***Conceptual Analysis and the Analytic Method in Kant's Prize Essay***

Gabriele Gava

University of Turin

gabriele.gava@unito.it

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

**Abstract**

Famously, in the essay *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* (*Prize Essay*), Kant attempts to distance himself from the Wolffian model of philosophical inquiry. In this respect, Kant scholars have pointed out Kant's claim that philosophy should not imitate the method of mathematics and his appeal to Newton's "analytic method." In this paper, I argue that there is an aspect of Kant's critique of the Wolffian model that has been neglected. Kant presents a powerful attack to the idea that philosophy should proceed through the analysis of concepts and argues that we should *give up* the aim of arriving at "complete" concepts as one of its fundamental desiderata. Importantly, this attack to philosophy conceived as conceptual analysis is *distinctive* and *original* if one compares it with Kant's critique of analysis in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which, according to Anderson (2015), rests on the idea that analysis is *insufficient* to ground substantial metaphysical truths. I also make an additional point. Scholars have debated whether the appeal to Newton's "analytic method" involves a form of empiricism or not. I submit that this debate is ill-conceived, because Kant uses a notion of "given concepts" that is indeterminate with respect to their a priori or a posteriori status.

**Acknowledgements**

I thank the participants to Marcus Willaschek's colloquium in Frankfurt and the two anonymous referees for this journal for their useful feedback on previous versions of this article.

*Conceptual Analysis and the Analytic Method in Kant's Prize Essay*

## 1. Introduction

Famously, in his essay *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* (hereafter *Prize Essay*),[1] Kant argued that philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular had to stop imitating the method of mathematics. Philosophical disciplines had rather to adopt a procedure that suited their proper objects of investigation.[2] Kant bases his divorce of mathematics and philosophy on an analysis of the differences between their cognitions and methods. As far as mathematics is concerned, Kant scholars have emphasized that the *Prize Essay* proposes an account of mathematical definitions that appears original with respect to the tradition[3] and anticipates some aspects of Kant's mature position in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, even though important bits of that position are still missing (see, for example: Hintikka 1967; Parsons 1992; Carson 1999; Guyer 2000; Shabel 2003; Shabel 2006; Rechter 2006; Sutherland 2010; Dunlop 2014). In this respect, one issue that has been discussed in detail is whether Kant's account of mathematical concepts in the *Prize Essay* could explain their applicability to objects, given that Kant has not yet developed his notion of intuition (see Carson 1999; Guyer 2000; Dunlop 2014).

When focusing on Kant's proposal in philosophy, it is key to understand how Kant attempts to distance himself from Christian Wolff and his followers, who famously derived a *general* method for the sciences based on the structure of the proofs in Euclid's *Elements*.[4] In evaluating Kant's critique of Wolff's approach, scholars have generally focused on two issues: his claim that philosophical definitions are radically different from mathematical definitions and his appeal to Newton's "analytic method" as an appropriate model for philosophy.

---

[1] The essay, which was drafted in 1762, was submitted to a competition announced by the Prussian Royal Academy of Sciences for 1763 and was then published in 1764. The question of the competition asked: "One wishes to know whether the metaphysical truths in general, and the first principles of *Theologiae naturalis* and morality in particular, admit of distinct proofs to the same degree as geometrical truths; and if they are not capable of such proofs, one wishes to know what the genuine nature of their certainty is, to what degree the said certainty can be brought, and whether this degree is sufficient for complete conviction" (Translation according to Kant 1992: lxii). Kant's essay arrived second in the competition. Moses Mendelsohn authored the winning essay.

[2] For an account of the differences between the methods of mathematics and philosophy in Kant see Wolff-Metternich 1995, de Jong 1995 and Gava 2015.

[3] Shabel (2003) and Dunlop (2014) show, however, that Kant's account of mathematics in the *Prize Essay* enjoys a stronger continuity with Wolff's position than it is generally assumed.

[4] For a general reconstruction of Wolff's mathematical method see Gomez Tutor 2004.

Let me begin with the first issue. Kant argues that mathematical definitions are obtained through the "*arbitrary combination* of concepts" (2:276),[5] while philosophical definitions ensue from "*separating out* (Absonderung) that cognition which has been rendered distinct by means of analysis (Zergliederung)" (2:276). In turn, that mathematics and philosophy must approach their definitions differently depends on the different ways in which these disciplines acquire their concepts. In mathematics, it is *through* the definition that we first obtain a concept and a corresponding object. By contrast, philosophy and metaphysics work with concepts that are already "given." Their task is to make these concepts distinct: "In mathematics, namely, I have no concept of my object at all until it is furnished by the definition. In metaphysics I have a concept which is already given to me, although it is a confused one" (2:283). Since it is the definition that first *produces* a mathematical concept and the corresponding object, one can be sure that a mathematical definition never errs. Mathematics "can say with certainty that what it did not intend to represent in the object by means of the definition is not contained in that object" (2:291). By contrast, because the concept of a philosophical definition is given independently of the definition, we can never be sure that the latter has exhaustively captured the concept. In philosophy, "the concept of that which is to be defined is given. Now, if one should fail to notice some characteristic mark or other, which nonetheless belongs to the adequate distinguishing of the concept in question, and if one judges that no such characteristic mark belongs to the complete concept, then the definition will be wrong and misleading" (2:291). Since analytic definitions of given concepts have a much lower certainty, they should not be placed at the beginning of a philosophical investigation, but should at best *close* it: "Far from being the first thing I know about the object, the definition is nearly always the last thing I come to know" (2:283). Brigitta-Sofie von Wolff-Metternich has insisted on this distinction between philosophical and mathematical definitions to mark the fallibility of philosophy with respect to mathematics. Insofar as we can never be sure that our definitions are adequate in philosophy, philosophy is incapable of giving ultimate answers (Wolff-Metternich 1995: 3).

