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www: drustvo-dtp.si

E: analecta@drustvo-dtp.si

PUBLISHING BOARD

Miran Božovič, Mladen Dolar, Peter Klepec, Alenka Zupančič (president), Slavoj Žižek

EDITED BY Alenka Zupančič, Gregor Moder and Dan Nădășan

COPYEDITED BY Josh Rocchio

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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Kant, Mysticism, and the Pre-Ontological Real

Sabine Hossenfelder repeatedly formulated in some of her podcasts the extreme sceptic claim that we cannot be absolutely sure that the outside reality really exists, that it is not just a hallucination in my mind. I agree with her, but also at the ontological level. What we perceive in our everyday life as external reality is, as we have abundantly learned from relativity theory and quantum mechanics, an appearance concealing a radically different reality. We try to formulate this different reality through modern science, but there is a radical uncertainty inscribed into the very heart of this reality: the more we try to reach and grasp the real beneath it, the more we are dealing with symbolic constructs that do not fit what we experience as our reality. Just think about how in recent decades, quantum scientists have advocated totally incompatible theories: Multiple Worlds, repeated Big Bangs, etc. It is as if we are cursed by a vicious cycle here: the more we want to grasp how things “really are in themselves,” the more we get caught up in intellectual speculations. My sad conclusion is that, while I fully respect the efforts of quantum physics, the only moments when we are in touch with the Real are the moments of what Lacan called “subjective destitution” and/or what mystics called the “night of the world,” the collapse of the symbolic universe. We should fearlessly *reject* “objective reality”: when reality dissolves into “subjective” fragments, *these fragments*

themselves fall back into the Real, losing their subjective consistency. The paradox of the postmodern rejection of the consistent Self resides in its ultimate result: we lose its opposite, objective reality itself, which is transformed into a set of contingent subjective constructions. A true materialist should do the opposite: refuse to accept “objective reality” in order to undermine consistent subjectivity. The task is not to grasp how reality is “in itself,” independently of our mind, but the task is to locate our mind itself, inclusive of its antagonisms, gaps, and tensions, *and* inclusive of its symbolic constructions of “objective reality,” into a historical Real.

Alain Badiou opposes mysticism and philosophy as the two modes to approach the unity of being and existence (for Badiou, “being” designates the multiplicity grounded in a Void, i.e., a sphere of ontology whose modern secular form is pure mathematics, while “existence” is a transcendental category: a multiplicity “exists” if it has its place in a transcendental horizon that structures a domain of being, transforming meaningless multiplicity into an element of the order of meaning, of a potential subjective engagement) (Badiou, 2025). Mysticism asserts a direct “irrational” (or, rather, pre-rational) unity of being and existence: the unity of being as One is not constructed through a long process of rational development (as is the case with Hegel’s logic, which begins with pure being and ends with the rational totality of absolute Idea), it is immediately “felt” as an intuition. In other words, in mystical experience, beginning and end directly coincide and there is no work of reason needed to mediate them. In my view, however, a mystical experience is not that of the direct-intuitive unity but, on the contrary, the experience of a radical discordance, of a fall from unity, of the pure (pre-dialectical) absolute contradiction that opens up space for every form of rational elaboration. Intuition of failure here paradoxically coincides with the failure of intuition.

In this sense, I endorse John Millbank’s characterization of my stance as that of “mystic materialism” – the “mystic” dimension has nothing to do with some obscure spiritualism, but it simply points towards the “night of the world,” the zero-level, the ground on which our universe thrives. Not only do I endorse Millbank’s characterization, but I also want to emphasize the conjunction of the two terms, “mystical” and “materialism”: since

our perception of external reality is always mediated by the symbolic order and thus has the minimal status of a symbolic fiction, our only contact with what one cannot but naively call “reality as it is in itself” occurs in mystical experiences, which brings us close to the very gap in the Real that establishes us as subjects. We should thus totally reject the equation of an authentic mystical experience with any kind of spiritualism: mystical experience is the only ultimate proof against solipsism, a proof that we are not alone, that we are embedded in material reality.

How are we to understand this? Lacan said in 1969 (a year after the fateful 1968): “You are, however strange this may appear, the cause of yourself. Only there is no self. Rather there is a divided self” (Lacan, 1969). Lacan’s logic is here clear: *objet a* is the object-cause of desire, but this weird object is the subject itself in its objectivized form, so the subject causes itself through *objet a*, and the basic division of the subject is this very division between $\$$ and *a*, which are the same thing in the form of lack and excess. All the paradoxes of human subjectivity are grounded in this incompatibility of subject and *a*: *a* is the obstacle to my identity, a foreign stain in me, but this very obstacle causes me as the subject of desire.

In his Seminar XIV, Lacan mentions the “weird correspondence between subject and object” (“l’étrange correspondance entre sujet et objet”) (Lacan, 1967) – why is this correspondence strange? For two interconnected reasons. First, this correspondence is not what philosophers usually mean by the correlation between subject and object – it is almost its opposite, a kind of negative correlation, since the subject is defined precisely by being a non-object. Subject and object are two sides of the same coin, lack and excess; they cannot be “synthesized” so that excess will fill in the lack because they are strictly coexistent, one and the same thing at two different levels – if the lack were to be filled in, there would no longer be a subject, and the subject would fall into reality as one of the objects. Second, this correspondence is not properly dialectical but a non-dialectical foundation, a gap that opens up and sustains the very space of dialectics, in some sense even its non-dialectical presupposition.

To clarify this crucial point, one should venture into the notion of a Thing that is not a part of our (transcendentally constituted) reality. In

Die Frage nach dem Ding, his treatise on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Heidegger restricts himself to "thing" in the sense of an empirical object, part of our transcendently constituted reality, without mentioning the Thing in the more radical Freudian or Lacanian sense needed: the pre-ontological Real, the "immortal" horror not bound by finitude, a feature of imagination prior to fantasy, like Maupassant's *horla* or the alien from Ridley Scott's film of the same name (Heidegger, 2018). We should render here the two opposed philosophical senses of imagination. In Kant, imagination is a synthetic activity that is necessary for reality to manifest itself, a medium in which sensory data and pure reason come together – to quote Ulisses Razzante Vaccari: "This conciliatory function of imagination shows, via a synthesizing action, how the manifold may be then connected by knowledge as it pervades the manifold of the sensitive data and makes it available to the synthetic unity of apperception" (Vaccari, 2008). Imagination is thus transcendental, constitutive even of our perception of actual objects, and Heidegger focuses on this, reading imagination as pre-discursive Manifestness. In Lacan's terms, we could read this imagination as the fantasmatic support of reality.

In Hegel, imagination at its most radical is pre-ontological, the violent activity of tearing things apart, the infinite power of abstraction. One cannot avoid mentioning here two often quoted passages, the first one from *Jenaer Realphilosophie* and the second one from the preface to the *Phenomenology*. There is nothing more foreign to Hegel than the lamentation of the richness of reality that gets lost when we proceed to its conceptual grasping – recall Hegel's already quoted unambiguous celebration of the absolute power of Understanding:

What is thus separated, and in a sense is unreal, is itself an essential moment; for just because the concrete fact is self-divided, and turns into unreality, it is something self-moving, self-active. The action of separating the elements is the exercise of the force of Understanding, the most astonishing and greatest of all powers, or rather the absolute power. The circle, which is self-enclosed and at rest, and, *qua* substance, holds its own moments, is an immediate relation, the immediate, continuous relation of elements with

their unity, and hence arouses no sense of wonderment. But that an accident as such, when out loose from its containing circumference, – that what is bound and held by something else and actual only by being connected with it, – should obtain an existence all its own, gain freedom and independence on its own account – this is the portentous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of pure Self. (Hegel 1977, pp. 18-19)

This celebration is in no way qualified, i. e., Hegel's point is not that this power is nonetheless later "sublated" into a subordinate moment of the unifying totality of Reason. The problem with Understanding is rather that it does not unleash this power to the end, that it takes it as external to the thing itself – like, in the above-quoted passage from *Phenomenology*, the standard notion that it is merely *our* Understanding ("mind") that separates in its imagination what in "reality" belongs together, so that the Understanding's "absolute power" is merely the power of our imagination, which in no way concerns the reality of the thing so analyzed. We pass from Understanding to Reason not when this analyzing, tearing apart, is overcome in a synthesis that brings us back to the wealth of reality, but when this power of "tearing apart" is displaced from "merely our mind" into things themselves, as their inherent power of negativity. In this way, the dimension of the Imaginary returns in its grounding role, not as the site of imaginary identifications and self-recognition but as a (possible) name for the violent act of dismembering (the production of *le corps morcele* with its *membra disjecta*), which tears apart every organic unity. In a move further from Kant, imagination is asserted not just as synthesis but also as "analysis," the activity of tearing apart what seemed to belong together. Hegel formulated this process in his *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, where he writes about the "Night of the World":

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him – or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here – pure self – in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head – there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so

disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes awful. (Hegel 1974, p. 204)¹

One should not be blinded by the poetic power of this description, but read it precisely. The first thing to note is how the objects that freely float around in this “night of the world” are *membra disjecta*, partial objects, objects detached from their organic Whole – is there not a strange echo between this description and Hegel’s description of the negative power of Understanding, which can abstract an entity (a process, a property) from its substantial context and treat it as if it had an existence of its own? It is thus as if, in the ghastly scenery of the “night of the world,” we encounter something like *the power of Understanding in its natural state*, spirit in the guise of a *proto-spirit* – this, perhaps, is the most precise definition of horror: when a higher state of development violently inscribes itself in the lower state, in its ground/presupposition, where it cannot but appear as a monstrous mess, a disintegration of order, a terrifying unnatural combination of natural elements. This is why Hegel does not consider madness an accidental lapse, distortion, or “illness” of human spirit, but something that is inscribed into an individual spirit’s basic ontological constitution: to be a human means to be potentially mad:

This interpretation of insanity as a necessarily occurring form or stage in the development of the soul is naturally not to be understood as if we were asserting that every mind, every soul, must go through this stage of extreme derangement. Such an assertion would be as absurd as to assume that because in the *Philosophy of Right* crime is considered as a necessary manifestation of the human will, therefore to commit crime is an inevitable necessity for every individual. Crime and insanity are *extremes* which the human mind *in general* has to overcome in the course of its development. (Hegel 1830, §408)

Although not a factual necessity, madness is a formal possibility constitutive of the human mind: it is something whose threat must be overcome

¹ Translation quoted from Donald Phillip Verene (1985, pp. 7-8).

if we are to emerge as “normal” subjects, which means that “normality” can only arise as the overcoming of this threat. This is why, as Hegel put it a couple of pages later, “insanity must be discussed before the healthy, intellectual consciousness, although it has that consciousness for its *pre-supposition*” (*ibid.*). In short, we do not all have to be mad in reality, but madness is the Real of our psychic lives, a point to which our psychic lives necessarily refer in order to assert themselves as “normal.”

Do we encounter this Real of madness in what Heidegger calls “the forgetting of the meaning of being”? But what if metaphysics is precisely the stance of (not just “letting be” what is there in its meaninglessness but) a desperate search to find a meaning that sustains beings? So how does the horizon of meaningfulness/disclosure relate to Sartre’s nausea? Is nausea simply the traumatic experience of being outside a disclosure of meaning? It’s not so simple: the disgusting thick absurd presence is not reality in itself, it remains fully subjective in its substantiality – the true in-itself is closer to quantum waves, their pure non-substantial oscillations. Here is a key passage from Sartre’s *Nausea*:

This moment was extraordinary. I was there, motionless, paralyzed, plunged in a horrible ecstasy. But at the heart of this ecstasy, something new had just appeared; I understood the nausea, I possessed it. To tell the truth, I did not formulate my discoveries to myself. But I think it would be easy for me to put them in words now. The essential point is contingency. I mean that by definition existence is not necessity. To exist is simply ... to be there; existences appear, let themselves be *encountered*, but you can never *deduce* them. (Sartre, 1959)

Sartre is here at the opposite end of Andrei Tarkovsky, whose films enact the impossible combination, a divine experience *and* disgusting wet mud. We should thus get rid of the fear that, once we ascertain that reality is the infinitely divisible, substanceless void within a void, “matter will disappear.” What the digital information revolution, the biogenetic revolution, and the quantum revolution in physics all share is that they mark the reemergence of what, for want of a better term, I am tempted to call

postmetaphysical idealism. It is as if Chesterton's insight into how the materialist struggle for the full assertion of reality, against its subordination to any "higher" metaphysical order, culminates in the loss of reality itself: what began as the assertion of material reality in modern sciences ended up in the realm of the pure formulas of quantum physics. Is this really, however, a form of idealism? Since the radical materialist stance asserts that there is no World, that the World in its Whole is Nothing, materialism has nothing to do with the presence of damp, dense matter – its proper figures are, rather, constellations in which matter seems to "disappear," like the pure oscillations of superstrings or quantum vibrations. On the contrary, if we see in raw, inert matter more than an imaginary screen, we have always secretly endorsed some kind of spiritualism. As we have already mentioned, the supreme expression of such spiritual materialism is found in the films of Tarkovsky: when one of their heroes has a spiritual experience, it is not by way of an effort to elevate himself above the earthly reality, gazing up towards heaven or a distant horizon; on the contrary, he lies flat on the humid earth, soaking his face into mud and dirty water. It is needless to add that such a spiritualization of matter is the very opposite of the basic stance of modern science, in which "matter" is also "spiritualized," but in a totally different way: matter becomes an abstraction formalized in mathematical formulas. Here we encounter another crucial aspect of the opposition in the idealism/materialism dichotomy: materialism is not the assertion of inert material density in its humid heaviness – such a "materialism" can always serve as a support for gnostic spiritualist obscurantism. In contrast, true materialism joyously assumes the "disappearance of matter," the fact that there is only void.

I recently stumbled upon a rather imbecilic rightist podcast against Hegel, which nonetheless got one point right: this origin of the entire line of thought from Hegel to Marx and Communism resides in the Rhine mystics, from Meister Eckhart to Jacob Boehme (TIKhistory, 2024). In contrast to previous (and later) mystics (like the Neo-Platonists) who practiced the bottom-up approach (our material reality emerges through the gradual process of the fall from the supreme divine Absolute), the Rhine mystics practiced a top-down one: their starting point is humans as fallen beings

since, god himself needs humans to become actual god (even though, or, rather, precisely because humans stand for fall, sin). As Eckhart put it: not only is god the origin of man but god in his full actuality is at the same time born in man. Especially important is here Jacob Böhme whom Hegel described as “the first German philosopher.” Boehme asserts the embrace of the *Ungrund*, the Nothing considered as a pure ungrounding – it is this nothing which generates a tragedy in god Himself, and in so doing generates in the divine justice the tragedy of its own undoing in actuality. Everything, from the Godhead down, is comprehended as enclosing within it already the seed of its undoing.

The notion of the *Ungrund*, of the abyss, without foundation, dark and irrational, prior to being, is an attempt to provide an answer to the basic question of all questions, the question concerning the origin of the world and of the arising of evil. The *Ungrund* is interwoven with freedom: it is impossible to separate them, the *Ungrund* as a primordial freedom is indeterminate even for God. Boehme’s teaching about the *Ungrund* and freedom is an attempt to apperceive the world-creation from the inner life of the Divinity: the world-creation bears a relationship to the inner life of the Divine Trinity, and cannot be for It something completely external. The principle of evil thus acquires an actual seriousness and tragic aspect. Boehme senses God not only as love, but also as anger and wrath. He senses within God a poignant and harsh quality: the God the Old Testament is wrath, while Christ is love. Boehme teaches about torment in the dark abyss, which the light of Christ has to conquer. Along these lines, Badiou perspicuously turns around the theological premise that god created the world out of nothing:

In the theological discourse this is how God created the world: out of nothing. But I’d still say that the greatest example of creation ex nihilo is the creation of God. It was God, rather than the world, that was created out of nothing! Because if God had existed, the creation of the world wouldn’t have been a problem. God is, by definition, limitless. His power is infinite, so he could well have created something out of nothing. The problem lies rather with us: how could we, poor finite, mortal humans, create something out of nothing? (Badiou, 2025)

My putative reply to this claim is: God as infinitely powerful precisely could NOT create something out of nothing (if we ignore the thesis that “nothing” is not just nothing but an unformed mass, like Plato’s *khora*). God as infinitely powerful stands for unconditional actuality where there is no space for creation – already in the *Talmud* we can read that god should first contract himself and create the nothing itself, and this contraction is a kind of self-limitation of god. But did we now not regress to a crazy mixture of Gnosticism and Hegelian speculation, ending up in a topic of the Absolute that is clearly out of place in our post-Hegelian universe? Was Hegel not the last one who dared to talk about the Absolute in this way? Further, in what precise sense *did* Hegel talk about the Absolute? In his short text “*The Return of Metaphysics: Hegel vs Kant*,” Robert Pippin provides a succinct description of his (Kantian, in my view) reading of Hegel:

Hegel’s basic claim had three components. The first is the claim that a priori knowledge of the world, the ordinary spatio-temporal world, is possible; knowledge about that world, but achieved independently of empirical experience. The second component is where all the interpretive controversies begin. It is the claim that this a priori knowledge, while in some sense ultimately about the world, consists in thinking’s or reason’s *knowledge of itself*; thinking’s understanding of thinking or, as Hegel designates, a ‘science of pure thinking.’ ... Hegel’s enterprise takes as its topic the categories or ‘thought determinations’ (*Denkbestimmungen*) necessary for thought to have determinate objective content, *an enterprise that at the same time specifies the determinations inherent in the possible determinacy of being itself*. That means it is a metaphysics, one based on the ‘identity’ in this sense, of ‘thinking and being.’ This is not a knowledge of any nonsensible reality, it is a knowledge of any intelligible reality, the only kind there is. It is a revival of the great principle of classical philosophy: to be is to be intelligible. Thinking’s knowledge of itself is knowing what could be intelligible and therewith a knowledge of what could be. (Pippin, 2022)

Sum ergo cogito is thus the formula of transcendental idealism: whatever there is has to appear within the structure of *Denkbestimmungen* deployed

in logic, so that “I am” is already a statement within the space of thinking, i.e., only a thinking being can say “I am.” But is this the ultimate limit of our thought? Does Hegel really follow Kant’s insight that, even if our thinking cannot reach reality in itself, it has one object fully accessible to it – thinking itself? Pippin’s idea is that, based on this insight, Hegel simply extends it to all possible objects and thus elevates it into metaphysics: whatever we think is circumscribed by the form-determinations of our thinking.

However, Hegel’s “reversal” of Kant is much more refined and radical. Kant’s position is that the intractable thing that resists our cognitive grasp is reality “in itself,” while thinking can clearly analyze itself and bring out its own immanent structure – antinomies and inconsistencies only arise when thinking is applied to reality beyond the scope of our experience. Hegel’s position is that inconsistencies and “contradictions” are immanent to thinking, so that they emerge already when thinking tries to think itself, its own immanent structure – our thinking “reaches” reality precisely because its immanent “contradictions” mirror contradictions in/of reality itself. Thinking’s failure to grasp reality is immanent to reality itself.

In a way that is parallel though not identical to Hegel’s, Schelling radicalizes Kant’s notion of a primordial, atemporal, transcendental act by means of which we choose our “eternal character,” the elementary contours of our ethical identity. And the link with Freud’s notion of an *unconscious* decision is clear here: this absolute beginning is never made in the present, i.e., its status is that of a pure presupposition, of something that always-already took place. The topic of radical Evil, from Kant to Schelling, is an attempt to solve the enigma of how it is that we hold an evil person responsible for his deeds (although it is clear to us that the propensity to Evil is part of this person’s “nature,” i.e. that he cannot but “follow his nature” and accomplish his deeds with an absolute necessity), Kant and Schelling postulate a non-phenomenal, transcendental, atemporal act of primordial choice, by means of which, each of us, prior to our temporal bodily existence, chooses our eternal character. Within our temporal phenomenal existence, this act of choice is experienced as an imposed necessity, which means that the subject, in his phenomenal self-awareness,

is not conscious of the free choice that grounds his character (his ethical “nature”) – that is to say, this act is radically unconscious.

Kant gets involved here in a difficult predicament: for him, we are not free when we just do what we want, but only when we follow the moral law AGAINST our spontaneous tendencies (which enslave us to our pathological nature). However, in his detailed analysis of evil, Kant is compelled to distinguish between “ordinary” evil (the violation of morality on behalf of some “pathological” motivation, like greed, lust, ambition, etc.), “radical,” evil and “diabolical” evil. It may seem that we are dealing with a simple linear graduation: “normal” evil, more “radical” evil, and, finally, the unthinkable “diabolical” evil. However, upon closer look, it becomes clear that the three species are not at the same level, i.e., that Kant confuses different principles of classification. “Radical” evil does not designate a specific type of evil acts, but an a priori propensity of human nature (to act egotistically, to give preference to pathological motivations over universal ethical duty) which opens up the very space for “normal” evil acts, i.e., which roots them in human nature. In contrast to it, “diabolical” evil does designate a specific type of evil act: acts that are not motivated by any pathological motivation, but are done “just for the sake of it,” elevating evil itself into an a priori *non-pathological* motivation – something akin to Poe’s “imp of perversity.”

While Kant claims that “diabolical evil” cannot actually occur (it is not possible for a human being to elevate evil itself into a universal ethical norm), he nonetheless asserts that one should posit it as an abstract possibility. Interestingly enough, the concrete case he mentions (in Part I of his *Metaphysics of Mores*) is that of a judicial regicide, the murder of a king executed as a punishment pronounced by a court: Kant’s claim is that, in contrast to a simple rebellion in which the mob kills only the person of a king, the judicial process that condemns to death the king (this embodiment of the rule of law) destroys from within the very form of the (rule of) law, turning it into a terrifying travesty – which is why, as Kant put it, such an act is an “indelible crime” that cannot ever be pardoned. However, in a second step, Kant desperately argues that in the two historical cases of such an act (the killing of Charles I under Cromwell and the execution of the king in 1793 France), we were dealing just with a mob taking revenge. Why this oscillation and clas-

sificatory confusion in Kant? Because, if he were to assert the actual possibility of “diabolical evil,” he would find it impossible to distinguish it from the Good – since both acts would be non-pathologically motivated, the travesty of justice would become indistinguishable from *justice itself*.

This deadlock present in Kant demonstrates how right Lacan was when he pointed out that the idea of progressive evolution is a new form of teleology. The only way to break from teleology is to adopt a top-down reading of history that conceives of linear progress as a retroactive fact, as the outcome of a backward projection of our standpoint into the past. In a quantum-holographic history, this retroactivity is rendered visible, and all superpositions that were present in the past and were erased through their collapse are rendered visible again. In this sense, one can even say that Walter Benjamin, in his *Theses on History*, proposes a holographic notion of history in contrast to the predominant progressist-evolutionary version. A revolution in the present redeems the past in that it reactualizes past superpositions lost in their collapse towards a ruling ideology. Such a direct contact between the present and the past is timeless in the sense that it bypasses the network of causality and temporality connecting the past and the present. As Walter Benjamin put it in *The Concept of History*, “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth” (Benjamin 2005).

How can we read this claim without collapsing back into anthropocentric, teleological thinking? Perhaps the supreme example of what we might call ‘holographic history’ is provided by none other than Marx. Marx is not an evolutionist, he writes history ‘top-down’: his starting point is the contemporary global capitalist order and, from this position, he reads the entire history of human society as a gradual approach towards capitalism. Recall Marx’s top-down reading of history in the introduction to *Grundrisse*: “Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known” (Marx 1973, p. 38). There is no teleology here; the effect of teleology is strictly retroactive: *once capitalism is here* (emerging in a

wholly contingent way), it provides the key to understanding all the other possible formations. Teleology resides precisely in evolutionary progressivism where the key to the anatomy of man is the anatomy of apes. In a holographic, top-down history, the key to the anatomy of the ape is the anatomy of man that it anticipates.

This sense of radical contingency (brought about by awareness of the hologram images of what *could* have been) is also present in Kant, who claims that, in some sense, the world was created so that we can fight our moral struggles in it: when we are in the midst of an intense struggle, one that means everything to us, we experience it as if the whole world could collapse if we were to fail. A similar feeling occurs when we fear the failure of an intense love affair. There is no direct teleology here; our love is the result of a contingent encounter, so it could easily also not have happened – once it does happen, though, it decides how we experience the whole of reality. When Benjamin wrote that a big revolutionary battle decides not only the fate of the present but also of all past failed struggles, he mobilized the same retroactive mechanism epitomized by religious claims that, in a crucial battle, not only the fate of mortals but the fate of God himself is decided.

It is against this background that we should appreciate Peter Sloterdijk's reply to my brutal question about how he relates to god: "It wasn't me who abandoned god, god abandoned me, he pushed me away, he lost interest in me."² Far from a joke, this statement must be taken very seriously even (or even especially) by an atheist: becoming atheist is not a simple, subjective, free decision. Rather, my entire symbolic space is transformed, or, to repeat Deleuze, you can only choose (to drop god) if you are already chosen (i.e. if god has dropped you). Abandoning god is thus at its most basic not a primordial act but a *reaction* to "being abandoned by god." And this is what the naïve direct Enlightenment failed to see: in order for us to enter the space of rational argumentation, something has to happen in the space of the big Other in which we dwell – this is a crucial moment of the dialectics of Enlightenment.

² Private conversation.

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FRANK RUDA

Mutmaßung, or: For a Return to The Courage to Use One's Own Understanding

"We are always in peril, always in a bad plight, just on the edge of destruction and only saved by invention and courage."

(Emerson 1950, p. 508)

Introduction: The Concept of Courage

I will present in the following three distinct reflections that are all linked to a fundamentally Kantian diagnosis of a problem, notably that there is a lack of courage in the present world. The first part of the present article addresses (versions of) this historical diagnosis. The second part addresses the ideological and critical consequence of the historical diagnosis, and the third part presents a systematic rethinking of what is at stake with both the historical and the ideological components. The first part will reconstruct a diagnosis of the contemporary historical moment of decay. This is a diagnosis that claims we are living in the end times because there is a lack, or a suspension, of courage. This will not allow us to say what precisely courage is. Nevertheless, it will allow us to point out that, whatever it might be, we need it. The second part will allow us to say what courage cannot and should not be. And this will necessitate an elaboration of

the link between the concept of freedom and that of courage. Finally, the systematic and conceptual part will describe what kind of courage might confirm Kantian requirements.

Solzhenitsyn: Universal Cowardice

On 8 June 1978, Alexander Solzhenitsyn delivered a lecture – eight years after he won the Nobel prize¹ – at the invitation of Harvard University. It was broadcast throughout the USA and led to quite divided reactions. For some, it demonstrated that Solzhenitsyn was nothing short of a “fanatic,” an “orthodox mystic,” a “herald of the Cold War,” a “reactionary,” a ferociously doctrinal thinker and a “nostalgic of the Tsar”; for others it proved that he was “our Isaiah,” who “resuscitated the tradition of apocalyptic prophetism” and was a “direct heir to the homiletic tradition of New England” (cited in Duran 2022, p. 10f.). The lecture that produced such antagonistic reception was entitled “The Decline of Courage” / “A World Split Apart.” Speaking about courage and its decline seems to heat things up. Maybe this is especially the case when it comes from someone who was once – if rightly so or not – called “the most courageous writer in the whole history of Russia” for having “fought alone against the Soviet Empire” and for having won against it in the end (Yerofeyev 2008). For he had, at this time, converted from being a member of the Russian Orthodox Church to being a fighting atheist with Marxist-Leninist leanings, had been arrested and sent to the Moscow Gulag for criticizing Stalin, been stripped of his citizenship, whereupon he ended up in the US and ultimately reconverted to the Orthodox Church (he even met Putin).² Solzhenitsyn’s biography is up to this point – 1978 – riddled with punishments for acts that could be seen as being the embodiment of what Michel Foucault later described as those that display the courage of truth (Foucault 2011). It was certainly

¹ “Gulag Archipelago” appeared in 1973.

² At the heart of his position is “the spirituality of Russia, whose suffering is worth redeeming for all of humanity” since Russia has been chosen “for the painful edification of the century” (cf. Badiou 2018, p. 45).

this apparent courage to confront the Stalinist regime that made Solzhenitsyn, in Cold War times, an ideal ideological fit for delivering the commencement address at Harvard University – that is, at a university whose motto is “Veritas.”

Solzhenitsyn saw the truth of his contemporary world embodied in an increasing disappearance of worldly consistency that manifests itself in the violent assertion of Western supremacy over the rest of the planet. The West represents itself, in the present, as the future of the world as such. However, it is thereby blinding itself to the truth of a global situation that affects the East as well as the West. The Soviet Union pretended to bring about historical justice but did not have an impartial juridical system – and was hence structurally unjust –, whereas the West has no other idea of justice than that of having an impartial juridical system, by means of which it reinforces all the structural injustice that exists on a social, political and economic level. The West and the East are all the same. Yet, the West is also affected by another detrimental development. More specifically, Solzhenitsyn considers that “the most striking feature which an outside observer notices in the West in our days” is “the decline in courage” (Solzhenitsyn 1978). Even more so, “the Western world has lost its civil courage, both as a whole and separately, in each country, each government, each political party, and, of course, in the United Nations” (ibid.). The West in general, with its particularities, is the site of the disappearance of courage and it is structurally determined by this disappearance.

It “is particularly noticeable among the ruling groups and the intellectual elite, causing an impression of loss of courage by the entire society” (ibid.). The entire West has turned into a cowardly economic and socio-political organization, especially because its policies only follow someone else’s directive (that of the economy). This is why “political and intellectual bureaucrats show depression, passivity, and perplexity in their actions and in their statements, and even more so in theoretical reflections” (ibid.), for depression, passivity, and perplexity are what one gets when their courage is lacking. The decline of courage thus affects not only the modality of political action but also the domain of thought. This is one way of saying that, at least in the West, the state and its representatives

do not think (anymore). Thought and action are replaced by “state policies [based] on weakness and cowardice” (ibid.). Here, the diagnosis is that of a general paralysis of political life: “Should one point out that from ancient times declining courage has been considered the beginning of the end?” (ibid.). Courage declines: this is the beginning of the end. From a Kantian perspective, a historical sign in the negative sense could be identified here, a symptom of the end of a specific civilization or of civilization *tout court*.³ What Solzhenitsyn thus expresses is that courage is needed to see the truth of the situation, notably that not only courage is lacking, but that the Western world has entered into a mode of life that precisely avoids courageously seeing that which is obvious, namely its own end, and thus blindly persists in continuing as if this were still possible.

Kant: Courage and Historicity

One can recognize in this diagnosis a belated echo of Kant’s 1784 “What is Enlightenment?” (Kant 1991) that he famously begins by defining enlightenment as an *Ausgang*, an exit – a trope reminiscent of Plato’s cave, which also highlights a link between exiting a system that encloses itself upon itself, and thereby cuts itself off from the possibility of courage. Such an exit is from a self-incurred, self-inflicted immaturity. However problematic it might be to judge Kant’s claim vis-à-vis the actually existing enlightenment movement – and Hegel had brutal things to say about it –,⁴ his inaugural point is that the Enlightenment aims at exiting the ways of

³ This is a critique that resembles what one could call a critique of the Roman nature of the West. Rehearsing and updating the critique of the crumbling Roman Empire as the epitome of civilization instructs critiques of Western decline in a wide range of thinkers, from Spengler to Negri and Hardt.

⁴ Hegel *inter alia* points out that Kant’s Enlightenment endorsing the critique of pure reason ended up rationally justifying an irrational belief in God as a demand of reason that therefore was worse than previously dogmatic forms of religion, because it now naturalizes a concept of reason, which could not not be irrational and religious. Kant thus subverted reason by means of reason (cf. Hegel 1977, p. 79ff).

thinking that had become so engrained that they appeared natural, evident, and unavoidable to us. Enlightenment in this abbreviated sense is an attempt at denaturalizing what imprisons those who do not even recognize the prison anymore. For such a naturalizing imprisonment materializes when there is not only a “lack of understanding, but [a] lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another” (ibid., p. 54). Thinking for oneself requires courage. Otherwise, what we get instead is dogmatism and a lack of thought. A lack of courage is not only what we encounter at the beginning of the end times. A lack of courage is also how one experiences the midst of a self-incurred immaturity that could very well be the midst of those very times. This is why Kant translates Horace’s *sapere aude*, which could also be translated as “dare to know,” as “have the courage to use your own understanding!”

Without it, we get “laziness and cowardice [that] are the reasons why such a large proportion of men [...] gladly remains immature for life [...]. It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a [...] spiritual advisor to have conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not to make any efforts at all. I need not to think as long as I can pay” (ibid.). Without the courage to use one’s own understanding, one establishes an entire economy of those prosthetic extensions of humans (as Marshal McLuhan called all media) that take away our sovereignty and ultimately translate into an economy of experts – with an emphasis on both economy and experts – that takes over the administration of all determinations of our lives.

