarification. One could think of analytic judgments as those in which the concept of the subject, and the concept of the predicate are in the same box, so to speak.



Synthetic judgments on the other hand, are judgments in which the connection between the subject and predicate are thought without identity. To clarify, it is as if subject A is in its own box, and the predicate B is in a separate box. The addition of predicate B to subject A makes the judgment synthetic. Those that are not well acquainted with Kant are usually at least familiar with the phrase 'synthetic *a priori* judgments'. Synthetic judgments and *a priori* judgments therefore have a tendency to be linked exclusively to each other. But, synthetic judgments should not be understood as synonymous with *a priori* judgments. Quite the opposite is true: "it is experience on which the possibility of the synthesis of the [predicate B] with the concept of [subject A] is grounded" (B 12). Similarly, one should not mentally link analytic judgments with *a posteriori*⁶ judgments, for these two types of judgments are very distinct. The qualification of the judgment—analytic or synthetic—denotes only the relationship of the subject to the predicate

⁶ "after experience".

as either wholly contained, or wholly separate from it. These designations do not qualify the deductive source of a judgment.

Understanding the qualifications *a priori* and *a posteriori*

While the terms ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’ reveal nothing about the epistemic source of a judgment, the terms *a priori* and *a posteriori* do. These terms are generally taken to mean “before experience” and “after experience,” respectively. While such an understanding is not necessarily wrong, it is also not very comprehensive, and can be misleading. It is not the reader’s fault for thinking of the judgments in these terms because Kant does not offer a very thorough treatment of them at any point in his *Critique*. The distinction Kant offers the reader between *a priori* and *a posteriori* judgments is as follows:

One calls such cognitions *a priori*, and distinguishes from empirical ones, which have their sources *a posteriori*, namely in experience...[I]t is customary to say of many a cognition derived from experiential sources that we are capable of it or partake in it *a priori*, because we do not derive it immediately from experience, but rather from a general rule that we have nevertheless borrowed from experience...[T]herefore we will understand by *a priori* cognitions not those that occur independently of this or that experience, but rather those that occur absolutely independent of all experience. Opposed to them are empirical cognitions, or those that are possible only *a posteriori*, i.e., through experience. Among *a priori* cognitions, however, those are called pure with which nothing empirical is intermixed. Thus the proposition “Every alteration has its cause is an *a priori* proposition, only not pure, since alteration is a concept that can be drawn only from experience” (B2-B3).

While this is more of an excerpt than a quotation, the whole of it is pertinent: it demonstrates the insufficiency of the treatment of such an important distinction for the argument of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The excerpt is quite literally the entirety of Kant’s treatment of the distinction. Given that first time readers of the *Critique* are generally filled with anxiety and frustration caused by the technicality and impenetrability of the Kantian language, it is easy to see how one

could read the excerpt above, and come away with the understanding that *a priori* cognitions are completely independent of experience, and are thus pure.

One account for the extremely brief treatment of the distinction is that Kant has an agenda, namely, the *Critique* points toward the investigation of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgments. In this case, the important distinction is between pure and empirical cognitions, not *a priori* and *a posteriori* cognitions, because he wants to abstract from all *a priori* judgments those that are applied to empirical content, leaving only those that are pure—absolutely independent of all empirical content and experience. Kant's interest is vested in the question, "How are synthetic *a priori* propositions possible?" Kant really does a disservice to his critique by not elaborating on the nature of *a priori* propositions, a disservice that I hope to remedy.

All cognition starts in experience, and is therefore empirical to some degree. *A priori* cognitions, despite the loose translation "before experience," are not independent of experience by any means, unless they are pure. What, then, is the real distinction between the two kinds of cognitions? The secure marks of an *a priori* judgment are the qualities of strict universality and absolute necessity. In more colloquial terms, these marks mean that the judgment must be thought without exception. Experience cannot give strict universality or necessity to a judgment, only a sort of assumed or contingent universality. *A priori* judgments are therefore not derived immediately from experience, but instead can be thought of as organizing it to the form of our cognition (that begins in experience).

