

THREE SKEPTICS AND THE *CRITIQUE*: CRITICAL NOTICE OF MICHAEL FÖRSTER'S *KANT AND SKEPTICISM*

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What is it, fundamentally, that motivates Kant's mature theoretical philosophy? Michael Forster defends a new and openly "heretical" response to this question when he argues, in his recent book, that Pyrrhonian skepticism was an early and "central concern," and that the desire to respond to it played a far greater role in the genesis of the critical philosophy than is typically recognized. Humean skepticism, by contrast, was a secondary impetus, and Cartesian "veil of perception" skepticism played "no significant role at all" (p. 4).

Lucid and readable, Forster's book is an elegant 91 pages, divided into two parts, and supplemented by 54 pages of detailed if sometimes sprawling endnotes. In the first and broadly expository part, Forster presents an interpretation of the roles played by various kinds of skepticism in the origins of the critical philosophy. In the second and more systematic part, Forster criticizes Kant for various deficiencies, including his failure to interpret Pyrrhonism correctly and his inability to overcome Pyrrhonism correctly interpreted.

By contrast, Forster praises Hegel for construing Pyrrhonism as a radical form of skepticism and for providing an attractive answer to it all the same (pp. 90–1). Indeed, *Kant and Skepticism* seems at times to be not just an explicit companion piece to Forster's earlier *Hegel and Skepticism* but also a kind of brief on Hegel's behalf.¹ As a result, unfortunately, the discussion of Kant and the secondary literature tends to be somewhat less charitable—and less careful—than other recent work on Kant's epistemology.

I. Forster's Exposition of Kant

A. The Great Awakening

Forster starts off with a puzzle regarding Kant's two apparently conflicting statements about what first stirred him out of his precritical "dogmatic slumbers." The first and more famous statement is found in the *Prolegomena* of 1783, where Kant says that it was *David Hume* who had a vivificatory effect on him (4:260). In a 1798 letter to Christian Garve, however, Kant states that it was meditation on what later became the *Antinomies* that "first aroused me from my dogmatic slumber and drove me to the critique of reason itself, in order to resolve the scandal of ostensible contradiction of reason with itself" (12:258).

1. See p. ix of *Kant and Skepticism*, as well as *Hegel and Skepticism* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

According to Forster, these two different answers are a function, not of the onset of senility in the late 1790s (as was once suggested by Lewis White Beck²), but of the complex ways in which Kant's encounters with various skepticisms gave birth to the critical philosophy. He distinguishes between three different kinds: Cartesian "veil of perception" skepticism (VPS), Humean skepticism (HS), and Pyrrhonian skepticism (PS). Against the orthodox "Anglophone" reading of Kant, which sees VPS as a main opponent in the *Critique*, Forster claims that the project of vindicating our representations of external objects actually had almost nothing to do with the inception of the critical philosophy. Indeed, Kant's putative interest in VPS, he suggests, is "more a figment of certain interpreters' imaginations than a reality" (p. 12; cf. pp. 4, 93, 94). Although this jibe is explicitly directed at "Anglophone" commentators like Barry Stroud, Paul Guyer, and Georges Dicker, there are actually plenty of non-Anglos (like Dietmarr Heidemann, Luigi Caranti, and Dina Emundts) who regard Kant's arguments against VPS as some of the most fundamental and valuable portions of the *Critique*, and also English-speaking scholars (e.g., Karl Ameriks) who do not.³ Forster thus appears to use "Anglophone" to refer to a certain interpretive tradition that he doesn't like rather than an actual linguistic community.⁴

Equally heretical, perhaps, is Forster's claim that it was not HS that provided the impetus for the critical philosophy, but rather PS. Pyrrhonism, at least as he understood it, was what "first really shook Kant's faith in the precritical discipline of metaphysics" (p. 5). The decisive encounter with PS occurred in the mid-1760s, soon after Kant had published his book-length rationalist proof of God's existence (the *Only Possible Basis* of 1763). HS became significant somewhat later on, but more as a sharpened version of a worry Kant had raised on his own than as an independent impetus.

Forster's argument for the centrality of PS in Kant's development has three main components (see 18ff):

1. First, Kant says in the *Notice Concerning the Structure of Lectures in the Winter Semester 1765–66* that the "special method in philosophy is *zetetic*, as some ancients called it (from *zêtein*), that is to say, *investigative*" (2:307). According to Forster, "by the 'zetetic' method here Kant can only mean one thing: *the Pyrrhonists' equipollence method, or the procedure of balancing opposed arguments in order to produce a suspension of judgment*" (p. 18, original emphasis).
2. L.W. Beck, *Essays on Kant and Hume* (Yale University Press, 1978), p. 119.
3. See B. Stroud's chapter on Kant in *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (Oxford University Press, 1984); P. Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); G. Dicker, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2004); D. Heidemann, *Kant und das Problem des metaphysischen Idealismus*, Kant-Studien Ergänzungshefte 131 (de Gruyter, 1998); L. Caranti, *Kant e lo Scetticismo* (Marco, 2004) (as well as *Kant and the Scandal of Philosophy* [University of Toronto, 2008]); D. Emundts, "Die Paralogismen und die Widerlegung des Idealismus in Kants *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 54, 2 (2006), pp. 295–309; K. Ameriks, *Interpreting Kant's Critiques* (Oxford University Press, 2003) (see especially the Introduction).
4. Forster makes it clear in an endnote, however, that he still regards Stroud and Guyer as "in many ways excellent philosophers" (p. 94).

