

***Kant on Wolff and Dogmatism***

Gabriele Gava (University of Turin)

[gabriele.gava@unito.it](mailto:gabriele.gava@unito.it)

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct Kant's critique of dogmatism and Wolff as a defender of dogmatism in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. I will start by considering Lanier Anderson's (2015) recent account of Kant's criticism of Wolff and the project of a rationalist metaphysics. Anderson's main claim in this regard is that Kant bases his attack against Wolff on his distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. By means of this distinction, Kant is able to show that the kind of claims that Wolff defends in metaphysics are inevitably synthetic. Since, however, Wolff's strategy of argument tries to establish that these claims are analytic conceptual truths, his project is destined to fail. I argue that Anderson's approach is insufficient to provide an exhaustive account of Kant's criticism of Wolff as a dogmatist. In this respect, I suggest that Anderson's analysis provides an adequate account of Kant's criticism of Wolff's metaphilosophy, that is, of what Kant took Wolff to be *believing* and *saying* concerning what method philosophy should adopt. However, this does not completely capture Kant's critique of Wolff's *actual* line of argument.

In section 1, I present Anderson's interpretation of Kant's critique of Wolff. In section 2, I distinguish between two characterizations of dogmatism that Kant offers in the first *Critique*. I show that Kant sees Wolff's approach as "dogmatist" according to both these characterizations. Anderson's account of Kant's critique of Wolff is partial, since it only captures what Kant says on Wolff as a dogmatist according to the first characterization. Finally, in section 3, I suggest how we can coherently maintain that a single philosopher is a dogmatist according to both these characterizations. I submit that while the first characterization mainly describes the metaphilosophical views of the dogmatist, the second characterization describes her actual line of argument.

**1. Anderson on Kant's Rejection of Wolffian Metaphysics**

In his book *The Poverty of Conceptual Truth* (2015), Lanier Anderson makes two fundamental claims. First, he argues that Kant's notion of analyticity based on the idea of containment is defensible once it is read on the background of the rationalist logic of concepts to which Kant was

responding. Secondly, he maintains that Kant's introduction of a distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments provides the fundamental materials for a powerful argument against the project of a rationalist metaphysics.

A consequence of this reading is that the *Critique of Pure Reason* is seen as a "two-step argument against the Wolffian paradigm" (Anderson 2015: 205). The first step is negative. It is based simply on the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments and shows that the Wolffian approach, as dependent on purely analytic judgments, is destined to fail. The second step is positive. It shows what kind of metaphysics is possible, given Kant's account of the conditions of validity for synthetic a priori judgments.

My concern here is with Anderson's interpretation of the first step of Kant's argument. Anderson's reconstruction of this argument is based on two fundamental claims. First, he argues that Wolff is committed to a "containment" account of truth, according to which every true judgment is an analytic judgment where the subject-concept contains the predicate-concept in it. Second, he claims that Kant is able to show that the truths that metaphysics tries to prove are necessarily synthetic. Anderson thus argues that Kant establishes that Wolff's metaphysical project is destined to fail, since Wolff's method can only establish analytic truths while the truths that metaphysics pursues are essentially synthetic instead.

Anderson's reconstruction of Kant's rejection of the Wolffian paradigm captures an essential strand of Kant's critique of Wolff.<sup>1</sup> However, it is insufficient to account for Kant's critique of Wolff in all its complexities. I will now turn to my analysis of Kant's criticism of dogmatism and Wolff as a defender of this approach, where other aspects of Kant's critique of Wolff become apparent.