For Kant, it is the end times when lifestyle experts, spiritual advisors, and doctors start to rule. In such end times, those very experts have “first infatuated their domestic animals and carefully prevent the docile creatures from daring to take a single step without the leading strings to which they are tied, they next show them the danger which threatens them if they try to walk unaided [...] an example of this kind [...] usually frightens them off from further attempts” (ibid.). The end times come with an economy, with a production and management of fear that puerilizes. Therefore, everyone “is really incapable for the time being of using his own understanding” (ibid.). Getting used to not having the courage to

think for oneself ultimately leads to fearful incapacitation such that “they would still be uncertain in jumping over even the narrowest of trenches” (ibid., p. 55, transl. modified). Within the end times of experts, even the most modest leap of faith appears to be a jump over the Mariana Trench. This is what makes thinking for oneself quite difficult. Thinking cannot operate but by leading one through and over some trenches. One finds a similar diagnosis with a manifold series of thinkers – a very recent one was expressed in 2010 by Alain Badiou, who diagnosed a profound disorientation in the contemporary world, in the North as well as in the South, and that what therefore is needed more than ever is courage (Badiou 2010). The overall diagnostic point that thinkers as diverse as Kierkegaard, Kant, Hegel, or Badiou have in common is that, without courage, there is no leap of faith. And faith’s leaping is precisely that which thinking ultimately amounts to – which is one of the reasons why it has been said to have an inner connection to freedom.

One can also risk the claim that, in this regard, Kant’s 1786 text on the conjectural beginning of human history adds another dimension to the concept of courage (Kant 2007). Kant’s title reads in German *Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte*. *Mutmaßung*, conjecture, has in German literally *Mut* – courage – in it. Here, one can venture the claim that there is, at least for Kant, only proper history in the strong sense of the term, that is only an adequate form of historicity as the result of a leap of faith. This is to say that there is only historicity proper as a result of an act of courage – even though its leap is never a leap that would entirely lead out of the very nature that historicity seeks to liberate itself from. An act of liberation from nature is courageous *precisely* because it is an act against nature. Put differently, one can argue that for Kant human beings began to be human beings when, in their history, a courageous deed occurred. Courage makes history or history is made of courage. The reason for this is that such acts provide an adequate metric (*Maß*) by which to distinguish between what can count as history and what can count as nature. Human history begins with *Muth-maßung*, with courage proposing a measure of historical action, with an act of courageous *Maßnahme* und *Maß-Gabe* that did not previously exist. It makes and proposes an end – to nature – by

generating a possible measurement. This is why the lack of courage indicates the end of times, or of historicity as such.

The Ideological Critique of Freedom

These diagnoses are conceptually interesting today because they can be linked to a problem pertaining to the very notion and concept of freedom. Elsewhere (cf. Ruda 2016), I have argued that one can identify the repeated modern philosophical problematization of an ideology of naturalized freedom as an appropriation of freedom for the purpose of domination. In line with Lenin's harsh 1919 claim that, as long as we are living in any form of capitalist society, we should never use the signifier freedom, insofar as it is this very signifier that is crucial for organizing democratic forms of capitalist domination (cf. Lenin 1972), and in line with Angela Davis's 2008 remark that, after the official abolition of slavery in the US, "slavery was translated into the terms of freedom" (Davis 2012, p. 65), I maintained that freedom can become a signifier of political disorientation (Ruda 2024). This happens when it is taken for granted or as a natural given. The problem with it is that it makes us believe that freedom is real before it is realized. The way in which such mythical givenness presents freedom, at least in modernity, is in the form of a natural capacity that we are endowed with. That freedom is not a natural given and therefore not a possession does not only mean that freedom ought to be thought of as not simply individual but rather collective, even though this is undoubtedly true – in the sense argued for by Spinoza, Hegel, Marx, and many others. Nevertheless, if freedom becomes problematic when we take it to be a given, then thinking from the side of its collective actuality formally also means to rather think it systematically, in terms of its historical practice. There is no given freedom, but only practices of freedom, or, as Christoph Menke has argued, practices of liberation or emancipation (Menke 2024). Freedom thus takes shape concretely, even though it is universal, and such practices of freedom, emancipation, and liberation can elucidate how something can come about that we do not have, at least

not by nature. With regard to the concept of freedom, it is best to avoid being a naturalist.

This entails thinking of freedom historically, that is to say from the formal perspective of the *constitution* of freedom. Therefore, one must begin by losing what one never had – the fantasy of a freedom that is just given. Freedom is not, but it *happens*, it takes place, and it is enacted. Freedom manifests itself concretely, that is locally and always situationally, even though it is something that exceeds or is in excess of the situation. If freedom is not something that is just a given feature of our being, of our life form, and something that we therefore can never really lose – an assumption through which some parts of contemporary (critical) theory show not only their Aristotelian but also their therapeutic face, with the effect that all misunderstandings with regard to what freedom is can ultimately be corrected on the basis of its natural givenness –, then freedom is something that has to be created, maintained, and struggled for. Similarly to what Rimbaud said about love once, namely that “love must be reinvented” (Rimbaud 2001, p. 229), we can now claim that freedom must also (and maybe always) be reinvented. This is an inference that must be drawn, at least, when aiming to begin talking about the constitution, or shall we venture to say the beginning, of freedom. Such an approach does not only but can certainly also imply examining freedom’s material conditions. For if it depends on something that is not itself – as it is not a natural given –, the examination of its constitution will have to lead to an account of what it is that it is constituted by.⁵ It must depend on something that formally hetero-determines it. This is itself not a new thought, for already Rousseau claimed that we are forced to be free, or, as Deleuze has it, forced to think, that free practice is grounded in what Adorno called the addendum, a strange form of – almost Lutheran – compulsion; a moment

⁵ Hegel, for example, argued that, as long as people constantly have to worry about their own survival – for example in times of upheaval or war –, it is difficult to conceive of collective forms of social freedom emerging, like proper political self-determination or art (cf. Hegel 1986), even though it is certainly conceivable that even in times of great distress there can be other practices of freedom (people can still fall in love, for example).

of “*Here I stand, I can do no other!*” At the very origin of free practices, or practices of liberation, we experience a compulsion that leaves no choice. This is an insight that certainly also brings psychoanalysis to the table.

Some of our most intimate practices, ones that we identify as free, are certainly not constituted by our free will. Think of falling in love or of political, scientific, or artistic revolutions. In this regard, is not one of the crucial insights of psychoanalysis since its beginnings that the German folk song “Thoughts are free / Die Gedanken sind frei” (“Die Gedanken,” 2025) is not entirely true? One just has to recall their dreams from the previous night in order to prove this point. This obviously does not simply mean that we are merely and entirely determined, but rather that moments of freedom emerge when forms of determination, compulsion, or force emerge and when these forms of determination produce a gap, a hole in what otherwise determines and orients us. There is therefore, unavoidably, a transformative side to practices of freedom, even though these practices do not originate in freedom itself or in a free decision. Taking on such a hetero-determination as the ground of one’s being, of one’s freedom, means to conceive of one’s being historically, but also as being grounded in action and practice.

One consequence of such a view is elaborated by Frantz Fanon in *A Dying Colonialism* (Fanon 1965), in which he, at one point, argues that the very meaning of the signifier “Algerian” has changed due to the struggle against colonial French occupation, since Algeria had in this way become a signifier of the liberation of the world as such, even though this new meaning came with a loss and a certain reinvention of previously existing Algerian culture.⁶ “Algerian” now became the epitomization of a culture involved in the struggle against colonialism and thereby it redetermined, reinvented, and recreated itself. In this sense, wearing a veil was no longer simply an indication of a culture that was oppressive to women – even though “the behavior of the Algerian was very firmly denounced and described as medieval and barbaric” (Fanon 1965, p. 38) – but rather it

⁶ “The thesis that men change at the same time that they change the world has never been so manifest as it is now in Algeria” (Fanon 1965, p. 30).

became a form of resistance that Fanon calls “counter-assimilation” (ibid., p. 42). Freedom, or acts of liberation, in this case spring from a practice of counter-assimilation. Such a practice is also constituted by taking up a moment of hetero-determination as determination of a thereby transformed self. This is then the self that is, in Fanon’s case, transformed by a newly identified necessity for a struggle for emancipation. Such an act of identification of a necessity that is historically new is ultimately an identification of courage. It is an identification of something that is not negotiable and that forces one to persist. Courage is needed to do, to maintain, or unfold what derives from something that emerges as a new compulsion, a novel element in a historical situation – this is why courage appears when a situation is historical in the strong sense of the term. Such courage cannot be grounded in any already existing forms of knowledge or capacities.

Courage in Modus Addendi

Such courage is the courage to follow the compulsion arising from an addendum. This is why the influential Aristotelian definition of courage no longer applies here. Since, for Aristotle, in my reformulation, courage was the practically skilled and learned adequate situational application of a practical skill in the right moment and for the right reasons. Courage was a practical application of such skill and knowledge to a situation of danger that thereby was rationally apprehended in a skilled and knowledgeable way. We are dealing with courageous acts that accept a form of heterogeneity, a force at the very ground of freedom. It means that such courage comes with a change of coordinates: one accepts that one is supposed to act but one does not know how to. It implies an acceptance of a fundamental disorientation. Such a different form of courage then comes with ending a certain organization of one’s own world, but it enables and is part of the creation of a new one. Courage is creative because it denaturalizes, not only the world but also what seems possible or impossible within it. Thereby it denaturalizes what we think we are, what we think we have, what we think we are able to do, what we assume our situation

to be. Such denaturalization allows us to detect a limit point, something that the present situation hinges on and that seems impossible to tackle or question. It confronts us, therefore, with a question: What is the one thing, the one signifier, that one is not allowed to touch? The one for no one. What is the point that appears impossible to denaturalize (or historicize)?

Practices of collective freedom work with and on such points of impossibility. But how does one identify such practices of freedom? Here, two answers must be avoided: the first one is that they can simply be derived from our given experience (as these given experiences usually reflect the structure of the world as it is and, if practices of freedom are indeed transformative, they cannot simply be grounded in what is). This is the phenomenological or materialist temptation. But they also cannot simply be defined normatively; from a neutral theoretical or philosophical position, for the exercise would then be to find specimens of them, embodiments of their concept in the world. This is the idealist temptation.

Neither on the basis of experience nor through the application of a concept, but rather when they describe themselves as practices of liberation or transformation and actually appear transformative can one identify practices of liberation or transformation. This means that philosophy is also under hetero-determination and thus under the condition of practices in which hetero-determined practices of freedom take place. One must be on the watch and listen, a most important lesson taught by psychoanalysis. This means that philosophy's task is to reshape its concepts under the pressure of what happens outside of it. It has to learn to speak the languages of those outside of it and to listen to what can seem inaudible. As philosophy is attentive to the often invisible and inaudible extraordinary and transformative outside of it, it has to be *extraordinary-language-philosophy*, that is, the philosophy of the languages of extraordinary transformation. This does not imply that all self-declared transformation is transformative. More specifically, protocols of verification are needed to determine whether a practice is actually transformative or not. For there are practices that remain emancipatory and prevent themselves from becoming ossified. Some do this only for a certain time – even if, for example,

the Russian Revolution failed brutally, it was not a criminal experiment all along. Others pretend to be emancipatory and are not. The self-description of the German Nazi party as a transformative orientation was certainly never adequate, despite its own rhetoric (cf. Aly 2016 and Badiou 2005, pp. 10-26). Something similar holds for many contemporary positions on the right side of the political spectrum. The terms provided by those who claim the courage to make history must be contemplated because they affirm their own novelty. One has to think in their terms, thinking from within the immanence of that which orients what they do, but this does not mean blind acceptance of given concepts or categories.

It rather means to take up what is before us – to allude to Hegel's beginning of the *Logic* – and this can then mean to forge concepts by engaging with, for example, the women's liberation struggle in Iran, the Black Panther Party in the US, the October Revolution, and other practices from various fields. One must learn their idioms, think in them. Some of these collective practices might have or will have internally failed at the end. Some might have been externally destroyed, similar to the Paris Commune. But this does not undo their status of constituting courageous practices that reinvented what a form of collective practice – this would be the case in politics – can look like. To show to what degree they transformed the very concept of emancipatory practice, means to elucidate them – employing a term I borrow from Werner Hamacher (cf. Hamacher 1989) – as instantiations of affirmation. Freedom as affirmative and affirmative practice is what necessitates courage. Emancipatory practices force a transformation of the very concept of emancipation in philosophy and in this sense of philosophy itself. This was already Hegel's point: philosophy always comes too late. It does not tell people what to do, but it is a propaganda for what people are able to do, even that which does not lie in their nature. It is propaganda for what people have done and are thus able to do even though their acts are frequently declared to be impossible. But people are able to do the impossible, and philosophy is therefore propaganda, courageously endorsing courageous acts of the impossible. For this, philosophy itself must have the courage to let itself be determined by the courageous acts that happen outside of it.

Since emancipatory practices tackle what is deemed impossible, there is always a dimension of disidentification in it (this was part of Fanon's point). This is one way of reading Lacan's claim that psychoanalysis's *modus operandi*, its way of redetermining and reinventing the past, leads to a peculiar situation. As he puts it:

Where could this adjournment come to a stop? Do we have to extend the analytic intervention to the point of becoming one of those fundamental dialogues on justice and courage, in the great dialectical tradition? That is a question. It is not easy to answer, because in truth, modern man has become singularly unused to broaching these grand themes. He prefers to resolve things in terms of conduct, of adaptation, of group morale and other twaddle. (Lacan 1988, pp. 198-9)

This brief reflection could also be read as a methodological guideline for his earlier declared return to Freud. If Freud – the inventor of psychoanalysis – had been taken by some of his American followers as the original master of psychoanalysis who tells us how to practice it and how it works, the Freud we got in this account was one who provided us with guidelines for analytic practice that in themselves need no interpretation. Freud's words were in no need of analysis. This effectively amounted to claiming that he who systematically explored the existence of the unconscious did not have an unconscious, and this assumption, in turn, allowed for believing the further good news that analysts in general were in no need of interpretation, because they also were exempted from having an unconscious. To take Freud seriously means to affirm that his discovery also applies to himself; he had an unconscious and therefore there is no clear or unambiguous guideline for how to be an analyst, for how to analyze in the first place (cf. Lacan 2002). Analysis needed and needs analysis, without their ever being meta-analysis. Lacan courageously attempted to reinvent what seemed to be psychoanalysis, without knowing in advance how to do it, by inventing and discovering analysis in the process of analyzing it. The return to Freud, in line with this reflection, returned to something that the return had to create in the very act of returning to it.

Courage means to invent the means and the very capacity to do what one does not know how to. This is why it is not Aristotelian. And it means inventing the very form of practice that one is engaged with while being engaged with it. Courageous practice can thus be associated with Heinrich von Kleist's famous text about the gradual production of thought while speaking, whose bottom line is 'if you do not know what to say, just start talking, thoughts will come in the process.' This is why a courageous practice is affirmative. Courage is not about having a capacity, but rather about the affirmative assumption of one's own incapacity, of assuming the fact of not having "it." Courage starts from always already having lost it; it is about losing "it" the right (or maybe the left) way. Aspects of this loss bring us back to the distinction between fear and anxiety. For courage has customarily been understood as steel and grit in the face of something that we are scared of. In a distinction established since Kierkegaard and then elaborated and complicated by Heidegger, Lacan, Badiou, and others, fear always has an object that comes with its specific temporality, the future. We fear future objective events. Anxiety, on the other hand, is not at all about the future, instead it rather indicates a profound disorientation in the subjective present. It is about losing all objective grounding, losing the very orientation by means of objects, which produces a form of absolute certainty (of disorientation): I cannot say what it is that makes me anxious, but I am absolutely certain that I am anxious – which is why Lacan will say that anxiety never deceives (cf. Lacan 2014, pp. 55-84). For Heidegger, anxiety comes with a voiding of the world (everything appears nil and meaningless to me), which leads to a complete loss of worldly consistency. In anxiety, I am and feel isolated because I cannot say what caused it; because it does not occur in the form of an object I could refer to. Anxiety is thus not communicable. By contrast, when I fear, I can hope that what I fear will not come about, I can always say it. When I am anxious and I do not know what its cause is, all hope breaks down (that what I am anxious about will not occur), because it is already there. I experience it in the form of an unquestionably certain loss. Heidegger will insinuate that, in an anxious state, I do not feel at home in my home, because I realize that this home was never my home in the first place (Heidegger 2002,

p. 233f.). Fear allows me to economize, but anxiety does not. Therefore, there is an entire “politics of fear” (Badiou 2008) that economizes with the very imagination of the end of the world – brought about by immigrants, by climate change, etc. In this concrete sense, fear is stabilizing, anxiety makes things break down. Because it undoes, potentially, everything one took for granted. Anxiety brings us to the brink of our own collapse, as it makes all stability disappear. But working with it, working with breakdown, with undoing things and stable frameworks can prove quite productive. Working with breakdown, affirmative undoing is a way of understanding what another account of courage amounts to, one that does not start from any ability or capacity. Courage in this sense then means inducing anxiety, or delivering anxiety in the right kind of dosages.

Courage and Event

These reflections are part of a project that goes under the name “Courage and Event.” This puts the project in connection with a series of philosophical books from the 20th century that have an “and” in their middle, beginning with Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, 1927, which was then followed by Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* in 1943, and I would add to this series Alain Badiou’s 1988 *Being and Event* – which actually has two sequels, *Logics of Worlds* (2006), called Being and Event 2, and *Immanence of Truths* (2018), or Being and Event 3. In this series, we move from Being’s involvement with time to its involvement with nothingness and then with the event, to just superficially state the obvious. It is precisely the last in the series of books, that is Badiou’s, where there is a silent inversion at play. Badiou does not try to think being as the ground and grounding principle of time or nothingness or even of the event. He further does not think their identity, such that being is time or being is nothingness or being is evental. He rather tries to conceive of the event as a ground of being, as that which allows for any account of being. In Badiou’s parlance, this means that only through an event, say in one concrete case, the invention of formal and demonstrative mathematics with the ancient

Greeks (cf. Badiou 2023, p. 233f.), there is a discourse that speaks so abstractly, so detached from any concrete beings, that it speaks about whatever being at all.

Something must have happened that made it possible for there to exist a discourse in which we can speak or rather write without reference to any object whatsoever and in such a way that it concerns any concrete being whatsoever. This is what mathematical discourse does for Badiou. In this discourse, there can be further events and these events transform and change our account of being – so post-Cantor, the late 19th- and early 20th-century mathematician, for example, we will have to think differently about the relationship between being and infinity because Cantor and the consequences generated by his extremely intriguing theoretical framework demonstrate that it is conceivable that there are different sizes of infinity. This implies that being is internally infinite and can now be (potentially) thought as infinitely infinite. For if there *are* different sizes of infinity, being itself needs to be thought of differently. Post-event, we thereby discover and explore a truth about being. Events are thus generative not only of our accounts of being but also of truths. With Badiou, events come first. They allow us to invent what they also allow us to discover – we invent what we discover to be able to do (in a post-evental collective political action, for example). Such a perspective allows us to understand the unfolding of consequences as practical production of truths, and these even concern and affect our account of being. In my reading, this does not lead to any form of vitalism. Because the event that we are talking about here is, *per se*, plural or manifold and it is not an event of being but an event that enables being, discursively and conceptually, to be “being” in the first place. Heidegger was, in some sense, right: there is no being or being is nothing, or to put it differently: there is no givenness unless something happens. Something therefore must have happened such that there will have been (an account of) being.

Philosophy's task, for Badiou, is to identify events and events do not happen in philosophy but outside of it. The task of philosophy is to identify an event in a non- or extra-philosophical practice. But philosophy always comes too late; it identifies a form of thought and in this sense is a

thinking of thinking or, in other terms, it is an identification of an identification. Any identification is unavoidably an affirmation. It says: “yes, there is something that happened,” and it had consequences. An identification is thus an identification of what? Of an event and what followed from it. Philosophy is identifying acts of identification of events outside of philosophy (that will then determine the way in which philosophy thinks of thinking). This identification is where there is always a wager. It is not only that philosophy has to wager on what can count as an event. It rather has to wager on the wager that outside of philosophy something has taken place in an evental manner. The courage to identify courageous acts is what it means to use one’s own understanding. Wager that someone, something jumped! Philosophy is therefore – and in line with Kant – the courage to over and again courageously risk the claim that there is a *Mutmaßung* in the world. That there are acts of courage that provide a novel measure for thought. Such courage of *Mutmaßung* is, in the end, the courage of truth. It is a courage to affirm that there is history.

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ANDREW CUTROFELLO

Kant's Four Discourses

In his preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant distinguishes four metaphysical discourses, each of which he represents as a form of society. The first is the discourse of the dogmatist. It appeared in antiquity when the reign of “the queen of the sciences” was administered by despotic ministers (Kant 1997, pp. Aviii-ix). Because of squabbles among the ministers and disgruntlement among the subjects a second discourse soon arose: the discourse of the skeptics, “a kind of nomads” who “shattered civil unity from time to time” (Aix). Since the skeptics were outnumbered, they could not prevent the dogmatists from continuing to build metaphysical systems, but they were strong enough to undermine their foundations. For years the state of metaphysics hovered between despotism and anarchy until a third discourse eventually arose: the discourse of the indifferentist. The indifferentist professes to be indifferent to metaphysics, but, since it is impossible to be completely indifferent, the indifferentist makes metaphysical pronouncements, typically on the basis of common sense rather than rational argumentation. As Matthew Kelsey and Güçsal Pular have independently shown, Kant takes indifferentism to pose a greater threat to metaphysics than dogmatism and skepticism (Kelsey 2013, Pular 2022). It is “the mother of chaos and night in the sciences” (Ax). The appearance of this monstrous mother has caused

the queen to mourn like Ovid's Hecuba: "*Modo maxima rerum, tot generis natisque potens – nunc trahor exul, inops*" ["Greatest of all by race and birth, I now am cast out, powerless"] (Aviii-ix). To restore the queen to her rightful place of honor, Kant proposes carrying out a revolution – not a Copernican Revolution, but a Glorious Revolution. Toward this end, he introduces a fourth discourse, one that is critical, or juridical, in character. The queen must be put on trial to determine the limits of her jurisdiction.

There are obvious parallels between Kant's four discourses and the four discourses that Lacan presents in his seminar *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Although Lacan's discourses are not overtly metaphysical, they characterize "the social link" (Lacan 1998, p. 17) in ways that resemble Kant's discourses. The discourse of the dogmatist is analogous to the discourse of the master. Just as the dogmatist tells people what to think, so the master (signified by S_1) tells the slave (signified by S_2)¹ what to do. In addition, the master prevents the slave from thinking by stealing his knowledge, i.e., by converting the slave's know-how into *episteme*, as Lacan takes to be the point of Socrates's instruction of the slave in Plato's *Meno* (Lacan 2007, pp. 21-22). This example links the master to the figure of the philosopher. Lacan further associates the divided subject ($\$$), who appears in the lower left corner of the discourse of the master, with the alienated consciousness of Hegel's master-slave dialectic (Lacan 2007, p. 89). This suggests that the process by which Hegel's unhappy consciousness achieves self-consciousness can be identified with the clockwise quarter turn from the master's discourse to the hysteric's discourse. Through this turn, the divided subject comes to occupy the place of the master.² The discourse of the hysteric is analogous to the discourse of the skeptic, which Hegel represents as a transitional stage between the stoical and unhappy consciousnesses (Hegel 2018, pp. 84-6). Just as the hysteric challenges the authority of the master, so the skeptic challenges the authority of the dogmatist. Accord-

¹ Here the chain of signifiers signifies the chains that bind the slave.

² Lacan treats the terms of the discourse of the master as places as well as terms. Thus, in the discourse of the hysteric, the subject comes to occupy the position of the master signifier, while the master signifier shifts its position to the place of knowledge, and so on.

ing to the clocklike logic of Lacan's models, the quarter turn from the master's discourse to the hysteric's discourse is both literally and figuratively revolutionary, as is the quarter turn from the dogmatist's discourse to the skeptic's discourse. The arrow on the top line of each discourse marks the relation between its speaker and its addressee. In the master's discourse, this relation takes the form of an imperative or command. The fact that the slave is in the position of knowledge does not mean that the master conveys information to the slave or that the master seeks to learn something from the slave. The master's aim is to set the slave's knowledge to work in order to produce the object of surplus enjoyment that Lacan signifies by the *objet petit a*. In the hysteric's discourse, the relation of speaker to addressee is interrogative rather than imperative. Once again, the hysteric is not trying to learn something from the master. The point of the hysteric's question is to provoke the master. In this respect, the hysteric's discourse is no less performative than the master's. The same can be said of the skeptic's discourse, which aims at revealing the ignorance of the dogmatist.

An even more intriguing parallel can be found between the discourse of the indifferentist and the discourse of the university. The latter discourse can be generated by rotating the terms of the master's discourse in a counterclockwise rather than clockwise direction – a counterrevolutionary turn. In this discourse, the master's position is occupied by the institutionalized body of knowledge (S_2). Addressing his Parisian audience in the wake of the events of May 1968, Lacan takes students to occupy the position of the *objet a*, the addressee of the university discourse. The discursive relation between S_2 and *a* is disciplinary rather than imperative or interrogative. The university assumes the place of the master when knowledge, like capital, becomes autonomous. Although the discourse of the master has not disappeared, it tends under capitalism to be subordinated to the discourse of the university. In precisely the same way, the discourse of the dogmatist tends to be subordinated to the discourse of the indifferentist. In fact, the two tendencies coincide, for the university is the institutionalized form of indifferentism. As the sciences have developed, they have grown indifferent to metaphysics – or only apparently so, since popularizing scientists routinely make metaphysical pronouncements.

Kant was well aware of this trend. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, he takes pains to subordinate the discourse of the university to the discourse of the critic by giving the faculty of philosophy the right to criticize the faculties of theology, law, and medicine. His attempt to place the critic within the university bears comparison with Lacan's attempts to house his seminar in one of the major Parisian universities. Lacan's failure to accomplish this is nowhere more evident than in the transcript of his visit to Vincennes, an experimental university that instituted a department of psychoanalysis, which he later tried to commandeer. Lacan and his audience talk past each other, agreeing on the desirability of transforming the university, but not at all on what this would involve or how it might be accomplished (Lacan 2007, pp. 197-208). Just as Vincennes grew out of the events of May, so the German university grew out of the French Revolution, whose significance lies at the heart of Kant's conflict with the faculty of law. In his essay "An old question raised again: Is the human race constantly progressing?", Kant observes that, prior to Copernicus, the planets seemed to move randomly back and forth rather than in perfect elliptical revolutions around the sun (Kant 1996a, p. 300). Analogously, the course of human history seems to be random because we lack an external standpoint with respect to which we could discern the guiding hand of Providence. Kant seeks to overcome this limitation by attending to the enthusiasm, or *jouissance*, felt by spectators for the Revolution (Kant 1996a, p. 302). On its basis, he confidently predicts that the human race is inexorably progressing toward the Platonic ideal of a republic. Kant characterizes his discourse as prophetic, noting that a successful prophet brings about what they prophesy precisely by prophesying it (Kant 1996a, pp. 297-98). Lacan's intervention at Vincennes also had a prophetic dimension. He said to his audience: "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one" (Lacan 2007, p. 207) – an act of divination worthy of the Hebrew prophet Hosea, whom he would briefly discuss the next year (Lacan 2007, pp. 115-16). Despite this outburst, Lacan denies that his rotating discourses provide an "Archimedes' lever" of the sort that Kant was looking for, or function as the "Ouija boards of history" (Lacan 2007, pp. 173, 188).

$$\frac{S_1 \rightarrow S_2}{\mathcal{G} \quad a}$$

MASTER/DOGMATIST

$$\frac{\mathcal{G} \rightarrow S_1}{a \quad S_2}$$

HYSTERIC/SKEPTIC

$$\frac{a \rightarrow \mathcal{G}}{S_2 \quad S_1}$$

ANALYST/CRITIC

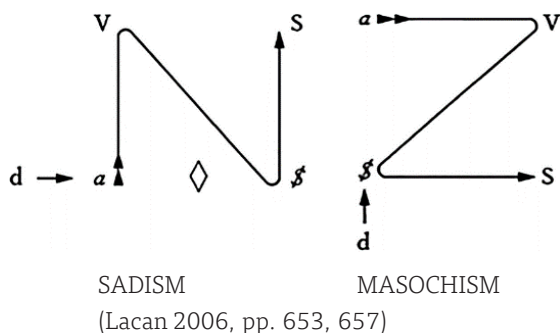
$$\frac{S_2 \rightarrow a}{S_1 \quad S_2}$$

UNIVERSITY/INDIFFERENTIST

The analyst's discourse can be generated either by giving the university discourse one additional counterclockwise turn or by giving the hysteric's discourse one additional clockwise turn. Since it originally grew out of Breuer and Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*, it would be natural to interpret the entire sequence of discourses as a linear progression from the master to the hysteric to the analyst to the university were it not for the fact that the university predates psychoanalysis. Addressed to the hysteric, the analyst's discourse is neither imperative, nor interrogative, nor disciplinary. It is interruptive. The hysteric oscillates between silence (aphasia) and logorrhea. The analyst interrupts the hysteric's silence by speaking and logorrhea by remaining silent. According to one of Lacan's schemas, the analyst occupies the position of desire in relation to the Other (Lacan 2007, p. 93), but just as the epistemic relation between the master and the slave does not concern the knowledge of the master, so the orectic relation between the analyst and the analysand does not concern the desire of the analyst. In playing the role of the object-cause of desire (*a*) (Lacan 2007, p. 53), the analyst prompts the subject to produce a new master signifier.

Just as the analyst's discourse can be generated through the hysteric's discourse or the university discourse, so the critic's discourse can be generated through the skeptic's discourse or the indifferentist's discourse. When Kant says that Hume woke him from his dogmatic slumber, he emphasizes the first route (Kant 2002, p. 57). When he attacks the commonsense philosophies of Reid, Oswald, and Beattie, as well as the "popular" philosophies of Eberhard, Feder, Garve, and Meiners, he emphasizes the second (Kant 2002, p. 56; Puzar 2022, p. 372). The failure of these

philosophers to advance directly from the discourse of the skeptic to the discourse of the critic was a missed opportunity, but the rise of indifference has opened up another path to it. Like the analyst's discourse, the critic's discourse aims at interrupting the subject. In the *Prolegomena*, Kant solemnly urges all scholars concerned with metaphysics to "suspend their work" until an answer has been given to the question as to "whether such a thing as metaphysics is even possible at all" (Kant 2002, p. 53). Interruption is thus a prelude to interrogation, the critic's aim being to settle jurisdictional disputes among the various faculties (both cognitive and academic). The analyst's discourse is not juridical, but it is inquisitive insofar as it seeks to interpret the analysand's desire. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the critic plays the role of the object-cause of the desire to know, which Aristotle identified as the basis of metaphysics, while in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the critic plays the role of the object-cause of the desire to act. In playing these roles the critic, like the analyst, inverts the relation that Lacan perceives between the subject and object of fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$). As Žižek observes in *Tarrying with the Negative*, the top half of the analyst's discourse ($a \rightarrow \$$) is structurally similar to Lacan's formula of perversion ($a \diamond \$$) (Žižek 1993, p. 71). In "Kant with Sade," Lacan constructs a schema of sadism based on the formula of perversion and, by giving it a clockwise quarter turn, he produces a second schema of masochism:



In the schema of masochism, the *objet a* is in the top-left corner, as it is in the discourse of the analyst. Although "this simulation is not as the

former," to quote Shakespeare's Malvolio, if we "crush [it] a little" as Malvolio does the letters M, O, A, I, we can locate the analyst as well as the critic in it (Shakespeare 1994, 2.5.131-32).³ Together the schemas of sadism and masochism depict two interrelated aspects of Kant's critique of practical reason. As Nietzsche and Freud first observed, there is something sadistic about Kant's categorical imperative (just as there is something Kantian about Sade's categorical imperative).⁴ On the other hand, there is something masochistic about the feeling of respect for the moral law (just as there is something Kantian about Masoch's desire to be the contracted instrument of the other's enjoyment). Unlike Deleuze, for whom the attitudes of the sadist and masochist toward the law are incommensurable,⁵ Lacan treats them as interchangeable. They can be likened to the positions of the doorkeeper and the man from the country in Kafka's "Before the Law" (Kafka 1971). In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant envisions an obscene obverse of Kafka's parable in which a man with lustful inclinations hesitates to enter a brothel because he knows that when he leaves he will be hanged (Kant 1996b, p. 163).⁶ In bringing out the sadomasochistic subtext of this scenario, which might be called "Before the Brothel," Lacan highlights the role that surplus *jouissance* plays in the critic's discourse, but he fails to acknowledge that the analyst and the critic are in the same quasi-perverse position. While he might be willing to concede the parallels between the

³ Note that the letters M, O, A, I appear in the word "masochism" as well as in the name "Malvolio."