But this last assertion is actually quite dubious. The verb *zêtein* means “to investigate” and can be found throughout Greek philosophy: Socrates famously claims to be engaged in “zetesis” in the *Meno*, for instance, and Aristotle refers to earlier Socratic philosophy as “zetetic” (*Pol.* 1265a12). But neither Socrates nor Plato clearly uses *equipollence* arguments in particular to ground suspension of judgment. Moreover, according to one recent monograph on the period, Pyrrhonism was typically associated with the “aporetic” method, while the more general zetetic mode of inquiry involved simply “seeking without bias the most probable answers to a wide range of philosophical problems.”⁵ It is thus not at all obvious that Kant’s reference to the “zetetic” method in the *Notice* can simply be equated with equipollence argumentation in particular, rather than with Socratic or skeptical “investigative” method more generally.⁶

In the endnotes, Forster presents some textual evidence on behalf of this equation. All of it is from obscure marginalia, letters, notes, or lectures, and some of it is rather misleading. For example, Forster mentions two successive *Reflexionen* (4454 and 4455) from the 1770s and claims that in them Kant “uses the same adjective [i.e. ‘zetetic’] to characterize the method of balancing opposed arguments.” A quick check of these texts, however, reveals that the reference to opposed arguments (“*einem Beweise einen andern und zwar eben so überzeugenden des Gegentheils zu opponirenis*”) is found in 4454, while “zetetic” (*zetetisch*) appears only once in an entirely different context in 4455 to refer to the method of critique in general. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that these notes were written at the same time or even successively; Nachlass editor Erich Adickes indicates that there is some reason to think that they were written years apart (17:557–8).⁷

2. The second source of support comes from *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* (1766), which Forster regards as Kant’s “*crise pyrrhonienne* in full bloom” and a “self-consciously Pyrrhonian work” (p. 19). In this work, Kant does appear to recommend skepticism about conclusions in speculative metaphysics on the grounds that someone else is liable to find convincing arguments for some contrary thesis. Forster argues, furthermore, that this attack on metaphysics and Kant’s acceptance of “empirical, mathematical, moral, or logical judgments” in *Dreams* is consistent with the claim that Pyrrho is the *eminence grise* here because Kant interpreted Pyrrhonism moderately—that is, as directed against speculative metaphysics in particular (p. 19).

Now it is certainly plausible that equipollence arguments were regarded by Kant and others in the tradition as characteristically Pyrrhonian. But despite Forster’s textual work on *Dreams* and related precritical works, he is not able

5. H. Tarrant, *Skepticism or Platonism? The Philosophy of the Fourth Academy* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 27–9.
6. For an argument that Kant is referring to a skeptical method generally in these texts, but not equipollence arguments in particular, see G. Tonelli, “Kant und die antiken Skeptiker,” in H. Heimsoeth, D. Henrich, and G. Tonelli (eds.), *Studien zu Kants philosophischer Entwicklung* (G. Olms, 1967), pp. 93–123.
7. See notes 10 and 11 on pp. 100–1. Significantly, Forster admits in these notes that, in the *Notice* at least, the zetetic method is mentioned by Kant as something that leads *not* to the suspension of judgment, but rather to “discovering truth.”

to produce a passage where Kant clearly equates the appeal to antinomies (in *Dreams* or later) with the Pyrrhonian appeal to equipollence (*isostheneia*). It may still be, of course, that Kant had Pyrrhonism in mind when developing the antinomies that partly inspired the critical philosophy. But textually speaking, there is no smoking gun.

3. Forster goes on to claim, finally, that Kant's frequent appeal to the *systematic* character of his position in the mature critical writings is designed as a defense against specifically Pyrrhonian challenges. The idea is that even if a skeptic is convinced by the argument of the Analytic that the categories and principles have legitimate application in experience, he might still take issue with other, more speculative metaphysical judgments (p. 47). The appeal to systematicity is supposed to handle these concerns, and thereby safeguard Kant's own "metaphysics of nature," because Kant thinks that systematicity entails exhaustiveness:

It is a central and recurrent theme in Kant's thought that the way to demonstrate that an aggregate of items of some particular kind is a *complete* collection of items of that kind is to show that they constitute together . . . an *entire system*. (p. 49)

In other words, if Kant can show that his "metaphysics of nature" is fully systematic, then he will also be able to claim that it is exhaustive of a priori metaphysics. In this way, "the Pyrrhonist can be compelled to admit, not only that these sources and principles provide metaphysical knowledge . . . but also that all of the remaining principles whose battles have hitherto sullied and might continue to sully the name of the discipline in fact belong outside it" (p. 51).

There is little question that Kant believes that systematicity in a theory indicates a kind of completeness. But again, it is hard to see why we should take Pyrrhonism to be Kant's target here as opposed to general skepticism about rationalist metaphysics—the kind of skepticism expressed in Kant's day by various Pietists, Lockean, commonsense realists, and, of course, Hume himself. Forster himself mentions in an endnote that the Pietist philosopher Christian A. Crusius—a deep influence on Kant—was using antinomies to question rationalist speculation as early as the 1740s (p. 99).

In defense of his interpretation here, Forster appeals to a passage from Heinrich Theodor von Schön's transcription of Kant's metaphysics lectures from 1789 or 1790. Kant is reported as saying that if metaphysics is not brought into the systematic form of a science, then "we lose an important touchstone of truth; we can no longer test our judgment by experience and it is easy to see that consequently the use of pure reason becomes very slippery" (Ak. 28:463–45). Forster glosses the assertion that reason becomes slippery as a reference to "the equipollence problem" (p. 125). But without further argument, this just seems baldly interpolative: the metaphor of "slippery reason" does not evoke thoughts of either antinomies or equipollence.

