



## Repeating Kant's Critique of Pure Reason

As Einstein exasperatedly said: if Kant had only been able to stop pontificating about the nature of time and space, he might actually have discovered something interesting about them. Einstein, with considerable justification, felt that he had refuted Kant, and was surprised to find that philosophers were reluctant to accept his claim. To me, it seems clear-cut. Kant repeatedly tells us that time and space are not things; but Einstein's insight is that this is wrong. Space-time is, indeed, a *thing* that we can roughly conceptualize as a kind of invisible fluid in which we have our physical being. Matter acts on space-time to change its shape, and space-time acts on matter to cause it to move. This interplay between space-time and matter is what we experience as gravity.

Einstein has done far more than correct a detail. The most obvious consequence is that the greater part of the Antinomy of Pure Reason - a good hundred pages of Kant's book - is rendered invalid. Kant argues, roughly, that it is not meaningful to inquire about whether the universe is finite or infinite in space and time. The fact that time and space are things radically changes the situation. Contrary to Kant's claims, the whole of space-time is now also a thing. The question of whether it is finite or infinite turns out to be related to its curvature, which is something we can measure. Thus the finiteness of the universe is part of the world of phenomena, and astronomers during the last few decades have done a great deal of practical work investigating these questions.

In the field of literature, Proust was as annoyed as Einstein. The following passage from *La prisonnière* (presented here with the Scott Moncrief translation) eloquently sums up his feelings:

– J'y vais, Madame, j'y vais », finit par dire Brichot comme le général Deltour s'éloignait. Mais d'abord l'universitaire me prit un instant à part : « Le devoir moral, me dit-il, est moins clairement impératif que ne l'enseignent nos Éthiques. Que les cafés théosophiques et les brasseries kantienne en prennent leur parti, nous ignorons déplorablement la nature du Bien. Moi-même qui, sans nulle vantardise, ai commenté pour mes élèves, en toute innocence, la philosophie du prénommé Emmanuel Kant, je ne vois aucune indication précise, pour le cas de casuistique mondaine devant lequel je suis placé, dans cette critique de la Raison pratique où le grand défroqué du protestantisme platonisa, à la mode de Germanie, pour une Allemagne préhistoriquement sentimentale et aulique, à toutes fins utiles d'un mysticisme poméranien. C'est encore le « Banquet », mais donné cette fois à Königsberg, à la façon de là-bas, indigeste et assaisonné avec choucroute, et sans gigolos.

["I am going, Madame, I am going," said Brichot, as General Deltour moved away. But first of all the Professor took me aside for a moment: "Moral Duty," he said, "is less clearly imperative than our Ethics teach us. Whatever the Theosophical cafés and the Kantian beer-houses may say, we are deplorably ignorant of the nature of Good. I myself who, without wishing to boast, have lectured to my pupils, in all innocence, upon the philosophy of the said Immanuel Kant, I can see no precise ruling for the case of social casuistry with which I am now confronted in that Critique of Practical Reason in which the great renegade of Protestantism platonised in the German manner for a Germany prehistorically sentimental and aulic, ringing all the changes of a Pomeranian mysticism. It is still the Symposium, but held this time at Königsberg, in the local style, indigestible and reeking of sauerkraut, and without any good-looking boys.]

### **Antithesis**

A brilliant and incalculably important book which more or less created modern thought.

### **Proof**

The difficulty of reconciling the world of sensations with the world of concepts is perhaps the central problem of philosophy. No one, before or since, has done it better than Kant did in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

I do not think it a coincidence that relativity and quantum mechanics, the great breakthroughs in twentieth century physics, were discovered by German-speaking scientists who were thoroughly acquainted with his work. Einstein's special theory of relativity crucially depends on the insight that different observers experience time and space differently. Lorentz had all the pieces of the jigsaw in front of him, but was unable to put them together into the realization that the "Lorentz contraction" cannot be conceptualized as an objective fact, but is rather observer-dependent. If he had been able to grasp this point, he would have gone down in history as the discoverer.

Quantum mechanics is an even clearer case, where the Schrödinger equation is almost a direct translation of Kant's ideas into mathematical form. The unknowable wave-function represents the noumenal world; the world of phenomena is represented by the system of operators which act on it, where the operators themselves are the senses and their eigenvalues are the sense data. Though one point is oddly reversed with respect to Kant. There is the same duality between determinism and free will, but it is the world of *noumena* that turns out to be deterministic, while the world of phenomena is not!