The phrase "How are synthetic *a priori* propositions possible?" is perhaps the most well known line from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but it is largely unintelligible without a basic understanding of what it is Kant sets out to investigate. Understanding the question also means understanding why it is a question in the first place. The same question can be put in much

simpler terms. It can also be asked as, “What can the understanding know apart from experience?” or as, “Can reason and understanding be sources of knowledge on their own?” Kant shows that synthetic *a priori* propositions are possible among the theoretical sciences—such as arithmetic—and are in fact the principles upon which these sciences are built. So why aren’t they possible in metaphysics?

Metaphysics cannot be included under the umbrella of sciences because its investigation involves speculative use of reason, as opposed to a justified use of reason. But if metaphysics is to be seriously considered as a science, its principles, which would be synthetic and *a priori* in nature, must be determined. Kant’s harshest criticism of his predecessors is that their doctrines are dogmatic. Philosophers begin by “confidently [taking] on the execution of the task [of metaphysics] without an antecedent examination of the capacity of reason for such a great undertaking” (B7). So the primary goal in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is not actually to establish metaphysics as a science, but to first see whether speculative reason is even capable of providing answers to the questions of metaphysics, that is, answers that are at once absolutely necessary and strictly universal.

The Transcendental Aesthetic

The Transcendental Aesthetic belongs to what Kant calls “transcendental philosophy,” the aim of which is to scrutinize the mode of the cognition of objects, not the object itself. To recapitulate, the Transcendental Aesthetic is the first part of that process of scrutiny: it is where Kant expounds how objects are to be shaped by our grasping of them, and how the object conforms to our cognition. All of this is to reveal the principles—or rules—of experience, which must be known *a priori* if they are to be universal and necessary.

Kant's understanding of experience is rather radical considering the philosophical tendency of assuming that cognition conforms to objects. Kantian experience does away with the notion of the wax tablet from the *Theatetus*; our cognition is not passive. It does not receive impressions from objects that reason then tries to organize into thought. Rather, cognition is active, and experience works in communion with understanding to produce thought. Thought must necessarily be connected to intuition and sensibility because that is the only way the objects are given to us.

So what does the faculty of cognition look like for Kant? How does our cognition grasp an object? The grasping begins with intuition and sensation. **Intuition** is the immediate relation of cognition to the object. Intuition is not the object itself, but a mere empirical representation of it that corresponds to sensation. Intuition is only possible through this capacity to "acquire representations through the way in which we are affected by objects, namely **sensibility** (B 33). Intuition cannot replace the function of sensibility, and vice versa. Each makes a distinct contribution to experience, and to the thought process. Kant calls **appearance** the "undetermined object of an empirical intuition" (B34). There are two compositional elements of appearance: matter and form. **Matter** is the element that corresponds to the empirical sensation. Form is a little tricky. Kant formally defines **form** as "that which allows the manifold of appearance to be ordered in certain relations" (B34). Even in context, this definition does not offer the reader a lot of clarity on form, mostly because "manifold of appearance" is ambiguous and abstract. I think it more prudent to define it as the mold that gives shape and order to appearance in accordance with our cognition.

One can think of the manifold of appearance as raw data from the senses that is then interpreted or grasped by our cognition through form. The raw data does not offer a picture of the

object, but gives us an un-unified mass of appearances. Not only is form that which allows the manifold to be ordered in a certain way to our cognition, but it is also that which unifies the raw data of individual appearances into a single appearance—a thing (think back to concepts). The understanding—through form and concepts—produces the “thing.”

Further, Kant asserts that matter can only be given *a posteriori*, and that the form of appearance must be already in the mind *a priori*. Because form is already in the mind, it is separate from sensation. Therefore there must also be a counterpart to empirical intuition, namely, pure intuition. Pure intuition, like its empirical counterpart, works in conjunction with sensibility, but the form of sensibility must also be pure. All of this is made clearer by an example Kant gives:

If I separate from the representation of a body that which the understanding thinks about it, such as substance, force, divisibility, etc., something from the empirical intuition is still left for me, namely extension and form. These belong to the pure intuition, which occurs *a priori*, even without an actual object of the senses of sensation, as a mere form of sensibility in the mind (B35).

The task of the Transcendental Aesthetic is to remove from intuition and sensibility all sensations and empirical intuitions so that only pure intuition and the form of appearance remain. Through this process, Kant discovers that only two things qualify as pure forms of sensible intuition: space and time. Space and time stand as the principles that dictate how our cognition grasps objects. They are the laws that govern experience.