Yet, when we focus on Kant's account of philosophical definitions in the *Prize Essay*, it is not at all clear how innovative Kant's position actually is. For even though Wolff and his followers did not distinguish between mathematical and philosophical definitions as Kant does, and they regarded the application of mathematical procedures in philosophy as fruitful, the paradigmatic cases of their philosophical definitions[6] are analyses of confusedly given concepts.[7] In other words, Wolff and the

[5] References to Kant's work will be given according to the standard edition (Kant 1900-), indicating volume and page number. References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* will use A and B to refer respectively to the paging of the first and the second original editions. If not differently indicated, translations of the *Prize Essay* are from Kant 1992.
[6] To be precise, it is *nominal* definitions that are analyses of confusedly given concepts. On the distinction between nominal and real definition in Wolff see: Dunlop 2018. I will address this distinction in Section 2.
[7] Take for example what Wolff says in his *German Logic* regarding how we can make our concept of the Will distinct. He stresses: "if we want to have a distinct concept of the will, then we must represent an example in which we have wanted something for the first time, and give accurate attention to what happens in our soul until we want it" (Wolff

Wolffians considered beginning with the analysis of given concept *compatible* with the application of the mathematical method to philosophy, which suggests that the chief difference between Kant and the Wolffians is that Kant *denied* and the Wolffians *permitted* that analytic definitions could come at the beginning of a philosophical investigation.[8] They agree, though, that philosophical definitions are analytic (see Gava 2018: 293, 299-302).[9]

The key to grasping Kant's departure from Wolff in the *Prize Essay* might lie elsewhere. Kant famously stressed the influence of Newton's "analytic method" on the model he was proposing.[10] He claims that philosophy must take the example of Newton, who started from "clear experiences" (2:286) in his investigations of natural phenomena. Similarly, philosophy, and more precisely metaphysics, must begin its inquiries with "certain inner experience" (2:286). The appeal to Newton and natural science was surely instrumental to indicating how philosophy had to take a new direction. However, scholars have proposed very different interpretation of its meaning. While de Vleeschauwer and, more recently, Clewis have taken the analogy with Newton as implying a strong form empiricism (de Vleeshcauwer 1939: 40-1; Clewis 2014), Friedman and Falkenburg downplay the empiricism entailed by that analogy. Friedman calls the method proposed by Kant "quasi-inductive" (1992: 22) and submits that Kant's account of what "inner experience" is does not exclude that the first data in a philosophical investigation can be acquired through conceptual considerations (1992: 24n39). By contrast, Falkenburg insists on the analogical nature of Kant's comparison between philosophical procedures and Newton's method. This comparison, being an analogy, does not imply that the first data of investigation are substantially similar for the items that are being compared (2018: 17-18; see also Falkenburg 2000: ch. 2; Falkenburg 2013). Kant's point is rather that we should start analytically, meaning that we should begin with a consideration of the phenomena under investigation and not from definitions. Furthermore, Falkenburg claims that this emphasis on Newton's analytic method anticipates Kant's "experiment of pure reason" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the analogy with Newton's method is developed in its full extent (2018: 20-22). The latter, when properly understood, implies both an analytic and a synthetic phase, which Falkenburg reads as a combination of inductive and hypothetico-deductive reasoning (Falkenburg 2013: 54).

---

1965 [1754]: 133). It is clear that Wolff takes the concept of the will as confusedly given, where the task of philosophy is to make the concept distinct.

[8] I am not claiming that this is the only difference between Kant's position in the *Prize Essay* and the Wolffians. In particular, I remain neutral regarding whether Kant's account of mathematical cognition is original. My point is that negating that analytic definition can be placed at the beginning of an investigation *appears* to be the main novelty when one compares Wolff's and Kant's account of analysis. However, as will become clear below, I think that Kant has a stronger critical point against Wolff.

[9] Again, if one focuses on *nominal* definitions. See Section 2.

[10] The distinction between an analytic and a synthetic method was widely used in the 17th and the 18th century. For a useful reconstruction of the different senses in which the distinction was used see: Engfer 1982: ch. 2. See also Tonelli 1976.

There is also disagreement concerning what the comparison with Newton implies regarding the first data of a philosophical investigation. For example, Friedman has argued that Kant's methodological proposal in the *Prize Essay* depicts philosophy and metaphysics as fundamentally relying on propositions of the exact sciences (1992: 23-4), while Schönfeld, unpacking what Kant might have meant with "inner experiences," characterizes the first data of metaphysical investigations as "elements that are open to an immediate evident awareness" and are accompanied by "phenomenological certitude" (2000: 225).

While focusing on Kant's appropriation of Newton's analytic method is helpful when we want to spell out his attempt to depart from the Wolffian model of philosophy, there is an aspect of Kant's critique of this model in the *Prize Essay* that has been neglected. Kant proposes a powerful critique of philosophy conceived as conceptual analysis, at least when analysis is understood along Wolffian lines.[11] Accordingly, Kant claims that obtaining *complete* concepts through analysis should not be a desideratum of philosophical inquiry. To motivate this claim, he argues that following this desideratum inevitably leads to errors and unsupported claims. Importantly, this attack is *distinctive* and *original* if one compares it with Kant's critique of analysis in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which, according to Lanier Anderson (2015), rests on the idea that analysis is *insufficient* to ground substantial metaphysical truths.

While the main focus of the paper is on Kant's critique of analysis in the *Prize Essay*, I also make an additional claim. I suggest that the question whether Kant's appeal to Newton's "analytic method" involves a form of empiricism or not is ill-conceived. In the *Prize Essay*, Kant has not yet distinguished between concepts given a priori and a posteriori. As a consequence of this, he leaves indeterminate what the status of the "first data" of philosophical investigations is.

I start in Section 2 by briefly sketching Wolff's model of analysis and show how it is directed toward obtaining definitions or complete concepts. In a further step, Section 3 will distinguish between two desiderata of philosophical investigations according to the *Prize Essay*. The former can be characterized as broadly in agreement with Wolff's ideal of analysis. It only plays a minor role in Kant's proposal. The second desideratum is central and demands the identification of immediately evident indemonstrable propositions. It is in this context that Kant develops his critique of analysis. Finally, in Section 4 I will consider what kind of status these indemonstrable propositions have, if they are empirical or a priori truth. I will suggest that Kant does not provide an answer to this question, since he had not worked out his distinction between a priori and a posteriori given concepts yet.