The mark Kant made on literature is only slightly less telling. As I recently discovered in Gautier-Vignal's [\*Proust connu et inconnu\*](#), Proust was fascinated by Kant, and the whole of the Recherche greatly influenced by his ideas. I must reread *Le temps retrouvé* from this new perspective; I suspect that many things which puzzled me first time round will become clearer. ([less](#))

Immanuel Kant is the kind of guy who not only sucks all of the joy out of life; he takes great pleasure in opening the spigot of your happiness-tank and watching it all spill out onto the burn-out lawn and sink into the earth -- seeping toward the planet's molten, pitiless core and, thereupon, toward its irrevocable dissipation.

If he were alive today, I suggest to you that Kant's corporeal manifestation would be that of a paunchy, balding man, eternally sixty years old, who is often seen in his yard, cleaning out his gutters or basement wells or tending his garden joylessly. He's perhaps wearing a modified pith helmet and too-tight khaki shorts which reveal the topography of his bunched twill underpants as he crouches to slake the thirst of his prized marigolds. Of course, his plastic eyeglass frames are a mottled brown -- no, not tortoise-shell, but a harsh two-tone pattern reminiscent of the formica customarily surrounding a late 1970s basement wet bar. Additionally, the lenses are several sizes too large to conform to even the most deluded strictures of fashion. His socks (or 'stockings,' as he calls them) are a heavy,

nauseous tan, ribbed but slouchy. A stubborn elastic band around the stockings' crown tries to hold them steadily around the mid-calf, but the up-again, down-again athleticism of gardening forbids this vain hold-out against gravity. Consequently, the stockings occasionally puddle around his knobby ankles. But not for long. He grunts, squats, hoists -- grunts, squats, hoists. If the ritual's speed were only increased and set to an uptempo adult contemporary favorite, we might suspect it was a dance. Or else an elaborate tic.

Next we should discuss his legs, shouldn't we? Necessity seems to demand it... Kant's legs -- when both his safari-aspirational shorts and his stockings are performing optimally -- are visible from the mid-thigh to the mid-calf and are fantastically white and nearly hairless. It's the kind of white that shames even the newest-fallen snow, and the kind of hairlessness that visits certain men at an advancing age. It's almost as if the sproutings of those once-masculine hairs had wearied over time and just surrendered the puttering gardener to a pleasant sexual neutrality. His legs, otherwise, are surprisingly bulbous with muscle at the height of the calf: a cleft, spastic musculature, as in the shape of cloven hooves. His sandals are wide and deep brown about the straps (three straps in total, none crossed or set at provocative angles), and vaguely semitic in design -- which is to say, tough as citrus rinds, in order to deflect the cruelties of the Negev.

This is what Immanuel Kant would look like today, probably. If he were your neighbor (a half dozen houses down the street, perhaps) and you were driving to your vinyl-sided ranch or bungalow with a sackful of perishable groceries in the trunk of your Volvo S40, and if you tapped the horn friskily and waved at Mr. Kant as he dug in his garden, he would, I assure you, remain defiantly crouched, folded in upon himself, beholden to some faithless prayer. He would seem as if to have not heard your car or your horn and neither to have suspected your hand were raised in salutation. But of course he is nothing else but an intelligent man, and so he hears and of course he knows, or at least suspects. But he simply straightens his sun-bleached helmet, sinks his fingers more deeply into his yellow suede work gloves, and digs toward an object which will bring him no joy or satisfaction, but rather a steady, textureless hum within and throughout his consciousness which passes in some muddled cultures for the noise of enlightenment.

Reason should take on anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge, and to institute a court of justice, by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless pretensions, and this not by mere decrees but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws; and this court is none other than the critique of pure reason itself."

Kant's critical turn shows that the problem of self-knowledge, not metaphysics, is the true subject matter for first philosophy. It shows that it is not metaphysics that can serve as a meta-science, or as the discipline that can critique science in order to discern its underlying logical systematicity; rather, it is the theory of self-knowledge that can perform that function. Kant shows that it is the theory of self-knowledge alone that can identify the logical principles by which we can conceive the unity of knowledge. This is perhaps the basic Kantian insight: knowledge is one because experience is one, and all knowledge is based on principles that are ultimately drawn from the structure of experience.