On the Transcendental Logic

Transcendental Logic concerns itself with the laws of the understanding as they relate directly to the constitution of the object. Put as simply as possible, the Transcendental Logic investigates whether any object can be grasped completely *a priori* through just form and

without an application to experience. The answer to this question, as we will discover, is negative. One thing that Kant does not explicitly say, nor have I as of yet, is that transcendental philosophy, and subsequently transcendental investigations, are all about exploring the possibility of *a priori* knowledge. Unlike general logic, transcendental logic must verify and establish itself first. However, the possibility of *a priori* knowledge has to first be assumed in order to even postulate something like transcendental knowledge or transcendental logic. Kant never leaves the assumption lingering or unanswered, unlike some of his predecessors. Rather, he makes a real attempt to tackle the problems of the investigation.

The Transcendental Aesthetic, the Transcendental Analytic, and the Transcendental Dialectic are the logical steps necessary to answer the question of whether anything can be known through pure acts of thinking, *i.e.* whether there is a real and totally pure *a priori* cognitive process. In the Transcendental Aesthetic, it was discovered that there are indeed pure forms of sensibility and intuition—space and time. Sensibility and intuition, you will recall, are the first steps in the normal cognitive process. Had Kant discovered the answer to whether there are pure forms of sensibility and intuition to be negative, that would have been the end of the *Critique*. He would have proven that it is impossible to grasp an object wholly *a priori*.

The Transcendental Analytic

Kant's goal in the Transcendental Analytic is to give an account of how the pure concepts and pure forms of the understanding are possible, and also to determine what their role must be in the constitution of knowledge. While the steps of empirical cognition and *a priori* cognition are the same in name, the functions of the two cognitive processes are very different. This is due to the fact that the *a priori* cognitive process must abstract itself from all empirical content,

leaving only that which is pure. This is a step that is obviously not incorporated into the process of empirical cognition.

Kant reveals, however, that pure concepts are worthless, empty, and utterly uninformative without empirical content. This is the key to revealing the illusion of transcendental logic. We learn only the “formal conditions of agreement with the understanding,” and absolutely nothing about the content of pure thinking through pure concepts (B 87). In the introduction to the *Transcendental Logic*, Kant issues a warning about the limit of the science of thinking, or logic. Logic is only capable of evaluating errors in the form of cognition, and not in the content of it. Therefore, even when the form of cognition is in agreement with the laws of understanding, logic is incapable of delivering the object, which is necessarily dependent on content.

At the beginning of the *Transcendental Analytic*, Kant announces the four points that the section will concern itself with. They are:

1. That the concepts be pure and not empirical...
2. That they belong not to intuition and to sensibility, but rather to thinking and understanding.
3. That they be elementary concepts, and clearly distinguished from those which are derived or composed from them.
4. That the table of them be complete and that they entirely exhaust the field of pure understanding” (B89).

The most important things for the reader to take away from these points are that these concepts must underlie all other concepts—i.e. they must be elementary—and that they must originate *only* in the understanding.

The first move of Kant’s argument in the *Transcendental Analytic* is to show that pure concepts are discoverable through clues from our normal (empirical) concepts. What these clues are, I am not entirely sure. The exposition is not very clearly put to the reader, so I only put forward a possible interpretation of Kant’s argument. I take Kant to be making the argument that

our ‘lesser’, empirical concepts presuppose some kind of ‘higher’, non-empirical concepts⁷. Kant says:

Thinking is cognition through concepts. Concepts, however, as predicates of possible judgments, are related to some representation of a still undetermined object...the functions of understanding can therefore all be found together if one can exhaustively exhibit the functions of unity in judgments (B94).

If we accept this at face value, we must also accept that in presupposing the notion of a higher—or pure—concept, Kant also presupposes a corresponding higher cognition and a corresponding higher level of understanding. While Kant does not explicitly (or at least coherently) state any of this, I think it is the correct way to understand the development of the argument in the *Analytic*.