⁴ "[T]he categorical imperative smells of cruelty . . ." (Nietzsche 1998, p. 41). "The super-ego, the conscience at work in it, can then become harsh, cruel and inexorable against the ego which is in its charge. The categorical imperative of Kant is thus a direct inheritance from the Oedipus-complex" (Freud 1991, p. 198). For Sade's categorical imperative, see Lacan 2006, p. 648.

⁵ "It would therefore be difficult to say that sadism turns into masochism and vice versa; what we have in each case is a paradoxical by-product, a kind of sadism being the humorous outcome of masochism, and a kind of masochism the ironic outcome of sadism" (Deleuze 1991, pp. 39-40).

⁶ "What analysis shows, if it shows anything at all . . . is very precisely the fact that we don't ever transgress. Sneaking around is not transgression. Seeing a door half-open is not the same as going through it. We shall have the occasion to come back to what I am introducing now – there is no transgression here, but rather an irruption, a falling into the field, of something not unlike *jouissance* – a surplus" (Lacan 2007, pp. 19-20).

dogmatist and master, skeptic and hysteric, indifferentist and university, he maintains that the critic is no analyst. Standing transfixed before the brothel or the law, Kant does not carry out the revolutionary turn – be it Glorious, Copernican, or Freudian – that would have led him from the hysteric's discourse or university discourse to the analyst's discourse.

Mladen Dolar has pointed out that Lacan credits Hegel with superlatively (i.e. sublimely) exhibiting the discourses of the master, hysteric, and university, but refuses to credit him with exemplifying the analyst's discourse (Dolar 2006). Yet, as Dolar points out, Hegel is, for us, a kind of analyst (Dolar 2006, pp. 149-50). Žižek goes one step further, suggesting that Lacan simply disavows Hegel's exemplification of the analyst's discourse (Žižek 2004, p. 57). Just as we can ask what we are in Hegel's eyes, so we can ask what Lacan is in Kant's eyes. From Kant's critical perspective, Lacan fails to raise the question *Quid juris?* with respect to the four discourses, just as Aristotle fails to provide an adequate deduction of the categories – a Kantian charge (A81/B107) that Hegel repeats against Kant himself (Hegel 2010, p. 86). When Lacan draws the four discourses on the blackboard, he answers the question *Quid facti?*, but without explaining why they are structured the way they are. As Brent Adkins pointed out in response to an earlier version of this paper, it is not clear why the terms of the discourses are restricted to the specific positions Lacan assigns them, precluding, in particular, any direct relation between the terms in opposite corners (Adkins 2024).⁷ Of course, Lacan would say that the philosophical question *Quid juris?* is not pertinent, since the analyst's function is to find and not deduce.⁸ But, from Kant's perspective, this is just to say that Lacan remains within the indifferentist's discourse.

⁷ I take this opportunity to thank Brent Adkins for his illuminating response to the version of this paper that was presented under the title "Lacan's Four Kantian Discourses" at the Sixty-Second Annual Meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in Rochester, New York in September 2024, as well as members of the audience for their questions and comments. The idea for the paper grew out of a reading of Seminar XVII with Virgil Brower, Colby Dickinson, and Gregory Trotter.

⁸ "Personally, I have never regarded myself as a researcher. As Picasso once said, to the shocked surprise of those around him – *I do not seek, I find*" (Lacan 2018, p. 7).

To see how Kant would address the question *Quid juris?* with respect to the four discourses it is helpful to take a quick detour through Plato's *Parmenides*. In a passage that bears comparison with Socrates's instruction of the slave in the *Meno*, Parmenides tells Socrates that the greatest difficulty for the theory of forms is that the correlative relation between a master and a slave seems to have nothing to do with the correlative relation between the form of mastery and the form of slavery (Plato 1996, pp. 133d-134a). Aristotle resolves the difficulty by locating the forms of mastery and slavery in the master and slave themselves rather than beyond them. This solution requires the introduction of an underlying subject of predication (*hypokeimenon*). As Lacan never tires of pointing out, the divided subject ($\$$) that he places beneath the master signifier in the master's discourse is Aristotle's *hypokeimenon* (Lacan 2007, pp. 13, 48). In resolving the greatest difficulty for the theory of forms, Aristotle opens up a new difficulty for the theory of the subject, for it is now unclear how the correlative relation between the master and the slave is related to the correlative relation between the subject and the object of *jouissance* that the slave produces. Note that, in the discourse of the master, there is no *hypokeimenon* supporting the slave's status as a slave, the *objet a* functioning as what we might call a *hyperkeimenon*, that is, an overlying subject of predication. Kant resolves Aristotle's difficulty by identifying the *hypokeimenon* with the transcendental subject and the *hyperkeimenon* with the transcendental object. This enables him to distinguish empirical and transcendental levels of the master's – or dogmatist's – discourse. Just as he derives his fourfold table of categories from the fourfold structure of Aristotelian judgment, so he could in principle derive Lacan's four quartets from the division of the subject-object relation into empirical and transcendental levels. S_1 would then stand for the empirical subject, S_2 for the synthesis of the manifold, $\$$ for the transcendental subject, and a for the transcendental object = X (cf. Cutrofello 1997, p. 86):

$$\frac{\text{empirical subject}}{\text{transcendental subject}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{synthesis of the manifold}}{\text{transcendental object}}$$

The dogmatic empirical subject determines an object by subsuming the manifold under a concept. This is legitimate in the case of concepts of understanding, but illegitimate in the case of ideas of reason. By indiscriminately challenging all of the dogmatist's knowledge claims, the skeptic undoes the manifold's empirical synthesis and so destroys the unity of the object. In the indifferentist's discourse the synthesis of the manifold – common sense – assumes the position of the master, thereby displacing the role played by the empirical subject in the constitution of knowledge. By replacing the empirical object with the transcendental object, the critic becomes capable of investigating the limits of the subject's ability to synthesize the manifold. In the second *Critique*, the critic determines the capacity of pure reason to motivate the will. The sadomasochistic tendencies that come to the fore in the second *Critique* are already latent in the first *Critique* in Kant's phantasmatic attitudes toward the queen and the mother. Yet just as the analyst differs from the pervert in enabling the subject to traverse its fantasy rather than persist in it (Žižek 1993, p. 72), so the critic does the same by exposing reason's dialectical illusions – while allowing them to be recast as practical postulates.

It is just these practical postulates that Lacan refuses to countenance when he insists that the four discourses are not the Ouija boards of history, that “[i]t is not necessarily the case that things always happen this way, and that things rotate in the same direction” (Lacan 2007, p. 188). Is this not a decisive difference between the analyst's discourse and the critic's discourse? Perhaps an answer to this question can be found once again in Plato. In the *Statesman*, the Eleatic Stranger introduces a myth in which the current age of Zeus is distinguished from the previous age of Cronus. During the age of Cronus, the course of the cosmos was supervised by the gods, and everything moved in the opposite direction from the way it moves today. People advanced from death and old age to infancy and birth. In other words, everything tended toward a state of decreased entropy. When Cronus and his cronies let go of the wheels of the cosmos there was a brief cataclysm followed by movement in the opposite direction, i.e., toward increased entropy. Such is the age of Zeus, the age that we live in (Plato 1999, pp. 268e-274e). It is our task to resist the law

of entropy, as has been eloquently argued in Mussett (2022) and Dalton (2024). In Seminar XVII, Lacan emphasizes the importance of the discovery of the second law of thermodynamics in the nineteenth century, a discovery that he links to the recuperation of surplus value in capitalism (Lacan 2007, pp. 48-51). Kant did not anticipate these developments. In proclaiming that natural and human history are governed by laws of Providence, he implicitly clings to a version of the mythical age of Cronus (as do dialectical materialists who invoke Ouija boards of another sort). Like Plato, Lacan insists that we live in the age of Zeus. Dolar reminds us that Lacan briefly identified a fifth discourse – the discourse of capitalism – which he thought he could distinguish from the university discourse (and which allowed for direct relations between $\mathcal{S}$ and S_2 , and S_1 and a) (Dolar 2023, p. 15). In Book VIII of the *Republic*, Plato himself identifies five social links in the cyclical decline from aristocracy to timocracy to oligarchy to democracy to tyranny. Like Lacan, Plato knew that things don't always move in the same direction, yet like Kant he believed that we need to believe in the attainability of the ideal.

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GÜÇSAL PUSAR

"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 Aix, 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-cosmolonigology*. 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).

* * *

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

* * *

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.

* * *

The first counterargument appears right after Kant's first reference to indifferentism 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 comportments 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 [*Naturlanlage*] (*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

* * *

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 metaphilosophical 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 endeavors

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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ERIC REINHART

Kant's Animating Principle: On Aesthetic Vitalism and the Origin of Desire

When we encounter beauty, there is the feeling of an absolute certainty, a certainty beyond all logic. Leibniz observed that when we find a poem or an image beautiful, we know it clearly – that is, without being in the slightest doubt. And, paradoxically, we know this with such clarity because there is in the beautiful, as Leibniz puts it, “an ‘I don’t know what’ which satisfies or shocks us” (Leibniz 1953, p. XXIV). There is a constitutive excess in it that defies explanation.¹

Wolff, and then Baumgarten, would go on to link this too-muchness to the particularity of the beautiful. The beautiful is always singular. We apprehend it as such only in a particular instance: this specific thing is beautiful, not those kinds of things in general. The beautiful refuses abstraction by which it could be subjected to explanation, rules, or determinate concepts and made into what Leibniz, and those after him up to Kant, calls distinct knowledge. According to Wolff, who in addition to his

¹ Leibniz writes in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* about a clear knowledge of beauty, “that is without being in the slightest doubt, that a poem or a picture is well or badly done because there is in it an ‘I don’t know what’ which satisfies or shocks us. Such knowledge is not yet distinct... It is when I am able to explain the peculiarities that a thing has, that the knowledge is called distinct” (1953, p. XXIV). Poetic knowledge, or knowledge of the beautiful, is, by definition for Leibniz and then also for Wolff and Meier and Kant, indistinct and necessarily obscure.

influence on aesthetic thought is often regarded as the founder of psychology, knowledge of particulars can never be distinct. The particular – left to be in its particularity – remains accessible to us only as confused, obscure knowledge. Particularity is itself a resistance to the general, to abstraction. One can focus attention on a particular feature of an object and then, by abstracting it from the concrete texture of the whole, render it an object of understanding and distinct knowledge. To do this, however, is to sacrifice the confused knowledge of the thing that is necessary to apprehend a thing as beautiful and Wolff argues, to apprehend a person, from whom we might seal ourselves off through abstractions that dissolve their essential singularity.²

When Kant, near the end of his life as he seeks to bridge a gap between the sensible world of experience and the supersensible claims of reason he has elaborated in the first two critiques, turns to the power of judgment, he deepens this inherited emphasis on singularity in the aesthetic encounter. But unlike his predecessors, whether the British empiricists (Hume, Hutcheson, Burke) or the German rationalists (Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Meier), Kant *turns away from the object* as the center of the question of the aesthetic. The too-muchness of the beautiful, this excess of the aesthetic encounter, is reformulated by Kant not as an attribute of the object for which one might discover norms governing taste, as others had sought to do, but rather as a projection onto a contingent object of that which is constitutive of human being.³ The irreducible particularity

² For a brief exposition of Wolff's conceptualization of the particular and the importance of its persistence against the force of abstraction, see Karsten Harries (2016, pp. 21-23) and his references there to Alfred Bäumler's *Das Irrationalitätsproblem in der Aesthetic und Logik* and Wolff's *Psychologica Empirica* (especially paragraph 320 on the essentially singular).

³ As Kant writes, "whenever we judge any beauty at all, we seek the standard for it a priori in ourselves" (1987, p. 152). In his discussion of the sublime, Kant writes of this projection onto the object as a *subreption*: "the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we show to an object in nature through a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject)" (2000, p. 141). It is through this subreption – a concept from Roman law: the obtainment of a gift by concealment of the truth – that our supersensibility is made available to our intuition.

of the aesthetic encounter becomes a felt testament to the supersensible valence of each singular human being as more than their natural determinants and representations in the phenomenal world. In the beautiful and sublime, we – paradoxically – feel our supersensibility. The aesthetic is thus neither about objects in general nor about art objects in particular; instead, Kant writes, it exhibits *the subjective principle* – that is, the indeterminate idea of the supersensible in us (Kant 1987, pp. 213–214). This aesthetic is dense with an ontological pressure. While inaccessible to our direct representation or experience, we know this pressure by its effects as it conditions and puts into motion experience and subjectivity, animating desire and its drive to representation and communication with others.

One cannot make bigger claims than these that Kant attaches to beauty and the aesthetic encounter. But what is the aesthetic? What is the beautiful? Do these questions really matter in a world besieged by pressing material violence and ordinary struggles to stay alive? From my vantage as a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and ethnographer in urban communities living through violence and dispossession, in both everyday practices and in Kant's foundational text of modern aesthetics, the aesthetic seems to be precisely the matter of staying alive.

Toward Object Disorientation

To return to the aesthetic and its politics in an affirmative mode first requires clearing a space for it to be reapproached as other than that which has been bequeathed to us under the name aesthetics as the specialized study of art and artists. It requires that we displace the object as the center, push out preoccupations with culture and ideologies of taste, and recognize, with Kant, that the uses of art often produce obstacles to, rather than bring us nearer to, the power of the aesthetic.⁴ To think the aesthetic –

⁴ See Kant's comments on art as an instrument of governments, acting often through religion, to "relieve every subject of the trouble, yet also the ability, to expand his soul's forces beyond the barriers that one can choose to set for him so as to reduce him to mere passivity and so to make him more pliable" (1987, p. 135). Throughout

most paradigmatically, the encounter with the beautiful as it manifests in an encounter with an object – demands, paradoxically, that we lose sight of the object. Even more difficult, particularly from within ethnographic anthropological traditions that have relied so heavily on the notion of experience to ground and legitimate themselves, is that it challenges us to cede our insistence on experience itself.

In his first introduction to *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant separates the aesthetic from experience when he distinguishes between two fundamentally different uses of the term aesthetic. The first use pertains to the transcendental aesthetic as the forms of sensibility that we attach necessarily to objects so as to refer them to our cognitive powers. The transcendental aesthetic concerns the universal forms of space and time that Kant defines in *Critique of Pure Reason* as the conditions of all possible experience. This aesthetic is objective; it is object-oriented – that is, attached to the phenomenal appearance of objects. By contrast, the second use of

the third critique, Kant views art with suspicion and sees it as a misleading vehicle for probing the dynamics and potentiality of the aesthetic. At best, art offers a benign but interested approach to beauty, such that it is not a free beauty but instead what he calls adherent beauty. At worst, art is corrosive to the aesthetic as such and operates as a means of producing docile subjects for whom aesthetic freedom has been occluded by the ostensible provision of it in ready-made experiences of art that, contrary to true aesthetic free play, bind the subject to given structures of governance, discourse, and experience – all that the aesthetic has the potential to suspend and re-open to critique and subversion.

In dissociating the aesthetic from conventional foci on art and cultures of taste, I affirm much of the Marxian and postcolonial criticisms of these object-oriented, Eurocentric aesthetic traditions, such as criticisms articulated by Terry Eagleton (1990), Gayatri Spivak (1999), David Lloyd (2018), and Simon Gikandi (2011), for example. I understand my return to Kant's emphasis on the subjective character of the aesthetic, shaken loose from ideologies of the object and culture, to be adjunctive and supplementary to such critiques of the racial, colonial, and bourgeois underpinnings of such traditions. My ambition here, however, is less to offer yet further criticism of aesthetic ideology than it is to recuperate a line of aesthetic thought that, despite or perhaps because of its birth from within the heart of the Enlightenment, contains potentialities for subverting the enduring constraints on forms of being with others effected by dominant Enlightenment emphases on what Kant defined as reason, history, universality, autonomy, and freedom, and the associated valorization of the universal over and against the singular.

aesthetic, which is the subject of the third critique, refers to a presentation that is referred not to cognition but to the faculty of feeling, of pleasure and pain. It belongs not to objects but is instead entirely subjective; it entails a reflective movement that refers us not to experience, which is necessarily conditioned by cognition and its transcendental principles, but instead to qualities of feeling – of subjectivity and a sense of being beyond subjectivity – that are always singular, unprecedented, and particular (Kant 1987, pp. 409-410; Kant 2000, p. 25).⁵ These inner movements, and thus we as aesthetic beings, are beyond cognition and its powers of representation.

For this reason, in what is perhaps Kant's most difficult and self-contradictory text as a result, he moves away in the third critique from a reliance on experience and the conceptual abstractions through which he had built his critical project up to that point and advocated for the Enlightenment cause of a universal reason, history, science, and progress. Earlier transcendental claims find themselves shattered against the singular, subjective character of the aesthetic encounter for which the bounds of experience and its universalizing conditions no longer hold.

The aesthetic cannot be approached through generalizable rules or concepts but only through particular examples that, in each instance, refuse to yield generalities. In Kant's repeated uses of examples, because the aesthetic is inseparable from its subjective particularity, the example cannot be passively accepted to stand in for a general phenomenon. It instead demands that we actively appropriate the example to ourselves, where this appropriation entails moving with the aesthetic encounter to its incomprehensible, supersensible ground – a movement by which

⁵ My argument for an object-disoriented aesthetics is indebted to Alenka Zupančič's articulation of "object-disoriented ontology" (2017, p. 72ff), which redirects ontological inquiry away from objects as static entities and toward the structural antagonisms and contradictions that animate being itself. Zupančič's emphasis on generative negativity such that "the subject is not simply an object among many objects, it is also the form of existence of the contradiction, antagonism, at work in the very existence of objects as objects" (p. 10) resonates with my own arguments regarding the desiring-production that characterizes the aesthetic encounter through the breakdown of cognition, understanding, and representation it provokes and the associated open-ended sociality and political possibility this enables.

we ourselves, as selves tethered to the transparent European Subject asserted as a universal condition of the properly human by Enlightenment thought, are in turn appropriated and exceeded.⁶

Kant will eventually reach a point at which he acknowledges that this supersensible ground, which is felt but not cognizable, “cannot be determined any further”; we can *think*, i.e. move subjectively in our minds with, but not *cognize*, i.e. render objective and representable, the aesthetic encounter that “stymies understanding” and “strains the imagination” (1987, p. 128). There is a point beyond which we can go no further with our cognition, as our capacity for comprehension is finite, even as our capacity for apprehension and our corresponding aesthetic potential is infinite (ibid., p. 108). In the development of such claims while continuing to trace the aesthetic, Kant in the First Part of the third critique presents us with an almost-mystical iteration of himself, this otherwise famed father of Reason.

Here we find Kant in his most proximate mode of thinking, one that bears a resemblance to what we might today call the auto-ethnographic, which is grounded on reflections upon his own immersion in feeling: the limit-moments of experience. We might be tempted to say that the third critique is Kant at his most persistently experience-near, if it were not for the fact that the subjective, singular emphasis in the aesthetic so thoroughly disrupts our reliance on experience and its objective, empirical attachments. The singular example, drawn from his own encounters with a particular tulip or the tangled lines in a specific baroque wallpaper, becomes the insistent and irresolvable provocation for thinking the aesthetic, precisely because this most intimate attempt at thinking holds within its movements a necessary distance from determinate knowledge and sensible experience.

⁶ See Kant 1987, pp. 145-146, for his comments on the necessity of examples rather than rules for thinking the aesthetic. See also paragraph 33, where Kant explains that one cannot be persuaded of or shown the beauty of a poem, for example, by another, but can only ever feel it for oneself, only judge it for oneself. Also see Harries 2016, pp. 109-110, from whom I have drawn here in the use of the term appropriation, with its echoes of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and texts on language, for his reflections on how Kant requires us to engage the exemplary.

The Immediacy of Mediation

If not the object, then what is it that we encounter in the aesthetic? In the first paragraph of the third critique, Kant ties this encounter to a friction felt between the attempted generation of a particular representation upon an encounter with beauty and the feeling of the power of representation in general, which elicits in the subject a feeling of life, of vitality. Kant writes that, in the aesthetic register,

the representation is related entirely to the subject, indeed to *its feeling of life*, under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, which grounds an entirely special faculty for discriminating and judging that *contributes nothing to cognition but only holds the given representation in the subject up to the entire faculty of representation, of which the mind becomes conscious in the feeling of its state*. (2000, p. 90)

In an aesthetic encounter, the mind attempts to produce a representation that would account for its sudden enlivening, that would explain or make sense of the beautiful or sublime, for example. But, as Kant will go on to repeatedly observe, no representation is adequate to this encounter, which exceeds our cognitive faculties and their capacities for representation. It is inexhaustible, unexpoundable (Kant 1987, p. 215). The partial representation that is produced and held up to consciousness thus produces a bit of friction – a surcharging of the representational faculty as it attempts in vain to produce a representation adequate to one's feeling. The effect is something like the blue sparks and heat of an overloaded electric circuit as the subject tries to draw more power through the mind than it can handle. The circuitry seizes as it melts into a feeling of pleasure or displeasure; representation breaks down in its hyperanimation.

This breakdown of the faculty of representation, which ordinarily operates smoothly and beneath our awareness, as it provides the material of consciousness and experience, and shocks us into a feeling of ourselves as representative beings – beings that inhere in and through the power of representation, which we can call language in its most general sense. This

is how we might take Kant's definition of the aesthetic that hinges on the subject's "feeling of life" (2000, p. 90): it is the aesthesis of our being, the sense of aliveness, in and through representation. The beautiful carries with it directly this feeling of life, the feeling of sense itself, whereas the sublime takes another route to the same end, provoking, as Kant puts it, a feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces, followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger (1987, p. 98). The aesthetic encounter in general, then, is an opening to the only possibility of immediacy available to us as beings constitutively caught in language: the immediacy of the fact of mediation, or the feeling of our being as in and through representation. With this, in the very first paragraph of the third critique, Kant lays the groundwork for how he will later in the text characterize the aesthetic as "spirit, or the animating principle in the mind" (1987, pp. 181-182).

Disinterestedness and Aesthetic Freedom

At the core of this animating principle of the aesthetic is what Kant calls *free play* between the faculties of the imagination and the understanding. The imagination is what apprehends a particular presentation. It takes up an intuition of a whole – what Kant calls a manifold: a synthesis that is more than its parts. The imagination exhibits, and its exhibitions can be of intuitions that step beyond the empirical and the bounds of its reality (i.e. spatio-temporal constraints) given by the transcendental aesthetic. Thus the imagination, like the capacity for apprehension it supports, has an infinite potential.⁷ The faculty of understanding, by contrast, transforms raw intuitions into experience, into representations; it conforms

⁷ For a brief overview of Kant's definition of the imagination, as given in *Critique of Pure Reason*, see Werner Pluhar's translator's introduction to *Critique of Judgment* (Kant, 1987, pp. XXXV-XXXVI). The imagination as laid out in the first critique must, through a complicated process, come into agreement with a concept given by the understanding, but in the aesthetic encounter of the third critique, as we will see, the imagination is unbound from its conceptual constraints as it animates but is no longer governed by the understanding.

presentations to the constraints dictated by objective reality. The understanding does this by generating and applying determinate concepts, laws, and rules. The understanding, then, is an operation of comprehension. While apprehension is infinite, comprehension is finite (Kant 2000, p. 138).

The aesthetic encounter is described by Kant as an interanimation, a mutual enlivening, of the imagination and understanding as they engage one another in free play. In experience, the imagination is subordinated to the understanding – to objective reality – as the understanding attaches meanings and representations to our intuitions. In the free play of the aesthetic, however, the imagination operates without being brought under the conceptuality of the understanding; no representation or determinate concept can be given to account for the beautiful or the sublime – that is, the feeling that such encounters elicit – and thus the imagination continues unrestricted its movement toward the infinite without resolution.

In a parallel process, the understanding is given an energetic surge by the aesthetic encounter that pushes it to speed up, to quicken, Kant writes, as it seeks to chase after this movement of the imagination that it cannot fully follow (1987, p. 151). Aesthetic judgment, which is precisely this free play of the imagination and understanding, refuses all constraint. It is this peculiar aesthetic freedom – free from the bounds of understanding and reason that otherwise subtend Kant's central concept of freedom as given in *Critique of Practical Reason* – that we feel in the encounter with the beautiful. This freedom, grounded not in reason but in feeling, allows us to feel our excess, to *sense* our excess without being able to *make sense* of it. It returns us to the supersensible as that which exceeds sensible reality and its laws. Rather than operating under concepts or the mandates of reason, as in the case of experience and morality, the aesthetic is its own rule unto itself. It is constitutively *disobedient* to all that would determine or constrain it: patterns, predictability, knowledge, rules. It gives itself its own singular law: that there can be no other law over it than that which arises within each singular encounter (Kant 2000, p. 168; Kant 1987, p. 224).

Kant's text turns alternately from a description of subjective states drawn from his own life – he begins from the observation that beauty happens; we are all subject to this feeling, he will testify as much as argue – to critical attempts to outline possible conditions under which these felt states, which themselves remain ineffable, could possibly be. If we agree with Kant that for each of us beauty happens upon us, that sublimity too happens, we also know that it does not happen all the time. Our cognition is not beset by constant hyperanimating breakdowns in which we drift off in infinite intuitions of felt realities beyond concepts and experience. There are particular conditions under which the aesthetic as free play between imagination and understanding becomes possible. The first of these that Kant observes is that of *disinterestedness*.

The condition of disinterest in the existence of the object – a necessary condition for free play in our apprehension of it – is not a prescription, as if it could be caused by an exercise of the will. It is not a qualification that one be free of material, bodily needs or demands in order to encounter beauty, as it has often been misunderstood. It is instead a description of what happens to us in the moment of aesthetic seizure: we have no practical or rational interest in the existence of an object that we encounter aesthetically. We do not seek to possess it or to make use of it; it is a provocation only for reflective contemplation, not acquisition.⁸ We are kept at a distance by it. We wish to let it be as just as it is. We may even feel a compulsion to protect it from proximity, both our own and others'.⁹ One who moves closer and closer to the beautiful object is typically motivated by an intention to analyze it, study it, possess it – that is, to transform the aesthetic encounter into an object of knowledge or use, to rein it into

⁸ Kant writes that aesthetic judgment "is merely *contemplative*, i.e., it is a judgment that is indifferent to the existence of the object: it [considers] the character of the object only by holding it up to our feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Nor is this contemplation, as such, directed to concepts, for a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (whether theoretical or practical) and hence is neither *based* on concepts, nor directed to them as *purposes*" (1987, p. 51).

⁹ Elaine Scarry pursues this protective inclination in relation to beauty in *Beauty and Being Just* (1999), finding in it a source for an extension of care and protection laterally to others. See, for example, p. 67ff.

the realm of experience. Such a collapse of distance and an insistence on knowledge threatens to destroy aesthetic possibility as such, to render it an object-oriented experience rather than a moment of subjective seizure and excess to cognition that subverts the Subject and sends us beyond our selves.

This disinterestedness and the distance it confers from the object dictates a separation of the aesthetic from what Kant calls the agreeable and the good. The agreeable would be a merely pleasant sensation: that tastes good, it satisfies my hunger, or green is my favorite color, as it puts my mind at ease and reminds me of grassy fields. These are not aesthetic encounters, sending the imagination and understanding into free play, but are instead simply experiences that gratify the senses. They remain bound to our bodily reality, to its inclinations and needs. And unlike the aesthetic, the agreeable is a matter of preference and opinion, not a feeling of the absolute certainty of a truth, as accompanies an encounter with the beautiful. The good is also bound, not by bodily reality but by a determinate concept such that something can be a good example of a general concept. It begins with an already-known rule or ideal. The good, for Kant, is tied to the satisfaction of the demands of reason and thus also to morality. Like the agreeable, enjoyment of the good is thus not free; it is dictated by pre-determined concepts that mediate our apprehension, constraining our imagination and its potential for infinite movement. Both the agreeable and the good focus on the outward existence of the object, rendering the subject subservient to the object and objective reality.

In the aesthetic encounter, however, the subject is not subservient to the object but is instead submerged in its own constitutive ground, in the subjective supersensibility to which the encounter returns us. Rather than putting us into a relation with the object wherein we seek to appropriate the object, as other, so as to derive satisfaction from it, where our existence depends upon it, the aesthetic encounter does not seek to demand the existence of a thing such that it might be appropriated but instead subjects us to our own appropriation, our own dislocation from ourselves. Rather than center the object, the aesthetic centers the subject in its own being, but only to put us outside ourselves.

As a result of this withdrawal of interestedness and a resulting distance from the object, the aesthetic does not demand that the object-other exist, does not demand that it manifest or give itself up for our practical use or satisfaction of reason. The aesthetic object, as other to knowledge and reason, is instead merely contemplated and, as an occasion only for this submersion in our own subjective state, is left to be as it is.

The aesthetic lets be. It asks nothing of the other, or rather nothing except the privilege of contemplating it aesthetically. Distance obtains and must be maintained for the aesthetic to endure. A degree of detachment, a protective distance from this object-other by which it is guarded from interest and demand, from reductive transformation into an object of legible knowledge (i.e. an object-same generalizable to a determinate concept and interchangeable with other objects within transactions of objective reality), is both a condition of possibility for the aesthetic and its effect upon us.

Kant emphasizes disinterestedness in a careful delineation of the beautiful, the agreeable, and the good to draw out the distinctive freedom of the aesthetic encounter, and it is easy to move quickly over his definitions and examples without taking in the full implications of disinterestedness. Disinterestedness is not only a condition of the aesthetic encounter but is itself bound up with it. It is one of its most profound and enabling effects. We leave behind, or cede, interest in the moment of the aesthetic encounter. We withdraw from this interest not by some act of will, asceticism, or generosity, but rather because we are uprooted from the stable position from which we might exercise interest. The interest that is suspended in the aesthetic encounter is fundamentally self-interest, and it is suspended not because interest – as an investment in existence – ceases to be, but rather because the self and its reality to which interest would be tethered fade from view. After all, we retain a kind of interest in the persistence and preservation of beauty; we want beautiful things to remain as they are, to be cared for. It pains us to see beauty destroyed, even that to which we have no direct relation or likely future contact. But this is an impersonal interest, detached from preoccupations with one's own existence and self-interest.

Aesthetic disinterestedness frees us from ourselves, from our given objective reality that closes in around us and determines us. It frees us from freedom – that is, from the insistence on being the autonomous Subject tied to Kant's peculiarly constraining concept of freedom through a universal reason that demands we conform to its rules, that we behave and render ourselves in accordance with the moral law said to be inscribed within us. The aesthetic encounter transports us beyond any such lawfulness and challenges its processes of subjectification. As Karsten Harries puts it, we leave behind the everyday claims that objects and objective reality exert over us. We are pushed back from things and leave behind our usual engagements in the world, not to the demotion of the world, however, but towards what we could call a “transfiguration of the commonplace” (Harries 2016, p. 59; Danto 1983).

The world, or now rather plural worlds, open to us and become fuller, more inviting, and limitless. *We are thus interested in the disinterestedness of the aesthetic insofar as we wish to shake ourselves loose of the interests bearing down on the way we live, directing our attention and activity.* Each of us, in our own way and differentially so, finds ourselves burdened by interests, by the normative reality that is written within us, upon us, and around us, circumscribing subjectivity and social formations.

Aesthetic disinterestedness, then, is not the privileged domain of the bourgeois aesthete; it may instead open even more widely in proportion to the burden of material constraints, variously oppressive realities, and ongoing histories of violence by which one is motivated to seek an outside. Aesthetic investments are in this way subject to inflection – to deepening and intensification – by one's particular historical and political conditions that bear upon psychic life and one's sense of oneself, of one's reality. It may be that the more constraining one's objective reality in the world, the more receptive and desirous one becomes toward the suspension of this reality and one's self by the aesthetic encounter that beckons us to feel more and, in turn, to be and to make more than what is and what we are said to be.

Unselfing and Paraesthesia

One can hear an echo of these latent implications of Kant's concept of disinterestedness in Elaine Scarry's emphasis on the *radical decentering* of the Subject that is effected by the aesthetic encounter (Scarry 1999, p. 109ff). The overwhelming of experience by an encounter with beauty pushes us, in the words of Simone Weil, "to give up our imaginary position at the center... A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions" (as quoted in Scarry 1999, p. 111). Scarry draws from Weil, whose words are interspersed throughout Scarry's observation that beautiful things act like "small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space; the aesthetic encounter holds out ladders reaching toward the beauty of the world, openings onto it; they lift us (as though by the air currents of someone else's sweeping), letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing, to the presentation of an otherness beyond our comprehension, that stands before us" (ibid., p. 112).