Kant does nothing less in this work than to introduce a new starting point for thought. And yet Kant offers here not "just" another philosophical perspective to set aside all others. It is this that perhaps makes his philosophical intent so notoriously hard to pinpoint. His analysis is not a positive doctrine, so much as an instrument that enables us to take a stance outside and above all positive perspectival stances (in philosophy and beyond), and to place these on a common logical map. This is because his analysis provides us with a means to conceive the logical, structural conditions that ground -any- possible perspective-taking. Wittgenstein's philosophical motto - "I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings" - might just as well apply to Kant.

Kant's Critique seeks to explicate, from a first-person (or what he calls a "transcendental" perspective) the structural, a priori principles that make possible the systematic character of experience and of knowledge alike. In this, Kant is a precursor to the phenomenological approach to describing the structure of cognition. This is because, unlike a third-person, empirical, psychological analysis of cognitive structure, Kant's seeks to render explicit the logic of coherent perspective-taking: i.e., the structural principles that must hold if we are to provide a sufficient explanation of the systematic character of experience.

Kant starts with the fundamental fact overlooked by past philosophers: the intractable fact of cognitive limitation. He points out that a perspective that seeks to start explanation with metaphysical principles that are deemed primary necessarily begs the most fundamental question: that our finite cognitive apparatus is sufficient to the task of

grasping the fundamental principles of a world-independent order of things. Kant's Copernican turn is based on the simple observation that the characteristic structure of our own reason provides us with our only pattern for inferring the structure of the real.

For instance, the question we should be starting inquiry with is not whether the world in itself is causally structured. This is because the answer to this question relies on the answer to more fundamental questions still: To what extent are concepts such as cause valid? On which intuitions derived from experience are they grounded? And to which domains do they legitimately apply? The Kantian motto - "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" - introduces a key criterion for evaluating the meaningfulness of concepts: that they be given content from intuitions derived from the sensibility. The attempts of pre-critical metaphysics to use these concepts to describe the mind-independent world fail this Kantian meaningfulness test since in such uses, these concepts cannot be given content by any possible experience.

Before attempting a "Theory of Everything," we must, therefore, map the structure of this finite cognitive system which filters our access to the real. Kant's great epiphany was that it is the constraints placed by the knowledge-construction process that form the most significant factor in determining the shape of any theory of the world. Since our knowledge of the structure of things is constrained more by the structure of thought than it is by the structure of things, we must build our paradigms on the basis of a prior analysis of the structure of thought.

Kant's philosophy is structured as a refutation of Hume. Humean skepticism was based on a reductionist analysis of experience which sought to resolve experience into basic "atoms," and then to reconstruct it from them. This reductionist approach to describing the structure of experience led him to doubt that any of the structural principles of reason, which were expressed in metaphysics (eg, the concepts of necessary causal connection, and of persisting, substantial identity) had any meaning. This led to his notorious inability to explain the systematic structure of experience, except as a loose aggregate of fictions synthesized out of the repeated "conjunction" of sense-impressions, which forms habits of expectation in us. According to Hume, these fiction-based habits alone are the basis of the regularities that our metaphysical principles express.

Kant recognized that trashing the presumptuous, question-begging fiction of knowledge as passive reflection of a mind-independent metaphysical order which Hume sought to expose means we can't start with the metaphysical question of identifying the rational principles that best characterize the structure of being. The only possible source for rational foundations left now is the structure of experience. Kant sought to show that Hume's reductionist, empiricist analysis of experience was flawed. His Critique attempts to offer a re-description of the phenomenology of experience that does justice to its systematic unity and continuity, and which can ground the principles of reason.

The tragic irony, as Kant argues, is that if Hume's empiricist starting point is correct, the explanatory power of science makes no sense. Science loses all rational grounding. The -fact- of scientific knowledge shows that Hume's understanding of experience is wrong. Kant's first-person, "transcendental method" provides a better starting point from which to describe the principles underlying the unity of experience, which alone make it possible for us to reason scientifically.

This method offers us with the means to answer Hume: the perceived "constant conjunction" of events in sense experience can provide us with a knowledge of causal relations because reason is equipped with a priori principles which help structure and organize sense experience, among which is our concept of cause. These a priori principles act as structural conditions for the possibility of all experience. So, it is not that we infer the generalization of causal relation from various sense experiences, as Hume thought; rather, no coherent experience of the world at all could be had without the structuring effected by these formal principles. As conditions for synthesizing sense impressions into a coherent whole, they define the horizon of our possible perspective-taking on the real, and, thus, the limits of our knowledge.