Let us now flesh out the faculties of the presupposed pure cognition for ourselves by comparing it to empirical cognition. One thing that must be said of understanding, whether it being empirical or pure, is that it is a unity of concepts. The question is, “What is the difference between an empirical unity and a pure unity?” Recall the manifold from the *Aesthetic*. The manifold is composed of both **matter** and **form**. (Matter directly corresponds to sensation, so we will not worry about it here) We are only concerned with form, which concerns itself with how the understanding grasps and shapes the manifold to its faculty of cognition. In empirical cognition, Kant shows that the form lies in the mind *a priori* and unites the manifold through concepts and produces the thing. In pure cognition, a purer (higher) form unites the manifold to yield the object. What could possibly be more pure than something that lies in the mind *a priori*? Kant’s answer: purer concepts that lie only in the understanding. Kant names and organizes these elusive concepts into the **table of categories**.

⁷ The reader would do just as well to substitute ‘pure’ for ‘higher’ in this instance, and in all subsequent uses of the word.

The four categories of pure concepts of judgment are: quantity, quality, relation, and modality. Kant spends a great deal of time explaining how he came to deduce these four categories in the *metaphysical deductions*. The effort it takes to trudge through the metaphysical deductions is not worth the fruits of that labor. It will suffice to say just a few things about the categories and the deductions. First and foremost: the pure concepts unify a whole judgment, as opposed to empirical concepts that only unify elements of a judgment⁸. Second: it is through this unity of the judgment as a whole that we are given the object. Third: in the metaphysical deductions, Kant not only shows how he deduced the categories, but also that the categories are grounded, and are therefore as valid as the pure concepts of space and time in the Aesthetic.

This all seems great, so just what is the problem? We have the object in our grasp! “Not so fast,” says Kant. After the metaphysical deduction (which I leave out on purpose) Kant moves on to describe in painful detail the transcendental deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding, which, not so coincidentally, are divided into the same four categories as the pure concepts of judgment. This is just to show that understanding naturally follows from judgment. I will purposely leave out the transcendental deduction for similar reasons to those stated above.

However, it will be prudent to say a few “Sparknote-esque” things about Kant’s conclusions from this section. Kant demonstrates that pure understanding is utter codswallop, *i.e.*, it is impossible. Why? Because the understanding itself cannot furnish pure synthetic *a priori* propositions. The concepts of pure judgment are as sound as pure concepts of space and time because they give access to the abstract form of experience. Mind you, form is already pretty abstract to begin with. Kant manages to take the empirical out of the experience, but only

⁸ Empirical judgments are still whole, as in: the element is itself a unity. But the addition of empirical judgments to each other does not yield a whole—and therefore pure—judgment. A pure judgment is not made up of empirical parts, or any parts. In this sense, it is a whole and it is a unity.

to show that there is nothing to prop up this very abstract form—the unifying concepts are literally empty, *i.e.*, void of anything. Only in using pure concepts of judgment to come to a pure understanding is the sheer formality of the concepts revealed. It is like trying to blow bubbles without a wand to give the bubble a shape. How does one unify an empty, shapeless concept with another of the same nature? The only way such a unity is possible is through a synthetic combination, hence the name: synthetic *a priori* propositions. The faculty that unifies these propositions is Reason.

The Transcendental Dialectic

In the Analytic, Kant shows that the pure concepts of judgment contribute nothing to the understanding because the concepts themselves are void of any content. They are still valid, but only when applied to appearances (experience). Essentially what Kant proves is that the understanding cannot furnish from within itself a pure, or synthetic *a priori* proposition. If Kant shows that synthetic *a priori* propositions are impossible at the level of the understanding, hasn't he simultaneously proved their impossibility in regard to metaphysics? Why isn't the Analytic the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason*? The short answer to this question is that transcendental illusion has yet to be addressed.

Kant identifies the transcendental illusion as a product of Reason. Reason is the highest unity of cognition; reason does not apply directly to experience or appearance, but to the understanding. In the Dialectic, Kant makes a very important distinction between understanding and reason, which can perhaps be more easily understood as a distinction between rules and principles. Kant defines the understanding as the **faculty of rules**, and reason as the **faculty of principles**. What is the difference between a rule and a principle? This is a perfectly valid

question, because up until the Dialectic, Kant uses the term “principle” in a very loose way compared to the very strict way he begins using it at this critical point in his argument. Principles should no longer be thought of as merely universals, but must be strictly and purely *a priori*. In the strictest sense, a pure and true principle must originate from within itself. A true principle is self-knowledge, and these principles are supposedly produced in pure reason, where they are absolutely separated from all possible experience. To put it as simply as possible, the Dialectic must decide between two alternatives: the first, whether reason is simply a higher form of unity that further organizes the understanding according to given forms, or the second, whether reason is a faculty that produces its own principles that serve to unify the understanding according to higher forms that are beyond what experience is capable of prescribing.