Forster also notes that in the von Schön transcript we find the claim that philosophy has a tendency to "fall into illusion and chimeras without

recognizing them as such. And that is precisely why people could challenge all its [i.e. reason's] propositions before there was a critique of reason" (Ak. 28:465). He then glosses the reference to challenging all of reason's propositions as another appeal to "the equipollence problem" (p. 126). But this too is highly questionable, since Kant might equally well have been thinking of various rationalist controversies, Humean challenges, or Pietist critiques of speculative metaphysics (again, consider Crusius).

In our judgment, then, neither the claim that reason is "slippery" nor the claim that prior to the *Critique* all of reason's propositions were susceptible to "challenge" constitutes any evidence whatsoever that Kant had Pyrrhonism generally in mind in this lecture, much less equipollence concerns in particular. There were plenty of other movements in the 18th century that might have raised the worry which the systematicity argument was supposed to handle.

B. *The Second Snooze*

Readers familiar with the orthodox account of Kant's development will be wondering at this point whether any role is left for Hume to play in Forster's narrative. The answer is yes: Forster claims that while Pyrrhonian concerns first awoke Kant to the problems with metaphysics in the 1760s, Hume's work precipitated a "second awakening" out of the "backslide" into dogmatism that was the *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770 (pp. 23–4). The credit Kant gives to Hume in the *Prolegomena* is thus explained as referring to "this briefer metaphysical snooze," whereas the Garve letter is about the first and greater awakening (p. 23).

Complicating this account, however, is Forster's indication that it was really Kant's reflections on his *own* previous work that occasioned the second awakening. In the 1772 letter to Herz, Kant articulates two related concerns regarding, first, how a priori concepts can refer to objects that neither cause the concepts nor are caused by them and, second, about how knowledge involving such a priori concepts is even possible. Forster regards Kant's subsequent encounter with Humeanism in the 1772 translation of James Beattie's *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* as simply sharpening these worries, as well as generalizing the questions that Hume (as he knew from the *Enquiry*) had raised concerning causation. On Forster's reading, then, it seems more apt to say that Hume (by way of Beattie) did not so much reawaken Kant as help him get back out of bed.

Forster's goal in the rest of part I is to develop an account of how Kant handles PS, HS, and his own concerns in the Herz letter by showing how a priori concepts refer to empirical reality, and how they figure into synthetic knowledge. This involves "reforming" speculative metaphysics into the critical "metaphysics of nature" and resolving the antinomies of reason by appeal to transcendental idealism. Forster assumes without argument a strong phenomenalist reading of the latter doctrine—one according to which the activity of the understanding logically structures an otherwise incoherent sensory array

into the ordered appearances of empirical reality (p. 38).⁸ The a priori concepts or categories refer because “they in a sense cause their objects,” and we can have knowledge of the truth of synthetic a priori principles because “[we] constitute reality to conform with [such principles]” (p. 43). Moreover, once we distinguish between phenomenal appearances and “things in themselves,” the thesis and the antithesis of each of the antinomies are both seen to be either nonproblematically false or nonproblematically true (p. 45).

Note that once again, Kant’s moderate interpretation of PS plays an important role in Forster’s story. Kant can regard the Pyrrhonist as “bound to accept” the solutions that he offers “to the Hume-influenced problems” because these solutions are generated by transcendental arguments that have their basis in empirical knowledge—knowledge that even *the skeptic does not question*. “[T]he Pyrrhonist, as Kant conceives him, does not in general question experiential judgments” or the logical principles that Kant appeals to in arguing for his conclusions (p. 47). Later, Forster will follow Hegel in taking issue with Kant’s interpretation of Pyrrhonism on this score.

C. Kant’s Alleged Anti-Pyrrhonism

While the focus on Kant’s relationship to Pyrrhonism in *Kant and Skepticism* is welcome and innovative, it is not clear (to us, anyway) that Forster has shown that this form of skepticism was a “central concern” behind the development of the critical philosophy in the 1760s. We have already raised a series of questions about the textual evidence Forster provides. More generally, we submit that the fact that Kant develops a reply to both the Humean and the Pyrrhonist simply does not show that Kant self-consciously *intended* the positive aspects of the critical philosophy as replies to both of these two skeptical positions. In other words, even if we grant that part of Kant’s answer to Hume can be *applied* to certain Pyrrhonian concerns (interpreted moderately), it is unclear why, in the absence of much stronger textual evidence, that application should not be viewed in the way that Forster views Kant’s response to VPS—namely as an unintended but “happy by-product” (p. 10).