Extending this transportive, self-dislocating effect of aesthetic acts of apprehending and creating that push us beyond ourselves and bring us to a feeling of life, of aliveness, Scarry points to Irish Murdoch's notion of *unselfing* in the face of the beautiful. This unselfing is not a solipsistic aestheticism but instead implicates and opens us as aesthetic beings to another form of being with others. Beauty is the most powerful provocation for unselfing in our surroundings. In this encounter, one does not forget oneself but, instead, "some more capacious mental act is possible: all the space formerly in the service of protecting, guarding, advancing the self (or its prestige) is now free to be in the service of something else" (ibid., p. 113). This process of dislocating the self from the center puts us outside ourselves and into an indeterminate relation to the object – one that dis-

turbs any simple binaristic subject-object relation. Relations between subject and object, self and other, are reconfigured in the aesthetic encounter such that one becomes a *lateral figure* who assumes a position of adjacency in relation to both one's self and the other, rather than one of center-periphery or hero of one's own story (ibid., pp. 112-113).¹⁰ For Scarry, this repositioning of the aesthetic subject beyond or beside the self opens a tie between beauty and justice.

It is through this unselfing and resulting adjacency that what I would like to think as *paraesthesia* – a mode of feeling alongside, around, and with an other – becomes integral to the aesthetic encounter and imbues it with an ethical significance and political potentiality. This peculiar sociality, one that is grounded not in positive content but in a resonance at the level of an incomprehensible and unrepresentable state of feeling, is at the core of the aesthetic as such. Kant makes this social dimension a necessary element of the aesthetic and places it at the core of the third critique, with his emphasis on the universal communicability of one's singular aesthetic judgment and the notion of the *sensus communis* that this communicability subtends.

As Kant explains, although we cannot explain the basis for a particular aesthetic judgment, we nonetheless feel absolutely certain of its universal validity. When we ask, "Isn't this beautiful?", we fully expect and even demand agreement from whomever we address with this declaration that only pretends to be a question. To feel beauty in relation to an object is not simply a matter of opinion but is an absolute conviction – one not only

¹⁰ Scarry proposes a third term, *opiated adjacency*, to describe this aesthetic repositioning of the subject. Opiated adjacency is meant to sit between Weil's radical decentering and Murdoch's unselfing, and to invoke the peculiar operation of the aesthetic that at once both sidelines us and makes us feel acute pleasure. Although many things may make us feel pleasure and many others make us marginal or adjacent to our own experience, Scarry suggests that the encounter with beauty is perhaps the only the only event in our lives that makes us feel pleasure and marginality simultaneously and synergistically. For Scarry, this delight in our lateralness lends itself to an ethical symmetry of everyone's relation to one another – a definition of justice she draws from John Rawls (p. 93). See p. 114ff and Scarry's essay "Poetry Changed the World: Injury and the Ethics of Reading" (2012) for an elaboration of her notion of opiated adjacency.

of the truth of our judgment for ourselves but also of universal truth: you also find this beautiful. This sense of universal validity is essential to aesthetic judgment, which requires an other, even if only imagined, who is addressed and with whom one shares the aesthetic encounter.

Of course, experience informs us that this is not in fact the case; our aesthetic judgments in relation to particular objects are not actually universally shared. Each judges for themselves – as aesthetic judgement is necessarily a wholly subjective judgment – and we constantly find that judgments of beauty, for example, are widely variable. Despite this apparent discord between experience and our feeling, however, we do not cede on our felt insistence, repeated upon each aesthetic encounter, that our aesthetic judgment must be shared by others. This tension finds resolution when we recognize that the agreement that we expect and insist upon from others is not an objective agreement with a particular judgment – that this thing is beautiful – but rather a subjective agreement with the state of mind that the aesthetic encounter provokes.

Recall that the aesthetic judgment is not that a thing is beautiful – a floating signifier without determinate content – but rather inheres in the free play of the imagination and understanding to which a particular contingent encounter sends us. It is a state of mind: the feeling of life, of one's animation, and of one's excess to objective reality and one's self. It is this capacity for a capacious feeling beyond representation and communicative rationality that one feels must be universally valid and with which one expects the other to agree. The demand for universal agreement in the judgment of beauty is a kind of aesthetic interpellation – a peculiar call to the other to meet one not at the level of a known subject position or determinate relation but rather in a shared feeling of excess to any fixed position in the world. In this agreement that is, as Lyotard puts it, a kind of “communication without communication,” what each affirms is the aliveness of the other (Lyotard 1991).

This aesthetic communicability – a sense of being able to share that which one cannot express; a communicability of the incommunicable – is the basis for what Kant calls the *sensus communis*. This a community of shared feeling that is both necessary for the aesthetic encounter to occur

and also predicated upon it. The pleasure we feel in the moment of aesthetic seizure is in part the feeling of falling into a supersensible connection with innumerable yet singular others that allows us to feel and share that which is most intimate to our own being.

This community of feeling is distinctive in its constitutive resistance to definition and content. It is made possible by a disinterestedness that enables the self to recede, to be decentered such that one is repositioned as adjacent both to oneself and the other. This is not, however, a renunciation of the self that compels a sacrifice of self-interest and subsumption of one's particularity in submission to a general interest, as in classical liberal concepts of community and nation. Instead, the self recedes in the aesthetic encounter and one falls into a concomitant submersion in the *sensus communis* in such a way that unencumbers and expands the feeling of each one's irreducible particularity – what Kant calls the expansion of one's soul – as it is untethered from the strictures of subjectivity and experience.¹¹ The singularity that one brings to the *sensus communis* is thus universal but not general; it remains particular to each one, incommensurable with all others, infinite, and unprecedented. Its only precedent is the unprecedentedness of the singularity of the other, which upholds and reinforces the unprecedentedness of each one.

Each feels their singularity as an excess to the specific representations and corresponding realities by which they are rendered as determinate in the world. We are all tied to particular enunciative positions that overdetermine the representations we may give of ourselves. The suspension of these determining forces in the felt inadequacy of our representational faculty in general that arises out of the aesthetic encounter thus takes on

¹¹ What I am calling the sense of one's singularity or particularity that is unbound and expanded in the aesthetic encounter echoes what Kant refers to as "the soul." For example, when describing the free play of the imagination as it roams without conceptual constraint, Kant writes, "For though the imagination finds nothing beyond the sensible that could support it, this very removal of its barriers also makes it feel unbounded, so that its separation [from the sensible] is an exhibition of the infinite; and though an exhibition of the infinite can as such never be more than merely negative, it still *expands the soul*" (Kant 1987, p. 135). See also pp. 181-182 for Kant's parallel claim that aesthetic sense animates the soul.

historically contingent, particular characteristics for each one. Differentially bound in the world, we can each only be untied in our own singular way and only in relation with an other with whom we can share the beyond of our symbolic determination.

Distributional Pressure and the Incitement toward the Other

Contrary to critiques of aestheticism in which it is imagined that the perceiving subject withdraws into solitude and turns away from engagement with the world, the aesthetic encounter requires community and incites our desire for it. In Kant's view, the beautiful only happens upon us when we are in society. If isolated on a desert island, he writes, we cede all interest in the beautiful; we do not think to adorn ourselves, plant flowers, or appreciate a beautiful form. Cut off from others, we are confined to the practical; an otherwise beautiful palace, Kant suggests, brings us no more satisfaction than a simple hut that shields us from the elements. Pleasure in a beautiful object is unavailable to us if we cannot feel it in community with others (Kant 2000, pp. 176-177). The aesthetic requires others.

With respect to our feeling in the aesthetic, "each expects and requires of everyone else a regard to universal communication, as if from an original contract dictated by humanity itself" (Kant 2000, p. 177). Only through relations with others can the world around us take on aesthetic character and an inner sense arise within us that acquires *almost infinite value* through its universal communicability. Kant argues that this universal communicability is at the core of aesthetic judgment:

One could even define taste as the faculty for judging that which makes our feeling in a given representation universally communicable without the mediation of a concept... Only where the imagination in its freedom arouses the understanding, and the latter, without concepts, sets the imagination into a regular play is the representation communicated, not as a thought, but as the inner feeling of a purposive state of mind.

Taste is thus the faculty for judging *a priori* the communicability of the feelings that are combined with a given representation (without the mediation of a concept). (ibid., pp. 175-176)

Kant goes on to link this universal communicability of aesthetic being to human sociability – an intrinsic need to be in relation with others. The aesthetic both makes us feel this need and enables its satisfaction; it supports our capacity to make connections with others, not at the level of determinate content but rather in the open-ended register of feeling. The aesthetic thus compels us towards others and also requires others as *other* – as beings beyond determination, open to resonance in their difference to comprehensibility. It is in this way that Kant defines aesthetic judgment as a faculty of judging by means of which one can communicate their feeling to everyone else; it is a register of being that promotes, even gives rise to, the intrinsic sociability of human being as activity. The aesthetic does not just require society in order to happen; it operates as an inaugurating force behind the constitution of social relations themselves.

It is from this vantage that Hannah Arendt sees in Kant's notion of communicability and the *sensus communis* an elementary, if latent, ground for a political philosophy, investing aesthetic community with a fundamental significance for thinking the political (Arendt 1982). Arendt observes that the relation into which the aesthetic puts us with others is not that which political philosophers have stressed as a necessary human interdependence for the fulfillment of our material needs, wants, and security; it is instead much more basic to our being. The sociability made possible by the *sensus communis* is necessary for the very possibility of our mental faculty of judgment, which is bound up with our capacity for feelings and emotions – that is, Arendt writes, “our whole soul apparatus” (ibid., p. 74).

Furthermore, this sense of universal communicability in our aesthetic impressions, as if inaugurated by a founding contract of intersubjectivity itself, does not regulate only our reflections but also inflects and drives action. It inspires us to act in the world as if a communion of feeling, a kind of subjective agreement or resonance, with all others is not only possible

but is *in a sense* already extant and simply awaiting activation. The aesthetic encounter thus inclines the subject towards the other – both toward the inner otherness or unrepresentability of oneself and simultaneously toward the other to whom one appeals for an affirmation and redoubling of this deterritorializing feeling of oneself whereby inner-outer and subject-object distinctions lose stability. Furthermore, it inclines us toward the other in a generative, reproductive activity that seeks to prolong and extend the aesthetic supersession of object-oriented circumscriptions of reality.

Arendt's unfinished reflections, cut off by her death, on the political implications of Kant's critique of aesthetic judgment gesture toward the confluence of what Elaine Scarry regards as two distinct constitutive dimensions of aesthetic being: a *generative drive* toward reproduction and a *distributional pressure* intrinsic to the aesthetic movement of one beyond oneself.¹² As in Kant's elaboration of how the beautiful sends the imagination and understanding into free play, whereby the drive to representation is imbued with an excessive energetic charge, Scarry reflects upon how the encounter with beauty activates a drive to make more and more – a compulsive pursuit of an immediate, terrestrial (rather than a deferred, heavenly idea of) plenitude (Scarry 1999, pp. 5, 33, 47). The aesthetic incites, even requires, the act of reproduction or replication of the feeling it imparts. We wish to hold the beautiful in view and in mind for as long as possible, to promote its endurance as we follow its movement along the horizon with our eyes. We are moved to draw it, write it, speak it, share it – anything to remain before it and the sense of aliveness we find in it. In this way, the aesthetic brings us face to face with our own powers to create (ibid., p. 115). Pleasure in the aesthetic encounter compels acts of reproduction; it provokes a basic desire to feel and to make more and more

¹² The final section of Arendt's *Life of the Mind* was to have been on "Judgment," of which only the first page, consisting of two epigraphs, was left in her typewriter at the time of her death in 1975. We must therefore make do with her lectures on Kant's political philosophy (1982), last delivered at the New School in 1970, to speculate on how she may have further extended Kant's third critique to think the stakes of judgment and the *sensus communis* for political form and action.

that would sustain our feeling of limitlessness. It pushes one toward an *unceasing begetting* of yet further occasions of aesthetic suspension of understanding and expansion of one's *soul* – that name by which both Kant and Arendt invoke the animating force of being – in the world around us (ibid., pp. 4-5).

This provocation toward aesthetic plenitude has a “forward momentum,” mobilizing a “desire to bring new things into the world,” perhaps most of all in the form of new human connections (ibid., p. 46). When the mind is overcome by an aesthetic event, it incites deliberation – a search for an adequate representation that becomes, in its impossibility, “a search for something beyond itself, something else with which it needs to be brought into relation” (ibid., pp. 28-29). As no operation of the understanding can yield a determinate thought adequate to the limitlessness of one's feeling, the only possible site of a resonance of our feeling available to us is the complementary limitlessness that we sense in another speaking being's capacity for feeling.

For Kant, the certainty with which we sense and expect this aesthetic capacity from all other human beings – a capacity with which he defines the human as such – is constitutive of and necessary for our own apprehension of the beautiful. We feel certain, without rational mediation of this conviction, of our capacity to share with the other that which is innermost to ourselves. This immediate certainty of aesthetic communicability enables us to seek to sustain and extend the aesthetic intensification of life by turning to another for an agreement: an agreement of feeling or an attunement at the level of mood or spirit. In this way, the aesthetic encounter, in its excitation of a drive to make more and more, pushes for its own distribution; it reproduces and regenerates itself by mobilizing a distributive and interpellative movement through others. It stirs a pressure within us to exceed ourselves as isolated experiencing subjects and to extend ourselves into resonant connections with others that supersede subject positions, bodily-material interests, and the constraints of communicative rationality.

There is here in aesthetic communicability and its open-ended sociality a conjunction with Lacan's reformulation of the Hegelian dialectic of

recognition in which the subject's desire is for the desire of the Other – *le desire c'est pour le desire de l'Autre* (Lacan 2007). There is a double meaning in this articulation, which expresses both a desire to be desired by the other and also a desire whose object is the very desire that one senses in the other. Desire, if we think it in its psychoanalytic valence with Lacan, who in turn draws on Kojève and Heidegger, is inaugurated by our being in language and the impossibility of ever saying that which we mean to say. There is an unbridgeable chasm between the signifier and the signified; it is in this gap of inexpressibility – what Heidegger calls the rift-structure of language (Heidegger 2002; 2008) – that each one's desire is inaugurated and propelled. In the infinite, indeterminate movement of desire constitutive of the speaking being who resists any closure or final determination, the only possibility for its recognition is in the limitless indeterminacy of the desire of the other.

It is this communicability of the incommunicable – the felt mutual recognition of unbound imagination, caught within the rift in language, and the feeling of being beyond any possible representation – that subtends the *sensus communis* and imbues us as aesthetic beings with the desire and need to make ties with others. The aesthetic encounter, as that which puts in motion the ceaseless search for representation adequate to our overwhelming feeling, thus incites a desire for life: for thinking, making, and being with others by which the aliveness of our being might be felt and sustained.

If Kant's first critique is, crudely put, about how and what we can think, and the second critique about how we should live and what we should do, then the third critique might be said to concern the question of why: Why do we think and why do we act? What propels us to do either? In this way, the aesthetic subtends both pure and practical reason, and it is the well-spring of both ethics and politics.

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ANTHONY CURTIS ADLER

Kant's Transcendental Alethiology: Truth from the Critique of Pure Reason to the Critique of Judgment

What is truth?

With this “old and famous question,” asked in the third section of the introduction to the transcendental logic in the *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*), Kant gives rise to an interpretative problem that, without being central to most Kant scholars' concerns, has nevertheless generated an extensive amount of literature (KrV A57/B82).¹ The difficulties surrounding Kant's theory of truth, however, have rather little to do with the ambiguity of his position. For, on the surface, Kant clearly ascribes in broad strokes to a “correspondence” theory of truth, the standard view that has, in one form or another, held sway since Aristotle: “The nominal definition [*Namenerklärung*] of truth, namely that it is the agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] of cognition with its object, is here granted and presupposed; but one demands to know what is the general and certain criterion of the truth of any cognition” (KrV A58/B82). Subsequent

¹ Kant's works will be cited parenthetically in the text, with page numbers referring either to the “Akademie” (Ak) edition of Kant's collected works [*Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, 29 vols. Ed. Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: G. Reimer, 1902], or, in the case of the *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (KrV), to the A (1781) and B (1788) editions. Translations, unless otherwise noted, follow the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

passages remove all doubt that, in at least some form – and despite Gerold Prauss's insistence that the “here” refers not to Kant's own text but to the position being challenged – the correspondence theory of truth represents Kant's own basic framework for thinking about truth (Prauss 1969):

One quickly sees that, since the agreement of cognition with the object is truth, only the formal conditions of empirical truth can be inquired after there [...] (KrV A191/B236)

Truth, however, rests upon agreement with the object, with regard to which, consequently, the judgments of every understanding must agree. (KrV A820/B848)

The deeper difficulties with Kant's position arise from the entanglement of the first-order philosophical question (*What is truth?*) and the second-order interpretative question (*What is truth for Kant?*). This forbids a tidy distinction between philosophy proper, which asks basic questions, and the history of philosophy, which addresses these philosophical questions only through the detour of exegetical commentary. Kant's “Copernican revolution” transforms the philosophical enterprise so radically that the concept of truth could remain untouched. If philosophy can no longer pretend to talk about things as they are in themselves – if objects are knowable only as existing *for* the subject, organized through the faculties of cognition – then what can remain of the correspondence of knowledge to the object? Kant either does not really mean what he says, tepidly ascribing to a correspondence theory of truth simply because no other options were available, or he means by it something altogether different than the established, conventional understanding. Thus, for Norman Kemp Smith, Kant “is the real founder of the Coherence theory of truth,” even if “[h]e never himself employs the term Coherence, and he constantly adopts positions which are more in harmony with a Correspondence view of the nature and conditions of knowledge” (Kemp Smith 2003, p. 36). This is because “all that is most vital in his teaching and has proved really fruitful in its after-history” suggests the coherence theory of truth explicitly developed by Lotze, Sigwart, Dewey, and others, and ultimate-

ly derived from Hegel's restatement of Kant's logical doctrines (ibid.). For Kemp, in other words, it is not Kant's own formulations that stand in the way of ascribing a correspondence theory of truth to him, but the fruit of his critical project, which, beginning with Hegel, has led to a totally different understanding of truth. Somewhat more generally, the interpretive problem we face is that Kant's first critique sets in motion a philosophical development leading to new candidates for a theory of truth, indeed a complete transformation of the discourse surrounding truth, which comes to assume far greater significance as a *thematic question* – though not as a philosophical value – than before. This leads not only to more rigorous formulations of correspondence truth, namely the explicit clarification of alternative substantive theories of truth such as pragmatism and coherentism, but also, on the one hand, to the formulation of eliminationist and deflationary accounts, and, on the other hand, to Heidegger's understanding of truth as *disclosedness* and *un-concealment*, Foucault's genealogy of veridiction, relativist and perspectival accounts originating with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, as well as rich considerations, originating with the Frankfurt School, of the political and social dimension of truth.² All this suggests that Kant's theory of truth only becomes comprehensible retrospectively – only in light of theories of truth that not only emerge in his wake, but that arise out of the “revolutionary” impulse of his critical project.

To lend plausibility to this claim, I will now give a rough sketch of how the *problematic* quality that correspondence theory assumes in Kant's first

² Because of the fragmented nature of the philosophical discourse on truth – a fragmentation reflecting the vicissitudes of the question of truth – it is difficult to gain even an overview of the range of approaches relevant for “retrospectively” appraising Kant's position. The best source of primary readings in the analytic tradition, focusing on the conflict between “deflationary” and “substantive” theories, is *Truth*, ed. Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Richard L. Kirkham's *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992, offers a comprehensive introduction to discussions of truth within analytic philosophy. A more ecumenical selection of readings, going back to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and James and focusing on substantive theories, can be found in *Truth: Engagements across Philosophical Traditions*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005.

critique paves the way to subsequent accounts of truth. We take our departure from Kant's well-known explanation, in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, of his "Copernican" revolution in philosophy.

If intuition has to conform to the constitution of the objects, then I do not see how we can know anything of them a priori; but if the object (as an object of the senses) conforms to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, then I can very well represent this possibility to myself. (KrV B xvii)

Nothing here demands an immediate rejection of the correspondence theory of truth. To the contrary, the correspondence theory of truth is implicit in how the question is framed: the "directness" in question suggests that knowledge, and hence truth, fundamentally involves a "vertical" relation between two strata that are so radically distinct as to involve a fundamental epistemological, and even ontological, ordering. And yet Kant nevertheless counters the understanding of this relation implicit in the correspondence theory of truth, according to which the *subjective* (=cognition) corresponds to, and hence directs itself toward, the *objective* (=Gegenstände, objects). What Kant claims, then, seems quite extraordinary. Correspondence truth, which itself implies the ordering of the subjective to the objective, only becomes comprehensible if we suppose that the objective in fact orders itself to the subjective. Correspondence truth resolves into two *contraposed* orderings.

It is hardly surprising that, in the wake of Kant, the correspondence theory of truth becomes less and less tenable. The first blow arrives with Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel – the development to which Kemp Smith alludes in the passage cited above. By rejecting the *thing in itself*, that ghostly vestige haunting Kant's *Critique*, the post-Kantian idealists make it even more difficult to think of truth as a relation of correspondence of knowledge to an objective reality radically exterior to it. Instead, the condition of the possibility of knowledge – and hence truth – is the absolute identity of subject and object. But if the subject and object are ultimately and originally identical, then not only must the deeper ground of correspondence

prove to be the coherence of this subject-object identity with itself, but *falseness* consists in the apparent non-identity of what is radically identical – and hence the correspondence theory of truth, which implies the non-identity of knowledge with its object, becomes the condition of the possibility of *untruth*. Thus, a tension emerges between discursive judgment, which implies separation, and a unifying intellectual intuition – a tension that is only really resolved when Hegel, rejecting the lingering nostalgia for a positive grounding in intellectual intuition, conceives of the dialectical proposition as the very means by which the absolute becomes manifest.³

More surprising, perhaps, is that two of the most radical revisions of the concept of truth, emerging not in the immediate aftermath of Kant's discrediting of dogmatic metaphysics but as distant philosophical developments, will also develop, albeit in quite different ways, the double order of Kant's "Copernican revolution." The first of these is Heidegger's hermeneutic concept of truth; the second, Tarski's "deflationary" account. Considered with a sufficient degree of conceptual abstraction, both make sense of the awkward "double order" by simultaneously taking it as the point of departure for thinking about truth and resolving it into a more comprehensible structure. With Heidegger, this involves reframing the double order as a "circle" – a cyclical interdependence between individual truths (disclosures of truth) and the already disclosed horizon within which alone disclosure can take place – no longer vicious but productive and originary, indeed constitutive for *Dasein* (human existence, roughly) itself.⁴ That an assertion is true (*wahr*) means that it is *entdeckend* – that it "discovers" entities in themselves (*das Seiende an ihm selbst*); it involves an *apophansis* – a "saying out" – that allows entities to be shown as they have been discovered (*ibid.*, p. 218). Truth (*Wahrheit*) thus comes to be conceived in terms of a discovery (*Entdecktheit*) of beings in their Being whose ultimate ground is the disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*) of *Dasein* itself (*ibid.*, p. 221).

³ A crucial document, in this regard, is Hölderlin's fragment *Urteil und Sein*.

⁴ See Heidegger 1986, pp. 8, 152-4, 314-5.

For Tarski, a logician concerned primarily with the logical clarification of scientific language, the double ordering resolves into the simple logical biconditional of the T-Schema:

X is true if, and only if, p.

Here, *p* is any arbitrary sentence to which the word “true” refers – any true sentence, in other words – while *X* is the name of that sentence. Since the name of a sentence can be expressed simply by use of quotation marks, then this can also be rewritten, somewhat more perspicaciously, as:

“S” is true iff S.

This can be illustrated by the following, charmingly banal, assertion:

“The snow is white” is true iff the snow is white. (Tarski 1944, pp. 343-5)

Tarski's T-Schema is not offered as a definition of truth *per se* but as a criterion for testing the material adequacy of a definition of truth in a language: a materially adequate definition of truth must imply all the equivalences of form T (ibid., p. 344). What matters for our very limited purposes, however, is that the *biconditionality* of the T-schema undermines the unidirectionality of correspondence as it is typically understood. One can no longer really speak of truth-bearers and truth-makers since there is no longer a unidirectional causal relation. The fact of the snow being white no more *makes* the statement true than the truth of the statement makes the snow white.⁵ In fact, it is not a relation between a proposition and reality; “The snow is white” is the sentential name for a proposition. We have entered into a purely formal-logical space.

Because Tarski and Heidegger's theories of truth both develop from the fissure opened with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is not surprising that the

⁵ It is important that Aristotle's own most basic definition of truth, which appears in *Metaphysics* 1011 b25, does not imply any unidirectional causal dependence. Hence Tarski is quite correct to regard his own semantic account as conforming “to the intuitive content of that of Aristotle” (ibid., p. 360).

richest and most compelling accounts of Kant's theory of truth – those readings concerned neither with narrowly exegetical questions nor with simply positioning Kant within a range of “options” wrested from their historical and philosophical context – take recourse to both of these theories, not despite but due to their very opposition. To substantiate this claim, I will consider two contrasting yet complementary examples: Gerald Prauss's “Zum Wahrheitsproblem bei Kant,” which rejects the interpretation of Kant as having a correspondence theory of truth, and Robert Hanna's “Kant, Truth, and Human Nature,” which offers a nuanced defense of it.

On Prauss's account, Kant invokes the nominal definition of truth as correspondence in the introduction to the transcendental analytic only to demonstrate the incapacity of formal logic to make sense of the question “What is truth?” let alone answer it. Formal logic, on his reading, leads to “precisely the starting point that, since Tarski, modern semantics has chosen” – a starting point that leads into the “wretched vicious circle [elende Dialelle]” of which Kant warned and which in turn demands subtle technical means to rescue truth from paradox (Prauss 1969, pp. 176-7). Recognizing the sterility of a formal approach, Kant abandons formal for transcendental logic, which asks about the conditions that must be satisfied for there to be two such things that relate to each other as cognition and object (ibid., p. 179).⁶ Consequently, the sense of truth assumes a fundamentally different meaning: whereas the formal sense of truth is *non-falsity*, the transcendental sense of truth is *Wahrheitsdifferenz*, “truth-difference.” *Wahrheitsdifferenz* – a word not actually used by Kant – means neither the non-false, nor correspondence with an object, but object-relatedness as such (ibid., p. 181). It is this object-relatedness that allows the difference between truth and falsity to appear.

With this notion of a transcendental logic of truth, Prauss comes quite close to Heidegger's claim, in *Sein und Zeit*, that the truth whose location is the assertion or judgment depends on entities being discovered in their Being. For Prauss, as for Heidegger, there are two quite different senses

⁶ For an expanded account of “transcendental truth” in Kant, see Paek 2005. Paek draws a suggestive connection with Aquinas.

of truth: one original, the other derivative. The derivative sense of truth involves the logical predication of truth and falsity through an assertion or judgment. The original sense of truth transcends the opposition of the true and the false; it is only in relation to this original sense that the truth or falsity of a judgment can actually say *anything at all*, or amount to anything more than pure formalism. Prauss, to be sure, does not speak of the discovery of entities or disclosure, let alone *Dasein* and *Being-in-the-world*, but it is hard to understand what *Wahrheitsdifferenz*, as the condition of the possibility of object-relatedness, could mean if not the transcendental field within which the disclosure of entities could take place, or indeed the very disclosure of the difference between true and false.

For Hanna, Kant does ascribe to a correspondence theory of truth, even though it only accounts for part of his position. The very fact that Kant speaks of a nominal definition implies that there should also be a real definition, but whereas a nominal definition is merely verbal – a formula that can be substituted for the word – a real definition accounts for the substantive essence of a thing.⁷ The problem, for Hanna, is that allowing such a distinction between nominal and real definition seems to lead to three “unhappy interpretive results,” that, taken together, call into question whether Kant has anything substantive to say about truth. These are, in brief:

- (1) Kant considers the *nominal definition* “minimally acceptable but ultimately vacuous.” (Hanna 2000, p. 226)
- (2) Kant does not manage to achieve a real definition, suggesting, for Kant, “in the last analysis nothing substantive can ever be said about the concept of truth.” (Ibid., p. 227)
- (3) While Kant raises the possibility of “the universal and certain criterion of truth of any and every cognition,” he immediately rejects the existence of such a criterion, suggesting that, for Kant, the “question of the criterion of truth cannot be satisfactorily answered.” (Ibid.)

⁷ Regarding the meaning of the “nominal definition” for Kant, see Vanzo 2010. While Vanzo offers a more historically situated account of nominal definition in Kant, the gist of his reading agrees with Hanna.

Hanna, however, considers that such a conclusion is not warranted. For Kant, he argues, the definition of truth as “accordance of my cognition with its object” is “strictly and analytically correct, yet metaphysically and epistemically neutral.” Kant, consequently, ascribes to a “plausibly weak version of the correspondence theory,” one that shows a strong resemblance to Tarski’s semantic theory of truth. The real definition of truth, in turn, is equivalent to the “criterion of truth.” But because Kant rejects the possibility of a universal criterion of truth, he does not believe that there can be a single *real definition* of truth. Nevertheless, Kant believes that while there is no *single* criterion of truth, different kinds of truths have different criteria. Hence “truth has several different, equally legitimate, and systematically specifiable criteria” (ibid.). Consequently, Kant is neither an unhappy deflationist nor an advocate for a strong and substantive correspondence theory, but is instead a “constrained pluralist about truth.”

These two interpretations, their differences notwithstanding, share a similar tendency: both analyze a seemingly unified conception of truth in two vastly different directions representing opposite ends of the neo-Kantianism that dominated German and Austrian academic philosophy into the beginning of the twentieth century. This suggests, in turn, that both accounts, while seeking to defend Kant’s theory of truth, ultimately call its coherence into question. On Prauss’s account, logical and transcendental truth seem fundamentally disjoint, raising deep questions as to how the logical structure of truth relates to its transcendental structure. With Hanna, to be sure, the senses of truth are more clearly complementary: the real definition would seem to give a more concrete and substantial meaning to the neutral, weak correspondence theory claimed by the nominal definition. Yet even if he does not fragment the sense of truth, fragmentation enters his argument in a different way – through the very notion that there are multiple, equally legitimate criteria. While the real definition may *cohere* with the nominal definition, the real definition itself has fragmented into several real definitions whose relation to one another remains opaque.

To better understand what this means, let us take a closer look at Hanna’s argument for the existence of plural criteria in Kant. He begins by citing Kant’s argument for the impossibility of a *universal* criterion, which

first appears in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁸ The argument runs as follows: were there a universal criterion, applicable to all objects, then this would have to abstract away from all the content of cognition, and yet the truth concerns nothing else than just such content, and hence the very idea of such a criterion is absurd. In the *Jäsche Logic*, this same argument is cast in slightly different terms: a “universal material criterion of truth” is impossible, indeed self-contradictory, because as a “material” criterion it must concern the very differences among objects that, as a “universal” criterion, it abstracts away from (Ak 9, pp. 50-1). According to Hanna’s reading, Kant is disputing neither that truth can have universal or necessary features nor that it is possible to have criteria for truth; he is merely rejecting the “monolithic truth-theory of the Cartesians,” according to which a proposition is true if and only if it can be grasped through a clear and distinct intuition (Hanna 2000, p. 243)

But what are Kant’s plural material truth criteria? The first example that Hanna gives is the principle of non-contradiction. While this serves as a negative criterion for all judgments, it applies as a sufficient criterion only for analytic cognitions (ibid., pp. 244-5).⁹ This one example is enough to establish the minimal claim that there is at least one genuine criterion of truth. But as Hanna goes on to demonstrate, a material criterion can also be given for the other fundamental variants of judgment: synthetic a priori, and synthetic a posteriori. In the case of the former: this criterion is nothing else than “[t]he highest principle of all synthetic judgment,” namely that “every object stands under the necessary conditions of [the] synthetic unity of the manifold of intuition in a possible experience” (KrV A157-8/B196-7). In the case of the latter:

That coherence [*Zusammenhang*] of appearances determining one another with necessity according to universal laws, which we entitle nature . . . [is] the criterion of empirical truth, whereby experience is distinguished from dreaming. (KrV A451/B479)

⁸ See KrV A59/B83.

⁹ See also KrV A151/B190-1.