In these two alternatives, we find the main question of the *Critique*, namely, “What can reason know independently of experience?” As it will turn out, reason can know nothing independently of experience. The transcendental illusion is that reason thinks it can. Unlike the logical illusion, there is no treatment for the transcendental illusion. All that can be done to protect reason from itself is to expose the illusion for its emptiness, but even in doing this, we cannot eradicate it.

Dialectical inferences protect reason from the transcendental illusion. There are three classes of inferences that correspond to three disciplines of metaphysics⁹. It will suffice to address only one inference—the cosmological discipline of metaphysics that deals with questions regarding the nature of the world. In the particular inference of the cosmological ideas, the antinomies of pure reason work to shatter the illusion that reason can know anything independent of experience. The goal is to understand how.

⁹The three different disciplines of metaphysics are psychology, cosmology, theology

In Book Two of the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant introduces the dialectical syllogism of which there are three kinds—one of them is the antinomy of pure reason. The transcendental idea that the antinomies protect against is the concept of an absolute totality. Generally speaking, the various dialectical syllogisms have the same structure in that they are syllogisms with “no empirical premises, by means of which we can infer from something of which we are acquainted to something of which we have no concept, and yet to which we nevertheless, by unavoidable illusion, give objective reality” (B397). To use plainer language: reason, erroneously asserts an acquaintance with the transcendental idea. In the dialectical syllogism, we make a cosmological inference in the first (major) premise based on transcendental idea. The inference is then applied to the second (minor) premise. The subject of the second premise is something we have no concept of, and yet, through the inference is assigned objective validity.

Specifically speaking, an antinomy is a contradiction between two equally valid conclusions—a thesis, and an antithesis. It is a paradox. The best explanation of an antinomy is through example. In the first antinomy, the thesis and antithesis are as follows:

Thesis: The world has a beginning in time, and in space it is also enclosed in boundaries.

Antithesis: The world has no beginning and no bounds in space, but is infinite with regard to both time and space” (B 454/ B455).

The proofs are indirect, and establish their validity by arguing that the opposite (its contrary) is impossible. Both claims are equally capable of arguing successfully against the other, leaving reason at an impasse. Reason will forever vacillate between each claim, unable to decide which is truer, or more right. Once pure reason reaches this point, it must self-destruct, for it cannot choose.

While the first antinomy is an excellent illustration of just one of the many problems pure reason faces, we have not yet uncovered the dialectical inference upon which this antinomy rests. The final blow to pure reason comes in the deconstruction of the dialectical syllogism, and an exposition of the fallacy of the dialectical inference. The syllogism is: **“if the conditioned is given (major premise), then, the whole sum of conditions, and hence the absolutely unconditioned, is also given, through which alone the conditioned was possible (conclusion)”** (B 436). The minor premise, which is not explicitly stated, is something like **“appearances are given as conditioned”**. Before delving into an exposition of the fallacies and problems of the illusion, it will first be necessary to better understand the relationships of each premise to each other, and to the conclusion.

Kant notes that the idea of an absolute totality only concerns itself with the exposition of appearances, and not with the understanding’s pure concept of a whole. From this we infer the minor premise, namely, that appearances are given. Thus, “reason demands a completeness of the conditions of their possibility, insofar as these conditions constitute a series, hence an absolutely complete synthesis, through which appearance could be expounded in accordance with laws of the understanding” (B 443). Secondly, Kant notes: “it is properly only the unconditioned that reason seeks in the synthesis of conditions” (B 444). It is crucial that we not lose sight of the fact that the unconditioned is both contained within the totality of the series of the conditioned, and also that the unconditioned is the whole of the series. There are two senses of totality at play here, one is finite, the other infinite. But totality is only a transcendental idea. The possibility of the unconditioned being an absolute totality of conditions is impossible to know through appearances. Yet, reason still possesses the idea of completeness of the series in

both the finite and infinite senses. Its relation to empirical concepts is questionable, and, in my understanding is the primary reason the dialectical syllogism fails.