Likewise, in the absence of stronger textual evidence, it is unclear why we should take Kant’s various comments about antinomies in rationalist metaphysics to stem from specifically Pyrrhonian concerns. It is true that in the *Blomberg Logic* (of the 1770s) there is considerable discussion of PS, but there it is not construed as a method for permanently suspending judgment about some

8. This assumption is never defended. Instead, Forster simply asserts that Kant employs reductive phenomenalist arguments (96, note 22), or that he arrived at a “qualified form of phenomenalism” at the end of the Transcendental Deduction (p. 10). To be fair, defending this or any other interpretation of transcendental idealism would have significantly lengthened Forster’s admirably concise book. What is surprising in light of Forster’s hostility to “Anglophone” readings of Kant, however, is that he regards phenomenalism as the correct interpretation of transcendental idealism. For this means that his overall picture is much closer to those of Strawson, Bennett, Guyer, and Van Cleve than his other remarks about these Anglophone authors would suggest.

subject matter by means of equipollence arguments. Rather, in these lectures, Kant praises the essentially antidogmatic, inquisitive nature of Pyrrhonian philosophy as the real “path to the truth of the matter” (24:208). In contrast to the “dogmatism” of some of Pyrrho’s followers, true

[s]keptical doubt . . . consists in being conscious of the uncertainty with a cognition and thus in being compelled to inquire into it more and more, so that finally one may nonetheless *attain certainty with the help of careful investigations*. . . . Thus the *scepticus* constantly inquires, he examines and investigates, he distrusts everything, but never without a ground. In this he resembles a judge. . . . He postpones his final judgment quite long before he dares to settle something fully. These were the ancient and pure attributes of *scepticismus* and of an unadulterated skeptic. Skepticism in the beginning was actually very rational, but its followers spoiled it and earned it a bad reputation. (24:209–10, emphasis added)

Here and elsewhere in these lectures, the “pure” skeptic is praised not simply for refraining from conclusions for which he lacks sufficient evidence but also for “daring” to go on and make some “nondogmatic” judgments.

As already noted, Forster is aware that Kant read Pyrrhonism as a moderate position that is primarily opposed to dogmatic speculation as well as dogmatic skepticism. And he too cites the *Blomberg* lectures in places (see especially pp. 19, 103). But this makes it all the more difficult to see how he can regard the critical philosophy as a self-conscious *response* to or refutation of Pyrrhonism. Indeed, given the antidogmatic virtues of “pure” skepticism, it seems more reasonable to think of the critical philosophy as an *embodiment* of Pyrrhonism as Kant understood it. As for the bastardizing followers mentioned at the end of the last passage and elsewhere, Kant shows no inclination here to take their radical skepticism seriously (more on this in Section II.B below).

D. *Kinds of Skepticism*

A final concern about this part of the book relates to Forster’s practice of distinguishing sharply between various kinds of skepticism (pp. 3–4). This is especially important with respect to VPS, since it is supposed to be part of the novelty (or heresy) of Forster’s interpretation that it avoids the “Anglophone” tendency to interpret Kant as primarily concerned with that characteristically modern form of skepticism (p. 5).

Forster defines VPS as “skepticism concerning the legitimacy of inferring from the existence and character of one’s mental representations to the existence and character of a mind-external world” and adds that “this tends to be the very paradigm of skepticism for most Anglophone philosophers” (p. 4). In contrast, HS concerns “[first] the existence of concepts not derivable from corresponding sensible impressions . . . [and second] knowledge of propositions neither true simply in virtue of logical law nor known from experience” (p. 4).

Note, however, that this account of VPS is ambiguous between two different forms of skepticism about the external world. One form challenges claims to the immediate, noninferential justification of external-world beliefs and says rather that we must always rely on shaky inferences to such beliefs. On this construal, VPS involves the claim that since sensory representations are the *causal* intermediaries of our awareness of the external world, they must be *epistemic* intermediaries as well.

Kant certainly rejected VPS construed in this way, as is clear from both his repeated insistence that intuition is an epistemically immediate awareness of an object (A19/B33, A68/B93, and A371) and his discussion in the *Anthropology* of the various sensory modes as differing in causal immediacy while nevertheless generating epistemically immediate judgments (§19, 7:156–7). The Refutation of Idealism, too, can be seen as denying that the presence of causal intermediaries entails the presence of epistemic intermediaries (B274).

Another form of VPS, however, puts the skeptical challenge in terms of intentional content. Suppose that the legitimacy of a concept depends partly on its relation to some or another experience. If it can be shown that one's experiences lack the features that are necessary to produce a given concept with the content that it has (e.g., the concept of an external object), then the concept's legitimacy is threatened. This is still skepticism concerning the legitimacy and character of one's representations and their connection to the mind-external world, and thus still a form of VPS. But it also threatens Forster's strong distinction between VPS and HS, since both forms of skepticism are now fundamentally concerned with the derivation of the content of our concepts. Indeed, worries about intentionality form a central strand of "Anglophone" readings of Kant that privilege VPS: They are part of Strawson's discussion of the conditions required for objective representation, for example, and of the more recent self-consciously "Strawsonian" reading offered by John McDowell.⁹ Even Jonathan Bennett—who coined the phrase "veil of perception" in this context—typically construes VPS in terms of representational content (or intentionality more generally).¹⁰

Once the distinction between VPS and HS begins to blur in this way, we might wonder whether even PS is as independent of these as it first appears. We have seen above that Forster defines PS as "a skepticism . . . which motivates suspension of judgment by establishing a balance of opposing arguments, or 'equipollence'" (p. 4). But the standoff between the thesis and antithesis arguments of the Antinomies might equally be motivated by worries about the legitimacy of the content of our concepts. Kant himself seems to indicate this when he says, of the First Antinomy, that

there was then no actual contradiction of reason with itself in the propositions that the series of appearances given in themselves has an absolutely first beginning, and that this series absolutely and in itself is without any

9. P.F. Strawson, *Bounds of Sense* (Methuen, 1966); J. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994).
10. See J. Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 68–70.

beginning. For the two propositions are quite consistent with each other, since appearances, according to their existence (as appearances), are nothing at all in themselves—i.e., are something contradictory, and hence presupposing them in this way must naturally entail contradictory conclusions. (A740/B768; emphasis added)

Here it sounds as though the antinomy derives from thinking that the content of our concept of *totality* arises from appearances, and in virtue of that applies to them. Kant's claim, obviously, is that this is not the case: The legitimate application conditions of the concept are different from what members of the debate take them to be, and it was only the *specious* assumption that appearances were the kind of thing capable of totality that generated the antinomy. Once the confusion about the concept of *totality* is removed and the conditions of its proper application are clarified, the antinomy disappears.