To clarify these three different criteria, Hanna applies the technical language of “isomorphic semantic projection” (Hanna 2000, p. 237). Each of the three criteria assumes the following form:

Proposition P is true *iff* P projects isomorphically onto X, where X is either:

- (1) every logically possible world (=analytic a priori cognitions)
- (2) every possible world of human experience (=synthetic a priori)
- (3) an actual or real world, but not every possible experienceable world (=synthetic a posteriori). (Ibid., pp. 244-8)

Such a presentation, however, should not lead us to think that the criteria can operate independently of Kant's account of the faculties of the mind. Rather, “each truth-criterion correlates directly with a distinct human cognitive capacity” (ibid., p. 247). Analytic truth is “conceptual truth,” resting in “our capacity for conceptualization and having thoughts – the faculty of understanding” (ibid.); “[s]ynthetic a priori truth is based on the possibility of human sensory experience...our capacity for pure intuition and pure productive imagination – the faculty of pure sensibility” (ibid.); “And synthetic a posteriori truth is based on the application of conceptual and judgmental rules to particular actual objects of perception, and therefore connects directly with our capacity for inner and outer empirical intuition – the faculty of empirical sensibility” (ibid.). This is to say, each faculty involves a certain kind of *disclosure* and each discloses its own object domain. The criteria of truth, in each case, involve the relation to this specific disclosure. While the criteria are described in terms of “isomorphic semantic projection,” the condition of this projection's possibility lies with the different cognitive faculties. Hanna's interpretation thus appears closer to Prauss's than might first seem to be the case; both, even without making any explicit reference to Heidegger, affirm the dependence of propositional truth on a more original – logically prior – moment of entitative disclosure. While this more original moment of disclosure can be juxtaposed to the *assertion* of truth through a “truth-bearing” judgment, it is nevertheless structured around the possibility of judgment – a connection

that leads into the heart of the transcendental deduction of the categories. For only thus can it constitute a domain of objects.

That there are not only multiple criteria for truth and multiple real definitions of truth, but multiple “fields of disclosure” achieved through distinct faculties of the mind, suggests even more strongly than before that truth is not only *plural* but *fragmented*. If a judgment or an assertion can still be said, in some minimal way, to correspond to objects, it is only because there is no single, homogenous object domain but multiple objects’ domains. Consider a geometry teacher standing in front of a circle drawn on the blackboard. She tells the class, “*Every point on that line is equidistant from the center.*” Is this statement true or false? If she is referring to the actual circular shape drawn on the backboard, it is strictly speaking false. Yet the actual line implies an idealized geometric space, and with respect to this her assertion is true, and indeed, for Kant, an *a priori* synthetic truth.

To speak of fragmentation assumes a relation to lost or broken unity. Pluralism, in contrast, is neutral if not tendentially positive – but only since it has relinquished the desire for a more radical, totalizing unity and is content to affirm difference. Hanna, by interpreting Kant as an alethic pluralist, risks underplaying the significance that totality will come to play not only in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, with its discussion of the regulative function of pure reason, but above all in the *Critique of Judgment*, which Kant will himself conceive as the means of uniting the two disjoint parts of philosophy – the respective doctrines of nature and of freedom – into a coherent whole (Ak 5: 176-9). Indeed, what takes the place of unification and totality, in Hanna’s reading, is *constraint*. Kant is a pluralist, but a “constrained pluralist about truth” (Hanna 2000, p. 227). It is precisely this constraint that keeps Kant from becoming either a “truth-relativist” or an “unconstrained pluralist,” allowing him to hold to a correspondence theory of truth and reject “non-classical truth-values” such as dialethism (ibid., pp. 247-248). The more precise nature of Kant’s constraint consists in the belief that:

There are precisely three types of truth, correlating one-to-one with the three basic semantic types of propositions, and then in turn with the three basic cognitive faculties making up our total capacity for cognition. Each of the three types of truth is a type of non-traditional correspondence. And since Kant is committed to the law of excluded middle or bivalence, each of the three types of truth is also a type of classical truth. (Ibid., p. 247)

The constraint in question ultimately involves totality – the total capacity for cognition. According to Hanna’s reading, the “three types” of truth are correlated with the *total capacity* for cognition; they are constrained to the totality of *human cognition*. The totality in question is inseparable from the inherent and radical finitude of the cognitive capacities of human beings. But granting that Kant’s pluralism is a constrained pluralism, and that he is neither a relativist nor a wild pluralist, it is nevertheless worth asking whether he is quite so constrained as Hanna would have him be. For indeed, cognition is only one of human beings’ capacities, and human nature is characterized both by the finitude of the understanding, constrained to possible objects of sensible experience, and by the infinitude of reason, whose peculiar fate, so Kant begins the preface of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is to trouble itself with questions that it cannot answer (KrV A vii). Can the matter of truth be constrained to cognition?

Hanna recognizes that, for Kant, “the capacity of cognition is only the first of two constitutive psychological capacities of the human person, the other being the capacity for desiring and willing – human agency” (Hanna 2000, p. 249). It is, moreover, the ultimate “primacy of the practical” – the need to hold open a space for human agency and morality – that compels Kant’s constraint. And indeed, while the plural meanings of truth are constrained to cognition, nevertheless “the very *sense* of the concept of truth ultimately derives from the special role it plays in human agency and morality” (ibid., p. 248). Truth is ultimately important and meaningful not only as the core value of cognition, governing the entire enterprise of science, but because “all important moral concepts of sincerity and insincerity, and veracity and mendacity, presuppose the concept of truth.” What matters in this regard is not whether my judgments are true but that I am

truthful, “non-cognitively aimed at truth.” For indeed: “Kant is telling us that truthfulness, not the truth, shall make you free” (ibid., p. 250).

Truthfulness, on my reading of Hanna’s argument, involves being “non-cognitively aimed at the truth,” because speaking truthfully cannot be reduced to trying always to say things that are factually true. Statements of fact are untruthful when they either imply an intention that does not exist or conceal one’s true intentions. If I ask for my neighbor’s hammer, saying “I only need it for a couple of days,” this may be factually true, but it is untruthful if, nevertheless, I intend to sell it rather than returning it when I’m finished with what I had to do. Conversely, if I tell my neighbor “I will return this hammer to you in a few days,” but I then get kidnapped, preventing me from returning it, the statement will be proved false, and yet the promise will still have been made truthfully if, in fact, I sincerely intended to return it. But while truthfulness plays a far greater role than truth in the second critique, I would argue that it does not exhaust the problem of truth in Kant’s critical philosophy. While one can plausibly argue that only these three types of judgments are fully and unproblematically truth-bearing, it is not clear that these three judgments belong exclusively to cognitive judgement. In a passage from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant distinguishes between the two parts of the doctrine of elements: “an *Analytic*, as the rule of truth [*Regel der Wahrheit*], as the first part, and a *Dialectic*, as the exposition and resolution of illusion in the judgments of practical reason” (Ak 5: 16). While this division parallels the organization of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the order of the analytic is reversed: instead of moving from sensibility to concepts to principles, it will go from principles to concepts to sensibility (Ak 5: 16). The necessity for this inversion follows from the fact that the *Critique of Practical Reason* considers reason not in relation to objects but in relation to the will and its causality:

Here the law of causality from freedom, that is, from some pure practical rational principle, constitutes the unavoidable beginning and determines the objects to which alone it can be referred. (Ak 5: 16)

This leaves no doubt that certain non-cognitive judgments also involve truth and can indeed be said to be true or false. While we might perhaps still think of this relation as a correspondence – though to an object that is produced rather than given – it is hardly possible to think that correspondence applies to all truth in a single non-equivocal way. Moreover, whatever this truth is, it cannot be thoroughly assimilated to the analytic judgments that appear in the first critique and that Hanna attributes to the faculty of understanding. The truth of practical reason, if we may speak of such, involves the specific mode of givenness of the “practical rule,” which is “unconditional,” and “represented a priori as a categorical practical proposition by which the will is objectively determined absolutely and immediately,” and wherein pure reason is “immediately lawgiving” (Ak 5: 31). The consciousness of this “fundamental law” – its disclosure to consciousness – is a “fact of reason” that cannot be derived from antecedent data but “forces itself upon us of itself as a synthetic a priori proposition that is not based on any intuition, pure or empirical, although it would be analytic if the freedom of the will were presupposed” (Ak 5: 31). This peculiar “fact of reason” thus involves the synthetic a priori revelation of analytic truth. Because Kant says so little about this practical truth, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions as to how it could be understood, but it is, at the very least, clear that, because it combines features of both analytic and synthetic a priori truths, Hanna’s account of the criteria in terms of isomorphic projection cannot apply.

Having now considered the role of truth in Kant’s practical philosophy, and having seen that truth is not just an issue in pure cognitive judgments, we are in a better position to assess Hanna’s claim that Kant is a “constrained pluralist about truth.” It is, at the very least, clear that, even if Kant is a constrained pluralist, he is not as constrained as Hanna would have him be: the problem of truth, for Kant, escapes beyond the narrow fence imposed by the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

But if Kant’s alethic pluralism is not constrained to the sphere of cognition, this means that the several modes of truth are not ultimately kept together through the unitary nature of human cognition. This suggests that if it is constrained, it is only in a much weaker sense: while it is certainly

possible to map out the possible forms of truth, and while the bugbear of relativism can be happily kept at bay, nevertheless the multiple, though still finite, senses of truth cannot be unified through the underlying sense of objective correspondence. Moreover, the ultimate harmony between them cannot be taken for granted; they describe a fragmented field, riven with tensions. Whereas the three real definitions or criteria articulated by Hanna describe three nested domains – the world of logical possibility, the world of human sensible experience, the actual world – whose hierarchical relationship (the second is a special case of the first, and the third a special case of the second) forbids radical conflict, this is no longer so the moment we allow, at the very least, that practical reason has its own kind of truth. Suddenly, a rift opens between *nature* and *freedom*. The truth of freedom is not simply the sort of cognitive truth that is presupposed by truthfulness as an ethical virtue – ethics, after all, unfolds in a world whose objective truth must be acknowledged – but the sort of truth discovered in the promise; the truth of our membership, as finite rational beings, in the kingdom of ends. Such is the truth of our radical capacity for moral agency, which announces itself to us in the inner voice of conscience.

This brings us to the *Critique of Judgment*, which takes its departure from the rift between freedom and nature. Thus, in the introduction, he speaks of the “incalculable [*unübersehbare*] gulf fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, as the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible [...]” (Ak 5: 175-6) Between the first and the second, no transition is possible; it is as if they were two different worlds. Nevertheless, reciprocal influence exists between them. The concept of freedom should realize its purposes in the sensible world, and nature must somehow be conceived such that its laws harmonize (*zusammenstimme*) with the realization of the moral law (Ak 5: 176).

Thus there must still be a ground of the *unity* of the supersensible that grounds nature with that which the concept of freedom contains practically, the concept of which, even if it does not suffice for cognition of it either theoretically or practically, and thus has no proper domain of its own, nevertheless makes possible the transition from the manner of thinking in

accordance with the principles of the one to that in accordance with the principles of the other. (Ak 5: 176)

Here the emphasis is no longer on the compatibility of nature and freedom but on the gulf between them. The use of the word *unübersehbar* – imperfectly translated as “incalculable” – to describe this gulf is itself telling. In ordinary German, this could mean either immense or obvious – either incapable of being seen to the end or incapable of being seen past. Allowing the ambiguity to stand, while keeping in mind the implicit reference to vision, would lead us to the following interpretation: the gulf is un-over-seeable since it discloses the absolute difference between these two modes of disclosure. The absolute absence of common ground between these two domains is not only disclosed as a positive fact, but discloses a new mode of truth *qua* disclosure. This new mode of truth does not promise to unify nature and freedom by envisioning a new ontological domain that unites freedom and nature under a higher-order concept. It is not a question, as it becomes with German idealism, of attaining the perspective of the absolute. Rather, it merely joins together nature and freedom – nature-truth and freedom-truth – by opening a field within which an encounter with both truths takes place.

This field, of course, is constituted through the faculty of the power of judgment. Significantly, the faculty of judgment does not constitute a domain (*Gebiet*); unlike the domains of nature and freedom, no special object belongs to it (Ak 5: 176). We could thus think of it as a pure field of truth – one where the question of truth is no longer bound up with ontology. This leads to a surprising conclusion: even though the *Critique of Judgment* has almost nothing to say about truth, it is in fact even more fundamentally concerned with it than the other two critiques. For it has to do not with a specific kind of correspondence to a specific object domain, but with corresponding and disclosure as such – or, as we might put it, the *truth of truth*. Such a conclusion is justified simply by recognizing the fundamental role of judgment in all three sorts of truth whose different criteria Hanna elaborated upon. Judgment is where truth happens.

If judgment is where truth happens, what are we to make of those kinds of judgment that are the special concern of the *Third Critique*: judgments

that, without *resulting* in truth, exhibit the very power of judgment? Such judgments, I propose, are not truth-bearing but truth-concerned. Without resulting in this or that specific true judgment, they nevertheless concern the very possibility of truth as such – a possibility that rests on both the amenability of nature for understanding and the ultimate coherence of cognitive and practical truth.

In the dialectic of the teleological power of judgment, Kant, having outlined the various philosophical systems of nature, then asks, “What do all these systems want?” For while they seek to explain our teleological judgments about nature, they end up either denying all truth to such judgments or, acknowledging the truth of such judgments, promise “to demonstrate the possibility of a nature in accordance with the idea of final causes” (Ak 5: 392). Neither of these systems, however, can attain its aim: both are equally impossible. For while the concept of a *natural goal*, as deployed in teleological judgment, applies to nature as an object of experience, it nevertheless subsumes the causal order of nature under a form of causality that is only thinkable through reason. For it to be possible to use this rational concept dogmatically for the determining power of judgment, we would have to guarantee the “objective reality of this concept.” While the concept of a thing as a natural end is conditioned by experience, being only possible “under certain conditions given in experience,” it cannot be abstracted from experience, but “is possible only in accordance with a principle of reason in the judging of the object” (Ak 5: 396). The concept of a thing as a natural goal is conditioned by experience but cannot be derived from experience. It is not to be understood, in other words, as a higher-order abstraction from experience, but involves an additional element, rooted in reason, that, as such, lacks objective reality.

Kant's solution to the impasse presented by teleological judgment appears in the 75th section of the *Critique of Judgment*. In making a teleological judgment, one is *not* saying that the generation of certain things in nature is only possible through a teleological cause, with purposes determining objective reality. Rather, one is saying that, because of the peculiar nature of our cognitive faculties, we are compelled to judge that the things of nature could not have come into existence otherwise than

through a purposive causality, and hence to think of a being that is productive in a manner analogous to an understanding, which realizes the ideas that it conceives by bringing them into existence through a series of mechanical causes (Ak 5: 397-8). Teleological judgments, this is to say, are not determinative judgments about reality but reflective judgments about a person's faculties of cognition.

The first principle is thus an objective fundamental principle for the determining, the second a subjective fundamental principle merely for the reflecting power of judgment, hence a maxim that reason prescribes to it. (Ak 5: 398)

This leads us to a striking conclusion: teleological judgments, as judgments about our own faculty of cognition, concern precisely what the ultimate ground of material truth is, the basis of the three criteria that, according to Hanna's reading, constitute the "real definition" of truth. And hence, while teleological judgments lack their own objective criterion, they are nevertheless judgments *about* truth. They are concerned, in a very fundamental way, with the sort of truth involved in cognition, even if they do not themselves say something true about objective reality. We might speak of a second-order truth, or, borrowing the language of post-Kantian German idealism, of a higher potency of truth born from the reflection on the very capacity for truth.

The same basic reasoning applies *a fortiori* to aesthetic judgment, the primary focus of the *Critique of Judgment*. Consider the following passage from the pithy deduction of the judgment of taste:

Now since the power of judgment in regard to the formal rules of judging, without any matter (neither sensation nor concept), can be directed only to the subjective conditions of the use of the power of judgment in general (which is restricted neither to the particular kind of sense nor to a particular concept of understanding), and thus to that subjective element that one can presuppose in all human beings (as requisite for possible cognitions in general), the correspondence of a representation with these conditions of

the power of judgment must be able to be assumed to be valid for everyone a priori. I.e., the pleasure or subjective purposiveness of the representation for the relation of the cognitive faculties in the judging of a sensible object in general can rightly be expected of everyone. (Ak 5: 290)

The faculty of judgment, for Kant, is the unifying faculty of cognition, since all cognitions take the form of judgments. Truth and falsity, in turn, apply in the first place to judgments; it is judgments that are said to be true or false. Hence, as far as the judgment of taste concerns the subjective conditions of the use of the faculty of judgment, it concerns nothing else than the subjective – as opposed to objective – conditions of truth. It is significant, moreover, that in just this context Kant deploys the concept of correspondence (*Übereinstimmung*), referring to the correspondence of a representation (*Vorstellung*) with the conditions of the power of judgment. This suggests that the power of judgment is a subjective power for correspondence that itself serves as the grounds for the specific correspondences of cognitions to specific objects on which knowledge depends. While the judgment of taste does not establish specific truths about the world, it conveys the potential for truth within the human powers of cognition; indeed, it is disclosive of the very truthfulness of experience. When we judge that something is beautiful, we judge that it is amenable to understanding, even though it has not yet been understood. The judgment of beauty is not objectively true – it says nothing about the object itself. But it promises truth.

This promise also involves the prospect of a deepening agreement among different minds. Hence taste, for Kant, comprises a form of *sensus communis*, by which Kant understands a capacity for judgment that, in its reflections, takes into consideration the a priori mode of representation (*Vorstellungsart*) of everyone else, thus escaping from the illusions that result from mistaking the private constitution of one's mind for objective determinations of reality (Ak 5: 293). That the *sensus communis*, in just this way, plays a vital role in the human search for truth appears clearly in the *Jäsche Logic*, where he remarks that the “external touchstone of truth is the comparison of our own judgments with those of others,” adding that:

[t]he common human understanding (*sensus communis*) is also in itself a touchstone for discovering the mistakes of the artificial use of the understanding [...] This is what it means to orient oneself in thought or in the speculative use of reason by means of the common understanding, when one uses the common understanding as a test for passing judgment on the correctness of the speculative use. (Ak 9: 57)

Aesthetic judgment not only attests to the truthfulness of experience, but helps orient us toward the truth.

The *Critique of Judgment* concerns judgment as such in terms of its own a priori principle. Such a principle could only be the principle of truth, the pure a priori condition of the possibility of truth independent of any objects whatsoever, be they empirical, purely a priori, or practical. Such a principle or a priori condition does not establish a *Gebiet*, an object domain in relation to which a judgment or cognition could be said to be true (or false). Rather, it is the condition for the unity of the specific criterion corresponding to the plural real definitions. We might think of this condition as a further criterion, but this would not mean that a universal criterion of the truth is possible after all. The criterion of unity does not establish a universal criterion for truth such as would apply to all specific objects even while abstracting from all specificity. Rather, the criterion for unity speaks to the possibility that different criteria, different objects, different truths can be brought together. Here, an analogy might be drawn with the concept of the transcendental tracing back, through the Scholastics, to Aristotle. Kant's rejection of a universal criterion of truth is, indeed, analogous to Aristotle's argument that Being cannot be regarded as a highest-order universal. While every entity partakes of Being, there is no single common sense of Being that can be derived by abstracting away from all particularity, since it is this very particularity that accounts for this entity being the kind of entity that it is.

Such an a priori condition of truth is nothing else than the *sensus communis*, human finitude in its essential finitude. Human finitude is the paradoxical condition of belonging both to the domain of nature and freedom, of being claimed by both domains – *suffering* both domains.

Accordingly, the primary concern of the *Critique of Judgment* is with feelings of pleasure and displeasure whose grounds, as far as they are disconnected from any interest in an object, are to be found a priori. These aesthetic feelings disclose the relations existing between different faculties of the mind. Hence, in the case of the judgment of taste, the feeling of pleasure is the very consciousness of “the purely formal purposiveness in the play of the powers of cognition of the subject” occasioned by a representation through which an object is given (Ak 5: 222). This feeling is rooted in an “inner causality”, which lacks any reference to a specific object of cognition; hence it contains “a mere form of the subjective purposiveness of a representation in an aesthetic judgment” (Ak 5: 222). Moreover, this disclosure does not produce knowledge of any kind; it does not result in some knowledge that would then render it irrelevant. Rather, “[w]e linger over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself” (Ak 5: 222). This tarrying suggests that the aesthetic experience involved in the judgment of taste not only *discloses* a field of truth that involves nothing less than the possibility of a relationship between the objective modes of truth, but that this disclosure is never just a *fait accompli*. Instead, it must be continually reaffirmed, and precisely because it is not the disclosure of an object but a pure disclosure – a disclosure of the very possibility of disclosure, or, in other words, of the ultimate amenability of the human mind to truth. Such an amenability is no longer guaranteed, as it was for Aquinas, through divine knowledge, but in the *sensus communis* as humankind’s plural finitude, revealed above all through aesthetic judgment and indeed through the historical cultivation of taste.

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DOMINIK FINKELDE

Kant, Maimon, and the Differential Theory of Perception

Salomon Maimon, a Jewish philosopher of Polish-Lithuanian origin, is widely remembered for his intellectual engagement with Immanuel Kant – a debate Kant himself recognized as significant. In a letter to Marcus Herz dated 7 April 1789, Kant acknowledges that “none of my opponents understood me and the primary question [of the first *Critique*] as thoroughly as Mr. Maimon, nor do many possess such keen insight for similarly profound inquiries” (Kant 1986, p. 395, trans. D.F.). Kant’s respectful reference to Maimon highlights the weight of their philosophical exchange, which revolves around two pivotal epistemological issues that Maimon frequently investigated in his works: the essential relationship between mind and world, articulated through the questions “quid facti?” (“What of fact?”) and “quid juris?” (“What of right?”).

The first question, “quid facti?,” asks “What facts exist?” or “To which facts do human judgments refer?” Essentially, it asks whether human cognition can genuinely apply judgments to empirical facts, and if so, by what means? The second question, “quid juris?,” builds on the first and examines the legitimacy – or more precisely, the epistemological justification – by which Kant’s a priori concepts (such as causality and substance) can be applied to sensory intuitions. These intuitions are distinct from the concepts of understanding, as they passively receive what is “given.” In contrast,

understanding actively transforms the “given” into the raw material for judgments. To resolve the apparent incompatibility between sensibility and understanding, Kant introduces in his doctrine of schematism “a third thing, which must stand in homogeneity with the category on the one hand and the appearance on the other” (Kant 2000, A 138 / B 177). This “third thing” is identified as “time” (ibid., A 139 / B 179), acting as a formal mediator between sensory data and understanding. For instance, sensory data becomes comprehensible only if something constant endures as “a being (in time)” (ibid., A 143). However, Maimon remains unconvinced by this solution. He advocates for a more radical resolution, proposing that both understanding and intuition should be traced back to a single, unified foundation.

The two questions, “quid juris?” and “quid facti?”, lead to numerous areas of investigation, which will be further explored in the following sections of this paper. These include the coherence of Kant’s separation of human cognition into *Sinnlichkeit* and *Verstand*, the difference between the form and content conditions of knowledge, the concept of the “thing-in-itself,” and Maimon’s concept of epistemological differentials. Drawing from the calculus of infinitesimals, Maimon uses the idea of infinitely small elements of cognition to theoretically bridge the gap between the sensory and the conceptual – a gap he believes Kant did not overcome. On this path of analysis, Maimon thus aligns facets of Humean and Leibnizian philosophy, which Kant, obviously, would consider incompatible. As a result, Maimon is seen as both a skeptic of empirical knowledge and a metaphysician who, at least from Kant’s perspective, retreats behind the critical approach of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Gilles Deleuze (2007), alongside Martial Guérout (1929), was one of the few 20th-century philosophers to engage with Maimon’s differential speculations, making them the foundation of his theory of differential immanence.

The Given and Its Myth

Theodor W. Adorno succinctly captures the core issue regarding the relationship between mind and world in his *Negative Dialectic*: “The conceptual

order," he observes, "imposes itself on what thinking wants to grasp" (Adorno 2004, p. 5, transl. changed). Yet, since "objects do not dissolve into their concepts," thought can only produce a "semblance of identity" (ibid., transl. changed). This raises a critical question: do objects that resist conceptual capture exist as genuine sources of reality, or are they merely products of our intuition and thought? This dilemma is encapsulated by the notion of the "myth of the given," which suggests a belief in an immediately available experience that serves as the foundation of knowledge. If the conceptual order strives to penetrate something, then there must be some reality that it aims to grasp.

Wilfrid Sellars both characterizes and challenges this idea of the "myth of the given" (Sellars 1997, p. 33), suggesting that it assumes a strict separation between "given" sensory impressions (or "raw data") and the conceptual frameworks we use to understand the world. The "given" is often assumed to be the non-inferential foundation of human knowledge, apparently presenting our sensory impressions as the basic building blocks of our understanding. Consequently, the human mind supposedly accesses the world through this "given," without interference from cognitive processes or prior assumptions. The origins of this myth can be traced in part to British empiricism, exemplified by Locke's notion of "sensations" and Hume's discussion of "impressions" – both viewed as mechanisms for processing stimuli, which supply the raw material for sensory intuition and the formation of ideas within the human mind. However, for Maimon, a more crucial and influential concept is Kant's notion of the "thing-in-itself." In one of the most well-known quotes from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this "thing-in-itself" is described as "the entirely undetermined thought of something in general" (Kant 1990, A 253) and as a "something = X, of which we know nothing at all nor can we know anything in general (in accordance with the current constitution of our understanding)" (ibid., A 250). Still, Kant argues, we know at least that this "something" exists, even though its ontological status of existence is not clearly determined. The "thing-in-itself" can be seen as a "limit concept" that neither includes any specific object nor refers to a domain that conforms to any categorical or even spatio-temporal order. Nonetheless, it can be assumed

to function as a source of material experience. After all, where does the red impression I see through my windshield come from, if not from the traffic light at the intersection or that “something = X,” which serves as the source of the traffic light’s redness? If my consciousness were to fabricate “red” autonomously, I might imagine green instead, potentially causing an accident, and thus lose any access to an intersubjective realm of human experience. So, obviously, Kant’s “something = X” aligns with the tradition of the “myth of the given” causing critique from the post-Kantian period of the late 18th and early 19th century onwards. It evokes a “beyond” that is present both in Kant’s dualistic talk of “phenomena” and “noumena,” and in his division of human cognition into sensibility (formally determined by space and time) as the source of material content – and understanding (formally determined through a priori categories). Maimon’s critique targets the issues arising from these dualisms. He emphasizes this in his comments on Kant but also on Carl L. Reinhold, who believed he had resolved Kant’s problem of the thing-in-itself through his concept of “representation” (*Vorstellung*) within his own theory of knowledge. In both cases – in Kant’s notion of the thing-in-itself and Reinhold’s philosophical idea of representation – the same problem arises: Can something that appears to be “outside of consciousness” (Maimon 2024, p. 179) become part of cognition?

Maimon articulates this question in his treatise *On the Categories of Aristotle*. He writes, “How can the understanding, whose function is merely to think general forms or relationships concerning indeterminate objects, think specific objects through these forms whose determinations are not contained in these general forms? What determines it to think of some objects in one form and others in another?” (Maimon 1794, p. 229, transl. D.F.). According to Maimon, the concept of the thing-in-itself does not solve the problem. As something we know nothing about, it eludes any determination of the relationship between the particular and the universal, into which the particular is supposed to merge for truthful thoughts. Interpreting intuitions as providing (particular) material for cognition based on “something = X” only restates the problem of cognition without solving it. In this context, a reader like Maimon faces the same question

as “the Indian man who, when told that the world stands on a pair of *elephants* and the *elephants on a great tortoise*, in his innocence asked, ‘*and what does the tortoise stand on?*’” (Maimon 2024, p. 179). The concept of a “something = X” as part of an interplay with other elements of cognition turns out to be a fantasy arising from the inability to comprehend how various elements in the mind are related as a “whole” without an “other” or “outside.” One conclusion Maimon draws from this is expressed in his critique of Reinhold: “The *original* sensible perception [...] does not represent anything outside of itself.” Or, as Maimon emphasizes, “it [sensory perception] does not represent anything” (ibid., p. 178). If humans nonetheless insist on relating “every original perception as representation,” according to Reinhold, or as “intuition” in its pure forms of space and time, according to Kant, “to a something (outside of consciousness),” then this something is caused “by an illusion of the capacity of imagination” (ibid.) and nothing more. In other words, due to the inability to conceptualize the “whole” of cognition in its dependence on (inner-psychic and unconscious) elemental components, the imagination produces a “given” or “ground” as something external to cognition itself.

Consequently, Maimon’s counter-thesis to Kant claims that the mind does not relate to a transcendent object outside its cognitive relationships but to a thought-object that can be expanded within the psyche through, in part, unconscious elements of cognition – more on this later. Maimon writes, “Kant claims that sensibility and understanding are two completely different faculties. But I argue that an infinite thinking being must think them as one and the same power [*Kraft*] despite the fact that we must represent them as two different faculties in us, and that for us sensibility is incomplete understanding” (Maimon 2010, p. 98). This notion of an eternal being profoundly influenced Maimon’s view of the human mind. Just as, for the infinite thinking being, the world of sensibility is entirely determined by absolute understanding – aligned with Maimon’s “principle of determinability,” where no epistemic gap exists between cognition and its object – so too must human sensibility be reductively traced back to the power of understanding. Only through this reduction is Kant’s two-world doctrine overcome, as sensibility effectively collapses

into understanding. To eliminate any reference to an external “outside,” the cognitive functions of consciousness must locate the elements of cognition within consciousness itself, including the so-called “given.” Thus, what Kant refers to as “intuition” is no longer a sensory faculty distinct from the conceptual nature of understanding, impacted by a mysterious “something = X.” Instead, intuition is itself already conceptually shaped.

Maimon mentions three moments that play a role in the affection of human cognition: “1) we are not conscious of the concepts contained within sensibility [German – *Affizierung*]; 2) with respect to the concepts that we can attain, we must attach them to sensibility in order to achieve consciousness of them; 3) so, for the most part, we come by both these concepts themselves as well as their relations to one another incompletely and in a temporal sequence according to the laws of sensibility” (ibid.).

In addition to emphasizing that sapient beings are not fully aware of the concepts embedded within sensory experiences, Maimon underlines in the quote that human cognition is, by definition, incomplete. Intuitions do not relate to something “given” outside the cognitive faculty, not to an object and its “X.” Rather, intuitions are, as Ernst Cassirer puts it, “themselves the object” (Cassirer 1995, p. 89). The domain of human experience is not an independent reality. It is a “fiction” (ibid., p. 104) arising from the determinations of our thinking, shaped by the categories and principles of understanding, and then imagined to exist “outside” of us. Almost 200 years later, American philosopher Donald Davidson, opposing the Kantianism of Peter Strawson and Willard V. O. Quine, developed a similar critique of both the “myth of the given” and the form-content distinction, leading both Strawson and Quine from Davidson’s perspective towards skepticism (Davidson 1973). According to Davidson, the “ground” or justification of a judgment can only ever be another judgment, not an intuition.

Causality

Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* refuted Hume’s comment on causality and argued that the criterion for the truth of our mental ideas as building blocks

of understanding cannot be based exclusively on sensory impressions; it must rely on concepts of understanding, like cause and effect. These concepts do not derive their reality from impressions; instead, impressions are interpreted as *perceptions of objects* and their transformations in time through the application of cause and effect. Maimon, in his “Third Letter of Philaletes to Aenesidemus,” questions the extent to which Kant’s concept of causality, as a “synthetic a priori” rule of reasoning, can be applied. It obviously provides, so much may be granted, a general condition for objects of experience in a broad sense; but is it, modally speaking, truly a *necessary* rule by definition? And what happens when considering individual experiences? “For the mere *perception* that certain things *follow each other* according to a rule still does not imply that they *must follow* each other according to a rule, though this latter is something which belongs to the *essence of causal connection*” (Maimon 2024, p. 188). If causality is assumed as a universal condition for experience, how can the objectivity of human experience be deduced from perceiving causes and effects alone? If this question is not sufficiently clarified, the claim to universality fails.

Maimon reflects on famous examples Kant presents in the first *Critique*, particularly in the “Second Analogy,” to support the transcendental concept of causality. These examples include the contemplation of a house as a purely subjective sequence of representations (*Vorstellungen*) and a ship moving down a river (Kant 2000, B 233–B 256). Kant emphasizes that the perception of appearances always occurs in a sequence. Appearances (*Erscheinungen*) are perceived over time, which does not mean that the sequence of their representations is inherent to the objects perceived themselves. One can contemplate a house from the chimney down to its ground floor or vice-versa. The succession of perceptions is simply a subjective sequence of apprehension. It does not prove that the parts of the house exist in a set order. However, for empirical appearances to carry any truth, there must be, in situations of changing events, a rule for the sequence of perceptions that “makes the order of perceptions that follow one another (in the apprehension of this appearance) necessary” (*ibid.*, A 193). A ship moving downstream creates a sequence of perceptions that, unlike the house, cannot be reversed. The ship is first seen upstream,

then downstream. “I must therefore derive the *subjective sequence* of apprehension from the *objective sequence* of appearances, for otherwise the former would be entirely undetermined and no appearance would be distinguished from any other” (ibid.). Thus, appearances depend on rules of perception, which themselves rely on sequences of events. Without this necessity, even if specific experiences contradict it, humans would be unable to make either true or false judgments about states of affairs. “Therefore I always make my subjective synthesis (of apprehension) objective with respect to a rule in accordance with which the appearances in their sequence, i. e., as they occur, are determined through the preceding state, and only under this presupposition alone is the experience of something that happens even possible” (ibid., A 195).