Now concerning the fallacy . . . Logically speaking, there is nothing wrong with the hypothetical syllogistic argument because “the concept of the conditioned already entails that something is related to a condition, and if this condition is once again conditioned, to a more remote condition and so through all the members of the series” (B 526). No transcendental criticism can be made of this analytic assertion of the hypothetical syllogism. However, we begin to run into some problems with the latter assertion that the unconditioned is also given. Considered as a member of the series, through the process of regress, if the given quality holds true for all members of the series, then the unconditioned is also given. Here, the term “conditioned” seems to be used in a transcendental sense. Kant articulates the problems very concisely:

On the contrary, I am dealing with appearances, which as mere representations are not given at all if I do not achieve acquaintance with them, then I cannot say with the same meaning that if the conditioned is given, then all the conditions (as appearances) fir it are also given, and hence, I can by no means infer the absolute totality of the series of these conditions (B 527).

The major premise only holds if the conditioned is an object in itself. Kant has already argued that man does not have access to the object, but only to appearances and representations. The major premise ignores the impossibility that the transcendental concept of “conditioned” corresponds to the reality of “conditioned”. The unconditioned is never met in experience; man is not equipped to have a complete knowledge.

However, this problem, which is asserted in the major premise regardless of the actuality of becoming acquainted with the conditioned, conflicts with the empirical use of it in the minor premise. The minor premise is tied to the empirical use of the conditioned because it refers to

appearances, which, in themselves, are nothing more than empirical syntheses. The dialectical illusion is a *fallacy of equivocation*. The “major premise takes the conditioned in the transcendental signification of a pure category, while the minor premise takes it in the empirical signification of a concept of the understanding applied to mere appearances” (B 528). The fallacy is unavoidable because it is a common mistake of our reason. Despite warning, our reason will continue to fall into the dialectical illusion. Reason demands an absolute totality of the conditioned because that is just part of the nature of our reasoning. Kant does not attempt to explain this aspect of the reasoning.

Instead, Kant has explained is that there is no pure use of reason, and subsequently that metaphysics, as a science, is not very useful in discovering an answer to the cosmological questions. Metaphysics is innately dialectical. In an indirect way, Kant also makes a case for his theory of transcendental idealism (in contrast with other philosophers who have an idea of transcendental realism). While I will not pretend to understand the complexities and intricacies of his idea, a very basic understanding of it suggests that it is a distinction between objects and appearances. Transcendental realism, on the other hand, is the notion that there is a bridgeable gap between things in themselves and appearance, and that the whole of things is potentially knowable. In the *Transcendental Aesthetic* and *Transcendental Analytic*, Kant walks through how *a priori* knowledge in both natural science and mathematics is possible. *A priori* knowledge in those fields is within the bounds of our reason. In the *Transcendental Dialectic*, Kant has proven the general uselessness of metaphysics in answering the questions that plague the mind. Any attempt to use metaphysics to stretch reason beyond its boundaries will yield fruitless, and empty results.

Concerning Truth:

Upon reaching the end of the Doctrine of Elements, the reader should first pour himself a generous glass of wine, and congratulate himself that he successfully labored through. The second order of business is to take stock of everything argued in the *Critique* for the purpose of deciphering the central argument. Kant argues a number of things in the various divisions of the Doctrine of Elements, but each division is a necessary step in the whole of the argument. While each division is an essential aspect of the whole argument, none is Kant's final aim. The aim of the *Critique* is to establish the limits of reason, and to explore whether the understanding can know anything independent of experience. Over the course of argument in the Doctrine of Elements, Kant comes to prove the impossibility of synthetic *a priori* propositions in regard to metaphysics, and the sophistry involved in the pretended use of pure understanding. Independent of that which is empirical and sensible, the concepts of the understanding are uninformed and empty and cannot give rise to substantive knowledge. Knowledge requires the cooperation of sensibility and understanding. Any transcendental or pure use of the understanding is dialectical or illusory. Basically, what Kant concludes is that metaphysics is a cruel area of study—it asks questions that it inherently can't answer.