II. Forster's Criticisms of Kant

The second part of *Kant and Skepticism* comprises four chapters in which Forster raises four basic challenges to Kant's treatment of skepticism. Here the focus is wholly on PS and HS; Kant's solution to VPS is left aside for reasons discussed earlier. In Sections A and B, we suggest that the initial challenge to Kant in this part of *Kant and Skepticism* is too easy, and the last one is too hard. These chapters bookend two others, however, in which Forster develops some deeper and very important challenges to Kant's position. In Section C, we highlight Forster's solution to one such problem—concerning the status of the practical postulates—but then go on to argue that it is less charitable than a possible alternative. In Section D, we suggest that while the other main problems Forster articulates do spell trouble for Kant, the problems themselves are familiar, and the articulation of them does not advance very far beyond previous discussions in the literature.

A. In What Sense Metaphysics?

The first problem Forster takes up concerns how the critical philosophy can count as a kind of metaphysics—as Kant repeatedly says that it does—given that one of its central goals is to *critique* metaphysics. The “relatively straightforward and satisfactory” solution, Forster says, is that within the scholastic/rationalist discipline of metaphysics there was a division between “special” metaphysical speculation regarding supersensibles (God, the soul, the freedom of the will, etc.) and “general ontology” regarding the fundamental features of reality as a whole. Kant's project is similar enough to the latter to merit the name “metaphysics of nature,” even though its focus is on the transcendental conditions of *our experience* of reality, and eschews the sort of a priori speculation about supersensible *things* that was characteristic of earlier metaphysics (pp. 55–6). We find little to object to here: The problem is easily handled and seems largely terminological.

B. *The Pyrrhonist's Revenge?*

The final chapter of the book deals with what Forster regards as the hardest challenge for Kant: PS *properly interpreted*. Again, Kant himself regards “pure” ancient skepticism as providing a method that leads the way to nondogmatic philosophy rather than a stable or permanent position.¹¹ He also views it as directed against metaphysical claims about supersensibles rather than empirical judgments, introspective reports, or logical principles. Forster, on the other hand, follows Hegel in viewing Pyrrhonism as directed against virtually *all* of our beliefs.¹²

This is not the place to enter the debate about how to interpret various ancient skeptics. Instead, we propose to grant Hegel's/Forster's claim that Pyrrhonism is a radical form of skepticism, and also the claim that Kant has limited resources against it. Even so, it is not clear that this amounts to a challenge that would or should exercise Kant. Hegel, of course, criticized his predecessor¹³ in an effort to showcase his own “presuppositionless” approach in the *Phenomenology*—an approach designed to handle Pyrrhonian concerns—and Forster follows suit. But few philosophers nowadays view Hegel's philosophy as providing a clear (or presuppositionless) refutation of radical skepticism. Our suspicion is that about the same number would regard the inability to refute such skepticism as a genuine cause for concern.

In support of this, note that when Kant does occasionally consider radical forms of skepticism, which he associates not with Pyrrho but with some of his followers, he is wholly dismissive:

A universal resolve to doubt everything is of no use whatsoever; it is wholly absurd but there are few men, or we could probably even say none, who would be inclined to such a childish and harmful addiction to doubt. (*Blomberg*, 24:210)¹⁴

Skepticism, by renouncing all assertoric cognition, ruins all our efforts at attaining possession of a cognition of the *certain* (*Jäsche*, 9:85).

Similarly, in a written note from the 1780s:

Skepticism is a principle adopted to break with dogmatism, but not with the aim of introducing true conviction against it, but rather only in order to

11. See *Blomberg*, 24:210ff; *Herder*, 24:4; *Philippi*, 24:330.

12. See Hegel, “The Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy” [1801] in G. di Giovanni and H.S. Harris (eds.), *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism* (Hackett, 1985). In agreement with Hegel is Miles Burnyeat, “Can the Skeptic Live His Skepticism?” in M. Schofield, J. Barnes, and M. Burnyeat (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1980). A recent commentator who largely agrees with Kant's more moderate reading is Michael Frede. See “Des Skeptikers Meinungen,” *Neue Hefte für Philosophie*, 15/16 (1979). For yet another moderate alternative, see G. Fine, “Sceptical Dogmata: *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I 13,” *Methexis*, XIII (2000), pp. 81–105.

13. Or, more precisely, Hegel criticized G.E. Schulze (aka Aenesidimus), who became a kind of stalking-horse for Kant in this case.

14. For similar remarks in other pre-*Jäsche* lectures, see the subsequent pages in *Blomberg*, as well as *Wiener*, 24:885 and *Dohna-Wundlacken*, 24:745–6.

topple the persuasions of others. The inclination to this is not natural but artificial and can only arise from displeasure with the usurpation of dogmatism. . . . It is thus certainly an evil, since it seeks to do nothing but damage, namely to rob human reason of all hope in the most important questions of reason.” (R5643; 18:294)

The radical skepticism described here seems close to Pyrrhonism as Hegel and Forster interpret it, and these passages suggest that Kant took a very dim view of it indeed.