Now Maimon, contradicting Kant, argues that these “two kinds of succession,” whether of the house or the ship, are “in themselves [...] not [...] distinct from one another and so when someone asserts that the ship actually moves downstream, he does not in fact know what he means by the word ‘actually’” (Maimon 2010, p. 101). Maimon criticizes the lack of distinction between the successive perception of events and the perception of real (actual) events occurring in time. For Maimon, all perceptions, whether called “real” or “apparent,” are successive representations in consciousness. Hence, saying that the ship “actually” moves downstream fails to clarify what is meant by “actually,” as no distinction is drawn between “actual” and “apparent” sequences. A random sequence could appear just as necessary – such as if the boat were moving upstream due to a hidden steam engine. For Kant, the ship’s movement is an empirical fact confirmed by natural laws. He differentiates between subjective sequences (how we perceive things) and objective sequences (how things occur in time). According to Maimon, however, this differentiation does not sufficiently establish the objectivity of human cognition. For Maimon, all perceptions are successive representations in consciousness. Paul Franks gets to the heart of this matter when he writes, “In short, the Humean naturalism envisaged by Maimon accepts [...] the [Kantian] argument that constitutive principles underwrite the justifications without which experience would be impossible, and indeed that they are indispensable

to our current epistemic practices”, but the Humean naturalism at the same time “rejects [...] the argument that our current epistemic practices actually amount to experience, and that the actuality of experience justifies the principles that constitute its possibility” (Franks 2007, p. 54). Franks highlights the nuanced critique of Kantian epistemology from the perspective of Maimon’s Humean naturalism, which accepts the necessity of Kant’s constitutive principles for our cognitive practices but challenges the idea that these principles are justified by the existence of experience itself. This points to a deeper skepticism regarding whether our epistemic practices genuinely constitute “experience” in the Kantian sense at all. This may clarify why Maimon feels compelled to bridge the gaps in human cognition, causing skepticism to get a foothold by invoking the notion of an infinite, divine understanding.

Maimon comments on another example with billiard balls taken from Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hume 2007, pp. 20–21). Here, one billiard ball hits another, *causing* the second ball in the Kantian meaning of causality to move. Maimon, though, argues that when one body “a” strikes body “b,” “we have no means of recognizing cause and effect and distinguishing them from one another,” as Kant would have thought, “for because *a* and *b* move off after the contact with the same degree of motion we can view each one equally well as cause or as effect; or rather, we must view their common motion as the effect of a cause external to both of them because at contact they constitute one body” (Maimon 2010, p. 117). Maimon highlights the moment of collision as one that is impossible to clearly separate into cause and effect in the moment of contact. Once the billiard balls touch and interact, no clear marker determines the cause and the effect. The inertia of ball “b” could be seen as causing ball “a” to move. The impact creates a state in which both balls act as one system that cannot be split into clear successions of cause and effect.

Maimon’s arguments emphasize that cause and effect are not absolute properties of the relationships between states of affairs changing over time, as Kant’s concept of causality might suggest. Cause and effect rely on how we structure relationships between states of affairs; one state of

affair is not inherently the cause of another. Our cognition determines the relationship. Kant may believe he has rescued the natural sciences and their objectivity from Hume's skepticism, but Maimon rejects this claim. Hume's associative mechanisms of the human mind (resemblance, contiguity, cause, and effect) organize empirical truths into sequences of events, but these truths never attain an objective, ontological status like rational truths. For truths about facts (*Tatsachenwahrheiten*) to achieve the same form and content as rational truths (*Vernunftwahrheiten*), they would need to be accessible to an infinite understanding.

Maimon mentions the example of the irrational number, the square root of two (*ibid*, p. 94). Though infinitely indeterminate, its status as a mathematical entity is unquestioned. For a divine understanding, however, this irrational number would also be intuitively comprehensible in its infinite nature. The same holds true for empirical facts from God's perspective. No particularity can evade full subordination to the law of universality, allowing the divine understanding to see the world as its own reflection, i.e., without epistemic remainders. As Maimon sees in Leibnizian metaphysics, this absolute transparency of the principles of the particular and the universal is unattainable for the human mind. Cassirer succinctly expresses this when he writes, "Outside the ideal concept of the 'divine mind,' there is no escape from Hume's skepticism" (Cassirer 1995, p. 96).

With this last comment, Maimon's general project of philosophy materializes, namely to theoretically explore objective cognition using his "principle of determinability" (*Satz der Bestimmbarkeit*) and the dogmatic postulate of an infinite and divine understanding. This divine understanding remains infinitely separate from the human mind. "So we start in the middle with our cognition of things and finish in the middle again" (Maimon 2010, p. 181). The approach of the finite understanding toward the infinite is a task that can never be completed. Maimon's philosophy thus returns to Leibniz's metaphysical idealism through a critique of Kant inspired by Hume. Objective knowledge arises by understanding its fundamental elements and building a complete justification upon them. The contents of cognition from experience cannot meet this demand. My (subjective) perception of the color "red" at a traffic light is not akin to

understanding the concept of a straight line as the shortest distance between two points. Nevertheless, *Tatsachenwahrheiten* must be taken care of. Ultimately, Maimon aims not only to demonstrate the necessary role of a divine being's understanding, but he also wants to explain how human beings access states of affairs. His controversial "differential theory of cognition" is especially important for this.

Infinity in the Particular

The primary focus of the infinitesimal calculus developed simultaneously by Leibniz and Newton is on calculating the extreme rates of change of mathematical functions $f(x)$. One example is calculating the slope or gradient of a curve, which shows how steeply the curve changes direction. In the case of a flat line, the slope is zero. If a straight line rises constantly within a coordinate system, it has the same slope at all points, which can be determined using a "slope triangle." Like a staircase step, the vertical difference (y) is related to the horizontal difference (x). However, the slope of a curve is different – consider a parabola – because no point on this curve has the same gradient. Paradoxically, this includes the very point on the curve one wishes to analyze. If you wanted to "zoom in" on this point metaphorically speaking, you would see that, within this point's boundaries, there are further slope differences and, within those slope differences, even more.

Similar to the famous paradox of the race between the tortoise and the hare – where the hare can never overtake the tortoise because the tortoise moves forward with each step the hare takes – the moment of surpassing can only be determined in an infinitely shrinking slope curve (toward zero) without ever actually happening. Strictly speaking, this moment does not "sensibly" exist but can be mathematically determined. This is achieved by defining the chosen point with a straight line, the tangent. As already noted, this tangent can only be determined approximately, which is done using a secant. The secant (Latin "secare," meaning "to cut") intersects two points on the curve, which converge infinitely toward the targeted curve

point through a differential quotient. Thus, differential theory provides infinitely small quantities that, despite the impossibility of “sensibly” capturing them (from a human perspective), can nonetheless conceptually be determined and must also, from the perspective of God, actually (or materially) exist. For Maimon, this insight reveals a continuum that, despite its infinity or its status as an abstract or virtual “idea of reason” (as Maimon calls the differentials), remains determinable. The individual differential values (dx) and (dy) are undefined (both “approach 0”), but their ratio is not. As Gilles Deleuze points out in his comments on Maimon, the “reciprocal synthesis of differential relations” becomes the “source of the production of real objects” (Deleuze 1994, p. 173) of experience. The matter of an idea is embedded in the “thought-element of qualitativeness” (ibid.). A qualitative idea emerges from the quantitative. Deleuze further explains, “[A] principle of determinability corresponds to the undetermined as such (dx , dy) [considered separately, D.F.], a principle of reciprocal determination corresponds to the really determinable (dx/dy) [related to each other, D.F.]; a principle of complete determination corresponds to the effectively determined (values of dx/dy) [within the finished differential calculus, D.F.]” (ibid., p. 171).

The role of differential quotients in the questions “quid facti?” (What is the case?) and “quid juris?” (What is the justification?) becomes evident when Maimon uses the infinitely small changes as a model for how reality (as thought) and mind (as thinking) endlessly relate to and determine each other, with reality being nothing but an effect of thought itself. Alongside differential theory, Maimon draws equally on Leibniz’s concept of “petites perceptions.” In his *New Essays on Human Understanding* and in his *Monadology*, Leibniz explains that human consciousness does not always grasp everything occurring within it. Micro-perceptual, i.e., unconscious processes, form the basis for conscious thinking and perception. (By the way, Kant, for his part, speaks of an unconscious activity of the imagination that “is a hidden art in the depths of the human soul” and “whose true operations we can divine from nature and lay unveiled before our eyes only with difficulty” [Kant 1990, B 181].) We do not directly perceive the minute rustling of individual leaves in the treetop of an oak, which

collectively forms the sound we hear. The rustling is a perceptible object of experience, but the unconscious elements of cognition composing it remain hidden from us – in contrast to a divine understanding. “[T]his ‘outside us’ signifies something in whose representations we are not conscious of any spontaneity, i.e., something that (with regard to our consciousness) is purely passive and not active in us” (Maimon 2010, p. 108). The same applies to the shades of color in the treetops, whose infinite variety of greens are perceived as a single concrete olive-green, for example. As Freud and Lacan have shown, this applies to our thinking at the level of the ego function, since – independent of our understanding – “something always thinks” (Lacan 1970, p. 189). In the flow of unconscious thoughts, we only grasp those that cross the threshold of perception in a way that the cognitive consciousness recognizes, like recognizing a tree that consciousness suddenly identifies, even if the tree initially passed indeterminately on the periphery of our field of vision.

Just as in the infinitesimal calculus, the ratio (dy/dx), despite its infinitude, remains mathematically determinable, so too in individual perceptions (which are thoughts based on unconscious thoughts), it is not the individual elements (thought-perceptions) that matter, but the never-fully-determinable relations between them. These are differences that ‘make a difference’, generating meanings. Meaning arises from the relationships between infinitely small and relationally determinable thought-particles, not from intuitions whose potential sources lie, allegedly, in things-in-themselves. “So, if we judge that fire melts wax, then this judgment does not relate to fire and wax as objects of intuition, but to their elements, which the understanding thinks in relation to cause and effect to one another” (Maimon 2010, p. 184).

This insight suggests what Maimon believes he has uncovered with his differential philosophy: an answer to the problem that our representations and concepts are grounded and limited by external influences (sensory experiences). With the combination of differential theory and “petite perceptions,” he demonstrates that “sensibility” and “understanding” are parts of an internal, virtual process. (This recalls modern theories of consciousness, like Thomas Metzinger’s idea of the “ego” as a flight simulator

or Donald Hoffman's interface theory of perception.) Within this process, sensibility and understanding mutually shape each other in relation to an ever-receding idea of material experience. This means that the structure of our thought arises from internal relations among initially unconscious elements of consciousness, not from a "given" that serves as the ground or reason. "Sensibility thus provides the differentials to a determined consciousness; out of them, the imagination produces a finite (determined) object of intuition; out of the relations of these different differentials, which are its objects, the understanding produces the relation of the sensible objects arising from them" (Maimon 2010, p. 21).

The particular can now be detached from its dependence on Kant's "thing-in-itself" and thus released from the property of sensibility as "given" (Sellars) or as "something = X". Infinitely divisible proto-units of cognition remain and serve as a conceptual principle to reconcile the incompatibility between sensibility (intuition) and mind (understanding). (Whether one could still speak classically of a mind-world relationship in Maimon's epistemology of the infinitely small now becomes, obviously, questionable.) "The metaphysically infinitely small is real because quality can certainly be considered in itself abstracted from all quantity" (ibid., p. 183). From the relations between these infinitely small elements of cognition, objects of experience arise in human consciousness – not through interaction with the sensory matter of the "external world," but through synthetically processed infinities. "For example, if I say: *red* is different from *green*, then the pure concept of understanding of the difference is not treated as a relation between the sensible qualities (for then the Kantian question *quid juris?* remains unanswered), but rather either (according to the Kantian theory), as the relation of their space as a priori forms, or (according to my theory) as the relation of their differentials, which are a priori ideas of reason. The understanding can only think objects as flowing" (ibid., p. 22). The decisive argument follows now: "The particular rule by which an object arises, or its type of differential, makes it into a particular object; and the relations of different objects arise from the relations of the rules by which they arise of their differentials" (ibid.). The qualitative aspects of sensation are thus transformed into quantitative terms. The manifold that becomes intuition

is reinterpreted as the (initially unconscious) matter of conceptual thought, just as Maimon reinterprets Kant's "pure intuitions" of space and time. Since space and time arise only as a result of objects of experience being synthesized through differential processes, sensibility is no longer an independent realm but is instead integrated into differential understanding.

Space and time are no longer "pure intuitions" of sensibility but form "a schema or image of the possible diversity of objects" (Cassirer 1995, p. 97). As such, they presuppose "internal differences in the elements to be spatially or temporally connected" (ibid., p. 98, transl. D.F.).

The epistemological problem of "quid juris?" mentioned earlier thus seems resolved, though, *inter alia*, with reference to divine cognitive thinking. The "pure concepts of understanding or categories never relate directly to intuitions but to their elements, which are ideas of reason (differentials) concerning how these intuitions arise and, through them, the intuitions themselves" (Maimon 2004, p. 193).

In conclusion: Maimon, following Leibniz, argues that perceptions, as building blocks of judgments, do not become elements of cognition through external impressions (as "given"). Instead, our thought contains fundamental elements, though they are only infinitely approximable. Maimon calls them "ideas of reason" and "*noumena*." From these internal, virtual differences, real, perceivable things in the world of human experience emerge within the human capacity of judgment. The relationships between these ideas of reason are the conditions of meaning. What the individual elements (differentials) are is not decisive, as they remain unconscious. What matters is how they relate to one another. "These differentials of objects are the so-called *noumena*; but the objects themselves arising from them are the *phenomena*. With respect to intuition = 0, the differential of any such object in itself is $dx = 0$, $dy = 0$, etc.; however, their relations are not = 0, but can rather be given determinately in the intuitions arising from them. These *noumena* are ideas of reason serving as principles to explain how objects arise according to certain rules of understanding" (Maimon 2010, pp. 21-22).

Human understanding produces the form of the objects of our experience and the objects themselves. Their reality arises from the relations

of infinitely small perceptions that seem to be proto-thoughts. Maimon interprets the matter of sensation – i.e. the raw content that forms the basis of perception – as a composite of differential elements. They are called “noumena” because they have no spatial extension but are potentially sensory since they are determinable differentially. Only through their sum or combination can they lead to conscious experience. In this way, Maimon hopes to bridge the gap between sensibility and understanding with a hybrid concept, while also keeping the gap intact. For if differentials are interpreted as ideas of reason mediating between sensibility and understanding, this works only if sensibility is reinterpreted as an activity of understanding. This theme reappears in modified form in John McDowell’s philosophy, when he redefines sensory intuition as being proto-rational (McDowell 1994). Humans do not derive natural laws from sensory-empirical contents but synthesize the rational manifold according to the greatest possible determinability of the particular under the universal. If the particular is not recognized as a cognitive object according to a thoroughly objective rule, as Maimon’s “principle of determinability” suggests, this shows, for Maimon, that Kant’s synthetic a priori judgments do not prove the necessary validity of the laws of natural science. Thus, he writes in contrast to Kant, “I doubt whether we have experiential propositions, and so I cannot prove their objective validity the way Kant does” (Maimon 2010, p. 100).

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KOBE KEYMEULEN

Weeding out the Critical Root – How Kant Thinks the Radical

It pays to be a radical today, particularly in theory. If so desired, one can have radical ethics, epistemology, hermeneutics, imagination, sex, and menstruation.¹ Another prestigious title to obtain, though perhaps with more difficulty, would be that of a “thinker of the radical.” Then we could at least be in great company: this phrase conjures up images of Marx and Engels, most certainly, Godwin, Badiou, or Althusser, and perhaps Hegel, in certain circles. Few, however, would think here of Immanuel Kant, ever the invoked figure of all manner of projects (from the UN to analytic deontological ethics), which, decidedly, no one likes to refer to as “radical” in any sense. And yet it is Kant, and only him, who among the great canon of philosophers ever wrote a text prominently featuring the term: *On Radical Evil in Human Nature*, the first essay of his *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793). It is not some minor, forgotten tract either, only recently discovered in a hidden archive, but one that has influenced an entire legacy of ethical thought after Auschwitz and fuelled some of the (arguably) most impactful works originating out of Ljubljana at the turn of the millennium (Žižek 1996, Zupančič 2000).

¹ See Biederman and Mendieta 2014; Aragón and Macedo 2015; Caputo 1987; Khasnabish 2020; Holmes, Murray and Foth (eds.) 2020; Bobel and Lorber 2010.

And yet, if there is one point nearly all literature on the subject wants to convince us of, first and foremost, it is precisely that “‘radical evil’ does not refer to a special kind of evil that is especially ‘radical’” (Wood 1999, p. 284). To some extent, this impulse is understandable. Hannah Arendt’s short passage in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), while revitalizing the text for a whole new generation of thinkers,² undoubtedly also imposed an unfortunate connotation unto “radical evil”: “in the word [Kant] coined for it [...], he at least must have suspected the existence of this [kind of] evil [...], a *phenomenon* that [...] breaks down all standards we know” (Arendt 1973, p. 459, my emphasis). This rebranding was incredibly effective; consider the change in *Frankfurter* language from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (“The Jews [...] are branded as *absolute evil* by *absolute evil*”) (Adorno and Horkheimer 1987, p. 204, my emphasis) and *Negative Dialectics* (“The trouble is not that free men do *radical evil*, as evil is being done beyond all measure conceivable to Kant”) (Adorno 2003, p. 216, my emphasis). It was also, however, decidedly not what the Prussian philosopher had in mind, leaving (at least) a generation of scholars to dispel the notion from the mind of the reading public, over and over again. But most, if not all, take an additional, somewhat curious step, arguing that we shouldn’t even reflect on the word at all, that it is “defined by common sense” (Matušík 2008, p. 8). Nearly every commentator wants to convince us at some point that the term “radical” meant *nothing* to Kant, and as such *should not be paid any attention to*.³ It is “simply” and “strictly” a reference to the biblical *radix malorum est cupiditas* (greed is the root of all evil) and “nothing more” (Pasternack and Fugate 2020). This is precisely the kind of symptomatic insistence in discourse that should pique the attention of anyone preoccupied with radical thought.

² Arguably including Kant scholarship itself, by way of John Silber’s *The Ethical Significance of Kant’s Religion*, who also penned the introduction to the new 1960’s English translation, which coincided with the resurgence in popularity; cf. Palmquist 2015, p. xiii.

³ One important exception here is certainly Steven Palmquist, who does *not* take this to be self-evident, but instead suggests that the notion of *radix* (as root) ought to be connected Kant’s preferred metaphor of man as a tree (Palmquist 2015, p. 84).

We can note therefore that the main claim of these interpretations is that “there is no evidence Kant means anything more” by the term (Bernstein 2002, p. 28). My previous work demonstrates that this claim is about as historically unfounded as it is oft repeated (see Keymeulen 2024). Rather, there is no reason to ascribe ignorance or clumsiness to Kant’s choice of term. If we no longer dismiss this option outright, a new path opens up before us: what if Kant’s text is actually working through the notion of radicality? Or, to put it more directly: how can we read *On Radical Evil* as a text not (solely) concerned with what is evil (as this is well-trodden terrain), but (also) what is *Radical*? This essay explores precisely this question. To do so, I will first establish some minimal starting points, including other uses of the term “*das Radicale*” elsewhere in Kant’s oeuvre (which have been ignored thus far). Then, we will closely go through the text with Kant, observing the role radicality plays within it. Finally, I will draw some conclusions on how this new reading relates to and could inform contemporary so-called “radical” philosophy. Doing so, I will sketch how one might bridge the gap between Kant and the most famous expression on radicality in the history of philosophy, namely Marx’s dictum that “to be radical is to grasp the matter by its roots [Radikal sein ist die Sache an der Wurzel fassen]” (Marx 1981a, p. 385).

Finding the Soil

By asserting the possibility that Kant thinks the radical, we also do not want to force him to immediately fit into or respond to any kind of pre-conceived notion of radicality, but allow him to lead us down a path of his choosing. This is somewhat contrary to the majority of commentators, who claim that *On Radical Evil* has a *preset* goal, and it is that of justifying a certain kind of Christian morality.⁴ After all, is it not found in a book that

⁴ “There is no doubt that he wanted to ... defend ... the moral core of Christian religious faith” (Bernstein 2002, p. 19). “Kant ... translates the religious mode of sin into the moral language of radical evil” (Matušík 2008, p. 128).

is often literally shortened to *The Religion*?⁵ In a sense, this is a repetition of Goethe's first reactions to the text, in an infamous letter to Herder:

On the other hand, Kant, too, after having spent a long human life purifying his philosophical mantle of many a sordid prejudice, has been brazenly stained with the stain of radical evil, so that even Christians might be enticed to kiss its hem. (Goethe 1887, GW IV 10, pp. 131-132)

From this perspective, which takes *Radical Evil* (both as title and concept) a priori to mean a sinful human nature (in the quotidian, non-Kantian sense of the phrase), Kant performs a “deplorable concession to the unenlightened misanthropic Christian doctrine of original sin” (Wood 1999, p. 284). Though all might agree that Kant remains (at least somewhat of) a Kantian in his methodology, and thus would be unsatisfied with an anti-philosophical argument, this defense remains (at most) the kind of deductive justification that defines the Critiques (Caimi 2014, pp. 14-16). This kind of pre-limiting approach must be challenged in two ways.

The first requires a brief look at the relationship between Kant and the *Théodicée* tradition (“fait une apologie ... [de] l'origine du mal, par rapport à Dieu”; per the original Leibniz formulation) (Leibniz 1846, p. 44) by recognizing that the other half of the book's title, *Within the Bounds of Reason. On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy* (1791) is a tract whose title is frequently cited in secondary literature when one wants to make the point that Kant had a dislike for theodicies, even if the actual reasons often go unmentioned.⁶ It is not because, as one might expect, Kant holds that there is no evil in the world, but, on the contrary, he agrees with this observation (MpVT AA VIII, p. 254).⁷ What he criticizes

⁵ I would again point out that this ignores the actual publication history of *Die Religion* as essentially a collected volume, in which *Das Radicale Böse* even takes up an outlier position (Keymeulen 2024, pp. 244-48).

⁶ As Bernstein puts it: “Just the very title of this essay is significant” (Bernstein 2002, p. 3).

⁷ All citations of Kant in this text will follow the tradition of Kantian scholarship, based on the *Akademieausgabe von Immanuel Kants Gesammelten Werken*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900, using the following abbreviations, the volume and page number:

is mainly the then-contemporary, 18th-century tradition of theodicies, in which authors posited themselves as lawyers defending God from a lawsuit (charged with an infinite number of atrocities). Kant contrasts these “doctrinal” theodicies with the “authentic” ones of the past (*ibid.*, p. 264). These would have been reasonable (*Redliche*) affairs, acknowledgments of one’s shortcomings: “[In] authentic [theodicy] it is not so much a matter of reasoning as of sincerity in noting the inability of our Reason” (*ibid.*, p. 267).

The writers of such theodicies lament, as it were, that they even have to produce such a text, but in their writing, they confront (and rediscover) Reason as something they have a capacity for rather than a *command* over (as would be the case in doctrinal theodicies).⁸ Crucially, Kant is skeptical about the practical deployment of Reason for the purpose of arriving at a pre-conceived truth or certainty. Indeed, this distorts both what Reason needs and what we need Reason for, harkening back to Kant’s intervention in the Lessing controversy: *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?* (1786). There, although Jacobi and Mendelssohn assigned a role to reason in their own way, they both eschewed “the need for Reason” (WDO AA VIII, p. 140, my emphasis). For Kant, even Mendelssohnian “healthy Reason [*gesund Vernunft*]” is a reading of Reason as something that we simply use and that does not require anything in return. Instead, though we often find ourselves in need of certain concepts (‘if only we could conceive of x or y’), the *need* is actually for Reason itself. The phrase performs double duty here. One *longs* for Reason and Reason itself also has an object of desire, namely concepts to reason *with*. Relating this to the history of theodicy, Kant argues for a similar shift from truth (*Wahrheit*) to veracity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*):

MpVT: *Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee*,
 KRV: *Kritik Der Reinen Vernunft* (A/B),
 WDO: *Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren?*,
 RGV: *Die Religion Innerhalb Der Grenzen Der Blossen Vernunft*.

⁸ I capitalise ‘Reason’ throughout this essay to indicate the Kantian understanding of *Vernunft*, rather than the colloquial term.

One cannot always stand by the truth of what one says to oneself or to another (for one can be mistaken); however, one can and must stand by the truthfulness of one's declaration or confession. (MpVT AA VIII, p. 267)

Our first clue is thus as follows: Kant does not rule out the starting position of theodicies ('there exists such a concept as evil'), but wants to reverse their traditional relation to Reason. The initial starting point should *feed* Reason and prompt it to develop a reasonable thesis, and not the other way around. This is *veracity*. The consequences of pre-determining the aim of Kant's text can be taken even a step further. One would not be aware of this if one were to exclusively consult the secondary literature, but he actually uses the term "radical" elsewhere too, most notably in the first *Critique*:

These comparatively fundamental powers [*Grundkräfte*] must once again be compared with one another, so as to discover their unanimity and thereby bring them close to a single *radical*, i. e., absolutely fundamental, power. But this unity of Reason is merely *hypothetical*. One asserts not that such a power must in fact be found, but rather that one must seek it for the sake of Reason... (KRV AA B677, my emphasis)

This is our second clue. A radical concept is something we seek for the sake of Reason itself. But how should we contextualize this within Kant's broader philosophy? The quote concludes Kant's discussion of the *hypothetical* use of Reason, which is when we use Reason to try to make sense of "problematic concepts" (ibid.). Thus, the term "radical" does not make a statement for Kant about whether something "really exists" (namely, if it is indeed "encountered"). Rather, it tells us something about a concept we turn to when we are thinking through a difficult hypothesis. A new possibility thus suggests itself: reading *On Radical Evil* not as a text with a purpose determined by the secondary author (a proper expression of Christian sin, etc.) in which radical evil plays a *role*, but as a logical/hypothetical text. One starts from a certain hypothesis and rolls out its consequences. This is how, in the next section, we will observe how evil is *radicalized* for Kant.

Digging into the Earth

Following a brief introduction, *On Radical Evil* is divided into four parts: (1) Concerning the Original Predisposition (ursprünglichen Anlage) to Good in Human Nature, (2) Concerning the Propensity (Hange) to Evil in Human Nature, (3) Man is by Nature Evil, and (4) Concerning the Origin of Evil in Human Nature. The next sections of this essay follow Kant's argument as it develops through these parts, up to his introduction of radical evil in (3), guided by the two proposed clues. For the sake of brevity, I will only highlight the elements that pertain to our interest in the question of the radical. As such, this should not be considered a complete account of a text that has a multitude of connotations and consequences for contemporary philosophy.

Rigor (Introduction)

Kant opens *On Radical Evil* with a classic theodicy formulation: “‘The world is in ruins’ is a complaint as old as time” (RGV AA VI, p. 19). Continuing, he argues one can either take *this* as the hypothesis to offer up to Reason, or, like many other philosophers (and “pedagogues”), its negation: “that the world is going in the opposite direction – from worse to better” (ibid.). As clarified in the following first *Remark*, taking up *one or the other* is unavoidable in the current moment; Kant writes, “The conflict between [these] two hypotheses is grounded in a disjunctive proposition: Man is (by nature) either morally [sittlich] good or morally evil” (RGV AA VI, p. 22). This might fire up any commentator seeking to immediately strike down Kant for (seemingly) involving Christian morality right away. But is this really the case? This is a claim about *hypotheses*; it does not refer to good and evil themselves (as existing phenomenal entities) but to a disjunction *about* the distinction between good and evil. It is the necessary, logical distinction that will help *orient* us in our thinking (in the sense of WDO). Kant introduces a crucial distinction between two possible attitudes, “rigorists ... and latitudinarians” (RGV AA VI, p. 22). This is clarified in the accompanying footnote, where Kant outright adopts the language of logic:

If the good = a, the opposite contradicting it is the ‘not-good.’ Then, this ‘not-good’ is the consequence either of the mere lack of a ground of the good, = 0, or of a positive ground countering [Widerspiels] the good = -a; in this latter case, the not-good can also be called positive evil. (Ibid.)

Here, a particular logical problem is displayed, as a result of Kant’s veracious position-taking. Ordinarily, one can distinguish between doing good (G), not doing good (G_0), and doing not-good/evil (E) – in more formalized Kantian terms, one might phrase it as pursuing a lawful maxim (G), not pursuing a lawful maxim (G_0), and actively pursuing an unlawful maxim (E). Of E, we know with reasonable certainty that it will always belong to the not-good, but what of G_0 ? This logical tension reveals itself when we, with Kant, choose to present the first hypothesis up to Reason, rather than the second. After all, then one should have to actively do good for good to occur – passivity only contributes to the ongoing catastrophe. One must therefore come to regard E and G_0 as one unity, a unity that can only be grasped as the strict negation of the active good ($\neg G$). This is a *rigorous* attitude. Rigorous towards the good, because Kant strictly excludes what can be signified by this concept under this concept and what cannot. There is only one articulation of the good and the rest follows therefrom. Contrast this with what Kant calls the “indifferentists” (ibid.), those who are not driven to the same point as he is and can therefore be *indifferent* to G_0 – they do not have this problem at all. The same applies to the “syncretists” (ibid.), who adopt the second hypothesis and can count G_0 to the good. Both forms of thinking, according to Kant, are “latitudinal.”⁹ In short, latitudinal attitudes deny the need of/for Reason. There is no *need* for Reason (the world is not in ruin after all), nor does one give Reason that which it itself needs, namely a problematic concept to take care of. Thus, we can posit that, in *On Radical Evil*, Kant’s general veracious attitude towards the world’s corruption turns into a rigorous attitude towards the concept of the good.

⁹ Undoubtably a reference to the term used to describe heterodox 17th-century Anglican clergy, who in some sense preached ‘latitude’ (from the Latin *latus*) or other forms of religious political tolerance – which eventually found itself expressed in the writings of Locke and other forms of early liberalism (see Marshall 2016).

This rigorous attitude offers up a question to Reason. It is easy to consider the good and this “new” evil ($E' : \neg G$) separately, because it is a completely exclusive disjunction. If we ask what the first is, it seems we are left with a circular articulation (what is E' ? $\neg G'$, what is G ? $\neg E'$). But the question that remains is what this means for their *point of distinction*, the ground of division between good and evil. This introduces the notion of *Gesinnung* (disposition), “the first subjective ground for the adoption of certain maxims [as drives]” (RGV AA VI, p. 25) *Gesinnung* is the point where the subject is first confronted with the moral law. It “applies universally to the entire use of Reason” because the subject would be free in *this* choosing act. Moral judgment comes only *after* it embraces (or fails to embrace) a certain maxim, regardless of disposition. *Gesinnung* is thus free by its condition of possibility, the “spontaneity of arbitrariness [*Spontaneität der Willkür*]” (ibid., p. 24). In this way, it also has a black box functionality, something we cannot consider good, evil, or even neither/both. It is “indifferent” (ibid.), a chrono-logical point that enables the differentiation between good and evil (because a moral decision follows from it) but does not do so itself (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Disposition of a Latitudinarian Attitude

This is a reflective process, as *Gesinnung* must also rely on *previous* moral choices (these are also part of our *Willkür*). If we now, with Kant, opt for a rigorous approach, there are only two moral choices – *for* the law, or *not*. How are we to understand the implications of this for *Gesinnung*? After all, it then no longer relies on a set of indistinguishable influences, some of which were previous moral choices. When it wants to include previous choices made, they are always coded strictly binary – *for* the law or *not*. This suggests that there might be something more to the inclusion

of moral choice; one cannot redefine *Gesinnung* as some sort of sorting mechanism, as that would deprive it of its status as a free, subjective basis for decision-making. One can only explore this notion further by staying strictly on the side of the spontaneity of *Willkür*, although this begets another difficulty. In a system of classical ethics, one could perhaps easily determine the conditions under which a maxim or decision is the right one. Now, however, we find ourselves before the decision and point of divergence (Figure 2).