I hold Kant to be, in a sense¹⁰, the best-justified metaphysical philosopher because he is, in my opinion, the most thoroughly grounded and therefore also the most thoroughly justified. This is not to say that being well justified and being thorough are the same, but it certainly doesn't hurt one's argument to be thorough. This is also not to say that there are no soft spots in Kant's argument. Part of the difficulty in understanding the *Critique* is the responsibility put on

¹⁰ Kant is only a metaphysical philosopher in so far as he investigates the possibility of grounding metaphysics as a science. One might say he is an "anti-metaphysical" philosopher, since his conclusion is that it is impossible to establish metaphysics as a science.

the reader by Kant himself to interpret the usage of key terms in various movements of the argument. Instead of defining his terms point blank, Kant tasks the reader with deciphering definitions from context. A glossary of terms, or even a more obvious defining of terms, would have served Kant well in his writing. Regardless of the shortcomings of the *Critique*, what I mean when I assert that he is well justified is that Kant makes a real attempt to answer any and all questions pertaining to the investigation at hand.

In the Platonic dialogue, *Sophist*, the character identified as the as “the Eleatic Stranger” attempts to discover and define the sophist. His method of defining involves division by dichotomy, and grouping of arts and skills. He ultimately comes to identify two arts: productive and acquisitive. The Stranger dichotomizes productive art into human and divine. The Stranger discovers the sophist under the division of human art, hiding behind private speeches based solely on opinion. The other side of opinion is science. The difference between science and opinion (specifically in the *Sophist*) is that the first is verified and based on knowledge, while the latter is carried out without knowledge. Opinion is synonymous with ignorance. The dichotomies under the division of divine art almost perfectly replicate the divisions under the human art. The only difference is that the divisions are carried out more completely under the human art, while the divisions end with the dichotomy of science and opinion under the divine art.

The distinctions drawn in the ancient Platonic dialogue stand the test of time and can still be used to judge whether a self-proclaimed philosopher is a sophist, or whether he makes a real and scientific attempt to answer a question, regardless of whether the answer is right or wrong. Immanuel Kant is not a sophist. There is something very right and very objective about Kant’s investigation into what can be known independently of experience. Kant grounds himself in logic, which turns out to be a very smart move on his part. Logic is the philosophical discipline

that attunes most closely to the form of a science. Unlike other philosophical disciplines, logic is self-contained: it does not and cannot prove anything beyond itself. Therefore, logic can grant its subject—the laws of thinking—a universality and certainty that other philosophical disciplines are incapable of.

One of Kant's harshest criticisms of his predecessors is that their arguments are dogmatic, i.e. their arguments consist of statements put forth as authoritative without any kind of substantiation or proof of their validity. In other words, Kant accuses his predecessors of spewing opinion, and not science (knowledge). Kant does not think his predecessors have grounds for the claims they make. He insures himself from suffering the same fate by molding his investigation to the form of logic. Kant is the most well grounded metaphysical philosopher because of the way his argument is structured. Kant never makes any assumptions about cognition and its function. The Doctrine of Elements is so structured so that each section relies on, and necessarily follows claims that have been argued for in previous sections.

Earlier in the essay I discussed the importance of taking a step back from the argument itself and looking at the organization of the *Critique*. It is easy as a reader to get lost in the technical language and to lose track of the central argument. Understanding the organization of the *Critique* helps to secure one's understanding of the developing argument in each section, and how each and all together substantiate the claim of the central argument, namely, that synthetic *a priori* propositions are impossible regarding metaphysics and that we cannot know anything entirely independent of experience.

Kant's argument is painstakingly meticulous. I hope to have done a sufficient enough job at elucidating the argument that the reader understands it well enough to analyze and judge the central argument in a meaningful way. Asserting that Kant is the most well justified

metaphysical philosopher, I further assert that the conclusions he reaches are the most decisive answers to metaphysical questions concerning the unconditioned. Yet, the conclusions don't remedy the metaphysician's self-abusive tendency of investigating questions he is incapable of answering. The metaphysician resembles the Greek mythological character Tantalus, who is eternally tormented by what he can never have.

It is man's natural desire to know all things. However, history shows that man has never been able to reach a completion of human knowledge. If man attained such a completion of knowledge, there would no longer be a need for philosophy. Kant makes the case that reason can never grasp the unconditioned—the object itself. But the unconditioned does not go away just because it is out of reach. Man who desires to know all things is therefore left with the one thing he can never have in his grasp. What did man do to deserve a fate as cruel as Tantalus'?