But is Kant’s attitude here well motivated? Forster seems to regard Kant’s rejection of radical skepticism as relying on a kind of *argument* according to which it is self-defeating. A main goal of the final chapter of *Kant and Skepticism* is to refute that argument and thus establish Kant’s vulnerability to Pyrrhonism interpreted properly. But while it is true that Kant occasionally mentions radical skepticism in his lectures and notes (as above) and dismisses it as self-defeating, the claim typically reads like a kind of one-off remark and certainly does not figure prominently in the critical writings. Such nonchalance could just as well indicate Kant’s overall lack of interest in the issue. And, despite Hegel’s/Forster’s complaints on this score, it is not obvious that this is a disappointing or irrational position for a philosopher to take.

Consider Kant’s contemporary Thomas Reid by way of comparison: According to Reid, philosophers should resolutely oppose the “semisceptic” who divides our beliefs into two general kinds and then says that one kind—beliefs based on inner experience and a priori reasoning, traditionally—are authoritative, certain, or even incorrigible, while the other kind—those referring to external-world objects, or necessary connections, or supersensible beings, and so forth—are unjustified. In the face of a “thorough and consistent” skeptic, on the other hand, Reid simply shrugs:

A thorough and consistent sceptic will never concede [knowledge of] . . . ideas and impressions; and as long as he refuses to do so you can never oblige him to concede anything else. To such a sceptic I have nothing to say. . . . (*Inquiry* V.7)¹⁵

Confronted by a radical skeptic like Hegel’s Pyrrho, Kant’s dismissive comments in his lectures and notes, his silence about this issue in the *Critique*, and his favorable references to common sense or “common, healthy understanding” (*Gemeinmenschverstand*) throughout his career make it hard to imagine him offering more than a Reidian shrug in response to Forster’s argument.¹⁶

15. T. Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* [1764], Derek Brookes (ed.) (Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

16. For some of Kant’s many appeals to “common human understanding” see *Blomberg*, 24:17–26, “What Is Orientation in Thinking?” (1784), as well as the discussion in M. Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany 1768–1800* (McGill-Queens, 1987) and K. Ameriks, “A Common-sense Kant?” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79, 2 (November 2005), pp. 19–45.

In the first *Critique*, Kant says that he envisions writing a “metaphysics of morals” at some point but that such a treatise would not count as metaphysics “in its *strict* sense” because the latter refers exclusively to “the metaphysics of speculative reason” (A842/B870). This indicates, says Forster, that only theoretical reason is even in principle able to generate the kind of metaphysical knowledge (*Wissen*) which, properly systematized, counts as science (*Wissenschaft*) (pp. 58–9). By contrast, the highest status that can be achieved by practical judgments, at least in the *Critique* and the *Groundwork*, is that of “cognition” (*Erkenntnis*) and “belief”/“faith” (*Glaube*).

Forster regards *Erkenntnis* as the genus of which both *Wissen* and *Glaube* are species (p. 59). He thus thinks that Kant’s claim in these writings is that both theoretical and practical reason can produce *Erkenntnis* and *Glaube*, but only theoretical reason can produce the kind of *Erkenntnis* that counts as *Wissen*. The problem with this claim, says Forster, is that Kant lacks grounds for assuming that practical reason cannot also produce *Wissen*—that is, practical *Wissen* that enjoys an “equal status” with its theoretical counterpart. The fact that Kant does appear to assume this, at least in the *Critique* and the *Groundwork*, thus represents a “needlessly missed opportunity” (p. 60).

Significantly, Forster finds indications in later works that Kant changed his mind on this score: He cites passages in the second (1788) and third *Critique* (1790) where Kant uses both “*Wissen*” and “*Wissenschaft*” to describe the status of ethical principles such as the categorical imperative and at least one of the metaphysical claims that rests on them—namely that we are transcendently free. But, as Forster notes, Kant is never willing to say that the two other postulates of practical reason—that God exists and that the soul is immortal—count as knowledge, even though they too are supposed to be derived from our commitment to ethical principles.

The main complaint in this chapter, then, is that if all three postulates are entailed or presupposed by the principles of morality, and if the latter count as genuine knowledge, then there is no ground for the difference in status between the postulates. Forster’s solution is that we should simply reject the idea that there is more than a merely “psychological” link between moral commitment, on the one hand, and the existence of God and the immortal soul, on the other (p. 62).

This is an important problem, and Forster’s solution to it on Kant’s behalf has some obvious attractions. But our sense is that charitable readers should not accept it. For first, while it is right to say that there is some general looseness in Kant’s later works about the application of “*Wissen*” and “*Wissenschaft*” to the deliverances of practical reason, the overall pattern is not quite as Forster describes. Rather, Kant seems willing *throughout* the critical period to use epistemic terms to characterize our assent to practical, normative principles (principles about what one *should* do, practically speaking). Forster himself mentions a couple of the relevant passages in the *Groundwork* (1785)—albeit briefly in an endnote—but dismisses them as too “ambiguous” or “not prominent or emphatic” enough to be counterexamples to the general trend (p. 130).

We are uncomfortable with the dismissal of these passages but would also note that there are other such passages in the *Groundwork* that do seem to be unambiguous, prominent, and emphatic.¹⁷ In light of this, it seems preferable to admit that Kant always held that ethical principles have the kind of objective and subjective grounds that characterize knowledge (*Wissen*), even if he did not always emphasize the point.