The structure of reason conditions our access to reality; it determines what we can register as real. Kant shows how real innovations in geometry, mathematics, science, and logic have only been possible via a constructive method that in effect presupposes the cognitive synthetic a priori principles he describes. Thus, reason has only managed to gain insight into reality when it has, in each of these disciplines, first reflected on its own structure, and then formulated idealizations on the basis of its insight into its own structure which served to regulate its empirical inquiries. One can think of the discovery of the concept of inertia, by postulating the ideal, empirically non-realizable fiction of an absolutely frictionless plane. It is only in reference to such idealizations, postulated by reason as abstract stable reference points, that we can measure and carve up the chaos of reality into an organized, systematic whole. We ourselves supply the structure that phenomena can take for us.

Kant's radical insight is that that resultant systematic whole is a function of reason more than it is a function of the structure inhering in phenomena. For while "the material" of sense experience does indeed come from passive perception of the world, via the sensibility, such perception is actively structured from the ground up by the mind: first, via the "pure intuitions" of space and time supplied by the sensibility, which place all sensations onto a spatio-temporal map (for it is Kant's radical contention that we know space and time first as regulative functions of cognition, not as properties of the order of things). All this material is then further structured by being placed in a system of relations via the categories of the understanding, such as cause/effect, substance/mode. Kant thus anticipated the finding of cognitive psychology by two centuries by showing that our knowledge of the order of objects is the product of our cognitive-perceptual filtering. However, he also worked out its full epistemological implications – namely, that we need a new theory of knowledge, an alternative to pre-critical realism, if we are to be true to these facts about cognition.

Kant sought to supply a model of reason that makes explicit the structuring principles that determine the form of even the simplest sense experience. The beauty and power of his vision perhaps stems from his manage to gesture to this systematic unity that he believed characterized the mind. He argued that formal logic isn't enough to characterize the unity of reason; rather, a fuller model is needed to capture our full capacity to structure experience. His "transcendental logic" is intended as an alternative to formal logic which doesn't abstract from the content of experience, but rather lays bare the way experience in all its forms is structured by the categories and the synthetic a priori principles.

He argues that each discipline, from logic to math to the natural and human sciences, is grounded on the synthetic a priori principles he describes. Philosophy can only become as securely grounded as the sciences are if it manages to accurately characterize the map of these synthetic a priori principles. He believes that reason is "an organic unity," and that these principles together map this unity. Kant redefines the proper subject matter of metaphysics in formal, logical terms, as the study of the unity of reason, and of the principles that are presupposed by the most unitary perspective we can take on our experience:

"Metaphysics... is nothing but the inventory of all we possess through pure reason, ordered systematically. Nothing here can escape us, because what reason brings forth entirely out of itself cannot be hidden, but is brought to light by reason itself as soon as reason's common principle has been discovered. The perfect unity of this kind of cognition, and the fact that it arises solely out of pure concepts without any influence that would extend or increase it from experience or even particular intuition, which would lead to a determinate experience, make this unconditioned completeness not only feasible but also necessary."

Take-home points:

-His most important contribution, IMO, is his notion of the transcendental unity of apperception, which is a condition for the possibility of experience as a systematically-organized, science-generating whole. Any theory of mind that misses this key component will run into contradictions when applied to the task of providing an epistemic justification of science.

- Kant refutes formalist accounts of cognition, by showing that concepts are indexed to imaginative constructs that synthesize percepts.

-Kant formed the paradigm for the functionalism in terms of which research in modern-day cognitive science is structured. (see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ka...>)

-He invented the transcendental argument form that provides an alternative to reductionist forms of explanation, which seek to explain experience by abstracting from it its "atomic elements," and then proceeding to re-construct it as an aggregate of elements. The transcendental argument helps us start with experience, as a given whole, and explain its conditions.

-Kant's theory of cognition provides the best refutation of positivism, showing how its criteria of meaning are based on cognitively unrealizable abstraction. For Kant, the whole precedes the parts in cognition. Cognition acts as a systematic whole. Anything that can be given to the mind as either sense datum or fact is identified in relation to the forms of the understanding, which act as a coordinated, systematic whole in structuring any possible experience. Thus, the positivist criterion of meaning, which states that the validity of theoretical constructions must be judged through reference to "hard facts" - is cognitively unrealistic and puts the cart (isolated sense data) before the horse

(functioning cognitive systems).

