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“No Human Being Can Be without Metaphysics”: Kant on Indifference to Metaphysics

That the human mind would someday entirely give up metaphysical investigations is just as little to be expected as that we would someday gladly stop all breathing so as never to take in impure air. There will therefore be metaphysics in the world at every time, and what is more, in every human being. (4:367)¹

In his rational history of metaphysics, Kant presents the methodological moves available to human reason sequentially in terms of dogmatism, skepticism, and criticism. Dogmatism characterizes “the first and oldest steps in metaphysics,” which were made “with complete confidence” about pure reason’s capacity to attain cognition of the supersensible (20:262).² What distinguishes dogmatism in metaphysics is “the presumption of getting on solely with pure cognition from (philosophical)

¹ References to Kant are to the volume and page number of *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, herausgegeben von der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902), except the references to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which are to the standard A and B pagination of the first and second editions. The translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, as listed in the bibliography.

² See also B7, A761/B789, 18:294.

concepts according to principles, which reason has been using for a long time without first inquiring in what way and with what right it has obtained them" (Bxxxv). It is none other than "the total *failure* of all attempts in metaphysics," most dramatically manifest in pure reason's antinomial conflict with itself, that gave rise to skepticism about the very possibility of metaphysics. Skepticism, accordingly, represents "the second and almost equally ancient move made by metaphysics," a step that is "naturally of somewhat later origin, though still old enough" (20:263).³

Kant sees in the temporal sequence of the inception of metaphysics, which he says is "founded in the nature of man's cognitive capacity" (20:264), a resemblance to growing up. Dogmatism, as the "blind trust in the faculty of reason to expand itself a priori through mere concepts" (9:83-84), corresponds to the childhood of pure reason, with the implication that the skeptic would be like the rebellious adolescent who makes it into a principle to never trust their parents' authority again. And the third and final stage, that of adulthood, is constituted by criticism, "the intermediate and only lawful manner of thinking" between dogmatism and skepticism (18:293). This mature, critical stance of human reason, whose general maxim is "never to assume anything to be true except after complete examination of principles" (18:293), realizes itself in metaphysics as Kant's own critique of pure reason understood as a principled assessment of the sources and bounds of pure reason's cognitive capacity.⁴

Despite this sequential description, human reason's coming of age in philosophy, like its maturation in general, is never a matter of mere linear and definitive progress.⁵ History effectively inserts itself in the temporal elaboration of human reason's advance towards metaphysics in the form of a *vacillation*: "Once the first two stages have been passed, the state of metaphysics can continue to vacillate for many centuries, leaping from

³ On the quasi-dialectical character of the transition from dogmatism to skepticism see A1x, B22-3, A761/B789, 4:271, 20:281, 29:955.

⁴ See A761/B789 and 20:264.

⁵ This should not be surprising, for, as Kant himself states, reason "does not operate instinctively, but rather needs attempts, practice and instruction in order to gradually develop from one stage of insight to another" (8:19).

an unlimited self-confidence of reason to boundless mistrust, and back again" (20:264). The history of all pre-critical metaphysics is essentially the history of just such a vacillation.

The cumulative effect of this vacillation on the historical consciousness of the age is weariness: "The world," Kant writes, "is tired of metaphysical assertions" (4:377).⁶ Before the considered judgment of the late 18th century – "the age of criticism" – the whole of metaphysics would appear nothing other than "the battlefield of . . . endless controversies" (Aviii), "a chain of built-up and overthrown systems" (29:779). The stark contrast between this degeneration of metaphysics, with its "spirit of systems," and the rigorous and effective methodology of the blooming positive sciences, with their "systematic spirit," brought about a certain perplexity regarding the very procedure and value of metaphysics as well as its place within the order of academic knowledge – a perplexity that, as Kant saw it, gave rise to a widespread *indifference* to metaphysics where one would make it into "an honor to speak contemptuously of metaphysical broodings" (9:32).⁷

There is no shortage of examples of this anti-metaphysical attitude in 18th-century European philosophy, especially in the second half of the century. When Rousseau, for example, complained in the Preface to his first *Discourse* (1750) about the "metaphysical subtleties" that affect the Academies but do not concern "truths that affect the happiness of mankind" (Rousseau 1997, p. 4), he was speaking against the background of a widespread suspicion toward metaphysics that was decades old. This suspicion would turn into full-blown ridicule in the work of Voltaire, who in his *Candide* (1759) famously named the science taught by the Master Pangloss *metaphysico-theologo-cosmologonigology*. The work's conclusion is likewise unequivocal in the author's antipathy toward the other-worldly excesses of philosophical speculation: in response to Pangloss's final attempt to appeal to the idea of the best of all possible worlds, *Candide* responds, "This is well put . . . but we must cultivate our garden" (Voltaire 1998, p. 88), with the clear implication that there is neither any

⁶ See also 4:274.

⁷ See also A844/B872, 28:783.

real need for nor any practical use of the science of metaphysics. Thomas Reid, in his *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* of 1764, would even raise ridicule to the level of a veritable philosophical weapon. If for Voltaire ridicule was a tool to dissolve the stubbornness of irrational prejudice and dogmatic faith, Reid used it to defuse the hyper-rationality, as it were, of modern skepticism: according to him, whoever was in the grip of the "metaphysical lunacy" of purporting to doubt the basic truths of common sense needed not be reasoned with seriously but merely ridiculed (Reid 2000, pp. 19, 82, 215-6). The attitude toward metaphysics bordered on outright contempt in the extreme materialism of French *philosophes*. Holbach, for instance, in his notorious 1770 work *Système de la nature* – which is rumored to have scandalized even Voltaire – would display no respect for those "sublime sciences called theology, psychology, metaphysics," and, in a foreshadowing of the logical positivist program of eliminating metaphysics, describes metaphysics as a "pure science of words" (Holbach 1970, p. 85). And when Mendelssohn wrote to Kant in a letter from 1783 that "for many years I have been as though dead to metaphysics" (10:308), Kant would write in response, with a somewhat resigned indignation, that "virtually the entire learned world seems to be dead to her" (10:344).