## **2. Two Senses of Dogmatism in the *Critique of Pure Reason***

Kant describes dogmatism as one of the chief critical targets of the first *Critique* and Wolff as the main representative of that approach. But how does Kant characterize dogmatism? In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant provides at least three different characterizations of dogmatism. Two of these are directly related to his views on Wolff's method, but it is only one of the latter two that is adequately captured by Anderson's reconstruction of Kant's criticism of Wolff. A second and, arguably, more fundamental criticism is instead connected to what I will here discuss as Kant's second characterization of dogmatism. The three characterizations are: (1) dogmatism as the pursuit of a demonstration "from concepts"; (2) dogmatism as the absence of critique and the unwarranted

---

<sup>1</sup> Let me be clear: here, I am not interested in reconstruction Wolff's own view, but only Kant's interpretation and critique of that view. I remain neutral on whether Kant's interpretation is correct or not.

use of synthetic a priori principles; and (3) dogmatism as the affirmation of the Theses of the Antinomy of Pure Reason. I will here focus on (1) and (2).<sup>2</sup>

1. *Dogmatism as the pursuit of a demonstration “from concepts”*. According to Kant’s first characterization of dogmatism (hereafter dogmatism<sub>1</sub>), the latter is the attempt to establish metaphysical truths by the sole means of conceptual analysis. This account is to be found in the B Introduction of the first *Critique*, where Kant complains that one cannot acquire synthetic metaphysical truths by proceeding dogmatically:

Thus one can and must regard as undone all attempts made until now to bring about a metaphysics **dogmatically**; for what is analytic in one or the other of them, namely the mere analysis of the concepts that inhabit our reason *a priori*, is not the end at all, but only a preparation for metaphysics proper, namely extending its *a priori* cognition synthetically, and it is useless for this end, because it merely shows what is contained in these concepts [...]. (KrV, B 23)<sup>3</sup>

Kant formulates a similar objection to dogmatism twice in the Analogies. In the context of the First Analogy, he equates a dogmatic proof to a demonstration “from concepts” and laments the inadequacy of this procedure for establishing the persistence of substance (KrV, A184-5/B227-8). Kant argues that the proposition asserting that substance persists is synthetic a priori and is valid only for objects existing in space and time, that is, objects of possible experience. Kant’s point is that it is only when we think of the concept of substance as a condition for making sense of temporal relationships like simultaneity and succession that we must see substance as persistent. Persistence is not something that belongs to the concept of substance as such, but is rather something that we necessarily connect to that concept when we use it to judge upon objects of possible experience (in time). It is for this reason that, according to Kant, we cannot establish the persistence of substance by analysing the latter concept. Subsequently, Kant extends this consideration to the Analogies in *general* and stresses that, since the principles there defended are all synthetic a priori,

[i]f we had wanted to prove these analogies dogmatically, i.e., from concepts – namely, that everything that exists will only be encountered in that which persists; that every occurrence presupposes something in the previous state, which it follows in accordance with a rule; finally, that in the manifold that is simultaneous the states are simultaneous in relation to each other in accordance with a rule (stand in community) – then all effort would have been entirely in vain. For one cannot get from one object and its existence to the existence of another or its way of existing through mere concepts of these things, no matter how much one analyzes them. (KrV, A216-7/B263-4)

Therefore, the error committed by dogmatism<sub>1</sub> is that it tries to establish *synthetic* metaphysical principles by only using *analytic* means. In this respect, the role of the critical philosopher is to

---

<sup>2</sup> I provide an account of (3) in Gava ([forthcoming](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Translations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* are given according to Kant (1998).

show to the dogmatist<sub>1</sub> that her attempts were ‘in vain.’ To do that, what is needed is simply a formulation of the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, paired with evidence that the dogmatist can only establish analytic judgments and that metaphysical truths are irremediably synthetic.

As it is clear, this description of dogmatism and its main mistake matches almost perfectly Anderson’s reconstruction of Kant’s argument against Wolffian metaphysics. In fact, in the *Prolegomena*, Kant expresses a very similar point directly against Wolff. In that context, he complains that dogmatists<sub>1</sub> do not distinguish between synthetic and analytic judgments and, for this reason, try to establish synthetic principles as if they were analytic truths. According to Kant, this is exactly what Wolff and Baumgarten do when they try to establish the validity of the principle of sufficient reason by deriving it from the principle of contradiction (Prol, 4:270).

2. *Dogmatism as the absence of critique.* According to the second characterization, dogmatism (hereafter dogmatism<sub>2</sub>) is “the presumption of getting on solely with pure cognition from (philosophical) concepts according to principles, which reason has been using for a long time without first inquiring in what way and by what right it has obtained them” (KrV, Bxxxv). Here Kant still connects dogmatism to a procedure “from concepts”. However, he adds an important qualification: in proceeding from concepts the dogmatist makes use of certain principles without having a clear grasp of their origin and validity. Dogmatism is thus equated to the use of these principles without an antecedent critique (see also KrV, Bxxx, Bxxxv, B7; Log, 9:83-4).

But which principles exactly does Kant have in mind? Kant makes this explicit in *On a Discovery*, where he begins his response to Eberhard with a clarification of what, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is meant with the terms dogmatism and scepticism. In this context, he first defines dogmatism as “the general trust in its principles [that is, of metaphysics, *my note*], without a previous *critique* of the faculty of reason itself, merely because of its success” (ÜE, 8:226).<sup>4</sup> Kant clarifies what it means that these metaphysical principles are used “successfully” in a footnote, where he says that “[s]uccess in the use of principles *a priori* lies in their constant confirmation in application to experience” (ÜE, 8:226n). Therefore, the principles assumed by the dogmatist are metaphysical because they are used to determine a priori features of objects. They are used “successfully” because we constantly use them to determine features of objects of experience. It is because of this “success” that the dogmatist assumes them without critique. In the same footnote, Kant makes explicit that the principles that the dogmatist unduly assumes are those that the *Critique of Pure Reason* considers in the Analytic. As we know, Kant thinks that these principles are synthetic a priori and valid only within the boundaries of possible experience. The error of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Translations of *On a Discovery* are given according to Kant (2002).

dogmatist is thus that of assuming these synthetic a priori principles (because of their successful application within possible experience), failing to clarify the conditions of their legitimate use (ÜE, 8:227n). As a consequence of this, the dogmatist unjustifiably uses these principles for objects that cannot be given in possible experience, so that “a dogmatism arises in regard to the supersensible” (ÜE, 8:227n).

Dogmatism<sub>2</sub> is related to a quite different account of the role of the critical philosopher in responding to such a view. The critical philosopher needs to show that the dogmatist<sub>2</sub> makes an illegitimate use of some synthetic a priori principles that are assumed without critique. In order to perform the latter task, it is not sufficient to introduce a distinction between synthetic and analytic judgments and to prove that while the dogmatist, by her own means, can only establish analytic judgments, metaphysical truths are irremediably synthetic. By contrast, one need to already have a clear notion of a synthetic a priori judgment and of the conditions of its validity.

As it should now be clear, this account of the critical response to dogmatism does not fit well with Anderson’s reconstruction of Kant’s main argument against Wolffian metaphysics. Assuming that Kant has at least also Wolff in mind in presenting his response to dogmatism<sub>2</sub>, Kant’s argument would not be that Wolff does not have the means to establish synthetic metaphysical truths. Rather, his point would be that Wolff illegitimately assumes some synthetic a priori principles. In a Reflection from 1777-1778, Kant explicitly makes this point against Wolff: “Wolff did great things in philosophy; but he got ahead of himself and extended cognition without securing, altering, and reforming it through a special critique” (Refl 5035, 18:68; see also Refl 4866, 18:14).<sup>5</sup> I take it that when Kant here talks about the extension of cognition, he has synthetic a priori judgments in mind. Therefore, it seems that Anderson’s reconstruction of Kant’s argument against Wolff does not cover what Kant critically says on Wolff as a dogmatist<sub>2</sub>.

How should we account for the relationship between dogmatism<sub>1</sub> and dogmatism<sub>2</sub>? They are both characterizations of dogmatism that describe the procedure we follow in arguing for philosophical claims, but they seem incompatible on a first look. Dogmatism<sub>1</sub> proceeds only analytically “from concepts” and tries to establish a system of analytic truths. By contrast, dogmatism<sub>2</sub> proceeds synthetically, since it assumes synthetic a priori principles without critique. One way to account for this difference is to say that Kant simply identifies two different ways in which one can proceed dogmatically in philosophy, so that dogmatism<sub>1</sub> and dogmatism<sub>2</sub> need not be compatible. However, we have seen that Kant reads Wolff as being both a dogmatist<sub>1</sub> and a dogmatist<sub>2</sub>. It is of course possible that Kant understands *some* arguments put forward by Wolff as displaying dogmatism<sub>1</sub>, while *some other* arguments are instead guilty of dogmatism<sub>2</sub>. However, I think that dogmatism<sub>1</sub>

---

<sup>5</sup> Translations of Kant’s *Reflexionen* are given according to Kant (2005).

and dogmatism<sub>2</sub> are related in a more complex way in Kant's critique of Wolff's dogmatism. In the next section, I show how the same philosopher can be both a dogmatist<sub>1</sub> and a dogmatist<sub>2</sub>.

### 3. Two Levels of Critique

We know that dogmatism<sub>2</sub> is distinctive because it is a procedure that, in trying to establish philosophical claims, assumes synthetic a priori principles without critique. In the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant provides an explanation of the reason why we have a sort of "natural tendency" to proceed this way. Kant's remarks concern philosophical claims about objects that cannot be given in experience (KrV, A3/B6-7), which, in the B edition, are specified as God, freedom and immortality (KrV, B7). So, why do we have a "natural tendency" to argue for claims about these objects by assuming synthetic a priori principles without critique?

The first explanation that Kant gives appeals to the success of mathematics. Since mathematics provides a "a splendid example of how far we can go with *a priori* cognition independently of experience" (KrV, A4/B8), we are lead to assume that we can easily have the same success in pursuing metaphysical questions regarding supersensible objects (see also KrV, A712-3/B740-1; A724-5/B752-3). Kant's critique of the use of the mathematical method in philosophy deserves close attention,<sup>6</sup> but in the context of the present chapter, I am more interested in the second explanation Kant provides. According to the latter, in philosophy, we are naturally lead to assume synthetic a priori principles without critique because the majority of cognitions that we gain through pure reason are analytic and this leads us to falsely believe that synthetic *a priori* truths are also analytic. This is how Kant puts it:

A great part, perhaps the greatest part, of the business of our reason consists in *analyses* of the concepts that we already have of objects. This affords us a multitude of cognitions that, although they are nothing more than illuminations or clarifications of that which is already thought in our concepts (though still in a confused way), are, at least as far as their form is concerned, treasured as if they were new insights, though they do not extend the concepts that we have in either matter or content, but only set them apart from each other. Now since this procedure does yield a real *a priori* cognition, which makes secure and useful progress, reason, without itself noticing it, under these pretenses surreptitiously makes assertions of quite another sort, in which reason adds something entirely alien to given concepts and indeed does so *a priori*, without one knowing how it was able to do this and without such a question even being allowed to come to mind. (KrV, A5-6/B9-10)

These remarks add a new element to our characterization of dogmatism<sub>2</sub>. When the dogmatist<sub>2</sub> builds her philosophical arguments by assuming synthetic a priori principles the validity of which she has not checked, she does so *on the false belief* that she is proceeding analytically, solely on the basis of the analysis of concepts. Therefore, if we only consider what she *believes* she is doing, she

---

<sup>6</sup> On Kant's distinction between the methods of philosophy and mathematics see Wolff-Metternich 1995, Shabel 2006, Gava 2015.

thinks she is following a method that matches what Kant calls dogmatism<sub>1</sub>. She believes she is establishing metaphysical truths by simply arguing “from concepts”.

Where does all this bring us? It provides a more complex picture of how dogmatism<sub>1</sub> and dogmatism<sub>2</sub> can be combined according to Kant. In this combination, dogmatism<sub>1</sub> applies first of all to the metaphilosophical views held by a particular philosopher, that is, to her *beliefs* and *theory* concerning the method she is following. By contrast, dogmatism<sub>2</sub> pertains to the procedure she actually employs. Of course, the fact that the method that she follows does not always reflect her metaphilosophical views does not mean that her beliefs about her method and her actual method need always diverge. It is well possible that she often is a dogmatist<sub>1</sub> both in her metaphilosophical views and in the arguments she in fact proposes. To also be a dogmatist<sub>2</sub> in her practice, she just needs to *sometimes* assume synthetic a priori judgments without noticing it, and build philosophical arguments on their basis.

What is interesting about this characterization of the relationship between dogmatism<sub>1</sub> and dogmatism<sub>2</sub> is that it has obvious consequences for how we should account for Kant’s critique of dogmatism, broadly construed. That is, we must grant that Kant’s criticisms operate at two levels: a metaphilosophical level that concerns the views on method consciously held and defended by a philosopher, and a methodological level that points toward the procedure a philosopher actually follows, consciously or not. As we saw above, Kant’s criticism of dogmatism<sub>1</sub> argues that, since the metaphysical truths that the dogmatist<sub>1</sub> aims to establish are all synthetic, her method, being only able to prove analytic propositions, is destined to fail. It seems plausible to regard such a criticism as one being first of all directed to the metaphilosophy of the dogmatist<sub>1</sub>. For what Kant is saying is that the dogmatist<sub>1</sub>’s philosophical project is ill-conceived, given some views on method that are essential to the latter. Of course, this criticism applies also to the actual method followed by the dogmatist<sub>1</sub>, as long as her actual method coincides with her views.

By contrast, Kant’s critique of dogmatism<sub>2</sub> seems to only concern the second dimension of Kant’s critical rejection of dogmatism. Recall that Kant’s point against the dogmatist<sub>2</sub> is that she makes an illegitimate use of synthetic a priori principles. We know that Kant explains this illegitimate use by saying that the dogmatist<sub>2</sub> assumes synthetic a priori principles without evaluating the conditions and scope of their validity. Now, it would be extremely odd to say that this diagnosis and criticism operate at the metaphilosophical level. That would mean ascribing to the dogmatist<sub>2</sub> both an understanding of what a synthetic a priori judgment is and, simultaneously, the view that the assumption of such principles does not require justification. Kant certainly believes that there are schools of thought that argue for the uncritical assumption of certain principles that, for him, are synthetic a priori. This is for example what Scottish common-sense philosophers do for him (see Prol, 4:258-9). But he does not think that these philosophers *recognize*

these principles for what they are, that is, they do not have a clear notion of what a synthetic a priori judgment is. Therefore, it seems much more plausible to see Kant's criticism of dogmatism<sub>2</sub> as being directed to the actual methodology used by the dogmatist<sub>2</sub>, a methodology which is in part explained by her *neglect* of the problem of synthetic a priori judgments.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that Anderson's recent account of Kant's critique of Wolff's dogmatism is incomplete. Anderson's reconstruction well captures Kant's critique of Wolff as a dogmatist<sub>1</sub>. However, he fails to account for Kant's rejection of Wolff's dogmatism<sub>2</sub>. Subsequently, I have tried to explain in which sense Wolff could be both a dogmatist<sub>1</sub> and dogmatist<sub>2</sub>. I have suggested that while dogmatism<sub>1</sub> mainly describes the metaphilosophical views that a dogmatist consciously holds, dogmatism<sub>2</sub> instead captures the methodology that a dogmatist actually follows.<sup>7</sup>

#### References

Anderson, R. Lanier (2015): *The Poverty of Conceptual Truth: Kant's Analytic/Synthetic Distinction and the Limits of Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford 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". In *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, 728–49.

Gava, G. (forthcoming): *Kant's Method in the Critique of Pure Reason*.

Kant, Immanuel (1998): *Critique of Pure Reason*. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Trans. and Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kant, Immanuel (2002): *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*. Henry Allison and Peter Heath (Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kant, Immanuel (2005): *Notes and Fragments*. Paul Guyer (Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shabel, Lisa (2006): "Kant's Philosophy of Mathematics". In: P. Guyer (Ed.), *The Cambridge*

---

<sup>7</sup> This article is a shorter version of chapter of a book on *Kant's Method in the Critique of Pure Reason* on which I am currently working. [add further information at proofs stage if available]



*Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 94-128.

Wolff-Metternich, Brigitta-Sophie von (1995): *Die Überwindung des mathematischen Erkenntnisideals: Kants Grenzbestimmung von Mathematik und Philosophie*. Berlin: De Gruyter.