[11] I do not here want to deny that Kant might have also been influenced from other conceptions of analysis. For example, Messina (2015) has argued that Kant's account of analysis is strongly influenced by Christian August Crusius.

## 2. Analysis, Definitions and Complete Concepts in Wolff

To clarify what analysis (*Zergliederung*) is for Wolff, it is useful to begin with his account of definitions, which, in turn, he approaches from the standpoint of the different degrees of clarity of a concept. According to his *German Logic*, a definition is a concept that is clear (*klar*), distinct (*deutlich*) and complete (*ausführlich*). (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 141). When we have a *clear* concept, it means that we are able to apply it appropriately (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 126), even though we cannot distinguish its "marks," namely the "concepts" that constitute the concept in question. We can obtain a *distinct* concept when we form a clear representation of those marks that guide our appropriate use of the concept (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 128). The concept becomes *complete* once the marks we identify are sufficient to always correctly apply the concept (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 129).[12]

Another notion that is central to Wolff's logic of concepts is that of an adequate (*vollständig*) concept. When we have an *adequate* concept, we have not only a clear grasp of the constituent marks of the concept, but also a *distinct* grasp of these very marks. This means that we do not only clearly identify the marks that constitute the concept, but are also able to isolate the "sub-marks" that form those marks (cf. Wolff 1965 [1754]: 130-1). For example, in the concept of a "dog," we would not only be able to single out the mark "mammal" within this concept, but also the mark "animal," which is a mark of this mark. In other words, an adequate concept provides a representation of the internal conceptual structure of our concepts. This representation displays how concepts are subordinated to one another and allows to hierarchically organize our concepts in genus/species relationships. In this ordering, the higher genus concepts are "contained in" lower species concepts, whereas the latter are "contained under" the higher genus concepts. "Contained in" means that the genus concepts figure as marks in the species concepts. By contrast, "contained under" indicates that a group of species concepts belong to the same genus concept because they all contain that genus concept in them.[13] Using again the concept of a "dog" as an example, the concept of a "mammal" is "contained in" it because the concept of a "mammal" is a mark of the concept of a "dog." But this also means that the concept of a "dog" is "contained under" the concept of a "mammal," exactly because it has this latter concept as one of its marks.

The adequacy of a concept comes in degrees for Wolff. It is here that he makes an explicit link between the degree of clarity of a concept and the process of analysis. He writes: "adequate concepts have however their degree, as the concepts of the marks of which they are composed can again be analysed into many others" (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 131). Bringing this analysis to an end would mean carrying it out until we reach marks that are not further analysable into other marks

[12] I here follow the characterization of definitions in Gava 2018. However, my main point regarding Kant's critique of analysis does not rest on that characterization.

[13] In his reading of the "Wolffian Paradigm," Lanier Anderson (2015: chs. 2-3) insists on the role of this systematization of concepts in Wolff.

"because they do not any more contain in themselves a multiplicity of things distinguished from one another [*vieles von einander unterschiedenes*]" (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 131-2). Wolff expresses scepticism that a completely adequate concept can always be achieved and adds that in most cases it is not needed, either.[14] He stresses that it is enough that we carry out the analysis up to a degree that is sufficient for our aims. The latter could be the need to convey to others what we mean or to successfully carry out a demonstration (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 132). But when our aim is the erection of a science, our analysis needs to at least deliver definitions, namely concepts that are clear, distinct and complete. This is due to the fact that in science we need to unambiguously identify what we are talking about. Simple "descriptions," which Wolff contrasts with definitions, are insufficient in science. They enable us to discern the objects to which they refer only "under certain conditions" (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 141). This explains why, for Wolff, a science should begin with definitions. Since philosophy is a science for Wolff and since he equates definitions with "complete" concepts, philosophical should aim to obtain complete concepts through its analyses.

At this point, let me briefly clarify one issue. By focusing on Wolff's notion of analysis, I do not want to suggests that this is all there is to Wolff's method in philosophy and metaphysics. Various Wolff scholars have emphasized other aspects of his approach that are equally important. One of these aspects is the importance and irreducibility of the input provided by experience (see Engfer 1982: 254-5; Cataldi Madonna 2001; Gava 2018). In this respect, the notion of "clear experience" plays a central role, since clear experiences, much like definitions, can serve as the first premises of a demonstration (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 200; on clear experience see Dyck 2014: ch. 1). Another issue that needs to be kept in mind is that analytic definitions that aim at complete concepts are not the only kind of definitions that Wolff identifies. These are what Wolff calls "nominal" definitions, which he distinguishes from "real" definitions. The former are "definitions of words," while the latter are "definitions of things." The former identify properties of things that allow us to distinguish these from one another. The latter "show the way in which something is possible" (see Wolff 1965 [1754]: 143-4). That real definitions provide a grasp of the "possibility" of things means that they display how these things come to being (*entstehen*) (Wolff 1965 [1754]: 147). Therefore, while definitions of words allow us to successfully identify a thing as falling under a concept, definitions of things are able to indicate conditions that are sufficient for bringing into being a thing of a certain kind. Recently, Katherine Dunlop has insisted on the importance of real definitions in Wolff's system and their irreducibility to nominal definitions (Dunlop 2018). Here, I do not want to deny that real definitions are central to Wolff's method. Rather, I have focused on

[14] Given this scepticism on Wolff's part, when Lanier Anderson claims that Wolff's idea of philosophy involves a "logically ordered hierarchy of adequate concepts standing in genus/species containment relations" (Anderson 2015: 76), he is partially overstating Wolff's aim.

nominal definitions because it is in relation to them that Wolff characterizes his notion of analysis. In turn, it is this notion that informs Kant's critique of analysis in the *Prize Essay*.