-Mapping our cognitive limits helps us know where we have secure grounds to apply those fundamental metaphysical concepts that are integral to the structure of our reason, and where we overstep the bounds of experience and must halt speculation.

-These formal limits pre-determine the limits of possible development for both ontology and cosmology.

-In the end, we can only have a metaphysics of the experienced world, not of the world in-itself.

Perhaps the endless avalanche of interpretations this work has generated is itself a proof of its immense generative power for thought. The critical POV that Kant identified seems to constitute a nodal point for thought from which one can endlessly regenerate philosophy, either through the generation of new systems, or through the critique of historical ones by comparing them to the structural principles of human cognition.

Kant's formal analysis is the ultimate generator of methodologies. In the sciences, the Critique also made possible the crucial methodological principle of modern physics, i.e., the now necessary reference to the position of the observer in any formulation of physical law. When Heisenberg states that "What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning," he is merely summarizing Kant's first critique. After Kant, the structural limitations of perspective become the fundamental factor to contend with in all our empirical theorizing. Kant is also the conceptual architect for what would later become the human, esp cognitive, sciences. It is in his critical turn that these methodologies find their ultimate, rational justification.

It also made possible the "perspectivist" turn that lies at the heart of modern artistic practice: in the visual arts, starting at least with the Impressionists, and on to the present moment and traceable through the diverse proliferation of mediums during the last century; in literature, the self-reflexivity we cherish in the modern novel (eg: Proust, Joyce, Woolf). It is ironic that the supposedly austere and unimaginative Kant should become the begetter of whole artistic lineages.

In philosophy, he paved the foundations for phenomenology. It might be useful to picture Kant as mapping one end of the continuum of phenomenological description, with Merleau-Ponty sketching the other. At one end one gains a perspective over the universals of logic, mathematics, and the synthetic a priori principles that ground the various disciplines of reason and unite them into a coherent map of human knowledge, and at the other, we have all artistic attempts to push the development of cognitive form to greater concreteness, and thus to increase its "adequacy to experience."

Kant plants the seeds for a more radical questioning of reason, seen in Nietzsche and evolutionary epistemology. His relativizing of form to perspective blends well with evolutionary pictures of the organismic nature of the knower. Every species prefers certain arrangements that are conducive to its survival, and "abstracts" its world according to these species-specific preferences. Our characteristic capacity and preference for the kinds of cognitive forms that we have is our signature as a species, and not a fact about the world. There is only a step from here to Nietzsche's radical perspectivism.

The critical question concerns the sufficiency of Kant's cognitively-grounded realism. Can you find formal universals at least here, in the mind? Or is this last vestige of universality further deconstructible? If you answer yes to the former, what you're left with is a cognitively-grounded realism. If you answer yes to the latter, you're left in the cul-de-sac of relativism. And if you ignore Kant's critique altogether, as positivism tries to, you risk chasing the shadow cast by your cognitive biases across the cosmos and mistaking these for fundamental ontological principles.

One by one, Kant's universals have been relativized. The ideal of "transcendental critique" has been left by the wayside. Instead, all critique nowadays is pursued from historicist assumptions which insist on relativity of forms to context. Historicist analyses point out that Kant's candidates for the a priori structures are really static projections of what were mere features of a Western-specific cognitive mode, and that they were not, as a result, the universal and necessary structural principles of mind that he sought. In support of this would be Kant's importing of Aristotle's categories into his transcendental analysis, thereby bringing cultural bias into the project of identifying the a priori. A further example would be his reliance on the Newtonian paradigm for his formulation of the transcendental forms of space and time, which we now know must be grasped relativistically.

This brings up a big problem with the transcendental approach: can we ever identify the a priori on more than a

historical basis? We seem to rely, as Kant did, on the thought and science of the day to provide the material for transcendental analysis. Is there any way of filtering out the historical factor and boiling logico-phenomenological analysis down to the real fundamentals?

Another strand of critique of Kant comes from embodied mind theorists. In his "Philosophy in the Flesh," Lakoff argues that empirical findings show the inadequacy of a formal methodology such as Kant's. He claims such an approach lacks the empirical tools required to discern the phenomenologically-inaccessible yet causally efficacious structure of cognitive unconscious mechanisms, which are the true determinants of thought. Such mismatches between first- and third- person analyses of cognitive form lead such theorists to claim that there is a fatal incompleteness in the first-person method for self-understanding.