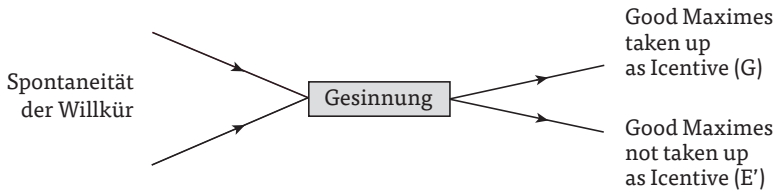


Figure 2. Disposition of a Rigorous Attitude

Without a notion of why Kant is writing this essay, it would indeed be difficult to understand why we now find ourselves in this position. Only by approaching *On Radical Evil* without presuppositions can we properly understand Kant's next step: the need of/for reason to reassert itself. Instead of writing off this line of inquiry, he considers what questions can still be asked. For this, he presents us with yet again another sterling bit of transcendental reflection: rather than pondering how *Gesinnung* functions, one can ask *under what conditions* can good or bad maxims be reincorporated into it as the spontaneity of arbitrariness. These maxims then need not necessarily result in the reacquisition of certain principles; it is only required that the possibility *show itself* at the level of *Gesinnung*. Thus, we preserve the freedom of the subjective ground of decision. The following parts of *On Radical Evil* address precisely this new line of questioning, given a rigorous attitude.¹⁰

¹⁰ We realize this only *retroactively*, after going through the different parts.

Anlage and Hang (Parts 1 and 2)

In *On Radical Evil*, one hypothesis drives the next, and so on. The introduction is followed by two sections on the (re)inclusion of good and evil in *Gesinnung*, respectively. At first glance, these two parts seem to have little to do with each other – Kant is “just” listing some typical, respective properties of good and evil. The first part deals with the “predisposition [Anlage] towards the good” and the second with the “propensity [Hange] to evil” (ibid., pp. 26, 28). It is these two sections that take center stage in the text’s scholarly interpretation; they give us Kant’s distinction between good and evil. But such an exegetical approach could be flawed. Focusing on two concepts in this way is like believing that we orient ourselves to the pole star – it only holds if we understand that this is because the pole star is given a *function* by Reason. Similarly, these concepts do not get their function inherently but serve them for the purpose of Reason.

Let us thus begin by examining the similarities and differences in treatment between the two parts of the text (*Anlage* and *Hang*). In both, Kant goes over three potential “stages [Stoffe]” of what we might call “(re-)absorption.”¹¹ They are not gradations of good or evil *itself*, but of how good or bad decisions can be regarded as the *Willkür* of a subject. Put differently, one could also say that Kant is searching here for how the concept of “good” or “evil” *can* operate at the level of *Willkür*. In this search, he is ever vigilant to keep the need of/for Reason central. In the first Critique, Kant tells us that one way to ensure a critical attitude and avoid dogmatism is to employ Reason as a tool of “purification” (KRV AA B25). We take what initially shows itself as the good (as it functions for *Willkür*) and purify it. We eliminate stage by stage what is not strictly necessary, like “a business trying to save money” (ibid., p. Bx).

Part 1 covers the good. Here, the only question one can ask is what conditions would make it possible for the right maxims to *always* be absorbed by *Gesinnung*? Here we, with Kant, must be careful to remain rigorous

¹¹ The three stages of the good are often not thus recognized in the literature, but they are referred to in the term Kant first uses, *Klassen* (in the sense of “kinds”). However, we shall still argue why we consider this a correct equation. Cf. Wood 1999, pp. 402-3.

thinkers: the absorption of the right maxims is necessary if we are to save the world from ruin. Broadly speaking, there is (I) the possibility of doing so for “one’s animality ... as a living being” (RGV AA VI, pp. 26-7): we can count good maxims to our *Willkür* for “physical self-love” (i.e. in order to stay alive).¹² Yet this possibility is still too “impure” and it still covers too many situations in which we might not be able to recognize the moral law. Something more specific (II) is the possibility that one does so “for one’s humanity, as a living and at the same time rational being.” Indeed, we can absorb the right maxims into our *Gesinnung* if we want a reasonable life (entailing, for example, love for and respect of others). However, this too is insufficiently pure for Kant, since a reasonable life may also (at times) tolerate the non-absorption of certain moral principles (G_o). There is thus once again a need for the purification of (III) the possibility of doing so “for one’s personality, as a rational and at the same time accountable being.” This, according to Kant, means a “receptivity of respect for the moral law [Empfänglichkeit der Achtung für das moralische Gesetz].” This is the stage of possible conditions when the right principles are recognized with certainty.

In Part 2, the stages of purification take a slightly different turn. After all, we should not be wondering under what conditions we would include *wrong maxims* or reject good maxims. To investigate E' ($=-G$), the question must be under what conditions can one *not include* (good) maxims in one’s *Gesinnung*? First, there is the first level (I’) “*fragilitas*,” the possibility that we fall short of principles; “I have the will, but not the ability” (RGV AA VI, pp. 28-30).¹³ However, this should again be purified. Indeed, strict *defectiveness* as a condition implies that one can at most *temporarily stop obeying* a law, something insufficient for grasping E' . Thus, one arrives at (II’) “*impuritas*,” which is when “dutiful acts are not done purely out of duty.” This takes away the temporal dimension, as strictly impure duties can always be recognized, but it still suggests that we must always *partly* recognize the moral law. Ultimately, Kant arrives at (III’)

¹² The rest of this paragraph solely refers to RGV AA VI, pp. 26-27

¹³ The rest of this section solely refers to RGV AA VI, pp. 28-30.

“*corruptio*” or “*perversitas*.” What could guarantee that we cannot include good maxims is when we are presented with *all* maxims as if they were not maxims. After all, a maxim must be able to be recognized as a *maxim* to be a good maxim.

These conditions are forms of good and evil, in the strict sense that they capture a certain kind of functional logic of good and evil in a given context. The crucial insight is that good and evil *function structurally differently* with respect to *Willkür* and *Gesinnung*. The functioning of evil, unlike the good, does not even require knowing what the laws are (specifically). This is the distinction between *Anlage* and *Hang*. Evil can actively create possibilities of its own (through corruption or perversion). It must therefore, in some sense, (strictly) *precede* any particular tendencies. This is what is captured by the term “Hang”. By contrast, the good can only passively evaluate *Willkür* (by demanding something *justify* itself) (ibid., p. 28). It is therefore always secondary, an *Anlage*. Though it could indeed be argued that this echoes various existing ethical theories, Kant presents it to us here as a crucial *logical* asymmetry. In fact, this is a direct consequence of the rigorous attitude. It is the rigorous attitude that assigned the good its one articulation while leaving evil free to run its logical course. Another possible articulation of this would be to say that evil can “speak the language of the good/law”, whereas the reverse is impossible. Evil is thus *negatively* defined by rigor. This can be sketched (somewhat clumsily) by Figure 3:

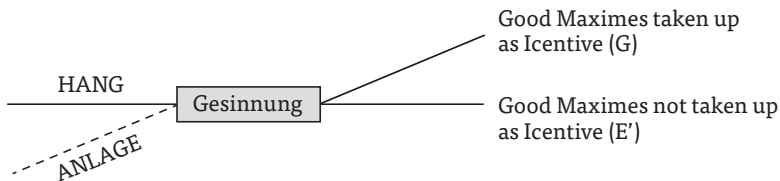


Figure 3. Disposition of a Rigorous Attitude (On Closer Inspection)

Radical Evil (Part 3)

Only now does Kant introduce the notion of “radical evil” (ibid., p. 32) but this does not undermine the reading of this essay, on the contrary. In the previous part, the good disappeared completely, so only one question now remains: what is evil? By this “evil,” Kant is no longer referring to the evil from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (meaning E), but rather this new conceptualization (E') that has unfolded here asymmetrically and, one could say, unexpectedly. To this question of “is,” he provides two answers. Namely, evil is “*angeboren*” (‘innate,’ roughly) and *radical*. Thus, we finally have radicality in our sights. I will first examine what is meant by the first term, “*angeboren*.”

“This [new] evil [E'] is *radical* because it corrupts the ground of all maxims [Dieses Böse ist *radical*, weil es den Grund aller Maximen verdirbt]” (RGV AA VI, p. 37). The sentence overflows with meaning. Especially crucial is the last term: “corrupts” (*verdirbt*). In addition to radical evil, Kant also writes of “radical wrongness” (*radikale Verkehrtheit*) (ibid.). Thus, what makes evil radical is precisely that it *corrupts* or *perverts*. To the extent that this evil *does* anything, it “spoils” or “inverts” things and “reverses the hierarchy” (Zupančič 2000, p. 89). It takes maxims and presents them as something else. Thus, although both G and E' are functional, only evil's logic is genuinely *structurally reflective*. It knows what the good *needs* given the context (a maxim must be able to be recognized as a maxim) and has adapted itself accordingly. It asserts something *only* by manipulating other theses to its liking. Evil is *benevolent* in its defense of different principles in different situations so long as it leads to the subordination of maxims. Unlike the good, its articulation is open; it can speak whatever language is needed. Here, we are again reminded of a contemporary analogy, namely the *virus*, which silently seizes the cells of its unsuspecting host for its own purposes.¹⁴ What this allows, upon reflection, is the fact that evil, at the beginning of this venture, was only *negatively* and *dividedly*

¹⁴ This is in reference to my investigation into the symptomatic use of the term ‘radical’ in contemporary scholarship more broadly; particularly recalling the assertion in the historiography of security studies that ‘radicalisation’ entered that particular lexicon when ‘terrorism’ came to be considered a “social virus”; see Keymeulen

defined – it was *not* allowed to be the good and had to be able to bring together a variety of different definitions of evil (E).

Evil is also radical because it specifically perverts the *ground of all maxims*, what we now understand as *Gesinnung*. Why is this such a crucial aspect of its radicality? *Gesinnung* was the limitation, the boundary, that we put on Reason at the beginning of this study, for two reasons. First, it was the only concept that was strictly *indifferent*. This meant that it was the *ground of differentiation* between good and evil. Similarly, it was literally indifferent, in the sense of “tolerant,” towards both concepts. The disposition *itself* does not differentiate between good and evil but is strictly its ground. Secondly, it of course grounds itself in freedom (of Reason). These two points caused us to regard the disposition as a black box, a concept that specifically did not invite adaptation. Kant thus reminds us that evil is radical because it not only “perverts” the space within which we have shaped it, but it also seeks to bend the limits of the very inquiry into its will.

Evil (E') corrupts this subjective “ground of decision-making” (*Entscheidungsgrundlage*) in the sense that it also *functionally* distorts *Gesinnung*. In the abstract, e.g. for the latitudinarian ethicist, it seems as if the first distinction between good and evil is made at the point of the ground of subjective decision-making. However, now we can see that the first distinction was already made somewhere before this, by *Hang*. This uncovered evil is also “indifferent” towards the good, as it also does not make this distinction. Because it inverts *all* maxims, Kant writes that it “can co-exist with a generally good will” (RGV AA VI, p. 37). Indeed, it (E', not E) does so unencumbered, something that is not the case the other way around. Evil also grounds itself in freedom, more specifically the freedom of Reason. Indeed, it is through Kant's recognition of the *need for Reason* that we have been able to articulate E'. Without it, we could not have gone through this logical sequence and evil would still be in its initial, uncorrupted role. Notice that evil assumes this role but does not thereby make it *disappear*. On the contrary, freedom and indifference are only strengthened by this development.

(2025), “The Infinite Virus – On the Discourse and History of the Concept of Radicality,” *Theory & Event*, forthcoming.

It is here, moreover, where Kant again rules out the possibility that evil would not only be *radical* but also “devilish” (*teuflisch*) – a now famous distinction.¹⁵ Indeed, the preceding description, namely “to include evil as evil as a driving force in one’s maxims” (ibid.), is often interpreted in the literature as an assertion that it is impossible for man to do evil *for the sake of* doing evil. Although such a thesis can indeed also be read elsewhere in Kant (see, for instance, ibid., p. 35), that is not what we are highlighting here. At this juncture, Kant emphasizes that an evil *Hang* does not also mean that the disposition itself can *only* be evil. It is not because evil (E’) is always active that it always *succeeds* in its intent. This is precisely the main point, after all. What has made evil radical is precisely that it lets *Gesinnung* be. The disposition must remain precisely “not malice [*Bosheit*]” (ibid., p. 37).

Thus, one could formulate a general theory: a concept is *radical* when it *corrupts* or *perverts* other concepts. In doing so, it considers itself *functional* and *reflective*. We see this especially in how it also perverts the reasonable limits we initially imposed on it. It is able to do so primarily by being *indifferent* and using the freedom (of Reason) to develop itself – thereby maintaining this very capacity. One can also formulate a theory of radicalization by observing what has happened in the text. Kant began with one explicit hypothesis, namely that the world is in ruin. This hypothesis, we believe, is grounded in that Kant considers it *veracious*, rather than it being *true* in a strict sense of the term. This produced a *rigorous attitude*, which reformulated evil (E) as the strict negation of good. Then, this new conceptualization was undetermined (E’) and had to be worked out within a few strict parameters. This resulted in a transcendental and functional analysis of the concept. Finally, we arrived at a conceptualization of E’ as radical, with the structural properties just described.

Pulling Out the Stump – Conclusion

Next, tragedy strikes – both in the text and in history. Kant himself admits that the remaining Part 4 of *Das Radicale Böse* is somewhat different in its approach. It takes its wonderfully developed thesis of the radicality of evil and flattens it; evil is not just radical, but also *angboren* (‘innate’). His only argument is the following:

¹⁵ He also did this a few pages earlier (RGV AA VI, p. 35).

The appropriate proof of this condemnation by Reason, sitting in moral judgment, is not to be found in this section, but in the previous one. This section contains only the confirmation of it through experience. (RGV AA VI, p. 39)

As other authors have also noted,¹⁶ this seems like almost an outright deception by Kant, because said “previous section” only gives us this argument:

There is no need to give formal proof of this, in view of the multitude of glaring examples that experience presents to us in the deeds of men. (RGV AA VI, pp. 32-33)

After all his logical explorations exploring the radicality of evil, Kant turns around and decides it actually means something else (‘man is evil by nature’), as this would be “proven by experience.” How was this written by, of all people, the critical philosopher himself? Why would he even entertain such a suffocating argument?

As put so memorably by Bernstein, *On Radical Evil* is where Kant is “at war with himself” (Bernstein 2002, p. 33) and centering the radical in the reading of the text shows exactly why. It is common to read in the above descriptions that concepts such as “evil” do or did X, Y, or Z. I would maintain, however, that such formulations are only intended at being economical with our language; it is, nevertheless, a phraseology that presents itself with force. The text’s approach, which through its very hypothetical nature and its commitment towards veracity and need for Reason, starts to move dangerously close to the position that “concepts move.” This, no doubt, would be dogmatic, Spinozist, and/or absurd to Kant – he acknowledges as much in the closing *General Remarks* of the text (RGV AA VI, pp. 46-50). But the question still stands: what changed between E, G, and E’? Did evil not, through the drives of Reason yet unarticulated at the time, find itself at the same time both *driven to its root* and *unrooted*.

¹⁶ See, for example, Formosa 2007, p. 228: “Does Kant deliver on the promised proof elsewhere in the text? He does not.”

Kant has very little room to account for this, for that would invoke not only dogmatism but also *speculative Reason*. That bogeyman of the introduction of the B *Critique* tempts us to “venture beyond the bounds of experience” Bernstein, sticking by the old Kant, concurs, saying, “the concept of radical evil is a dialectical illusion (*dialektischen Scheins*); it seduces us into thinking that we can explain something that we cannot possibly explain” (Bernstein 2002, p. 35, referring to KRV AA B88). Kant’s solution to ward off this terrifying spirit is to (post factum) foreclose the text’s hypothetical origins and *naturalize* them. Thus, in addition to being radical and *angeboren*, evil now also must be something of *human nature* for Kant; something *sensible* (RGV AA VI, p. 32) It indicates that one is not reasoning dialectically, but retroactively describing the internal steps prior to an *effective moral decision*. The whole text would then function with the “limitation” that one is only interested in evil as it relates to humans, more specifically the human “species [Gattung]” (ibid., p. 21). Therefore, if something new is discovered during this research, it stands to reason that this would be the “character” of the human species. This character could thus be called “innate” (in the sense of *angeboren*) (ibid.). This would eliminate any explanation of that tricky “need” for/of Reason – any need is that of nature itself. Thus, the earlier mentioned commentators (Goethe included) are certainly not *wrong* to characterize Kant’s text as ultimately forcing a justification of some kind, though it is perhaps of a slightly different nature. By accepting Kant’s own ultimate resignation, they too smother the (literally) radical thought that led him there.

The elephant that has slowly appeared in the room here is, without question, named “German Idealism.” The development of a radicalizing notion is, even if not ultimately approved by Kant himself, certainly *in the spirit of Kant* as it would be understood in the early 19th century. It has been written that *On Radical Evil* was “not taken up by Schelling or Hegel” (Van Eekert, Van Herck and Lemmens 2010, p. 255). This is hardly defensible now, given we can read Schelling’s *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (or *Freiheitsschrift*, 1809), which describes precisely the point we have developed:

The only correct conception of evil ... [must] be based on a positive perversity or inversion of principles ... and explained by profound physical analogies, especially that of disease. (Schelling 1997, p. 366)

Schelling did not yet have access to the term “virus,” but if he did, perhaps he would have deployed it here.¹⁷ Two of the *Freiheitsschrift*’s foremost commentators, Žižek and Heidegger (the latter from his 1930s lectures), also pick up on this. Heidegger is right to identify that Schelling’s aim as to write “a metaphysics *after* evil” (Heidegger 1988, p. 169). – that is, a metaphysics after Kant demonstrated the radicalization of evil. Žižek, despite not granting one bit of it to Kant (who would be too caught up in dispelling the notion of “diabolic evil”), also picks up on this same motif:

Schelling’s basic definition of [radical] Evil as the “*Verkehrung*” [...] of the proper relation [...]. (Žižek 1997, p. 63)

[a] perverse economy [is] not merely the background of Good [or] the opposite principle which the Good needs in order to assert itself, but maintains and supports the Good in a much more direct and uncanny way. (Ibid., p. 30)

Where Kant backs away, Schelling persists, shifting from pre-Critical Christian *Sinn* (sin) to the German Idealist, modern *Wahnsinn* (madness).¹⁸ The hypothesis that started it all becomes the foundational starting block for a new philosophy: the world is in ruins, not in a naturalized, phenomenal sense, but a metaphysical one; it is *out of joint*. From this position, all concepts become available to radicalization. Perhaps this is also why the “radicalization” of concepts would not prove to be an operative concept in either Schellingian or Hegelian thought. Nevertheless, German philosophy eventually found its way back to it again.

In the opening of this essay, I mentioned perhaps the most famous of all puns on radicality: “to be radical is to grasp the matter by its roots [Radi-

¹⁷ As it was only in the late 19th century that pioneers such as Louis Pasteur and Dmitry Ivanovsky would lay the foundations of virology.

¹⁸ I owe this pun to Žižek 1997, p. 76.

kal sein ist die Sache an der Wurzel fassen].” In his contemporary study of radicalism, Paul McLaughlin notes that, despite the tidal wave of pro forma references to Marx and Marxism, “few thinkers have tried to develop an analysis [of the term ‘radicality’] along these lines” (McLaughlin 2014, p. 18).¹⁹ Thus, it might be fitting to make some broad observations of interest here. First, there is a stark contrast between Marx’s *philosophical* deployment of the term and that of his collaborator. Engels mainly writes “*Radikal*” with a capital letter and thus as a noun, most likely referencing the 19th-century English *Radicals* (see Engels 1981a, p. 465; Engels 1981b, pp. 573, 581). In Marx, however, another kind of usage prevails: *radikal* (lowercase) as a predicate. Ironically, he returns to the Kantian notion in precisely the text some introductory authors (Singer 2000, pp. 28-31) attribute to his break with German Idealism, his introduction to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*.²⁰ Some examples include:

A *radical* revolution can only be the revolution of *radical* needs. (Marx 1981a, p. 387, my emphasis)

So where is the positive possibility of German emancipation?

Answer: In the formation of a class with *radical* chains, a class of bourgeois society which is not a class of bourgeois society. (ibid., p. 390, my emphasis)²¹

We have a radical German revolution, which requires radical needs of a class with radical chains (ibid., p. 386).²² One could interpret these as simply referring to the contemporary meaning, as Marx insisting on “real,” “hardcore” revolutions, needs, and chains. But are they not instead expressions of the very concept just observed in Kant, denoting a

¹⁹ Following this observation, McLaughlin will argue that the quote bears witness to a “political humanism” in the conclusion of the book (ibid., p. 182).

²⁰ Written separately from the main body and published postmortem.

²¹ For another example of this use of the term, see Marx 1981b, p. 361: “Wir sagen also nicht mit Bauer den Juden: Ihr könnt nicht politisch emanzipiert werden, ohne euch radikal vom Judentum zu emanzipieren.”

²² From the earlier “*Einer radikalen deutschen Revolution scheint indessen eine Hauptschwierigkeit entgegentreten*,” (Marx 1981a, p. 386, my emphasis).

profound, mobile negativity? The German revolution corrupts and perverts its French predecessor, releasing the latter's established rules in favor of adaptability to the specific pre-1848 conditions of the Prussian state. The chains and needs in question are those that, per the famous phrase from the Manifesto mentioned earlier, the proletariat has "nothing to lose but." Like Kant's evil, they can seemingly be annihilated and self-subverted, as they are only shaped by their united opposite, the class of bourgeois society.

Still, one cannot help but note the stark difference between Kant's operation and Marx's "grasping the matter by its roots," which must be explained through interim between the two. Hegel did not grace us with his own conception of radicality or radicalization, but his interpreter for the 21st century, Slavoj Žižek, did:

Hegelian sublation (*Aufhebung*) or negation of negation: in it, radical change (negation) overlaps with the pure repetition of the same. (Žižek 2012, p. 483)

My characterization runs both in complete agreement and exactly counter to this. Radicalization or radical change is, arguably, already negation and pure repetition; Evil becomes radicalized for Kant in its negation of the good, but equally in its persistence. With Hegel, we could term chemism as a "radical mechanism," just as we could every determination, category, and concept in the *Logic* as "radical Being." But we must also recognize that such an account, strictly limited to Kant, is equally incomplete in capturing Hegel's dialectics as we have come to read them today. Žižek actually notes the very missing dimension right after:

The New emerges when, instead of a process just "naturally" evolving in its flow of generation and corruption, this flow becomes stuck, an element (a gesture) is fixed, persists, repeats itself, and thus perturbs the "natural" flux of (de)composition. (Ibid.)

There is, at the end of the day, no conception of *this* New in *On Radical Evil*. Evil is radicalized, threatens to become unrecognizable, and then

Kant gives up his pursuit.²³ What Schelling realized (and Hegel systematized) is that in order to *rigorously think through*, in the spirit of Kant, the radicalization of any concept, it must ultimately entail the radicalization of *thinking itself*. Thought itself seeks to become corrupted, to infect and adapt. Marx heeds this advice and fully embraces the New in all quotes cited above. The New of the radical revolution is termed “communism” and the New of the radical chains and needs the “proletariat.” *On Radical Evil* remains crucial in understanding this dimension, even though its author ultimately backs away from its outcome. Kant ends up as modernity’s first *thinker of the radical*, even though he ultimately declined to become a *radical thinker*.

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²³ As argued above, this is more likely already because of the “flow of generation and corruption,” rather than a direct threat of anything “new,” but the critique still stands.

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ALENKA ZUPANČIČ

The Kantian Limits

It is absolutely not unthinkable to say that from a certain angle [The Critique of Pure Reason] can be read as an erotic book [...] I had always allowed myself to be persuaded that it was badly written in German, because first of all the Germans, with certain exceptions, have the reputation of writing badly. It is not true: *The Critique of Pure Reason* is written as well as Freud's books – and that is no small thing.

Jacques Lacan, *L'identification*, 21 February 1962

Introduction

Celebrating 300 years of Kant, it could be fitting to ask what single word might best capture the debates surrounding his legacy. The word that seems to impose itself is limit(s), or limitation(s). At the core of many sophisticated arguments, both appreciative and critical, lies this simple, fundamental idea that Kant is, above all, the philosopher of limitation(s): of our human limitations, and thus the limitations of our experience, knowledge, understanding and reason. The epitome of this limitation is the divide between phenomena and noumena, that is the proposition

according to which we can only know things as constituted through our cognitive structures, but not things as they are *in themselves*. This limitation appears to be the *price* we pay for access to objective, universally shareable knowledge.

This phrasing is of course far from neutral. It suggests that, as human beings, we need to *give up* or sacrifice certain pretenses or aspirations (“re-nounce the absolute”) in order to preserve some form of rational mastery, objective/universal knowledge, and orientation in the world. In these accounts, which emphasize limitation as the price of knowledge, limitation also resonates with finitude, further associating Kant with a certain, often pathos-driven aspect of the modern *zeitgeist* that finds a nonnegligible *surplus* satisfaction in the poetic assertions of our finitude.

On the other hand, this portrayal of Kant as the philosopher of limitations and finitude is also a primary target of criticism in some other currents of contemporary philosophy. The title of Quentin Meillassoux’s classic, *After Finitude*, which – possibly against his own intent – epitomizes the movements of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, is particularly telling in this respect.

In response to this emphasis on limitations, I will not argue that Kant is not about limits and limitations. Instead, I would like to raise a simple question: What exactly is a limit or limitation? This question deserves to be raised both as a question intrinsic to Kant and his philosophy, as well as in relation to other philosophers who – also in response to Kant, as is the case of Hegel – proposed a further and different take on this question. Moreover, beyond how Kant understood his notion of limit(s), one can try to make a case for the Kantian configuration itself being possibly understood in a way that differs from Kant’s own understanding of it. In this respect, I am tempted to propose something like a “speculative provocation” regarding the notion of Kantian limit(s).

For example: Does a limit imply containment, even self-containment? Or does it imply a split, a gap? Another question: Does limitation necessarily imply something “smaller”? Does it necessarily imply that something is “left out” or that something “remains” beyond? Is the Kantian universe actually *smaller* than the pre-critical universe, as Meillassoux suggests?

Might it not be possible that limitation actually produces a world that is, in some sense, “bigger” than a world without limitation?

The (Dis)satisfaction of Reason

The first thing to point out is that the world “limit” is not precise enough to guide us in these considerations. German has two different words available for capturing the semantic, namely *Schranke* and *Grenze*, and Kant makes a point of distinguishing between them. The only extended discussion of this distinction appears in §§57–60 of the *Prolegomena*, a division entitled “On pure reason’s boundary-determination.” In Lewis White Beck’s translation, *Schranke* is rendered as “limit” and *Grenze* as “bound” or “boundary.” We will stick to this translation, which is also consistent with Pluhar’s translation of Kant’s essay *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* with *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*. (Translators of Hegel tend to render *Grenze* as “limit” and *Schranke* as “restriction,” which makes the dialogue between Hegel and Kant – in English – somewhat confusing.)

The way Kant sets up the discussion in *Prolegomena* can be summed up as follows: Having established the conditions of something to appear as an object of possible experience, “it would be absurd to hope that we can know more of any object than belongs to the possible experience of it or lay claim to the least knowledge of anything not assumed to be an object of possible experience.” On the other hand, continues Kant, it would be “a still greater absurdity if we conceded no things in themselves or set up our experience as the only possible mode of knowing things, our intuition of them in space and time for the only possible intuition and our discursive understanding for the archetype of every possible understanding.” Why would this be absurd? Not simply on account of the presumptuousness involved in this kind of claim, ignoring something like a healthy modicum of modesty in positing ourselves in the universe, but for a much more precise epistemological reason (with important ontological consequences). Namely, it would imply that the principles of the possibility of experience are “considered universal

conditions of things in themselves (as Hume's *Dialogues* may illustrate). "In other words, the limits (*Schranken*) of our reason might in this way "be set up as limits of the possibility of things in themselves." And the only way to prevent this is a careful critique that "guards the bounds [*Grenzen*] of our reason with respect to its empirical use and sets a limit [*Ziel*] to its pretensions" (Kant 1950, p. 99 [A 163-164]).

Kant attributes here the opposite stance to Hume (namely that what is at stake with limits of reason are the limits of the possibility of things in themselves), but of course much of the Hegelian turn in philosophy and his criticism of Kant implies precisely this allegedly "absurd" consequence, albeit articulated in a much more complex and dialectical way. Hegel detects there the *limit of Kant*, that is of his philosophical proposition, yet at the same time he does not dismiss the question of the limit that Kant introduced in philosophy. His claim (differently from some of the claims coming from object-oriented ontology) is not that we should forget Kant and return to some point(s) of classical metaphysics, but rather that we should radicalize Kant and think of the limit in a way that would abolish the limitations of the Kantian project, without abolishing the concept of the limit (within which Hegel also distinguishes between *Schranke* and *Grenze*, although with an interesting twist).¹

In this sense, the notion of the limitation is also the *Grenzbegriff* relating and separating Hegel and Kant; it is the very locus or site of the passage, the transition from one to the other. In Hegel's *Logic*, it is also the site of the "Transition of the Finite to the Infinite," as the section is entitled, and then later of the "Transition" as a sublation of the very opposition of the finite and the infinite. This final point is of course the key difference

¹ See Dolar 2016, pp. 67–68. Another discussion, which we are leaving aside here, would be the discussion of the use that Marx makes of this distinction between *Schranke* and *Grenze*, when describing the capital's ability to transform all *Grenzen* into *Schranken* that can and must be overcome. "Capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier [*Schranke*]. Every boundary [*Grenze*] is and has to be a barrier [*Schranke*] for it [...]. If ever it perceived a certain boundary not as a barrier, but became comfortable within it as a boundary, it would itself have declined from exchange value to use value, from the general form of wealth to a specific, substantial mode of the same" (Marx 1973, p. 334).

between Kant and Hegel: whereas for Kant this opposition or difference is the foundation stone of his system, for Hegel it is only a starting point that leads to its sublation.

There is also a related question that would need to be discussed in this context, and which concerns a specifically Kantian wording, namely that of the boundaries of “the use of our reason,” *Vernunftgebrauch* or *Gebrauch der Vernunft*. The wording is overwhelmingly present in Kant, and opens the obvious question of *who* or *what* is “using” reason in this or that way, and where does this entity stand in relation to reason, which it “uses” in a good or bad way. In other words, what exactly is it that holds the office of the “border guard”? *Critique*, we are told, but again, critique conducted by what subject, and from where?

The question is all the more pertinent since Kant endows reason itself with a kind of subjectivity, also in the anthropological sense of the term, talking frequently about its “desire,” “needs,” and “satisfaction.” As a matter of fact, this facet of Kant’s argument is quite stunning and persistent if we pay attention to it. The tendency of reason (and consequently of ourselves) to overstep its boundaries is situated by Kant in an ardent desire and insuppressible search for *another satisfaction* (*Befriedigung*, *Gnüge*). The necessity of limitation comes from something that does not itself belong simply to epistemological considerations, but to a desire or drive that, moreover, “we are not at liberty to abstain from” (Kant 1950, p. 100 [A 166]). There is something unavoidable here, which no critique can prevent or eliminate, and which it even should *not* try to prevent or eliminate, only watch over it and its “boundary.” Kant relates this to “our natural predisposition,” which actually belongs to “anthropology” (*Ibid.*, p. 111, [A 184]).

An interesting short circuit appears here, linking the notions of need, desire, drive, and satisfaction to what we usually call the spiritual realm or ambition, rather than to a bodily one. There is something in this realm that makes us “feel compelled” to overstep the empirical boundaries of reason, “notwithstanding all interdictions” (*ibid.*, p. 100 [A 166]). When it comes to reason, its temptations are not oriented toward “mundane,” “base” empirical objects, but toward objects such as the ideas of God, soul, the world

as a whole. What counts as transgression (and hence as illegitimate satisfaction) here is the indulgence in things such as thinking about the true nature of God, making assumptions about the world as a whole, etc.

Let us look at some of these passages which abound in this section of the *Prolegomena*. If it were simply to abstain completely from thinking about things in themselves and forming ideas about them, the *needs of reason* would remain “forever dissatisfied [*unbefriedigt*]” (ibid., p. 101 [A 166]). Metaphysical tendencies (of reason) are part of its “natural predisposition,” and reason “finds no satisfaction” within the sensible based on the concepts of understanding (ibid., p. 202, [A 168]); it can only hope to “satisfy its desire” in the knowledge of things in themselves (ibid. [169]). Without forming these Ideas reason “cannot have any satisfaction” (ibid., p. 203, [A 177]).

For Kant, the tendency towards metaphysics (that is to say the fact that metaphysics is reason’s “favorite child”) is not accidental, it is “not to be ascribed to blind chance but to an original germ,” since “metaphysics, in its fundamental features, perhaps more than any other science, is placed in us by nature itself” (Ibid., p. 102 [A 168]).

It looks like nature planted within us something that derails us from nature itself. In other words, it would seem that nature wants us to think about things in themselves, or at least wants us to know that there is something beyond what we can grasp with the concepts and laws of understanding, yet at the same time prevents us from having a proper grasp or knowledge of this very something. Some interpreters talk in this respect about “reason’s peculiar fate,” which is that its very nature impels it to continually pose questions that it is incapable of answering (Howard 2022, p. 67). This is indeed how Kant sets the scene of reason.