Second, it is true that as the critical period progresses, Kant becomes more willing to say that the freedom postulate can count as knowledge on the basis of practical (albeit still “objective”) grounds. This is an important point that many commentators have missed. But to suggest that the other two postulates should be discarded as mere psychological attachments is an interpretive last resort. Throughout the critical period, Kant unequivocally holds that all three postulates are presupposed by rational moral commitment, even if the first does acquire some sort of special epistemic status late in the 1780s. A better solution to the problem would explain why Kant comes to regard only the postulate of freedom as “knowledge” during this period, even while viewing the arguments for the other postulates as still in some way sound.

One such solution, which there is no room to articulate fully here, appeals to Kant’s growing skepticism about our judgments regarding “real possibility.” By the time of the B-edition *Critique*, Kant holds that we must be able to “prove” that an object is really possible before we can legitimately claim knowledge of its existence (Bxxiv, note). Without such prior proof or demonstration, the most that probabilistic (e.g., physico-theological) or practical arguments can do is underwrite belief (*Glaube*). It is because we acquire quasi-intuitive “proof” of freedom’s real possibility via what the second *Critique* calls the “fact of reason,” then, that we can consider the relevant postulate an item of practical knowledge. In the absence of such proof of the real possibility of God and the soul, by contrast, even the conclusions of otherwise valid arguments count at most as firm belief (*Glaube*).

There is clearly much more to be said about this alternative solution.¹⁸ Still, it should be clear that if we construe Kant’s development along these lines, we may be able to make sense of the special epistemic status that freedom acquires in the second and third *Critiques* without dispatching the other two postulates as merely psychological in the way Forster recommends. Kant does continue to think that there are strong rational links between our ethical commitments and all three of the postulates, but because of his heightened *modal* skepticism (an important kind of skepticism that Forster does not discuss in his book), he

17. For example, in the very first paragraph of the book, Kant introduces ethics as the “science” of the “laws of freedom” (4:387). He goes on to say, in another passage that Forster does not cite, that “pure moral philosophy” contains laws that have the status of “absolute necessity” based “a priori simply in concepts of pure reason” (4:389). It is hard not to see these as prominent and emphatic claims (see also 4:391 for ethics characterized as *Wissenschaft*).

18. For more, see A. Chignell, “Real Repugnance and Belief About Things-in-Themselves: A Problem and Kant’s Three Solutions,” in B. Lipscomb and J. Krueger (eds.), *Kant’s Moral Metaphysics* (deGruyter, 2010), pp. 177–210; and D. Pereboom, “Kant on transcendental freedom,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 73, 3 (2007), pp. 537–67. Also germane here is Patrick Kain’s essay in the Lipscomb/Krueger volume, “Practical Cognition, Intuition, and the Fact of Reason,” pp. 211–32.

comes to think that only the postulate of freedom can satisfy all of the conditions on full-blown synthetic knowledge.

A related point: It is certainly the case, as Forster suggests, that Kant speaks loosely and generally about “cognition” (*Erkenntnis*) in places—sometimes including almost any representation or thought under that rubric. When he is being careful, however, Kant restricts the realm of cognition to those states that involve an intuitional content as well as a conceptual one—that is, empirical intuition, pure intuition of mathematics, or the quasi-intuitional sense of our own freedom that is the “fact of reason.” God and the soul, by contrast, are things of which Kant often and explicitly says we can have no genuine cognition. Thus (*pace* Forster), cognition in the strict sense seems to be a *precondition* or *constituent* of knowledge, and not the genus of which both knowledge and belief/faith are species. It is because we have no cognition of God and the soul—and no other way to prove their real possibility either—that we cannot have knowledge of these things, even if some of our arguments for them look pretty good (as Kant explicitly and repeatedly says that the physico-theological and moral arguments do).

D. Failures of Self-Reflection

It is central to Kant’s position that we can have synthetic a priori knowledge of the structure of space and time, the substance-property-causal nature of the empirical world, the interactivity of phenomenal substances, and so forth. As we have seen, Forster’s Kant seeks to explain this kind of knowledge—and thus to answer HS—by appealing to the “mind-imposition” thesis of transcendental idealism. We know about the basic structure of the world because we “impose” the forms of intuition and the fundamental categories on our experience.

In developing this response to HS, however, Forster thinks Kant is guilty of a series of “failures of self-reflection.” That is, he

failed to take sufficient account of a danger that in the course of addressing philosophical difficulties facing claims of a certain sort by making some further claims, one’s further claims may themselves be running into philosophical difficulties similar to those faced by the original claims, and perhaps even in a more severe form. (p. 63)

By way of example: Forster says that Kant fails adequately to reflect on the conditionals that serve as premises in his transcendental arguments for the principles of pure understanding—that is, the constitutive principles of all possible human experience. More specifically, Kant fails to see that those conditionals *themselves* require both proof and explanation in precisely the way that the principles themselves do. Thus, this counts as a failure of self-reflection in the sense just defined.

In order to see the objection here more clearly, consider Forster’s articulation of the conditional that Kant uses in the Second Analogy argument for the universal Causal Principle (65ff):

- (1) Necessarily, if there is experience of objective temporal events, then the principle that everything that is an experienceable objective temporal event has a cause is true. (Premise)

(1) is supposed to be the key premise in Kant's transcendental argument for the Causal Principle that

- (2) Everything that is an experienceable objective temporal event has a cause.