### 3. Conceptual Analysis and Indemonstrable Propositions in the *Prize Essay*

When one considers the model of analysis that Kant proposes for philosophical definitions in the *Prize Essay*, one can see that it closely resembles Wolff's characterization of nominal definitions. Kant accordingly submits that "[i]t is the business of philosophy to analyse concepts which are given in a confused fashion, and to render them complete and determinate" (2:278). Kant elaborates on the process through which we obtain a philosophical definition in the following way:

> In philosophy, the concept of a thing is always given, albeit confusedly or in an insufficiently determinate fashion. The concept has to be analysed; the characteristic marks which have been separated out and the concept which has been given have to be compared with each other in all kinds of contexts; and this abstract thought must be rendered complete and determinate. For example, everyone has a concept of time. But suppose that that concept has to be defined. The idea of time has to be examined in all kinds of relation if its characteristic marks are to be discovered by means of analysis: different characteristic marks which have been abstracted have to be combined together to see whether they yield a sufficient concept; they have to be collated with each other to see whether one characteristic mark does not partly include another within itself. (2:276-7, translation altered)

Notice three things in this passage. First, philosophical analysis starts from *confusedly* given concept. In Wolff's terminology, a confused concept is a *clear* concept that is indistinct. We are able to use the concept, but we are not able to identify its constituent marks, as when we have a clear but indistinct concept of time, because we can correctly recognize what time is, but are nonetheless incapable of positively naming essential marks of our concept of time. Second, the purpose of a philosophical definition is to obtain not only a distinct but a *complete* concept, where this exactly matches Wolff's characterization of a definition, according to which a definition is a concept that is clear, distinct and complete. Third, in analysing given concepts, one should determine the relations of subordination of its constituent marks. Kant says that one must "see whether one characteristic mark does not partly include another within itself." This suggests that when considering the relationships between marks $M_1$ and $M_2$ of a certain concept C, one should determine whether $M_2$ is a mark of C only because it is first a mark of $M_1$. In Wolff, revealing these relationships of subordination between the marks of a concept is essential for obtaining *adequate* concepts.

Given this characterization of philosophical definitions, Kant's methodological proposal in the *Prize Essay* seems to be very close to Wolff's account of analysis. They both consider definitions

based on analyses of concepts central to philosophy and they both see analysis as a procedure for uncovering fundamental marks and the relationships among them. Starting from this point of agreement, one might be tempted to advance a more general claim: Kant and Wolff agree that providing analyses of given concepts aimed at obtaining definitions or, to say the same, complete concepts is at least one of the central tasks of philosophical inquiry. Drawing this latter conclusion would however be a major misrepresentation of Kant's methodological proposal in the *Prize Essay*. For if it is true that for Kant philosophical definitions are fundamentally analytic in the *Prize Essay*, Kant denies that these definitions should play a central role in philosophy, either at the beginning or at the end of its investigation. As a consequence of this, Kant *gives up* the aim of arriving at complete concepts through analysis as a fundamental desideratum of philosophical inquiry. In this respect, his departure from Wolff's account of philosophy is radical.

In order to support this claim, let me first consider what the starting point of a philosophical investigation is according to the *Prize Essay*. One point of divergence between mathematics and philosophy on which Kant insists concerns the number of indemonstrable propositions within these disciplines. While there are only few of such propositions in mathematics, their number in philosophy is immense (see 2:281). Now, Kant stresses that identifying these indemonstrable propositions is the starting point of philosophical inquiry.

> But the most important business of higher philosophy consists in seeking out these indemonstrable fundamental truths; and the discovery of such truths will never cease as long as cognition of such a kind as this continues to grow. For, no matter what the object may be, those characteristic marks, which the understanding initially and immediately perceives in the object, constitute the *data* for exactly the same number of indemonstrable propositions, which then form the foundation on the basis of which definitions can then be drawn up. (2:281)

For my purposes, three claims are important in this quote. First, Kant submits that identifying those indemonstrable propositions that provide an immediate access to certain philosophical truths is the starting point of philosophical inquiry. Second, he adds that this task is "the most important business of higher philosophy." This already points toward a characterization of philosophical inquiry that does not equate it with conceptual analysis. Finally, third, Kant submits that these indemonstrable propositions provide the materials on the basis of which we might eventually be able to obtain a philosophical definition.

However, even though indemonstrable propositions *might* lead us to definitions, it is not for their role in attaining definitions that they are important. Rather, while, on the one hand, identifying philosophical indemonstrable propositions becomes *the* fundamental task of philosophical inquiry, on the other, the purpose of obtaining definitions of concepts is downgraded to a dispensable task.

That obtaining definitions is a dispensable task is clear from a passage where Kant clarifies how one should proceed in philosophy once one has identified some indemonstrable propositions:

> In philosophy and in particular in metaphysics, one can often come to know a great deal about an object with distinctness and certainty, and even establish reliable conclusions on that basis prior to having a definition of that object, and even, indeed, when one had no intention of furnishing one. In the case of any particular thing, I can be immediately certain about a number of different predicates, even though I am not acquainted with a sufficiently large number of them to be able to furnish a completely determinate *concept of the thing*, in other words, a definition. Even if I had never defined what an *appetite* was, I should still be able to say with certainty that every appetite presupposed the representation of the object of the appetite; that this representation was an anticipation of what was to come in the future; that the feeling of pleasure was connected with it; and so forth. Everyone is constantly aware of all this in the immediate consciousness of appetite. One might perhaps eventually be able to arrive at a definition of appetite on the basis of such remarks as these, once they had been compared with each other. But as long as it is possible to establish what one is seeking by inference from a few immediately certain characteristic marks of the thing in question, and to do so without a definition, there is no need to venture on an undertaking which is so precarious. (2:284)