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Kant used the label of "indifferentism" to describe the anti-metaphysical orientation of his day. Even though he never defined this term, it appears to be his designation for the philosophical stance that gave voice to the indifference (*Gleichgültigkeit*) to the metaphysical theorizing that was characteristic of his time. It appears early on in his preface to the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* at the crucial juncture of the historical exhaustion of the very idea of metaphysics: "Now after all paths (as we persuade ourselves) have been tried in vain, what rules is weariness and complete *indifferentism* [*Überdruß und gänzlicher Indifferentism*], the mother of chaos and night in the sciences, but at the same time also the origin, or at least the prelude, of their incipient transformation and enlightenment, when

through ill-applied effort they have become obscure, confused, and useless" (Axi; emphasis in the original).⁸

While he does not name names, judging by his explicit characterizations and indirect discussions, it seems reasonable to argue that Kant used "indifferentism" as an umbrella term referring to a loose group of philosophical figures and trends belonging to the French Enlightenment, Scottish philosophy of common sense, and German *Popularphilosophie* that, despite other doctrinal and methodological divergences, were united by the conviction that *metaphysics, as a speculative science, was a dispensable intellectual enterprise*.

Some, like the French materialists, located this dispensability in metaphysics' irredeemable obscurity and uncertainty by comparison with the methodological rigor of positive sciences, which could be utilized in the service of human emancipation and happiness in this world. Some, such as fideists like Hamann, on the other hand, regarded the rational ambition of attaining speculative cognition of the supersensible as an abomination in the face of the immediacy and omnipresence of a faith that was before and above reason. If the first group was against *metaphysical theorizing* insofar as it obscured the scientific paradigm of rationality in its otherworldly orientation, the second was against metaphysical *theorizing* for its overestimation of human reason's capacity to answer ultimate questions of existence and provide standards for life. These two defined the two extremes of the indifferentist spectrum: an eliminativist agenda on one end, and a quietist attitude on the other.

Most indifferentists, however, were of a moderatist ilk, trying to strike a reasonable – though by Kant's standards unprincipled – balance between dogmatism and skepticism. While the anti-metaphysical attitude of the French Enlightenment was primarily anti-dogmatic and attacked the pretenses of speculative reason to construct systems of thought independently of experience and observation (as exemplified by the rationalisms of Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz), the Scottish common-sense school was characteristically anti-skeptical in motivation and addressed the

⁸ See also 9:32.

devastations brought on our commonsensical view of the world by attempts to follow the path of abstract reason to the end (as exemplified by Berkeley's idealism and Hume's skepticism). Similarly, in Germany, one of the catchwords of the era, especially among the so-called *Popularphilosophen*, was "mitigated skepticism" (*gemäßigte Skepsis*). The goal of moderate skepticism was to rescue human reason from the pitfalls of stubborn dogmatism and exaggerated skepticism, both seen as excesses of speculative reason, by adding a healthy dose of doubt and fallibilism to the security and concreteness of common sense. This is why another catchword of the time was "appeal to common sense." Such appeals turned out to be very convenient ways of philosophizing indeed, for one could appeal to common sense – or *bon sens* or *gesunder Menschenverstand* – in a variety of functions depending on the need of the day: as the source of the first principles of reasoning and conduct, as an adjudicative authority on speculative conflicts, and as the very horizon of philosophical inquiry and intellectual orientation.

It turns out, then, that one could be against metaphysics in the name of *science* or in the name of *faith* – and between science and faith lay the wide, ambiguous in-between of *common sense*.⁹

If at its best indifferentism involved a questioning of the self-authorization of philosophical reason to go against the principles of common sense, as in Reid's comprehensive criticism of the modern philosophy of mind and the paradigm of philosophical rationality he discovered it to presuppose, at its worst it did not amount to much more than a pseudo-philosophical stance that tended to present itself in an eclectic style, flatten subtle metaphysical problems through conjectures and analogies, and drown out rigorous argumentation in the "bustle and clatter" (4:368) of popular debate. In this regard, it reflected "the prevailing taste of the age, which imagines difficult speculative matters to be easy (but which does not make them easy)" (10:341). This ethos found one of its most memorable images in a statement by Justus Christian Hennings, an otherwise minor figure from Jena: "My purpose is not to bake the finest bread, for that often contains the least nourishment. Rather I shall serve homemade

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of different kinds of indifferentism, see Pusar 2021.

bread and popular philosophy, so far as this can be done without disadvantage to well-groundedness [Gründlichkeit]".¹⁰

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Kant was highly critical of indifferentism, at times to the point of being outright dismissive. And yet he did not fail to see in it a noteworthy phenomenon, for it was located precisely at the point of transition between the collapse of all metaphysics that was dogmatic and its rebirth as critical metaphysics: "this indifference, occurring amid the flourishing of all sciences, and directed precisely at those sciences whose results (if such are to be had at all) we could least do without, is a phenomenon deserving our attention and reflection. This is evidently the effect not of the thoughtlessness of our age, but of its ripened *power of judgment*, which will no longer be put off with illusory knowledge" (Ax-xi). Indifferentism is, therefore, a Janus-faced phenomenon, a sign of both maturation and degeneration: the former because it is a symptom of the critical spirit of the age, and the latter because its diagnosis of the problem that has given rise to it is fundamentally flawed.