Instead, the first- and third-person pictures of cognitive structure are complementary, and any mismatch between them derives from our insufficient understanding of both. Such third-person theorists are in effect changing the subject. Logic is based on formal principles that are not reducible to neuro-cognitive principles. Consider the difference between making a logical proof and describing the neural structures that might support such proof-making process.

In the end, Kant offers the best arguments for why first-person description of the structure of experience has logical primacy in any paradigm. ([less](#))

It is done. I have finally scaled the sheer surface of this work. It involved continual toil, sweat, and suffering—falling down and picking myself up again. But, when you reach the end, when your eyes finally hit the bottom of that final paragraph, the feeling is momentous. You can stand and look down at the steep drop you managed to climb, and reflect with satisfaction that this mountain is one of the tallest. This is an Everest of a book.

That was melodramatic, but only a little. *The Critique of Pure Reason* is tough, and requires some serious effort to get through. Before attempting it, I would highly recommend first reading Kant's much shorter *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*, in which he summarizes the essential points that are elaborated and 'proved' (in his opinion) in this longer work. Additionally, I would recommend any potential readers to acquaint themselves with the philosophy of David Hume (*The Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*) and Rene Descartes (*Meditations on First Philosophy*). Thankfully, both writers are more stylish and succinct than Kant.

Nevertheless, I think overcoming a book's reputation for difficulty can often be as challenging as the book itself. It's sort of like the movie *Jaws*—you hear the rumors, you see its fin surfacing in the distance, but you never get a good look at the beast until you get down in the water. Thankfully, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* has not been known to eat people or destroy nautical vessels.

I'm not sure how Kant got his reputation as a horrible writer. Certainly, he is far more turgid than Rousseau, Hume, Descartes, Nietzsche, or even Locke. But, unlike more modern prose disasters like Heidegger, he's far from unreadable. Roughly on a par with Aristotle, I would say. Above all, the reader must pay close attention to his terminology. Kant is systematic—his goal is a perfect, self-contained whole that comprises every aspect of the universe. Bearing that in mind, one would expect his philosophy to be more dense and verbose than his predecessors.

Another way that Kant is unlike some of his forerunners is that he is not a skeptic. He does not begin his investigations by doubting everything he can, but firmly believes in the possibility of human knowledge. Interestingly enough, before writing his three *Critiques* (which he started in his late fifties), Kant had done some work in the natural sciences, and was quite familiar with Newtonian physics. Being the perceptive man that he was, when Kant read David Hume (who, as Kant says in the *Prolegomena*, caused him to "awake from his dogmatic slumber"), he realized that Hume's findings threw the entire scientific endeavor into severe doubt. So at least part of his goal in this work is to save the findings of science.

One more tension Kant is trying to resolve is that between scientific explanations and free will. If the world is governed by immutable physical laws that can be described by equations (as Kant believed), how can free will exist? And, finally, what can we know about the universe? If we follow in Newton's footsteps, can humans figure everything out? And, if so, what would be the consequences for religion?

After reading Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (which I would also recommend), Kant perceptively realized that, as human knowledge increases, God will seem less and less likely as an explanation for the natural

world. Being a pious Christian, he reacts by attempting to set a firm limit to the reach of human knowledge. This effort, paradoxically, leads Kant to conclude that all metaphysical and logical 'proofs' of God's existence are insufficient, and that humans will never be able to know for sure if there is a God. The upshot of this is that humans will also never be able to *disprove* God's existence, leaving room for faith.

When I first read this book, I was very taken by his thinking, and found Kant to be a profound genius. Well, I still think he's a profound genius; but now, however, after reading more philosophy and reflecting on Kant's system, I am somewhat less convinced, and think there are some fatal errors in his reasoning. That being said, nobody can deny that Kant is a superlative philosopher—scrupulous, methodical, fantastically ambitious—and deserves to be read, and read, and read again. After all, one doesn't read philosophers in order to agree with them. Precisely the reverse.

[\(less\)](#)

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* marks what is more or less a beginning of philosophy. It is no longer possible to go back behind his Copernican revolution, as if one could do philosophy without taking into account the subject or consciousness. This turn toward subjectivity is only tightened with the Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian turns toward language. Both naive empiricism (Hume, Locke, etc) and strict rationalism (Leibniz, Wolff, etc) are thoroughly overcome, synthesized if you will. Of course there remain Plato and Aristotle whom we will never be without, but they belong in a sense to an earlier dispensation of thought. And despite advances in the natural sciences, the world in which we live and have our being is Kantian, which is to say, still Euclidian and Newtonian. It is only from this subjective position that we embark upon scientific investigations into nature in general.