Kant states that once we have identified relevant indemonstrable propositions, we can set aside the purpose of providing definitions of concepts, at least as long as this is unnecessary for reaching the conclusions we want to establish. This clearly shows that carrying out analyses of concepts that determine what their constituent marks are and how these marks are related is not a fundamental desideratum of philosophical inquiry any more. But Kant does not only say that definitions are superfluous. He further adds that the purpose of providing definitions often leads to errors in philosophy and metaphysics. Kant already hints toward this point in the passage I just quoted when he says that defining concepts is a "precarious" (*schlüpfrig*) undertaking. He further elaborates on the risks of the obsession with definitions in another passage:

> Errors do not arise simply because we do not know certain things. We make mistakes because we venture to make judgements, even though we do not know everything which is necessary for doing so. A large number of errors, indeed almost all of them, are due to this latter kind of overhastiness; You have certain knowledge of some of the predicates of a thing. Very well! Base your conclusions on this certain knowledge and you will not go wrong. But you insist on having a definition at all costs. And yet you are not sure that you know everything which is necessary to drawing up such a definition; nonetheless, you venture on such an undertaking and thus you fall into error. (2:292-3)

Therefore, in philosophy, it is not simply the case that definitions should not be placed at the beginning of a philosophical investigation. Rather, definitions should be avoided, at least when they are not necessary. They are expression of an obsession with providing analyses of concepts that deliver complete concepts, where, in turn, this obsession is the most common source of mistakes in philosophical inquiries.

To be clear, Kant is not claiming that definitions are in principle unattainable in philosophy. However, he is certainly proposing a model of philosophical inquiry in which definitions and the purpose of providing analyses of concepts that result in complete concepts are not any more essential and central to the discipline. In this respect, Kant characterizes his methodological proposal as one of *modesty*. The obsession with definitions brings philosophers to make claims they are not justified in making. This could mean either that in defining a concept we attribute some marks to a concept that do not actually belong to it, or that we are too quick in asserting that we know everything important about a concept, where this is not actually the case.

Kant's proposal of modesty can be put as follows: stick to what you know with certainty through immediately evident propositions and only move to those conclusions that can legitimately be deduced from these propositions. This reflects the second "rule" Kant offers as guidance for correctly proceeding in philosophical investigations. The first rule simply says that one should not start with definitions, unless these only aim to identify the concept one is talking about (2:285). The second rule says: "one ought particularly to distinguish those judgements which have been immediately made about the object and relate to what one initially encountered in that object with certainty. Having established for certain that none of these judgements is contained in another, these judgements are to be placed at the beginning of one's inquiry, as the foundation of all one's inferences, like the axioms of geometry" (2:285).

At this point, one may raise two objections. First, one might point out that Kant explicitly claims that obtaining complete concepts and definitions is the proper "businesses" of philosophy (2:278). Accordingly, his remarks on the risks of analysis cannot mean that we should avoid analysing concepts altogether. Rather, they simply emphasize that analysis should be carried out with care and attention. Second, even if Kant maintained that complete concepts are unattainable for us or that we cannot ever be certain that we have obtained them, he could still equate appropriate philosophical knowledge with definitions. This would mean that Kant would defend a form of scepticism with regard to philosophical knowledge. On the one hand, he would characterize the latter by saying that complete concepts and definitions are essential to it. On the other, he would claim that we cannot obtain such concepts and definitions or that we cannot know whether we have obtained them.

I believe that both these objections can be answered when we realize what one of the main purposes of the *Prize Essay* is. As we know, Kant wants to clearly distinguish the methods of mathematics and philosophy. In turn, this is instrumental to showing that philosophy can attain the same degree of certainty as mathematics once we have correctly identified what its proper procedure of investigation is. Kant's remarks on the risks of analysis are clearly meant to showing that aiming at definitions and complete concepts has a *negative impact* on the certainty of philosophical investigations. The more we extend our analyses beyond what we know through immediately evident propositions, the more our conclusions become uncertain. Accordingly, it would be odd to claim that Kant still proposes complete concepts and definitions as the proper aim of philosophical inquiry, while at the same time emphasizing the risks of analysis. This would go against his main aim in the *Prize Essay* which is proposing a model of philosophy according to which it can attain certainty. Notice, moreover, that denying that analysis, complete concepts and definitions are the aims of philosophy is compatible with claiming that philosophical cognition is fundamentally analytic. This is the case because through immediately evident propositions we become aware of analytic marks of concepts, even though these marks are insufficient for a definition or a complete concept.[15]

Now turning to the second objection, describing Kant's position in the *Prize Essay* as presenting a form of scepticism regarding philosophical knowledge would go against the main purpose of the text, which, as we just saw, is showing how philosophy can attain certainty. Therefore, I believe that we have reason to resist this second objection, too.

I hope I have made sufficiently clear that Kant's methodological proposal in the *Prize Essay* is *not* best described as one of conceptual analysis, at least when analysis is characterized in Wolffian terms as aiming at complete concepts. Rather, Kant provides compelling and interesting considerations for renouncing this aim in philosophy and metaphysics. Taking this perspective highlights the originality of Kant's critique of Wolff's analytic model of philosophy in the *Prize Essay*, especially when this critique is compared with Kant's position in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Lanier Anderson has argued that, in this latter work, Kant attacks the Wolffian model by emphasizing that conceptual analysis is insufficient to attain substantial metaphysical truths. In this sense, "the critical philosopher identifies the expressive limitations of purely conceptual truth" (Anderson 2015: 205).[16] In contrast to this approach, the *Prize Essay* emphasizes some risks that are

[15] Using a vocabulary closer to current usage, we might say that the *Prize Essay* provides an account of philosophy according to which philosophy is analytic but cannot have the aim of identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for applying concepts.

[16] I have argued that Anderson's account of Kant's critique of Wolff is partial. Kant does not only criticize Wolff because he attempts to attain substantial metaphysical truths with "analytic" means. He also, and more fundamentally, criticizes him for illegitimately appealing to synthetic a priori principles while not realizing that they are synthetic (see Gava 2021; Gava 2023: Ch. 8). Still, this does not change the fact that Kant's critique of philosophy considered as analysis in the *Prize Essay* is original in comparison to the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

linked to the process of analysis itself. It is not simply the case that analysis is insufficient to attain what we want. Rather, it can be the source of errors and unsupported claims.