Such an ambiguity is to be expected, since, according to Kant, all genuine transformations of a science pass through a point of indifference that contains simultaneously a weariness of the old and an openness to the new (4: 367). More specifically in the case of metaphysics, the reason for the ambiguity is that even though indifferentism tends to cheaply capitalize on the erosion of whatever rigor and ambition metaphysics once had in its claim to be a rational science, it nevertheless embodies the pro-critical attitude of refusing to take for granted the traditional methods in metaphysics.¹¹ Indifferentism belongs to the age of criticism more than metaphysical dogmatism, and at least as much as Humean skepticism, owing to the reaction it embodies to a certain image of philosophizing, namely, as an intellectual activity that takes place through the ceaseless battle of claims that are dogmatic and objections that are either dogmatic

¹⁰ Quoted in Beck 1969, p. 321.

¹¹ See A783-4/B811-2 for Kant's charitable assessment of attempts to justify the principle of sufficient reason through appeals to common sense. Cf. 4:335n.

or skeptical.¹² This is why if, in one respect, indifferentism was the precursor to Kantian critique, in another it was its usurper. That this was how Kant himself saw the situation is clear from a number of passages from the *Prolegomena*, where he complains, for instance, that the indifferentist “would like to pretend that already long ago, through the prophetic spirit of his sound common sense [*durch den Wahrsagergeist seiner gesunden Vernunft*], he had not merely suspected, but had known and understood, that which is here presented with so much preparation, or, if he prefers, with such long-winded pedantic pomp: ‘namely that with all our reason we can never get beyond the field of experiences’” (4:314).

Kant’s worry seems to be that the prevalence of the indifferentist trend would occlude what to him seemed the only genuinely philosophical option left in the wake of the bankruptcy of dogmatism and skepticism, namely, his own critical philosophy. For if the indifferentists’ calls for moderation, with their attendant distinctions between what in their eyes counted as good as opposed to bad metaphysics, could produce the semblance of delivering what Kant could promise to deliver only as a result of a painstakingly long and tortuous conceptual labor, then his own proposal would look superfluous and not worthwhile from the start.¹³ Kantian critique would, consequently, have to specify and defend its very idea in this liminal space of indifferentism that was also the space of the Enlightenment and its crisis.

Elsewhere I argued that indifferentism, rather than dogmatism or skepticism, was Kantian critique’s true metaphilosophical rival.¹⁴ Here I want to reconstruct Kant’s more or less direct arguments against indifferentism in relation to metaphysics, concerning, more specifically, its actuality, method, and value. He identified three main problems with indifferentism, problems that have to do with its attitude toward metaphysics, conception of method, and intellectual aspirations. Kant argued that indifferentism embodied a self-stultifying meta-metaphysical attitude, had an inconsistent philosophical methodology, and set up a self-defeating cultural goal. I take up each argument in a separate section below.

¹² See MacKenzie 2004, pp. 1-6. On different kinds of objections, see A388-9.

¹³ See esp. 4:367.

¹⁴ See Pusar 2021.

They can be seen as three moments of a single overarching argument whose conclusion is that indifference to metaphysics is not philosophically viable. When seen together, these arguments also reveal the remarkable breadth of Kant's conception of metaphysics.

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The first counterargument appears right after Kant's first reference to indifference in the preface to *Critique of Pure Reason*: "... however much they may think to make themselves unrecognizable by exchanging the language of the schools for a popular style, these so-called *indifferentists*, to the extent that they think anything at all, always unavoidably fall back into metaphysical assertions, which they yet professed so much contempt for" (Axi; emphasis added).

Even the self-proclaimed despisers of metaphysics cannot immunize their philosophies against it, because, according to Kant, metaphysics pertains to the very structure of human thought: "There is a difference between thinking within metaphysics and thinking about metaphysics. Everyone does the former. Some, instead of thinking about it, rave about it" (18:51).¹⁵ This universality of thinking *within* metaphysics can be understood in two distinct yet related ways, echoing the traditional academic distinction between general and special metaphysics at the level of what can be called *natural metaphysics*. In the first instance, we can talk about something like a "metaphysics of common sense," to adopt an expression from Tetens, which would be the metaphysics that informs all our worldly compartments to the extent that common sense always already contains a pre-reflective comprehension and use of a priori concepts and principles (such as the principle of causality). In other words, a metaphysics, in the form of a virtual web of a priori principles responsible for the broadly stable shape of our experience of the world, implicitly pervades everything we think, say, and do. In keeping with Baumgarten and Meier's use of the term, Kant called this *metaphysica naturalis*:

¹⁵ See also A842/B870. Cf. 23:59.

The summation of all our cognitions of reason through concepts, which are inherent in every human being and of which he avails himself in experience, is *metaphysica naturalis*. Every cognition of reason, insofar as it is *in concreto*, or not speculative, is natural, and of these there is a considerable number; thus the common use of the understanding also has a metaphysics, and this metaphysics surely deserves to be raised to a science.¹⁶ (28:782)

But thought is implicated in metaphysics in yet another way: through the interest we take, as the finite and reflective beings that we are, in the fundamental questions of metaphysics, primarily those concerning the immortality of the soul, the reality of freedom, and the existence of God.¹⁷ Kant takes this as a genuinely rational interest, indeed one that is connected to reason's most vital concern of realizing itself in the world through its projects of knowing and acting. Understood as the more or less spontaneous expression of this interest, metaphysics, independently of how well grounded it might be by rational standards, exists as a predisposition that the human mind has to raising and attempting to answer ultimate questions of existence:

[T]his *kind of cognition* is in a certain sense also to be regarded as given, and metaphysics is actual, if not as a science yet as a natural disposition [*Naturanlange*] (*metaphysica naturalis*). For human reason, without being moved by the mere vanity of knowing it all, inexorably pushes on, driven by its own need to such questions that cannot be answered by any experiential use of reason and of principles borrowed from such a use; and thus a certain sort of metaphysics has actually been present in all human beings as soon as reason has extended itself to speculation in them, and it will also always remain there.¹⁸ (B21-2; emphasis in the original)

¹⁶ See also A247/B302, A762/B790, 4:369-70, 20:262.

¹⁷ See A798/B826, B7, B395n, 4:477-8, 8:418-9, 20:260, 20:295, 28:776.