However, while this may come across as a source of permanent and “systemic” frustration and deprivation, an ear tuned to psychoanalytic theory cannot miss here the ring of particular satisfaction that comes with this frustration itself, and particularly with dwelling on this limit, or border, of the impossible.

Also, it would be difficult to miss the proximity that this configuration maintains to the Lacanian configuration of desire and its relation

to satisfaction. The aim of desire is not to be satisfied (and hence be extinguished as desire, as is the case when we satisfy our needs), but it is to remain unsatisfied. In other words, desire is already a response to the structural dissatisfaction of the needs of reason, the dissatisfaction of its demand to know things in themselves. It is not simply that desire is never properly satisfied; rather, desire proper could be seen as a solution to the structural impossibility of reason's demand to become properly satisfied. It is a solution that results in the production of a new and singular object that appears at this limit and that is unlike any other object: the Lacanian *objet petit a*.² This gives body (object-like form) to the gap or interval that separates the demand from its satisfaction. The non-satisfaction constitutive of desire is its object-cause (and source of satisfaction), and not simply something like perpetual deprivation and yearning. In this precise sense, the obstacle or limit is the positive condition of desire, it is part of its armature. Could *Critique of Pure Reason* be read as critique of pure desire?

Lacan was actually one of the rare readers to notice and accentuate this "positive" substance of the Kantian "negative," "restrictive," limiting core of the *architectonic* (sic!) of pure reason. Desire could be said to have two aspects, or can be looked at from two perspectives. One is indeed reducible to the Hegelian diagnosis of the "bad infinite" or "finitized infinite": no satisfaction is the right one, no empirical object is ever It ("the right one"). On the other hand, we could see this *not-It* as itself forming an object (of desire); the "not-it" (or "notit") is not the opposite of It, its (simple) negation. Not-It is the way of saying that the *It* does not exist, and yet it is something, it has consequences, it has some sort of ex-sistence. What desire is pursuing is not simply the impossible "It," but rather the "not-It" in which the impossible becomes its own tangible trace.

In other terms, the void or absence (of the object) is transformed into the modality of "sliding away" or "eluding our grasp." The boundary, *Grenze*, is the point at which a void becomes a lack, the point where it leaves a trace of its negativity, becomes a "positive" trace of its own negativity.

² For more on this triad of need, demand, and desire in their dialectical movement, see Žižek 1993, p. 121.

And this is precisely what accounts for the “eroticism” that Lacan detects in *The Critique of Pure Reason*: it comes with what we could call a certain erotization of the limit or, rather, of the boundary. Boundary is the space of this eluding, of the negativity leaving a positive trace in evoking its own “absence.” Eroticism is a capture of a beyond at the point of its disappearing, it is a scene of its disappearing or sliding away; or, more precisely, it is a *mise-en-scène* of its disappearing and sliding away.

But before saying more on this, let’s return to Kant’s *Prolegomena* and to the distinction between *Schranke* and *Grenze* that he established there, and which carries in itself this peculiar charge of the negative.

The Charge of the Negative

Kant writes:

Bounds [*Grenzen*] [...] always presuppose a space existing outside a certain definite place and inclosing it; limits [*Schranken*] do not require this, but are mere negations which affect a quantity so far as it is not absolutely complete. (Kant 1950, p. 101 [A166])

Not many interpreters focus on this distinction, although Kant makes it and insists on it quite explicitly in *Prolegomena*. One of the few (recent) exceptions is Stephen Howard, in his article “Kant on limits, boundaries, and the positive function of Ideas.” Although my conclusions differ from Howard’s, I concur with several of his observations.

Kant first draws our attention to the difference between natural sciences (including mathematics) and philosophy or metaphysics. In natural sciences human reason admits of limits, *Schranken*, but not of bounds or boundaries, *Grenzen*. How should we understand this?

Mathematics and natural science treat only one type of object: respectively, constructions in pure intuition and physical bodies in space. These disciplines can investigate their objects “to infinity”: new theorems can always be

proved and more fine-grained properties of bodies can always be discovered.
(Howard 2022, p. 66)

A limit indicates something strictly negative (negation of extension, incompleteness, absence of), and – differently from bound or boundary – posits nothing positive. Limit is something that we can only approach ad infinitum, and never properly “touch” it. There always remains a space between “us” and the limit.

We could also recall here Lacan’s comment concerning Zeno’s paradox of Achilles and the tortoise:³

A number has a limit and it is to that extent that it is infinite. It is quite clear that Achilles can only pass the tortoise – he cannot catch up with it. He only catches up with it at infinity. (Lacan 1999, p. 8)

In this comment by Lacan, we also catch a glimpse of the notion of boundary or border, implied in the suggestion that Achilles can only “pass” the tortoise, that is *cross* the point where it finds itself. From this other perspective, the tortoise is no longer just a (negative) limit point of Achilles’ world and his efforts, but becomes something else: an actual other. And the question now becomes the one of their relation, which is also how Lacan picks it up – in the context of the question of the sexual relation and its (non)existence.

The relation between phenomena and noumena in Kant corresponds rather well to this model. On the one hand, noumena or things in themselves, are just a limiting concept. Yet, on the other hand, reason cannot abstain from thinking and making propositions about the things in themselves, for this belongs to its “natural” disposition. And in this sense, reason’s first step is already that of “passing,” transgressing the “limit,” which *thus turns into a boundary*, since it now delimits (separates and connects)

³ In this paradox, Zeno argues that a swift runner like Achilles cannot overtake a slower moving tortoise with a head start, because the distance between them can be infinitely subdivided, implying Achilles would require an infinite number of steps to catch the tortoise.

two different, heterogenous types of objects: phenomena and noumena. Noumena here do not have just a limiting role as the negation of phenomena but are themselves an object (of reason). In this precise sense, reason “creates” noumena as *something*: a positive *notion* of things in themselves is created.

This has interesting consequences for the perspective from which Kant’s “Copernican turn” is viewed, for example, by Meillassoux:

[...] it could be that contemporary philosophers have lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers [...]. (Meillassoux 2008, p. 7, emphasis in original)

It makes sense to ask whether what was allegedly “lost” ever truly existed. Could we not say, with equal justification, that noumena, or “things as they are in themselves,” are not in fact something we lost but rather something we first found with Kant? Noumena are there, so to speak, *on top* of the precritical universe, as an addition to it. In the precritical universe, the question of things as they are in themselves makes no sense (the Platonic distinction between appearance and essence differs radically, in its logic, from the difference between phenomena and noumena). And this is precisely why Hegel, in spite of his criticism of Kant and his notion of noumena, does not simply reject it and return to the precritical tradition. Instead, he maintains the difference between “in itself” and “for consciousness” (or “for itself”), and takes it a step further in the dialectical movement that brings us to the (possibility of) “in itself and for itself.”

In other words, the story does not necessarily go like this: we start with a vast space, draw a line within it, and thus exclude part of it, limiting ourselves to a smaller, contained portion. Wouldn’t it be equally plausible to say that it was Kant’s conception of the transcendental that created, for the first time, what we now refer to as “the beyond” or the “great outdoors”? In this view, nothing was strictly lost. Or, if something was lost, it is not synonymous with the “beyond.” A beyond was created, noumena got some kind of positive existence, based on the fact that reason is, by its nature, dialectical, and hence keeps moving between here and beyond,

keeps transgressing the boundary between phenomena and noumena. Critique, which is there to determine and guard this boundary or border, *does not prevent it from being crossed*. On the contrary, what it does is that it changes the status of reason's conclusions once they pass this border: they do not refer to any objects, but to *Gedankenwesen* or *Gedankendinge*.

Kant talks about the difference between a limit and a boundary, but we could also talk about the moment (and movement) in which a limit becomes a boundary through reason's "overstepping" or "overtaking" negativity (the space that always separates us from the limit point), which is now included in the "here" as its "beyond." Negativity is no longer ahead of reason but is within reason (as desire?), indicating its split.

Howard correctly emphasizes that the way Kant distinguishes in *Prolegomena* between limit and bound(ary) implies that with the notion of boundary, *Grenze*, we already start with a two. Yet we need to be more precise here: this "two" does not simply refer to two things, or "two heterogeneous objects" (as Howard suggests), but rather to *an object and a void*, that is to say, an object and its inherent impossibility that constitutes its ground, so to speak. Transcendental ideas lead us "to the spot where the occupied space (namely, experience), *touches the void* (that of which we can know nothing, namely, *noumena*)" (Kant 1950, p. 103 [A 107], our emphasis).

This is a very interesting and intriguing formulation by Kant: noumena are but the void (*die Leere*, also *der leere Raum*) that bounds phenomena. And, even more precisely, that binds them from within. This at least is the difference between the perspective of the natural sciences and that of philosophy. Whereas the former are not split in themselves, the latter is.

This brings us back to a previous point. If "sensibility and understanding in its empirical use have limits, whereas the pure understanding and reason have boundaries" (Howard 2022, p. 75), it is because their activity can be directed toward what Howard calls two heterogeneous objects: objects of experience and ideas of reason as thoughts of things in themselves. If sensibility and empirical understanding have a limit, but no boundary, it is because, as Kant puts it quite explicitly, in the case of understanding its boundary "lies without it," outside it (Kant 1950, p. 109

[A 181]). It is not even an object of its thought; *it is not a thing* (for it), as the contemporary colloquial expression has it. What Kant means is that metaphysics and morals lie entirely outside of the sphere of natural sciences, that there is “not a continual progress and approximation towards these sciences [metaphysics and morals], and there is not, as it were, any point or line of contact” (ibid., p. 101 [A 167]). With boundary, *Grenze*, on the other hand, the negativity becomes *touchable*.

This also presents us with the idea that, if it is only reason (as opposed to sensibility and empirical understanding) that has a boundary, this boundary is strictly intrinsic and immanent to reason; it constitutes its part and produces a split in it. Sensibility and empirical understanding have a limit, but no boundary.

To say that in natural sciences the boundary of something lies without understanding, as opposed to the boundary of reason that lies within it, further implies – for Kant – that sensibility and empirical understanding *never touch* this boundary. It is only the concept of phenomena that touches it, because, in order to talk about phenomena, we must be led “to the spot where the occupied space (namely, experience) touches the void (that of which we can know nothing, namely, *noumena*),” which is why we can now speak of the bounds or boundaries of pure reason, namely boundary between phenomena and noumena.

We have to be careful to notice the additional distinction that appears here, and its consequences, namely the distinction or difference between empirical knowledge and experience that ground that which is called phenomenal, and the notion of the *realm* or domain of phenomena, of appearances. The determination of the latter (as appearances) lies outside them. “Phenomenon” (or the realm of phenomena) is not a notion based on experience.

Boundary only exists between phenomena and noumena, specifically because they are set as distinct to begin with, even if we identify the noumena with nothing but a void. But this Kantian dualism gets a peculiar further twist with Kant’s meditation on what a bound or a boundary actually is.

The With-Without

Kant writes:

[...] in all bounds there is something positive (for example, a surface is the boundary of corporeal space, and is therefore itself a space; a line is a space, which is the boundary of the surface, a point the boundary of the line, but yet always a place in space) [...]. (Ibid., p. 103 [A 170])

Boundary itself is a space, a thing in its own right. Boundary suggests a point, or line, or surface of touch, of contact, and this point or line or surface has a peculiar status that, strictly speaking, is neither that of a phenomenon nor that of a thing in itself or a void. As the zone of their *touching*, it is a paradoxical extension, a space with a certain – why not use the expression – singular “charge of the negative.” As we put it earlier, a boundary is the space of the negativity leaving a positive trace, evoking its own “absence” or beyond. As such, boundary is a capture of a beyond at the point of its disappearing.

This further suggests that, strictly speaking, noumena are not what bounds the phenomena, but what bounds them are *boundaries* that belong to both and form a space of their own, an in-between that is neither a thing nor a non-thing. This is also what lies behind a peculiar bit of Kantian wording, namely that there are concepts that exist “on the boundary” (*auf der Grenze*). Now, what Kant calls a legitimate use of reason is not simply a use that stays on this side of the boundary, but rather a use that *includes the boundary*. And this is finally what the “critique” achieves.

The notion of the boundary in Kant introduces something third in relation both to the idea of limit as a purely negative determination and to the (inadmissible) positivization of things in themselves as “suprasensible objects” or objects of “nonsensible intuition.” In a way, Hegel is right when in his criticism of Kant he talks of a “fixed negation” or “negation *fixed in itself*” (Hegel 2010, p. 102). But what a Lacanian perspective adds here, and allows us to see, is that, with it, Kant has discovered the fixation and the split proper to desire and its unconscious dialectics. Moreover, do we not encounter a very similar structure in Freud’s discussion of *Verneinung*: a “negation” that

is not simply the opposite of what it negates, but that carries in itself the positive charge of what it negates? “Without” becomes a “with-without,” or simply “with-out.” In the famous example discussed by Freud, “This is not my mother” thus becomes something like “this is not-mother.”

We could say that the particular emphasis in Kant on the topology and the *spatial* dimension/rendering of the configuration at stake is also what makes Kant Kant and distinguishes him from Hegel, for whom the crucial emphasis is on temporality and its paradoxical movement.

This could be seen most clearly in the way Hegel picks up Kant’s example of the boundary as something in itself positive, occupying some space (a point, a line, a surface), and “liquefies” it into a temporal movement of reversal (removes its “fixation,” we could say). In his *Science of Logic* Hegel first posits, in agreement with Kant, that, since *Grenze* “and immediate existence are each at the same time the negative of each other, the something, which is now only in its *Grenze*, equally separates itself from itself, points beyond itself to its non-being and declares it to be its being, and so it passes over into it” (Hegel 2010, p. 100). The basic agreement with Kant would be that the *Grenze* of two things is their “common distinguishedness” and that it “points beyond itself to its non-being and declares it to be its being, and so it passes over into it.” This last point, however, already introduces Hegel’s further temporal twist and movement, which he introduces with (implicit) reference to Kant’s spatial example (“a surface is the boundary [*Grenze*] of corporeal space, and is therefore itself a space; a line is a space, which is the boundary of the surface, a point the boundary of the line, but yet always a place in space”). Hegel now points out that:

the point is the *Grenze*⁴ of line, not because the latter just ceases at the point and has existence outside it; the line is the *Grenze* of plane, not because the plane just ceases at it; and the same goes for the plane as the *Grenze* of solid. Rather, at the point the line also begins; the point is its absolute beginning,

⁴ I’m quoting the German term, because in the translation *Grenze* is rendered as “limit,” which can be confusing in respect to our previous discussion and could prevent us from seeing that Hegel is discussing here what Kant calls (in the English translation) the bound(ary).

and if the line is represented as unlimited on both its two sides, or, as is said, as extended to infinity, the point still constitutes its element, just as the line constitutes the element of the plane, and the plane that of the solid. These *Grenzen* are the principle of that which they delimit (*begrenzen*); just as one, for instance, is as hundredth the *Grenze*, but also the element, of the whole hundred. (Hegel 2010, p. 100)

This passage very nicely renders both the proximity and distance between Kant and Hegel, what distinguishes them. Hegel goes on to speak about the *unrest* of the something in its *Grenze*, of the contradiction that propels it beyond itself. We thus get a specific temporality of the dialectical movement, that of *becoming*: “the point is this dialectic of itself becoming line; the line, the dialectic of becoming plane; the plane, of becoming total space” (Ibid.). We could say that for Kant the inner limit (or *Grenze* as the inner limit) is a split, whereas for Hegel it is a movement, and this captures rather well the difference between the two philosophers. (Of course, we could also argue that for Hegel, movement itself is the form of the split.)

Without going into any more details of this discussion, I would just like to insist on this difference between the Kantian “fixation” of the *Grenze* (and the “erotic” movement contained in what happens at this *Grenze*, the satisfaction in dwelling on it and exploring it), and the Hegelian move of transforming the *Grenze* into the internal infinite movement that breaks down its own finitude.

There may be something at stake here in Kant that – regardless of our affinities – is not reducible to the passage from Kant to Hegel as a simply logical passage, that is to Hegel as a step further from and radicalization of Kant. Although I agree with this later assessment in many ways, there is also something resulting from the Kantian fixation on *Grenze* that captures a dimension of reality (signifying reality included) that is as real as the Hegelian movement and yet distinct from it: the emphasis on the in-between as a peculiar space with its own dialectic, a dialectic within dialectic, as it were. In a certain sense, the “dialectics of desire,” as formulated by Lacan, is perhaps just such “dialectics within dialectics,” but this would demand a more specific and elaborate argument.

For the purposes of the present argument, I would just like to conclude by relating this discussion of *Grenze* to another specifically Kantian move and point, namely his discussion of the difference between negative and indefinite judgement (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*), as it has been emphasized and exemplified particularly in the work of Slavoj Žižek. This is the difference between saying, for example, that something is “not dead” and saying that it is “undead” – in the first we negate a predicate, in the other we affirm a certain non-predicate. Žižek pointed out the specifically “spectral,” “ghostly” dimension of the latter (Žižek 1993, pp. 112-114), strikingly visible in the “undead” example and its relations to creatures that populate the popular margins of modernity, such as vampires. Lacan refers to this space in his commentary on Antigone (and of the desire that animates her) as the space *between two -deaths*, also emphasizing Antigone’s position at the “frontier,” which gets its spatial materialization in her punishment: being buried alive in a tomb (Lacan 1997, p. 224). The fact that Kant is a central philosophical reference in the *Ethics* seminar where Lacan developed this is hardly a coincidence. And, indeed, it could be argued that, in some ways, for Kant *Grenze* is also a liminal space:

As a boundary itself is something positive, which belongs to that which lies within as well as to the space that lies without the given content, it is still an actual positive cognition which reason only acquires by enlarging itself to this boundary, yet without attempting to pass it because it there finds itself in the presence of an empty space in which it can conceive forms of things, but not things themselves. (Kant 1950, p. 109 [A 181])

There is clearly a metaphor of restriction here: we can only go so far and no further. But at the same time, there is also what Kant describes as reason finding itself *in the presence of* an empty space of void, populated by “beings” that are in fact non-beings. What we encounter at the very boundary of reason could thus also be seen as a kind of (projection of?) a pre-ontological gap, the gap of things for which we cannot say that they are “not (yet) born,” but rather that they are “unborn.” This is precisely the term Lacan uses when discussing the status of the unconscious: “the area

of the unborn," of the "unrealized" (Lacan 1998, p. 23). One should not miss here the echo of the Kantian indefinite judgment: unborn and unrealized are not the opposite (or simple negation) of the born and realized, but rather they fall out from this distinction or opposition; they refer to a "limbo" and are pre-ontological in the Lacanian sense.⁵

Lacan often speaks of the unfortunate use of the negative prefix in the Freudian term *Unbewußte*, or "unconscious", insisting that what is at stake is not a simple negation or opposition. Unconscious thoughts are "eternally unborn"; what happens through analysis is not that they get to be "born," but they are rather taken up and discussed with all seriousness precisely *as unborn*. Becoming conscious of unconscious thoughts does not amount to their "realization" and they do not exactly lose the status of liminal beings; rather, this process of becoming conscious helps the subject orient (map) herself at the gaps of her reality and its contradictions.

Kant was not insensible to this peculiar dimension of being, to which also the Freudian unconscious belongs. He was not interested in the question of the unconscious; he came to think about this dimension from the other end, so to say, namely from the perspective of universal knowledge and its possibility. And what he arrived at was also not the unconscious, but a paradoxical ontological status of *Gedankendinge*.

The Freudian Thing is not the Kantian *Ding an sich*, or Thing-in-itself. Yet this statement should not be taken as a simple negation, for there also is something of the Kantian *Ding* in the Freudian *Ding*. It is just a thought; "just a thought," which, in its critical examination, points to the necessity of its appearing at a certain locus in the chain of thinking, and marks a gap, a double gap. It is the point at which epistemology, or the question of knowledge, falls into an ontological gap (the "lack of being"), and where ontology, or the question of being, falls into the gap in the structuring of knowledge. Hegel was quite right to insist on their speculative identity, yet dwelling on this gap as such, fixating on it and exploring it, designs the contours of a Thing that still remains with us.

⁵ "The gap of the unconscious may be said to be pre-ontological" (Lacan 1998, p. 29).

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Abstracts

Slavoj Žižek

Kant, Mysticism, and the Pre-Ontological Real

Hegel's notion of reconciliation is much more paradoxical than it may appear. It does not designate the final sublation (*Aufhebung*) of all tensions in a rational totality but the reconciliation with an irreducible excess of madness as a condition of rationality. This madness is directly experienced in what Hegel, following mystics, calls "night of the world" – mysticism can thus be rehabilitated as a basic materialist experience.

Keywords: Kant, Hegel, Lacan, Real, mysticism, understanding, reason

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Frank Ruda

Mutmaßung, or: For a Return to The Courage to Use One's Own Understanding

The present text thinks through Kant's famous formulation of the Enlightenment as being linked to the courage to use one's own understanding. It addresses the question of how we can understand not what it means to use one's own understanding, but what it means that one has to have the courage to do so. On this basis and against the background of diagnoses that indicate in what precise

way a lack of courage is (politically) detrimental, the article unfolds the contours of a concept of courage post-Kant.

Keywords: Badiou, courage, extra-ordinary language philosophy, Fanon, measure, Solzhenitsyn

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Andrew Cutrofello

Kant's Four Discourses

In his preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant distinguishes four metaphysical discourses: the dogmatist's, skeptic's, indifferentist's, and critic's. Explicitly conceived as social links, they bear an uncanny resemblance to the discourses of the master, hysteric, university, and analyst that Lacan introduces in *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. After explicating these parallels, specific differences between the critic's discourse and the analyst's discourse are explored. Lacan takes the critic to harbor quasi-sadomasochistic attitudes toward the law, but Kant would take Lacan to neglect to raise the question *Quid juris?* with respect to the four discourses themselves. Just as Kant derives his fourfold table of categories from the fourfold structure of Aristotelian judgment, so he could derive Lacan's four quartets from a problem that originates in Plato's *Parmenides*.

Keywords: Kant, Lacan, critique, psychoanalysis, indifferentism, university discourse

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Güçşal Pusar

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

A neglected 18th-century rival to Kant's critical philosophy is what in the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* he names "indifferentism," namely, the 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. The main goal of this paper is to demonstrate the extent to which Kant's critical reformulation and solution to the problem of metaphysics was embedded in the indifferentist problematic, and it does this by identifying and reconstructing Kant's main arguments against indifferentism. In Kant's assessment, indifferentism embodied a self-stultifying meta-metaphysical attitude, had an inconsistent philosophical methodology, and set up a self-defeating cultural goal. Reconstructing Kant's counterarguments against indifferentism has the added benefit of revealing the remarkable breadth of his conception of metaphysics, the indispensability of which he emphasized, first, as a natural predisposition of human reason, then, as its critical self-examination, and finally, as its consummate culture.

Keywords: Kant, critical philosophy, metaphysics, reason, indifference

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Eric Reinhart

Kant's Animating Principle: On Aesthetic Vitalism and the Origin of Desire

If Kant's first critique could be said to concern how and what we can think, and the second critique concerns how we should live and what we should do, then the third critique asks why: Why do we think and why do we act? What propels us to do either? This essay argues for an object-disoriented aesthetics, positioning Kant's third critique as a framework for rethinking the role of beauty and the aesthetic encounter in subjectivity, ontology, pure and practical reason, and political community. Moving beyond preoccupations in the philosophy of aesthetics with art and art objects that obscure the nature and function of beauty, Kant emphasizes the subjective principle of the supersensible, wherein the aesthetic is defined not by the properties of objects nor by experience but by the "feeling of life" itself that

the encounter with beauty elicits within the subject. What Kant identifies as disinterestedness, free play, and universal communicability allow for a decentering and dissolution of the subject, fostering a unique form of sociality – the *sensus communis* – that emerges from the communicability of the incommunicable that characterizes being as such. By reframing the aesthetic encounter in relation to desire as the animating principle behind language and reason, and by drawing out the aesthetic encounter’s resistance to objectification, representation, and understanding, object-disoriented aesthetics draws out the potential of beauty to subvert stable identifications and historical constraints, and to thereby cultivate open-ended political community and associated ethical action.

Keywords: object-disoriented aesthetics, aesthetic vitalism, disinterestedness, *sensus communis*, political community, desire, Kant, Scarry, Arendt, Lacan

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Anthony Curtis Adler

Kant’s Transcendental Alethiology: Truth from the Critique of Pure Reason to the Critique of Judgment

Starting from the tension between Kant’s professed adherence to a correspondence theory of truth and his rejection of knowledge of things as they are in themselves, I argue that Kant’s theory of truth only becomes comprehensible through the foundational inquiries into truth emerging in the wake of his philosophical “Copernican revolution.” Both Heidegger’s rethinking of truth as disclosure and Tarski’s semantic theory of truth respond to the Kantian “fissure,” and, in turn, two of the most compelling accounts of Kant’s theory of truth – Gerald Prauss’s “Zum Wahrheitsproblem bei Kant” and Robert Hanna’s “Kant, Truth, and Human Nature” – draw “retrospectively” on both Heidegger and Tarski in order to clarify Kant’s position. Defending Kant’s commitment to correspondence truth, Hanna argues that for Kant there are not only three different material criteria for theoretical truths but a further distinction can be drawn between truth and a non-cognitively directed truthfulness. Yet while Hanna, for whom Kant is a “constrained pluralist about truth,” stops at the second critique, I argue that truth also plays a

tacit role in the third critique. The faculty of judgment is a subjective power for correspondence – the condition of the very possibility of correspondence. The judgment of taste does not communicate a specific truth about the world, but instead conveys a potential for truth within the human powers of cognition. The ultimate condition of truth, taking the place of God in Aquinas, is the *sensus communis*, humankind's plural finitude, as revealed through aesthetic judgment and the historical cultivation of taste.

Keywords: Kant, truth, judgment, *sensus communis*, Tarski, Heidegger, Gerold Prauss, Robert Hanna

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Dominik Finkelde

Kant, Maimon, and the Differential Theory of Perception

This paper examines the philosophical interplay between Salomon Maimon and Immanuel Kant, with a focus on Maimon's critique of Kant's dualism and the epistemological challenges arising from the latter's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant acknowledged Maimon's profound insight into his philosophy, particularly on the foundational questions of cognition: "quid facti?" (what are the facts?) and "quid juris?" (what justifies these facts?). Kant's attempt to reconcile the sensory and conceptual realms through the schema of time is met with skepticism by Maimon, who proposes a unified foundation for understanding and intuition. Drawing inspiration from calculus and Leibniz's infinitesimals, Maimon develops a differential approach to cognition, suggesting that the human mind synthesizes reality through an interaction of infinitesimally small cognitive elements.

Keywords: differential theory of cognition, sensibility and understanding, epistemology, infinitesimal calculus, mind and world

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Kobe Keymeulen

Weeding out the Critical Root – How Kant Thinks the Radical

This essay explores how Immanuel Kant's seminal work *On Radical Evil in Human Nature* (1793), rather than strictly presenting an ethical thesis, can instead be understood as constructing a theory on how anything, including evil, can be radical. Although the term "radical" is used frequently in contemporary literature with varying intentions, Kant's text can present us with a deliberate, careful consideration of its meaning for critical philosophy. This paper opens with Kant's use of the term in the discussion of the hypothetical use of Reason in the first *Critique*, relating it to distinction between truth (*Wahrheit*) and veracity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*). It then pursues this approach throughout *On Radical Evil*, observing an inherent asymmetry between good and evil, where evil operates with reflective, corrupting adaptability. I conclude by situating Kant's insights within the broader trajectory of German Idealism and contemporary radical philosophy, focusing in particular on Marx's famous dictum on radicality – "grasping the matter by its roots." Ultimately, Kant is presented as modernity's pioneering thinker of the radical, even as he ultimately retreats from fully embracing the implications of his own critical framework.

Keywords: radicality, radicalism, Immanuel Kant, evil

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Alenka Zupančič

The Kantian Limits

If one were to capture the debates surrounding Kant's legacy in a single word, that word would likely be limit(s) or limitation(s). This paper delves into the Kantian notion of the limit and proposes an interpretation that may challenge our conventional understanding of the term. It does so by closely examining Kant's distinction between *Schranke* and *Grenze*, as discussed in the *Prolegomena*. The paper connects this discussion, on the one hand, to Hegel's critique of Kant, and on the other, to key psychoanalytic concepts that involve a peculiar kind of

negativity—one that is not so different from the negativity at stake in Kant's philosophy, and particularly in his discussion of Grenze.

Keywords: limit, boundary, Schranke, Grenze, desire, infinite, negativity

Notes on contributors

Anthony Curtis Adler is professor of German and Comparative Literature at Yonsei University's Underwood International College. Working at the intersection of philosophy, political theory, and media studies, he has published articles on a wide range of topics including Kant's Epicureanism, Fichte's aesthetics, the "biopolitics of noise" in the writings of Kafka, Lyotard's ecology, Agamben's theory of gesture, and the semi-auratic properties of the phonograph. He is also the author of several books, including *Celebrities: Media Culture and the Phenomenology of Gadget Commodity Life* (Fordham UP: 2016), *Politics and Truth in Hölderlin: 'Hyperion' and the Choreographic Project of Modernity* (Boydell & Brewer: 2021), a critical edition of Fichte's *Closed Commercial State* (SUNY Press: 2014), and a study of the cinema of Bong Joon Ho, slated to be published in 2025 by Bloomsbury Press as part of the *Philosophical Filmmakers* series. His current book project argues for the irreducibility of truth to ontology, demonstrating both the multimodality of truth and the importance of politics as a site of confrontation between different modes of truth.

Andrew Cutrofello is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University Chicago. He has published half a dozen books, including *The Owl at Dawn: A Sequel to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (State University of New York Press, 1995), *All for Nothing: Hamlet's Negativity* (MIT, 2014) and *The One and the Others: Metaphysics,*

Poetry, and the Antinomies of Plato's Parmenides (forthcoming from Northwestern University Press in 2025).

Dominik Finkelde is a professor of epistemology and contemporary philosophy at the Munich School of Philosophy. He has published on contemporary philosophy and German Idealism, especially on Hegel, Kant, Frege, Wittgenstein, Badiou, Lacan, and Žižek. Recent publications: *The Remains of Reason. On Meaning After Lacan* (Northwestern UP 2025), *Žižek-Handbuch* (ed.) (Metzler 2025); *Idealism. Relativism, and Realism. New Essays on Objectivity Beyond the Analytic Continental Divide*, edited with Paul M. Livingston (De Gruyter 2020); *Excessive Subjectivity. Kant, Hegel, Lacan, and the Foundation of Ethics* (Columbia UP 2017).

Kobe Keymeulen is a PhD student in philosophy currently finishing his dissertation at the Department of Philosophy & Moral Science, Ghent University (Belgium). His doctoral project, kindly supported by the Flemish Research Foundation FWO (11A5222N), investigates the relationship between contemporary continental philosophy and other disciplines (scientific and artistic). He has published on these topics in, among others, *Filozofia*, *Cosmos & History* and *Psychoanalytische Perspectieven*. A collected volume edited by him, *Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and the Question of (Inter)Disciplinarity*, is under contract at Palgrave MacMillan (expected winter 2025).

Güçsal Pular is an independent scholar and writer based in İstanbul, Turkey. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from DePaul University, USA. He has published mainly on Kant and the history of modern philosophy with a focus on metaphysics, philosophical methodology, and temporality. He is also the editor and translator of a Donna Haraway reader in Turkish.

Eric Reinhart is a social psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and political anthropologist based in Chicago. His research focuses on the intersections of public health, psychiatric reason, and political theory, with a particular emphasis on the varied functions of aesthetics and care. His publications include articles in leading medical, legal, social science, and humanities journals as well as public writing for *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *TIME*, *Slate*, *The Nation*, and a variety of other outlets.

Frank Ruda is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy at the University of Dundee and Professor at the European Graduate School. His recent publications include: *Indifference and Repetition; or, Modern Freedom and its Discontents* (Fordham UP 2023), *Reading Hegel* (with Agon Hamza and Slavoj Žižek) (Polity 2022), *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism* (Nebraska UP 2016). Currently, he is a fellow at the Käte Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies at the University of Heidelberg.

Alenka Zupančič is a Slovenian philosopher and social theorist. She works as Research Councilor at the Institute of Philosophy, Scientific Research Center of the Slovene Academy of Sciences, Ljubljana. She is also professor at the European Graduate School in Switzerland, and is invited as guest lecturer to numerous universities worldwide. Notable for her work on the intersection of philosophy and psychoanalysis, she is the author of numerous articles and many books, including *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan*; *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*; *The Odd One In: On Comedy*; *What is Sex?*, *Let Them Rot: Antigone's Parallax*, and *Disavowal*.

Slavoj Žižek is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, the International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at the University of London, and a professor of philosophy and psychoanalysis at the European Graduate School (Saas-Fee, Switzerland). His latest books include *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso 2012), *Absolute Recoil: Towards A New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso 2014), and *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (Bloomsbury Academic 2019).

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