Kant addresses the desire after the unconditioned by arguing that reason naturally pushes us to reach for it, as if that was supposed to be some kind of comfort. It would be comforting if upon recognition of its shortcomings, reason stopped trying to exceed the boundaries of experience. However, such is not the case. Reason is unceasing in trying to bridge the gap between experience and the unconditioned. It seems to me that Kant only accounts for the "how" behind reason's constant violation of the boundaries of experience, but not necessarily the "why". Kant might respond to such a criticism that the "how" and the "why" are the same. But even if I grant this to Kant, and validate the fact that he explains both the problem itself, and the reasons why I should not be uncertain or doubtful about the unconditioned, the question regarding the unconditioned remains in my mind. I will still continue to wonder after it. Kant cannot possibly be offended by my wonder because reason behaves similarly.

All things taken into consideration, it is left to judge whether the exposition given in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is enough to eradicate man's doubt and continuous search for the unconditioned. Should Kant's exposition satisfy man so much so that he will discontinue his search for that which is shown to be out of his grasp? Does Kant give us a satisfying placeholder for a truth that should eradicate all our doubt in the face of metaphysical questions? I think the answer to this question is negative, and I think in his heart of hearts, Kant also knows his exposition falls short. Kant is as much of a man as anybody else, and is thus subject to the same tortures as the rest of us; he is not spared from seeking out the unconditioned. He probably just did it in secret.

Is there any relief for man or for the metaphysician? Perhaps relief will come in trying to answer a different question than the one Kant pursues, namely, **what is truth if it's not the thing in itself?** Earlier I equated truth with certainty; truth is reached when all doubts have been eradicated. Albert Einstein, in his work: *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, talks about the "concept true", and the "habit of designating [it to a] correspondence with a 'real' object" (Einstein 8). Einstein seeks out the objective truth because he holds that it is attainable, whereas Kant maintains that objective truth cannot be had. Perhaps it is unfair to mention Einstein, who practices a very different science, one that does not concern itself at all with laws of cognition in relation to objects, but directly with the relationship of objects to each other. Regardless, Einstein's science manages to attain a truth that grasps the object, and eradicates uncertainty.

It seems that philosophy, even when practiced as a science, can never obtain as decisive and objective a truth as Einstein obtains for physics. How should we think of the relationship between truth and certainty knowing that there is objective truth in certain disciplines such as physics, but not in others, such as metaphysics? It seems that there is not a single, universal,

objective, “capital T” truth, but instead many objective truths corresponding to various sciences. Maybe these truths are “capital T” within their own disciplines, but not universally across all disciplines.

Personally speaking, I used to believe that there is a universal truth that informs all other truths—a ‘capital T’ truth. This essay is the culmination of four years spent reading works by great thinkers that challenged and rocked my conception of truth. It is an attempt to resolve for myself the paradox that I see in the condition of Man. In previous places throughout the essay, I rhetorically ask if there is any kind of relief for the self-abusive tendencies of both the ordinary man and the metaphysician. I shall now give answer.

I see two possible solutions for relief. The first option is for man to follow in Socrates’ footsteps and admit that he knows nothing. In the *Apology*, Socrates readily admits that he is “conscious of knowing practically nothing” (22d). In the same dialogue, comparing himself to another man, Socrates says, “it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not know what I do not know” (21e). If one knows nothing at all, then he is probably least concerned with knowing, or coming to know, anything about the unconditioned. In this case, the gap between reason and the unconditioned is a non-issue. It would seem that Socrates is the first man to see the real wisdom in the colloquialism, “Ignorance is bliss.”

The second option is to follow the advice Kant gives in preface B of the *Critique* in which he famously proclaims, “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith; and the dogmatism of metaphysics...” (Bxxx). It sounds rather cynical but I think Kant means it in earnest. As he will later show, reason cannot know anything outside of experience. Contrary to

what many people probably think, Kant is not an atheist. He thinks that all one can do is have faith in God, but cannot scientifically prove or disprove God's existence. The same is true for all that lies beyond experience: man can have faith in it, but not knowledge of it.

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