¹⁸ See also 4:279-280 and 4:364-367. It is noteworthy that thematic discussions of natural metaphysics are more prevalent in works and editions published after the first edition of the first *Critique*. I believe this is attributable to the increasing importance Kant came to place on the idea of purposiveness and the teleology of human reason.

In his polemic against the indifferentists, Kant intends primarily this second sense of natural metaphysics.¹⁹ In the *Metaphysik Mrongovius* of 1782-3, for instance, we find a variation on the criticism in the preface: “All the despisers of metaphysics, who wanted thereby to give themselves the appearance of having clearer heads, also had their own metaphysics, even Voltaire. For everyone will still think about their own soul” (29:765).²⁰ In a note from the late 1770s, we find the same point made primarily in relation to the practitioners of positive sciences, who, otherwise a paradigm of Enlightenment rationality, harbor the seeds of indifference to metaphysics: “The mathematician, the beautiful spirit, the natural philosopher: what are they doing when they make arrogant jokes about metaphysics[?] In them lies the call [*der Ruf*] that always urges them to make an attempt in the field of metaphysics. As human beings who do not seek their final end in the satisfaction of the aims of this life, they cannot do otherwise than ask: why am I here, why is it all here[?]” (18:93).

This “why,” Kant writes elsewhere, “by an unavoidable law of nature ... will pursue you” (A488/B516). There is, built into our cognitive comportment in the world, always room for ever further questioning, ever further asking for grounds – and, when combined with its desire for completion which it cannot satisfy by its mere empirical use, reason uses this room to extend itself beyond the domain of possible experience and generates

¹⁹ In highlighting this distinction, I do not intend to imply that these two senses are unrelated. Put rather briefly, the key to their connection lies in the teleological contexture of all acts of judgment as Kant thematizes them and the role that the ideas of reason play in opening up and shaping this contexture. See, for instance, the following passage from the *Opus Postumum*: “Reason inevitably creates objects for itself. Hence everything that thinks has a God” (21:83). Or: “[W]herever there is reason there are metaphysical concepts” (29:783).

²⁰ See also 28:620. As must be clear from my references, it is not Kant’s published work but rather his lectures on metaphysics that provide the most striking material for the reconstruction of this argument. It appears that there, more than in his published work, Kant felt freer to bring up what we may term the anthropological, or even existential, origin of metaphysics. While the texts I draw from in this context are not Kant’s own but rather student notes, there is now, especially after the publication in the early 1980s of two sets of lectures – *Mrongovius* and *Vigilantius* – a good consensus on their convergence and reliability.

a metaphysics. This does not mean that metaphysics owes its emergence to a mere logical obsession or empty curiosity, though: Kant is adamant that what drives reason “to go beyond its use in experience, to venture to the outermost bounds of all cognition by means of mere ideas in a pure use,” is ultimately not its speculative but practical interest.²¹ The ultimate “why” of “why am I here, why is it all here?” owes its exigency to its connection to questions about my ultimate destination and final end:

What will I do if there is a God and another world? Now it is clear that this interests us very much. I must now comport myself entirely differently than when I see that only the sensible world exists ... If I have a ground to suspect that there is another world and a world author, then an entirely other interest opens up. What must I thus do? In the practical respect, these two propositions are thus of the highest importance and more important than all other ends. – They concern our ultimate ends.²² (29:774)

The Pascalian tenor of this passage should not make us lose sight of Kant’s characteristic emphasis on the rationality of these questions. Pascal too had framed the two cardinal questions of metaphysics – concerning immortality and God – as the ultimate questions of existence, that is, as questions to which human beings could not remain indifferent. For Pascal, the exigency of these questions stemmed from their implications for individual salvation: it was simply impossible to live one’s life otherwise than as an answer to these questions; to exist meant to have in each case made a commitment – a “bet” – on a possible state of affairs that had eternal salvation or eternal damnation at stake. For Kant, on the other hand, the ultimacy of these questions derives from what their answers would mean for human reason’s noblest aspiration, namely, the realization of the highest good – the just distribution of happiness in accordance with virtue – in the world. This is not an irredeemably abstract idea that would

²¹ See, e.g., A797/B825. Cf. 18:79-80.

²² Similarly: “no thinking being can exist without the questions concerning what its vocation is, what its destiny will be, and what then duty is, whether it is mere prudence or whether duty might demand even the sacrifice of life” (28:776).

concern only the speculative metaphysician but rather an ideal that concerns everyone to the extent that what is existentially at stake in being able to conceive the possibility of a perfect alignment of virtue and happiness is the motivational effect of the moral law, that is, whether it can have full force on my conduct and sustain my hopes for moral progress.²³

All humans, Kant says, want to be happy, but morality teaches not how to be happy but how to be worthy of happiness, and it does so without presupposing anything metaphysical in the strict sense of the word.

Everyone readily comprehends that it is unfair to demand happiness without conducting oneself worthy of such. Morality teaches this. It thus rests not on metaphysics, since I can ground a morality that does not presuppose metaphysics [. . .] I ask, can I also hope to share in happiness if I am not unworthy of it? Here we must suppose a wise world-ruler[.] We do not find that happiness is always distributed in the right proportion. The vicious triumph and the virtuous must show no concern. Thus if our present life completes our existence, then we cannot say that we would be happy to the same extent as we are worthy. We must thus accept yet another world. – *From these two needs, God [...] and another world, metaphysics arises; everything in the immanent world refers to this, and among all the questions which speculative philosophy can ever cast up, none are so urgent and interesting that they should move us to entwine ourselves in such difficult speculations.* (29:776, 774-775; emphasis added)

Through “these two needs,” then, metaphysical questions – “Does the world have a beginning? Is there something in us that persists in and of itself? Is there a future?” etc. – are “woven into the nature of our reason” (28:378).²⁴ Once again, the point Kant makes is not the Pascalian one that indifference to these questions is impossible because they always already claim finite existence prior to and independently of reason’s involvement with them. His point, rather, is that this very impossibility of indifference

²³ See esp. 5:451; also 5:142-143.