Now that we have emphasized this original aspect of the *Prize Essay*, I want to move my attention to what Kant calls "indemonstrable propositions." Once we consider what Kant places under this label, it becomes apparent that the debate on whether Kant's "analytic method" is empiricist or rationalist is ill-conceived, since the *Prize Essay* leaves indeterminate whether the first data of philosophical inquiry are a priori or a posteriori. Asking whether they are one or the other means committing an anachronism, since it projects on the *Prize Essay* a distinction that Kant introduces at a later time.

**4. How are Metaphysical Concepts Given?**

Kant connects his appeal to indemonstrable propositions as a starting point of philosophical inquiry to the lesson philosophers should learn from Newton. As Newton started from evident and unquestionable empirical data, philosophers should start from immediately evident truths that can constitute a solid basis for their theorizing (2:286). Indemonstrable propositions specify in which sense philosophy should start from "given" concepts. Here lies a further point of divergence from Wolff. Wolff's analyses of concepts might indeed start from "given" concepts and restrain from arbitrarily creating new concepts through "synthetic" definitions. However, Kant's critique of the excessive trust of philosophers in their capacity to offer definitions involves an implicit point against the Wolffian model. Wolff had a too vast understanding of what "given" could mean, since he was not cautious enough to only take as "given" those propositions in which we attribute predicates to a concept with immediate and absolute certainty. This is the Newtonian lesson philosophy should learn.

This makes clear why according to Kant the Newtonian lesson involved a new understanding of philosophy: starting from immediately certain indemonstrable propositions meant, first, giving up the aim of obtaining complete concepts as central to philosophy. Second and relatedly, it restricted the scope of the "given" from which philosophy should begin. A problem is still unsettled, though. As I noticed in the introductory section, interpreters disagree regarding whether the appeal to Newton's "analytic method" implied a form of empiricism on Kant's part.

Kant's remarks on philosophical indemonstrable propositions often suggest that we have access to them through direct intellectual insight. Indemonstrable propositions express cognitions that are "immediate," in the sense that they are not obtained through reasoning or inference. Moreover, they are regarded as expressing certain knowledge. Kant accordingly says that, in considering our concepts of some objects, we can "be immediately certain about a number of different predicates" (2:284). Kant connects these indemonstrable propositions to what Christian August Crusius had

called the "first material principles of human reason" (2:295). These stay under the first *formal* principles, which are the law of identity and the law of contradiction (2:294). Material principles are propositions in which we immediately see the relation of identity or contradiction between the subject and the predicate of a proposition. They thus stay "under" these laws, but the knowledge they provide is not obtainable by simply appealing to these laws.

In order to explain what material principles are, Kant offers the proposition "a body is compound" (2:294) as an example. In this proposition, we see a necessary relation of identity between the subject and the predicate, so that "being compound" necessarily belongs to a body. This knowledge is however not obtainable by a simple appeal to the law of identity. Apparently, by means of the latter, we can only get to know propositions expressing tautologies, like "a body is a body."[17] The knowledge provided by material principles is also fundamentally different from knowledge obtained through inferences, which rest on the recognition of marks that different concepts have in common.[18] Therefore, material principles are "indemonstrable" because they express substantial truths we immediately recognize as certain without being able to provide any further reason to regard them as obtaining. These remarks strongly suggest that philosophical indemonstrable propositions are substantial truths that are known through direct intellectual insight.

Things, however, are not so simple. For Kant seems to give an empirical grounding to the first "material principles" of morality. As a response to one of the points raised by the question of the Academy, in the last part of the *Prize Essay*, Kant addresses whether natural theology and morality can attain certainty. In the section on morality, he first distinguishes between two kinds of "ought," one based on instrumental considerations, where what we ought to do is a means to a previously established end, and one that is immediately binding, where the "ought" directly relates to an action. Being the object of a direct "ought," the action becomes itself an end, but is an end that is necessary, since it ensues from the "ought." Kant submits that it is only this second kind of "ought" that properly constitutes an obligation (2:298). Now, the question is: what rules do express this strong form of obligation? He first identifies two "formal grounds" of morality, which are the correlates in this field of the "formal principles" of human cognition. These are the rules saying respectively "perform the most perfect action in your power" (2:299), which is the first formal

[17] Notice that material principles appear here to include analytic propositions that are not tautologies. In the *Prize Essay*, Kant has not yet drawn the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. In fact, it seems he still accepts a Leibnizian theory of truth according to which every true proposition is analytic. This is suggested by the fact that he traces back every true affirmative proposition to the law of identity and every true negative proposition to the law of contradiction (see 2:294).

[18] "[A]ny proposition is indemonstrable if either the identity or the contradiction is to be found immediately in the concepts, and if the identity and the contradiction cannot or may not be understood through analysis by means of intermediate characteristic marks. All other propositions are capable of proof. The proposition, a body is divisible, is demonstrable, for the identity of the predicate and the subject can be shown by analysis and therefore indirectly: a body is *compound*, but what is compound is *divisible*, so a *body* is divisible. The intermediate characteristic mark here is *being compound*" (2:294).

ground of all obligation to act, and "abstain from doing that which will hinder the realisation of the greatest possible perfection" (2:299), which is the first formal ground of the duty to abstain from acting. Because these two principles are purely formal, "no specifically determinate obligation flows from these two rules of the good" (2:299). To issue specific obligations, the formal grounds must be combined with indemonstrable material principles of morality.