But of course we will always go back and read and philosophize with those greatest minds. Back to Leibniz and Spinoza (but not Wolff), Locke and Hume, Descartes and his crowd, Aquinas and Augustine along with those countless assembled together as 'medieval', without fail to Plato and Aristotle, to Parmenides and Heraclitus. And we will travel to China and India and discover there this same spirit of thought. But in so far as we understand philosophical progress, in so far as we understand philosophical thinking in its historical dimension, something happened with Kant's critique which cannot be undone. Insofar as all systematic thinking endeavors to overcome a presupposed dualism (viz Descartes' two substances), it is with Kant that we first see an opening, that "the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience."

However one fails to say it, one cannot overemphasize the determinative role of Kant in the history of philosophy, and in the very possibility of philosophy, of thinking. Yes, there is something inadequate in Kant's methodology. Hegel clears up some of this. Another beginning is made later with Husserl. But the overcoming of alienated thought begins here; the turn toward the thinking subject, which is the heart of philosophy, begins with Kant. As does its grounding as science, as knowledge.

But too a word about his 'difficulty.' Thinking is difficult. Philosophy is difficult. Knowing is difficult. What we novice thinkers have to gain here -- and we must put aside this silly quip about how Kant can't write -- is a mode of real thinking. As Marguerite Young said, Style *is* thinking. And Kant's tortuous syntax reflects not only teaching philosophy to speak German (which Hegel was still endeavoring to accomplish) but because also the nature of Kant's matter, the *Sache*, is difficult and does not give itself lightly. Alone Kant wrote and published four different versions of the transcendental deduction of the categories, not because he didn't know how to express himself, but because the matter itself had never previously been attempted. And here too I find it advantageous, in so far as one lends oneself to learn to think, to follow a translation which most closely mirrors the mode of thought within the German language. There is at least some nugget of truth to Heidegger's quip that Being speaks only German and Greek.

There is no easy first avenue into Kant's work except that one has already accomplished his Copernican revolution. And to do so on one's own is perhaps comparable to learning the calculus or elementary particle physics on one's own. Philosophy is available to all, but it is also so easy to miss, to misrecognize philosophy as mere wisdom or opinion. But to take philosophy as real cognition, thought, knowledge, to find one's way behind both the methods and results of religion and the natural sciences, is a real accomplishment. To find one's way to fundamental principles from which all experience springs is no simple task. [\(less\)](#)

Both frightfully obscure and logically scrupulous, Kant functions sort of like a philosophical litmus test. Many a metaphysical charlatan (Lacan, Žižek, et. al.) has aped his mystifying prose-style without any attempt to match his rigour. And meanwhile, the most provincial of the analytic camp, unduly equating "abstruseness" with "bullshit,"

write him off as a mere historical oddity.

But the truth of the matter is that the *Critique*—Kant's magnum opus—constitutes one of the most inventive, meticulous and edifying works of philosophical mind-fuckery ever to be writ.

In a nutshell, the *Critique* finds Kant arguing for the doctrine of *transcendental idealism*, which asserts that our knowledge of the world only extends to the *phenomenal* (how things appear to us), rather than the *noumenal* (how things exist irrespective of us). Indeed, mustn't all possible knowledge and experience first pass through the lens of our own subjectivity? (Not that [everyone](#) will agree with this claim.)

That being said, Kant's view has more than its fair share of problems. For instance, the "Transcendental Aesthetic," in which he argues that all (human) experience is spatially and temporally conditioned, seems rather problematic—especially in the face of modern scientific conceptions of space and time. Even so, it would still need to be determined which of Kant's subsequent claims suffer as a result.

But perhaps the largest issue facing *transcendental idealism* is exegetical in nature.

Upon its initial publication, many readers of the *Critique* took it to express a particularly sophisticated version of Berkeley's so-called "mystic idealism," which led Kant to include a rather pointed rebuttal in subsequent pressings. And even though Kant takes obvious pains to differentiate logic from psychology (the *Critique* proceeds along the former grounds), some modern scientists have read Kant's *categories* as anticipating certain neurological circuits.

However, one of the most important debates in Kantian scholarship has been between the *dual object* and *dual aspect* interpretations of the *Critique*. According to the former, Kant believed *noumena* and *phenomena* to be two related but ultimately separate types of entity, whereas the latter holds that *phenomena* simply constitute the perceptible "aspect" of *noumena*.

Thus, it's not even clear *what* Kant's view truly *is*—at least in its particulars. So perhaps it'd be best to withhold any judgment regarding its ultimate truth or falsity...

Yet if the *Critique* is so difficult, and its arguments so terribly obscure, why should we even bother with it in the first place? Whilst perusing this book—a process which took up the better part of two years—I assembled a list of reasons for why *Critique* deserves its elevated position within the history of Western philosophy. Here's what I came up with:

(1) For taking the "negative" empiricism of Hume, which is as frightening as it is cogent, and combining it with an explanation for why the world still seems to make at least an iota of sense—i.e., finding a middle road between empiricism and rationalism.

(2) For constructing a devastating critique of *speculative metaphysics*. (Sorry, Leibnitz.)

(3) For replacing metaphysical arguments from *speculative reason* with metaphysical arguments from *practical reason*. That is, even if a metaphysical proposition is impossible to prove, it doesn't follow that we should not believe in it.

(3.1) For instance, either (a) free will exists or (b) we live in a thoroughly deterministic universe. Let's say we live in a thoroughly deterministic universe, in which case all of our beliefs will be accordingly determined, and hence we would simply and inexorably believe one of these propositions or the other. But now suppose that we truly enjoy the power of choice. If we have free will but fail to recognize this fact, we'll likely also fail to take responsibility for our actions. Therefore, we should—according to the dictates of *practical reason*—believe in the existence of free will, even if we can't come up with any airtight theoretical proof.

(4) For recognizing that all possible experience necessarily conforms to certain cognitive categories.

(5) For inventing the *transcendental argument*, in which the existence of some entity is deduced according to the preconditions for possible experience.

(6) For developing the doctrine of *transcendental idealism*.

(7) For formulating some pretty ingenious arguments against the then prominent theological proofs; and on the way, possibly laying the groundwork for second-order logic.

(8) For offering a (metalogical) account for why logic seems to be such a useful tool of inquiry, philosophical or otherwise.

A word of warning to the potential reader: this behemoth requires quite a lot of background knowledge—the empiricism of Locke, Berkeley and especially Hume; the rationalism of Leibniz; and even a dash of Newton (*à propos* the absolutist conception of space) and Aristotle (*à propos* the search for ontological categories) thrown in for good measure. But for those serious about philosophy, the *Critique*—Guyer and Wood's top-notch translation in particular—makes for an indispensable read.

I believe this is the sort of work that most people quickly imagine when they hear that terrifying word "philosophy." As the introduction succinctly states, Kant's *Critique* "though probably philosophy's single most acclaimed work, has remained notorious for being obscure and excessively difficult more or less since the day it was published."

There are essentially three camps of opinion that you'll find concerning this work:

1. It's really absolutely wonderful (I'm not too sure how these people live day to day, actually)
2. It's wonderful because those people said so and I don't want to look foolish (held by those who are more concerned with appearing philosophical than thinking like one).
3. It's hideously atrocious for a variety of reasons (this view is the most balanced).

Typically, I attempt to approach philosophical works with an open mind and a genuine interest in what the author has to say. What is particularly frustrating is when a writer is so terrible at writing that his views are obscured by his poor prose. This makes it nearly impossible to accurately critique what he is saying. In my opinion, a work of philosophy must be clear enough that an adequately educated person could understand the vast majority of it. Plato would certainly fit into this category since he was not simply an excellent philosopher, but a skilled writer as well.

Immanuel Kant does not impress me. He attempts to write an absurdly long book on his views of reason and knowledge, and by the end the vast majority of readers are left with almost no further understanding on the debate. If he were a better writer he could have done the same thing in three hundred pages or less with great lucidity. Instead he fumbles his way through his bloated subject with soul-crushing dullness. I appreciate even writers that I thoroughly disagree with if they're able to construct their arguments with precision and exceptional skill in clarity (such as Machiavelli's *The Prince*). Kant fits neither of these qualifications.

Judging on my empirical knowledge of great philosophy, I believe Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to be entirely undeserving of the lofty accolades bestowed upon it.