²⁴ “They are so woven into the nature of reason that we cannot be rid of them” (29:765).

constitutes the beating heart of the rationality of human reason, shaping its care-structure, as it were: a reason that is indifferent to metaphysics would be a reason that is indifferent to its practical vocation. And a reason that is indifferent to its practical vocation would be a reason that is in effect indifferent to itself: a passive recipient of the manifold of life, perhaps a mere instrument for technical manipulation severed from all consideration of ends, at best a neutral spectator to the drama of existence content with remaining within its self-contained unity, but ultimately irresponsible to the demands of its own freedom, unconcerned with whether they are realizable in this world.

All of this is tantamount to saying that, according to Kant, a reason that is indifferent to metaphysics would not be a reason: "These questions concern the highest interest, and to say reason should no longer occupy us with these matters is to say it should stop being reason" (ibid.).²⁵

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Kant's first salvo against the indifferentist is, then, to insist that "no human being can be without metaphysics" (29:247-8).²⁶ The broad anthropological sweep of this claim contains a virtual supplement, though: no human being can be without metaphysics, but *especially the philosophers*. It is simply impossible to philosophize without making metaphysical commitments at one point or another. His second criticism expands upon this in a more explicitly methodological direction. Kant's target now is the inconsistency of the indifferentist's method, or more precisely, the performative contradiction entailed by it. Kant discusses this in the history of pure reason section at the very end of the first *Critique*: "If something is to be called a method," he writes there, "it must be a procedure in accordance with *principles*" (A855/B883; emphasis in the original). He characterizes the method involved in various indifferentist orientations as a kind of naturalism: "The *naturalist* of pure reason takes as his prin-

²⁵ See also 28:378-9.

²⁶ See also 28:378, 29:247.

ciple that through common understanding without science (which he calls “healthy reason”) [*durch gemeine Vernunft ohne Wissenschaft (welche er die gesunde Vernunft nennt)*] more may be accomplished with regard to the most sublime questions that constitute the task of metaphysics than through speculation” (ibid.; emphasis in the original). This naturalism of pure reason, which is not to be confused with “methodological naturalism” in contemporary philosophical parlance, emphasizes the use of common sense over speculative, i. e., abstract reason as a justificatory criterion and orientational instrument. In most cases, such a naturalism represents the desire to continue to do metaphysics but without the complex theorizing or excessive argumentation that characterized its traditional forms, relying instead on “mere probability, reasonable conjecture, or analogy” (4:314). The indifferentist wants a homemade metaphysics, as it were, a *metaphysics without metaphysics*.

However, insofar as they aspire to philosophize methodically, the indifferentists involve themselves in something “most absurd”: “the neglect of all artificial means is recommended as a *method of its own* for expanding cognitions” (ibid.). But this is none other than “mere misology brought to principles” (ibid.), that is, the performative contradiction of a putatively reasoned hatred of reason.²⁷ Kant defines a misologist as someone “who hates science but loves wisdom all the more” (9:26). To the extent that they are naturalists of pure reason, “all despisers of the metaphysical sciences punish themselves in that they despise science itself and yet treasure their own method for thinking about supernatural truths” (29:948). In their commitment to a non-technical version of philosophy, they “can have nothing else in mind except to throw off the fetters of science altogether and to transform work into play, certainty into opinion, and philosophy into philodoxy” (Bxxxvii).²⁸ Their wisdom, Kant argues, is only “presumed and cheaply gained” (4:314). He even views the popular style of the naturalist as nothing more than a stratagem to “cloak his ill-founded claims” (ibid.), to appear philosophical while evading the inescapable

²⁷ See also Kant’s description of moderatism as “doxology” on 8:415.

²⁸ See 6:377 for an analogous criticism in the domain of ethics.

difficulty of rigorous philosophizing and, more damningly, the responsibility of speculative reason to undertake self-critique, to get to the bottom of the problems it itself gives rise to.

While doing so would surely not be enough to eliminate the metaphysical inclination of human reason, it would nevertheless still be practically possible to give up philosophical ambitions and decide to remain within the bounds of the concrete use of reason in mundane life – just eat one’s daily homemade bread, as it were. This would be equivalent to saying, in the words of Persius that Kant quotes, “What I know is enough for me; I don’t care for the labors of Arcesilas or Solon” (A855/B883).²⁹ While this would surely be problematic for Kant from a political point of view – since such indifference to philosophy would likely express itself as a more or less passive response to the manifold of life and thereby be implicated in the “laziness and cowardice” of remaining a minor, i. e., not making an autonomous use of one’s reason in civil life – it is important to note that the problem he frames in regard to the naturalism of pure reason is not exactly indifference to scientific or technical philosophy in general but taking this indifference as the key to the correct procedure in metaphysics.³⁰

²⁹ See also 4: 278-9.

³⁰ This implies that, although he does not signal it explicitly, Kant frames his argument in terms of an operative distinction between naturalism *simpliciter* and the naturalism of pure reason. Iain MacKenzie too talks about a performative contradiction in this context, but his account misplaces its true source in a generic metaphysical inconsistency: “No amount of silky rhetoric proclaiming the poverty of philosophy can hide the fact that the indifferentists cannot avoid philosophical presuppositions” (MacKenzie 2004, p. 3). A comparable equivocation between indifferentism proper and indifference in general also hurts Frank Ruda’s interpretation of Kant in *Indifference and Repetition*, even though Ruda is otherwise quite perceptive in locating the point of departure of Kantian critique in the problem of indifference. He identifies the key philosophical gesture of the indifferentist in the decision not to decide (Ruda 2024, p. 51). But, as Kant’s criticism above demonstrates, the indifferentist, so far from being paralyzed between alternatives like Buridan’s ass which Ruda uses to illustrate the indifferentist’s deadlock, has no trouble deciding on matters on which he has not secured the right to decide: that is, after all, what common sense is there for! In other words, so far from being paralyzed to the point of starvation out of a decision not to decide, the indifferentist wants to have his homemade bread *and* eat it too.