It is at this point that Kant seems to provide an empirical grounding to the material principles of morality. Kant connects the capacity to appreciate the "good" to feeling. Since morality identifies rules of the good, its material principles are traceable back to an "unanalyzable feeling of the good" (2:299). Now, these unanalyzable feelings are at the basis of an immediate knowledge of what is good, which in turn is expressed in indemonstrable propositions:

> But if the good is simple, then the judgement: "This is good," will be completely indemonstrable. This judgement will be an immediate effect of the consciousness of the feeling of pleasure combined with the representation of the object. And since there are quite certainly many simple feelings of the good to be found in us, it follows that there are many such unanalysable representations. Accordingly, if an action is immediately represented as good, and if it does not contain concealed within itself a certain other good, which could be discovered by analysis and on account of which it is called perfect, then the necessity of this action is an indemonstrable material principle of obligation. (2:299-300)

So, material principles of morality are identified through the immediate feeling of pleasure we experience in connection to the representation of a possible action. Because this account of principles of morality appeals to feeling and pleasure, it certainly involves an empirical grounding. However, the form of empiricism that it proposes must be qualified. To begin with, moral principles are not dependent, say, on the maximization of pleasure. Rather, pleasure is what allows everybody to recognize what is good independently of any consideration regarding what might be pleasurable for others. Moreover, it is not pleasure itself that is identified with the good. Pleasure only constitutes our way to know what is good. Since Kant, a few lines after the quoted passage, states: "*Hutcheson* and others have, under the name of moral feeling, provided us with a starting point from which to develop some excellent observations" (2:300), it is plausible to assume that Kant took his appeal to a "feeling of the good" to develop the idea of a "moral sense" of Scottish philosophers like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson.[19] It is not clear, however, how big a commitment to empiricism Kant's account of moral principles in the *Prize Essay* does in fact imply. On the one hand, Kant was certainly attracted by the idea of a moral feeling because it offered an *immediate*

[19] Even if many interpreters agree that moral sense theories exerted an influence on the pre-critical Kant, there is still large disagreement regarding the extent of such influence. On the relationship between Hutcheson and Kant see: Henrich 2009 and Walschots 2017.

access to the good that everybody could attain on their own. What Kant was seeking was an analogue of the "intellectual" intuitions that he placed at the basis of "theoretical" cognition. On the other, Kant does not seem to be fully convinced that an appeal to feeling can in fact offer a proper grounding of morality, since he concludes his essay by writing: "it has yet to be determined whether it is merely the faculty of cognition, or whether it is feeling (the first inner ground of the faculty of desire) which decides its first principles" (2:300).

Where do we stand? Are philosophical indemonstrable propositions grounded in empirical evidence? Do they rest on intellectual insight? Can any of these do the work? I submit that these questions are inappropriate when considering the *Prize Essay*. As I suggested at the beginning of this section, Kant's appeal to indemonstrable propositions specifies in which sense philosophy should start from concepts that are "given." Indemonstrable propositions express the immediate knowledge we have in connection to a concept. However, it is only at a later stage that Kant will introduce a distinction between concepts given a posteriori through experience and concepts given a priori through reason. The former are derived abstracting common characteristics from experience. Thus, I can obtain the concept of a horse that contains the mark "four-footed" by recognizing this characteristic as common to all horses I have seen. The latter are instead immediately recognized as true by means of reason and do not rest on experience. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant lists substance, cause, right and equity as examples of a priori given concepts (A728/B756). In student notes from Kant's lectures, one first finds the distinction between a priori and a posteriori given concepts in the 1770s (see, for example, 24: 131, 252-3, 270, 452). Even though it is difficult to exactly determine when Kant has begun using the distinction, what is clear is that it is not yet used in the *Prize Essay*, which means that the text simply leaves indeterminate whether given concepts, and the indemonstrable propositions which express the knowledge we have through them, are a priori or empirical.

This explains why Kant's examples of indemonstrable propositions sometimes points towards empirical propositions, sometimes towards a priori propositions. Kant's notion of given concepts in the *Prize Essay* simply leaves indeterminate whether these concepts are a priori or empirical. Since indemonstrable propositions are expression of the given concepts from which philosophy begins, it remains equally indeterminate whether these propositions are empirical or a priori. But this means that asking whether Kant's "analytic method" in the *Prize Essay* involves an empiricism or not is misleading and anachronistic, since it approaches Kant's text by using a distinction that Kant has not made yet.

The claim that Kant's notions of given concepts and indemonstrable propositions in the *Prize Essay* leave indeterminate whether these are a priori or empirical confirms a suggestion that Katherine Dunlop has made regarding Kant's philosophy of mathematics in the *Prize Essay*. In

particular, she has suggested that the chief difference between Kant's position in the *Prize Essay* and his view in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that only "in the latter Kant distinguishes between pure and empirical intuition" (Dunlop 2014: 659). Of course, Dunlop is not suggesting that the *Prize Essay* makes use of a notion of intuition which does not distinguish between empirical and pure intuition yet. Rather, her point is that while the *Prize Essay* can establish the applicability of mathematical concepts even *without* the notion of intuition, it is only by introducing the distinction between pure and empirical intuition and by establishing a necessary relationship between the two that Kant is able to secure the "*universal* applicability of mathematical concepts to (all) objects of experience" (Dunlop 2014: 678). Of course, the *Prize Essay* cannot distinguish between pure and empirical intuition simply because it does not use the notion of intuition in the first place. What Dunlop's analysis makes clear, however, is that the *Prize Essay* is not well equipped to differentiate between empirical and rational cognitions more generally. The fact that the *Prize Essay* does not distinguish between a priori and a posteriori given concepts, or that it leaves indeterminate whether indemonstrable propositions are empirical or not is a by-product of this general characteristic.

**5. Conclusion**

Interpreters of Kant's *Prize Essay* have focused on a number of issues concerning both his view on mathematics and his account of philosophy. As far as the former is concerned, they have investigated its account of mathematical concepts and definitions and highlighted problems and differences with his mature position. As far as philosophy is concerned, they have tried to capture Kant's departure from the Wolffian model by focusing on his characterization of philosophical definitions and his appropriation of Newton's "analytic method."