The problem that Forster sees here takes the form of a dilemma: On the one hand, if (1) is just a complex or "implicitly analytic" truth, then that can only be because its consequent is also an analytic truth. And that means, according to Forster, that (2) will also have to be analytic, contrary to Kant's own claim that the Causal Principle is synthetic and yet known a priori. On the other hand, if (1) is a synthetic proposition, then we will want to know about the grounds of *its* truth. Presumably, these grounds will involve at least one synthetic principle, and thus a vicious regress threatens.

This is an intriguing articulation of a problem that may be faced by some kinds of transcendental argument, and Forster clearly views it as one of the main contributions of his book.¹⁹ An initial worry about it, however, is that (2) does not follow directly from (1). Rather, we obviously need something like the following intermediary premises:

- (1.1) There is experience of objective temporal events. (Premise)
- (1.2) Thus, the principle that everything that is an experienceable objective temporal event has a cause is true. (from [1], [1.1] and *modus ponens*)

But given that (1.1) contains an existence claim, Kant could hardly regard it as analytic. Thus this subpremise, rather than (1) itself, might be the source of (2)'s syntheticity.²⁰

A second worry about the dilemma stems from the fact that many other commentators have also noticed something like this issue and *willingly* grasped the first horn on Kant's behalf. In other words, even though Kant himself may have thought he was delivering some new synthetic knowledge, figures like A.C. Ewing, P.F. Strawson, Ralph Walker, and Jonathan Bennett have argued that Kant's putatively synthetic principles are best viewed, in Bennett's words, as "unobviously analytic" judgments teased out of complex concepts such as that of an *experienceable objective temporal event*.²¹ And it is not just Anglophones

19. He mentions in an endnote that he has been circulating it for some time and that someone else who saw a draft of the manuscript seems to have both plagiarized and then "garbled" it in a 2006 publication (132, note 8).

20. There may be a question as to whether (1.1) is a priori as well, but Kant is typically willing to allow that our awareness of states in inner sense is not only authoritative but also capable of generating very general or formal a priori truths. Thus, "there is experience of chocolate taste followed by experience of pleasure" might not be suitably a priori for Kant, but an abstract claim like "there is experience of a temporal series of states" might well be.

21. J. Bennett, *Kant's Analytic* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. xi.

who do this; quite a few prominent German readers of Kant also view the constitutive or coordinating principles of our experience as broadly analytic.²² On this view, the Causal Principle turns out to be an unobvious but very important analytic truth, one for whose articulation Kant deserves a lot of credit, even if he was wrong to regard it as synthetic strictly speaking.

Another objection that Forster raises in this context concerns Kant's argument for transcendental idealism itself—again, construed as the thesis that the mind “imposes” various structural features on the objects of our experience. Forster claims that Kant fails to be properly “self-reflective” when he argues that this imposition thesis (call it “IT”) explains the possibility of our synthetic a priori knowledge of geometry, the causal nexus, and so forth. That is because the possibility of knowing IT *itself* requires an explanation, and this involves more than just providing an argument for IT's truth. In other words, Forster grants that the *truth* of IT might be the only possible explanation of how we can have various kinds of synthetic a priori knowledge, but still thinks we need some sort of explanation of how we can have *knowledge* of IT.

As far as we can see, there are two ways to interpret this objection. Forster might be asking whether and how a mind's act of imposition could itself be known by that mind in the very act of performing the imposition. This is a difficult question, one that was raised in Kant's own day by the likes of J.G. Hamann and much later by L.W. Beck in his 1978 essay “Toward a Meta-Critique of Pure Reason.”²³ Clearly there is much to say about this problem, and much has in fact been said. Forster does not go into any of this literature, however, or stake out a decisively new position (again, as far as we can see).

On the other hand, Forster might be saying that Kant fails to demonstrate how it is possible for us to know anything about the structure-imposing mind and its relationship to the world *because both of these relata are unknowable things-in-themselves*. That this is the real issue is indicated by the following remark:

It seems that the thesis of transcendentalism is understood by Kant, and indeed must be understood by him, as a thesis about things in themselves—specifically, as a thesis about the mind *in itself* imposing principles on things *in themselves*. But then any claim to *know* this thesis conflicts with Kant's central doctrine . . . that we cannot know anything at all about things in themselves. (p. 68)

This too is clearly an important problem, but it too is not really new. Rather, it is a version of a famous problem raised by Kant's contemporary F.H. Jacobi

22. Compare M. Hossenfelder, *Kants Konstitutionstheorie und die transzendente Deduktion* (deGruyter, 1978). This is also arguably Hans Reichenbach's suggestion in *Relativitätstheorie und Erkenntnis apriori* (Springer, 1920), as well as Carnap's in *Logische Syntax der Sprache* (J. Springer, 1934). Compare M. Friedman, “Kant and the Twentieth Century,” in P. Parrini (ed.), *Kant and Contemporary Epistemology* (Kluwer, 1994), pp. 27–46.
23. Hamann never published a full draft of his “Meta-Critique of the Purism of Reason,” but its general thrust was well known to other philosophers (including Kant) in this period. The piece by Beck is found in his *Essays on Kant and Hume*, in the work cited earlier.

in his 1799 *Brief an Fichte* and discussed in many commentaries (Anglophone and otherwise) since. Neither Jacobi nor those commentaries are mentioned in *Kant and Skepticism*, however, and so again the reader is left with the sense that while the problem Forster raises is certainly real, and the articulation of it as a “failure of self-reflection” is moderately illuminating, little genuine progress is made on it in this book.²⁴

24. Our thanks to Gail Fine for helpful conversation about this material and to Eric Watkins and Matthew Halteman for feedback on earlier drafts.