To the extent that in practice this is equivalent to the methodological decision to rely on common sense to decide in metaphysical matters, the indifferentist's performative contradiction is exacerbated by a twofold inadequacy of common sense, first as a justificatory tool, then as an adjudicative authority. It is, to begin with, unfit to make proper sense of the a priori content of metaphysical concepts and principles, let alone provide a justification for them. Common sense, or ordinary human understanding, as Kant defines it, is "the faculty of cognition and of the use of rules *in concreto*" and as such it can make sense of these only insofar as they can be exemplified in experience: not "All alterations occur in accordance with the law of the connection of cause and effect" but "The glass broke because it fell to the ground."

Hammer and chisel are perfectly fine for working raw lumber, but for copperplate one must use an etching needle. Likewise, sound common sense and speculative understanding [*gesunder Verstand sowohl als speculativer*] are both useful, but each in its own way; the one, when it is a matter of judgments that find their immediate application in experience, the other, however, when judgments are to be made in a universal mode, out of mere concepts, as in metaphysics, where what calls itself (but often *per antiphrasin*) sound common sense has no judgment whatsoever.³¹ (4:259-260)

Only speculative understanding, armed with the analytic and justificatory apparatus of transcendental philosophy, can make sense, e.g., of the principle of causality in its a priori, i.e., abstract and universal, con-

Deciding not to decide better exemplifies the skeptical attitude that Kant associated with the critical stance: not the negative certainty of dogmatic doubt but what Kant calls "the doubt of deferment" (8:226-7), the decision "to decide nothing without examination" (24:212), which he utilized as the metaphilosophical principle of *judicial impartiality* in his critique of pure reason, most notably in setting up the antinomies. See A423-4/B451-2; cf. A756/B784.

³¹ See also 4:278-279, 369-71, 8:415. Note that in passages like this where Kant uses "speculative" to characterize understanding, he uses the word in its broad sense to mean "abstract" or "discursive" and contrasts it with the concrete cognition of common sense.

tent and ground it as a principle of the possibility of experience. It is this transcendental procedure of grounding – executed twofold, first as transcendental deduction (of the pure concepts of the understanding), then as transcendental proof (of the principles of pure understanding) – that raises natural metaphysics in the sense of metaphysics of common sense (subjective genitive) to the level of science, viz., ontology, but only by reframing the latter into a “mere analytic of the pure understanding” (A247/B302): if against the “proud title” of ontology this designation is an index of humility, then against the indifferentist presentation of ontology as a “metaphysics of common sense” (objective genitive) it functions as a critical reminder that ontology could not proceed as a mere explication of the concepts and principles already in use in common sense.³² Indeed, what makes critical philosophy properly transcendental – and enables it to transform the very framework of ontology – is precisely the discovery of a non-dogmatic procedure of philosophical argumentation that, in its broadly anti-skeptical orientation, is also not indifferentist in its methodological point of departure.

But the need to institute an ontology does not arise in relation to the empirical use of the understanding but as a result of the universal skepticism about the possibility of a priori cognition in general that first arises from “the unpoliced dialectic” (4:351) of pure reason.³³ It is in this connection that common sense betrays its second methodological inadequacy in metaphysics: it is unfit not only to provide a ground for *metaphysica generalis* but also to adjudicate on speculative disputes in *metaphysica specialis*. This should not be surprising since Kant construes reason’s ascent to speculative heights, which without critique ultimately leads to its descent into “obscurity and contradictions” (Aviii), as a consequence of a certain self-reflexive normativity of reasoning that is operative also in common sense: reason starts from the principles of thinking (and acting) that have their practical validation in everyday experience (such as that of causality or of addition and division), but, through their unrestricted iteration (for “questions never cease”), ends up with versions of these principles “that

³² See 4:365.

³³ See also 8:227n.

overstep all possible use in experience, and yet seem so unsuspecting that even ordinary common sense agrees with them" (ibid.). Since it is itself complicit in reason's uncritical reach beyond experience, common sense remains ineffective in the face of metaphysical conflicts where each side has a legitimate claim to represent this or that interest of human reason.

Indifferentism represents the tendency to use common sense as an adjudicative authority in speculative disputes despite this shortcoming: by either imposing a premature reconciliation on the opposing sides, or appealing to our practical interest in morality, or feigning indifference to the whole matter.³⁴ None of these, however, would be satisfactory by the standards to which Kant holds pure reason, standards that are informed by his commitment to the idea of autonomy even in theoretical philosophy. The very idea of a critique of pure reason is animated by the conviction that pure reason, as a self-reflective capacity, must be able to solve its own problems, even if the solution would have to take the form of a "critical resolution", namely, the demonstration of their unsolvability. Reason, to be sure, can and must be criticized, but what indifferentism fails to appreciate – or, rather, chooses not to appreciate – is that since reason cannot meaningfully be *compelled* into *rational* insight – which would be a metaphilosophical iteration of the performative contradiction that plagues the naturalist methodology of the indifferentist – responsibility falls on it to criticize itself. Reason, in other words, can neither exempt itself from critique nor delegate its right of (self-)critique to another authority.³⁵ Such is the basic idea informing the design of the critique of pure reason as a tribunal that sets the stage for philosophy to simultaneously put to use and explicate pure reason as an autonomous capacity for self-discipline. With its talk of the frailty of the human understanding and appeals to common sense "as the highest tribunal of truth",³⁶ indifferentism may proffer an image of reasonableness that is palatable to the sensibility of

³⁴ See A464/B492-3, A473/B501-502, 8:152.

³⁵ See, esp., A738-9/B766-7, but also Axi-xii, A423-4/B451-2, A744/B772, A751-2/B777-80, A475-6/B503-4, A838/B866. See also O'Neill 1990, Ch. 1, and Neiman 1994, pp. 195, 200-201.

³⁶ Quoted in Kuehn 1987, p. 116. See also Mendelssohn 2001, pp. 20, 57, 59-60.

the age, but to recognize, in Reid's words, "the dictates of Common Sense" as fundamentally binding for philosophical inquiry is to refer reason to a heteronomous criterion of accountability and truth – and the "despotism" involved in this metaphilosophical gesture is just what Kantian critique is designed to drive out of philosophy.³⁷

* * *

The confusion of the indifferentist methodological outlook is connected to yet another problem: the *instability* of its meta-metaphysical position. When the boundaries separating the legitimate from the illegitimate cognitive use of pure reason are only intimated instead of being established with complete determinacy, they lack normative bindingness for philosophical inquiry. The result is typically one of the following: either the indifferentists themselves overstep those boundaries but with the semblance of continuing to do good metaphysics, or, even where they happen to maintain a modicum of consistency, their position lacks the efficacy to produce lasting conviction against the dogmatist. Kant's worry is that appeals to common sense will either degenerate into a form of dogmatism or will leave the door wide open to such a degeneration.

It can [...] help nothing at all to want to curb these fruitless endeavors of pure reason by all sorts of admonitions about the difficulty of resolving such deeply obscure questions, by complaints over the limits of our reason, and by reducing assertions to mere conjectures. For if the *impossibility* of these endeavors has not been clearly demonstrated, and if reason's *knowledge of itself* does not become true science, in which the sphere of its legitimate use is distinguished with geometrical certainty (so to speak) from that of its empty and fruitless use, then these futile efforts will never be fully abandoned. (4:317)

³⁷ Reid 2000, p. 19. Also note Kant's language in the preface: "not by dictates [*Machtsprüche*] but according to [reason's] own eternal and unchangeable laws" (translation slightly modified).

Critique as the knowledge of pure reason's necessary ignorance claims to be just this self-knowledge become true science. Short of such a critical self-knowledge, indifferentism will never be able to immunize philosophy against the speculative bent of human reason that gives rise to dogmatic metaphysics in the first place, because reason's metaphysical inclination will always prove stronger than the indifferentist's "indeterminate recommendations of moderation" (B128). Kant is adamant that no matter how unfruitful its historical attempts may have been, human reason will always continue to seek metaphysics: "We can therefore be sure that however obstinate or disdainful [*spröde, oder geringschätzend*] they may be who know how to judge a science not in accord with its nature, but only from its contingent effects, we will always return to metaphysics as to a beloved from whom we have been estranged" (A849-50/B877-8).³⁸ Indifferentism turns out to be just the expression of this estrangement, the vain attempt to stabilize pure reason's essential unrest by attempting to maintain an attitude of indifference to that for which it has an "undying affection" (4:380). This is why, from a historical and cultural point of view, indifferentism represents an unstable philosophical position with unrealistic aspirations: "it is pointless to affect *indifference* with respect to such inquiries, to whose object human nature *cannot* be *indifferent*" (Ax; emphases in the original).³⁹

³⁸ See also 4:381. Cf. 2:359.

³⁹ See also 29:765, 28:379. A note might be in order at this point to elucidate how this counterargument differs from the first one. Kant's first counterargument relied on the actuality of metaphysics as a natural predisposition of human reason thanks to the fact that ultimate questions of existence matter to us finite, rational beings. The point underscored now concerns human reason's equally essential interest in projecting and developing a *science* of metaphysics based on this predisposition. In other words, a third counterargument is necessary, because human reason's metaphysical predisposition expresses itself, according to Kant, as a predisposition to metaphysics: "the idea of a metaphysic inevitably presents itself to human reason, and the latter feels a need to develop it, though this science lies whole prefigured in the soul, albeit only in embryo" (20:342). Elsewhere Kant uses the image of a seed to describe the presence of the idea of metaphysics in human reason. See esp. 4:353, 4:368; also A834-5/B862-3.

Expanding upon this idea, Kant writes that precisely in those cognitions that “go beyond the world of the senses, where experience can give neither guidance nor correction, lie the investigations of our reason that we hold to be far more preeminent in their importance and sublime in their final aim than everything the understanding can learn in the field of appearances, in which we would rather venture everything, even at the risk of erring, than give up such important investigations because of any sort of reservation or from contempt and indifference [*Geringschätzung und Gleichgültigkeit*]” (A3/B6-7). Kant insists that the space reserved for metaphysical problems in the architecture of our rationality can be neither filled up by any other rational endeavor nor closed off from rational scrutiny, rendering any program of the positivistic elimination of metaphysics unfeasible: “Mathematics, natural science, law, the arts, even morals (and so on) do not completely fill up the soul; there still remains a space in it that is marked off for mere pure and speculative reason . . . [Metaphysics] has a greater attraction than any other theoretical knowledge, for which one would not readily exchange it” (4:381). And it is not just that human reason would not exchange metaphysics for any other theoretical discipline; it would even trade all of its other intellectual and scientific accomplishments for it: “Has the soul a continued existence to hope for after death? Does a unique being rule the world? If Newton had known how to have certain answers to these questions, he surely would give up all his findings for it” (29:378-9).⁴⁰

The priority that systematic metaphysics – in the broad sense of term inclusive of the critique of pure reason – enjoys over other disciplines and projects comes from its thematization and operationalization of reason purely in own terms, namely, as a self-projected unity of self-endorsed interests and ends. A critically grounded and elaborated metaphysics “considers reason according to its elements and highest maxims, which must ground even the *possibility* of some sciences and the *use* of all of them” (A850-1/B878-9), and thereby mediates the relation of all of our rational endeav-

⁴⁰ It is significant that Kant chose Newton as his hypothetical example, who was one of the heroes of the indifferentists, especially in France, for his epoch-defining refusal to “feign hypotheses”. See also 20:58-59.

ors to the essential ends of reason and the latter to its final end: “exactly in this sphere all other areas of learning and even ends [...] join together and unite in a whole” (4:381). As “the culmination of all *culture* of human reason” (A850/B878), such a metaphysics constitutes the highest instance of what Kant dubs philosophy according to its “cosmic concept [*Weltbegriff*] (*conceptus cosmicus*),” namely, “the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*)” (A838-9/B866-7; translation slightly modified). In its “worldly” character, that is to say, insofar as it addresses “that which necessarily interests everyone” (A839n/B867n), metaphysics reaches its culmination as the practico-dogmatic metaphysics of the highest good, which recuperates pure reason’s three cardinal ideas, in the wake of the critical verdict that they can afford no theoretical knowledge, as items of a rational faith that is necessary for me to maintain my hope that I may be adequate to the demands of my freedom, that this hope will not be defeated beyond redemption.⁴¹

At this point of pure practical rational faith reason’s initial advance toward the cognition of the supersensible “takes the form of a circle, whose boundary line returns into itself” (20:300), the same circle whose completion, Kant had written, is the only thing that could give our reason genuine “peace” (A797/B825). This is the peace that comes from “the full satisfaction” (A855/B883) of human reason’s metaphysical need. Reason’s satisfaction in what drives it to seek metaphysical cognitions is full yet qualified, owing to its shift of perspective from the speculative to the practical in accordance with the critical limitation of knowledge. In this regard, it is not as exaggerated as it may otherwise sound to claim that one fundamental goal of Kant’s critical philosophy is to clarify and elaborate the very idea of metaphysics so that it can reinterpret and accommodate the very need that drives it, namely, as a need that is connected to our moral consciousness and practical vocation.

⁴¹ These three articles of faith concern, first, the existence of God (as the moral author of the world securing the possibility of the alignment of virtue and happiness), then, the reality of freedom (as autarchy in the sense of the strength of will to attain virtue), and, finally, the immortality of the soul (as a requirement for the eternity we may need to approximate the ideal of morality in our efforts at moral reformation). See 20:298-9, also 5:471-472.

The image of the circle, however, suggests not only a *return* to the beginning point, a reconnection with what set reason on this path in the first place but also a *detour* that in this case is none other than Kant's own transcendental critique, the pinnacle of philosophy *in sensu scholastico*. This leaves him exposed to an indifferentist rejoinder that would have confronted him even at the very beginning: why then all this trouble, this immense conceptual labor, if we could have accessed this practical faith, directly and much more easily, through the healthy moral wisdom of an unprejudiced common sense?⁴² But even the simplicity of ordinary moral consciousness is not immune to being corrupted by the speculative: "Innocence is amiable, but not secure against seduction" (24:799). Therefore, "the path to wisdom, if it is to be assured and not impassible or misleading, must for us human beings unavoidably pass through science; but it is not till science is completed that we can be convinced that it leads to that goal" (5:141). There is, in other words, no shortcut to wisdom, no genuine satisfaction for a reason that brackets the demands of science and simply holds on to what it thinks is already within its immediate reach. Wisdom is "presumed and cheaply gained" if it does not integrate into its vision of the *ends* of reason a vision of its *limits*. Metaphysics, in its progression from the critique of pure reason to the practico-dogmatic doctrine of the highest good, does just that – and in doing so expresses and institutes a coherent and sustainable self-understanding of human reason that does justice to its constitutive propensity to develop and unify its aims and projects under a single, final end. Thus understood, metaphysics "alone constitute[s] that which we can call philosophy in a genuine sense" and "relates everything to wisdom, but through the path of science, the only one which, once cleared, is never overgrown, and never leads to error" (A850/B878).⁴³

* * *

⁴² See, esp., A830-1/B858-9.

⁴³ For excellent discussions of Kant's concept of metaphysics in the context of the teleology of reason, see Ferrarin 2015, esp. pp. 80-98 and 235-252, and Fugate 2016.

In each of these arguments, Kant's response to the indifferentist is basically one and the same: *metaphysics is indispensable*. But in each case the sense in which metaphysics is indispensable is different. The indispensability of metaphysics is recognized, first, as a *natural predisposition* of human reason; then, as a *science*, indeed, one that crucially includes the critique of pure reason; and finally, as the *consummate culture* of reason as its maximally coherent and comprehensive self-articulation. To speak in modal terms, these three moments of the indispensability of metaphysics correspond, respectively, to the *actuality* of metaphysics (insofar as it pertains to the teleology of human reason), its *necessity* (as the examination of its possibility in the form of a critique of the faculty of pure reason), and its *desirability* (as the systematic self-understanding of human reason as an autonomous power of knowing and acting in the world).

Against this background, it is not hard to see that this triad of arguments also correlates with the key stages of human reason's involvement in metaphysics, namely, its *need for*, *right to*, and *satisfaction* in metaphysics. The first argument relies on a certain conception of a metaphysical inclination or need that, in being endemic to the telic nature of human reason, opens up the very domain of philosophizing. The second argument concerns at bottom the question of right at the metaphilosophical level and, with it, the entire reconfiguration of the transcendental under the exigency of critique. And the third and final argument refuses as inadequate and unrealistic all attempts to divert or suppress this metaphysical need and signals that it must be able to be satisfied in a metaphysics that is instituted consistently with the transcendental-critical solution to the question of right. Taken together, these three arguments reveal not only how extensive the indifferentist challenge to metaphysics truly is but also how embedded in the indifferentist problematic Kant's critical reformulation and solution to the problem of metaphysics remains. When seen in their systematic interconnection, these arguments indicate that their coordinated elaboration coincides with Kant's systematic solution to the problem of metaphysics in the complete trajectory of the development of its idea, starting with the *origin* of metaphysics, going through its *ground*, ending in its *completion*.

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