In this paper, I have thrown light to an aspect of Kant's critique of Wolff's model of philosophical investigation that has been so far neglected. In the *Prize Essay*, Kant provides a critique of philosophy conceived as conceptual analysis according to which its aim should not be that of obtaining definitions or complete concepts. He bases this critique on the identification of some risks of pursuing philosophical cognition along this path. I have suggested that this critique of the Wolffian conception of philosophy is interesting and original with respect to Kant's critique of analysis in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While this latter work insists that analysis is insufficient to obtain substantial philosophical cognitions, the *Prize Essay* highlights possible errors that arise through the practice of analysis itself. Kant's alternative proposal is to identify immediately evident propositions where we recognize some essential predicates of concepts and then derive further conclusions on the basis of these propositions, without worrying about obtaining complete concepts. I have also made an additional point. I have suggested that Kant's account of given concepts and indemonstrable propositions in the *Prize Essay* is fundamentally indeterminate with

respect to whether these are a priori or empirical. As a consequence of this, the attempt to determine whether Kant's "analytic method" involves a form of empiricism or not is ill-conceived.

## References


Anderson, L. 2015. *The Poverty of Conceptual Truth: Kant's Analytic/Synthetic Distinction and the Limits of Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carson, E. 1999. "Kant on the Method of Mathematics." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37: 629-52.

Cataldi Madonna, L. 2001. *Christian Wolff und das System des klassischen Rationalismus*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms.

Clewis, R. 2014. "Kant's Empiricist Rationalism of the Mid-1760s." *Eighteenth-Century Thought* 5: 179-225.

De Jong, W. 1995. "How is Metaphysics as a Science Possible? Kant on the Distinction between Philosophical and Mathematical Method." *Review of Metaphysics* 49: 235-74.

Dunlop, K. 2014. "Arbitrary Combination and the Use of Signs in Mathematics: Kant's 1763 Prize Essay and Its Wolffian Background." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 44: 658–85.

Dunlop, K. 2018. "Definitions and Empirical Justification in Christian Wolff's Theory of Science." *History of Philosophy and Logical Analysis* 21: 149–76.

Dyck, C. W. 2014. *Kant and Rational Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Engfer, H. J. 1982. *Philosophie als Analysis. Studien zur Entwicklung philosophischer Analysiskonzeptionen unter dem Einfluss mathematischer Methodenmodelle im 17. und frühen 18. Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart: Frommann-holzboog.

Falkenburg, B. 2000. *Kants Kosmologie. Die wissenschaftliche Revolution der Naturphilosophie im 18. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.

Falkenburg, B. 2013. “From Kant’s Early Cosmology to the Cosmological Antinomy.” In *The Harmony of the Spheres. Kant and Herschel on the Universe and the Astronomical Phenomena*, ed. S. De Bianchi, 48-70. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Falkenburg, B. 2018. “Kant and the Scope of the Analytic Method.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 71: 13-23.

Friedman, M. 1992. “Introduction: Metaphysics and Exact Science in the Evolution of Kant’s Thought.” in *Kant and the Exact Sciences*, ed. M. Friedman, 1-52. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gava, G. 2015. “Kant’s Synthetic and Analytic Method in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the Distinction between Philosophical and Mathematical Syntheses.” *European Journal of Philosophy* 23: 728-49.

Gava, G. .2018. “Kant, Wolff and the Method of Philosophy.” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 8: 271-303.

Gava, G. 2021. “Kant on Wolff and Dogmatism.” In *The Court of Reason: Proceedings of the 13th International Kant Congress*, ed. Beatrix Himmelmann and Camilla Serck-Hanssen, 299-308. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter.

Gava, G. 2023. *Kant’s* Critique of Pure Reason *and the Method of Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gomez Tutor, J. I. 2004. *Die wissenschaftliche Methode bei Christian Wolff*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms.

Guyer, P. 2000. “Mendelssohn and Kant: One Source of the Critical Philosophy.” In *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*, 17-59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Henrich, D. 2009. “Hutcheson and Kant.” In *Kant’s Moral and Legal Philosophy*, ed. K. Ameriks and O. Höffe, 29-57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hintikka, J. 1967. “Kant on the Mathematical Method.” *The Monist* 51: 352-75.

Kant, I. 1900–. *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Berlin: De Gruyter, Reimer.

Kant, I. .1992. *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*. Trans. and ed. D. Wallford. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Messina. J. 2015. "Conceptual Analysis and the Essence of Space: Kant's Metaphysical Exposition Revisited." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 97: 416-57.

Parsons, C. 1992. "Kant's Philosophy of Arithmetic." *Kant's Philosophy of Mathematics: Modern Essays*, ed. Carl J. Posy, 43-79. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Rechter, O. 2006. "The View from 1763: Kant on the Arithmetical Method Before Intuition." In *Intuition and the Axiomatic Method*, ed. Emily Carson and Renate Huber, 21–46. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Schönfeld, M. 2000. *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shabel, L. 2003. M*athematics in Kant's Critical Philosophy: Reflections on Mathematical Practice*. New York: Routledge.

Shabel, L. 2006. "Kant's Philosophy of Mathematics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer, 94–128. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sutherland, D. 2010 "Philosophy, Geometry, and Logic in Leibniz, Wolff, and the Early Kant." In *Discourse on a New Method: Reinvigorating the Marriage of History and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Mary Domsky and Michael Dickson, 155–192. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court.

Tonelli, G. 1976. "Analysis and Synthesis in XVIIIth Century Philosophy Prior to Kant." *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 20: 178-213.

de Vleeshcauwer, H.J. 1939. *L'evolution de la pensée kantienne*. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan.

Walschots, M. 2017. “Hutcheson and Kant: Moral Sense and Moral Feeling.” In *Kant and the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. E. Robinson and C. W. Surprenant, 36-54. London: Routledge.

Wolff-Metternich, B. S. von 1995. *Die Überwindung des mathematischen Erkenntnisideals: Kants Grenzbestimmung von Mathematik und Philosophie*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Wolff, C. 1965 [1754]. *Von den Kräften des menschlichen Verstandes und ihrem richtigen Gebrauche in Erkenntnis der Wahrheit*. Ed. W. Arndt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms.