**Kant and Theoretical Inquiry**

Critics from the time of Jacobi onwards have charged that Kant’s philosophy is deeply inconsistent. On the one hand, having been convinced by Hume that discursive reason is unable to arrive at any substantive truth and thus that traditional “dogmatic” metaphysics is impossible, Kant insists that our knowledge is limited to the realm of possible experience and can never exceed those limits in such a way as to arrive at any substantive metaphysical truth. On the other hand, Kant’s entire “transcendental” project seems impossible without making reference to, and claims about, things and processes that, even on Kant’s own terms, cannot be objects of any possible experience. Indeed, as Jacobi argues, the very claim that noumena lie beyond our knowledge already makes a knowledge claim about such entities, one that cannot be justified on Kant’s own principles.[[1]](#footnote-1) More than this, Kant makes many claims about unobserved and unobservable entities and processes such as the categories, the various kinds of synthesis, the faculties of sensibility, understanding, and reason, as well as the transcendental unity of apperception as necessary conditions of possible experience.[[2]](#footnote-2) In his *Refutation of Idealism*, Kant insists that the existence of objects in space external to me is a necessary condition for the unity of consciousness and thus for subjective experience as well.[[3]](#footnote-3) This, however, seems flatly inconsistent with his claim that we can know nothing about such entities. Again, Kant refers to phenomena sometimes as mere appearances, other times as representations or even representations of representations, still other times as things-in-themselves insofar as we are aware of them in experience. Kant thus implies, in some contexts, that things in themselves are never present in consciousness except as represented thereby mind-dependent phenomena, and in others that they are present there as those very phenomena.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is not difficult, in that case, to agree with those early critics of Kant who claim that the very project of attempting to set limits to reason is stillborn, since to apprehend a limit is to at the same time apprehend that which lies beyond the limit as that which corresponds to and constitutes it.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In response to this, critics of Kant are divided about which way to go. Those of an idealist bent tend to see him as a transitional figure on the way to full-blown German idealism, and resolve the apparent inconsistencies in Kant’s philosophy by driving him to the consistent subjectivism inherent in his philosophy as articulated by Reinhold, Fichte, and Schelling. Others, unwilling to abandon Kant to the idealists, insist that Kant’s strictures against knowledge of “transcendent” entities need to be loosened and the contrary claims about our awareness of things-in-themselves be taken seriously, so that Kant turns out to be some sort of realist, and even a kind of dogmatic metaphysician after all.[[6]](#footnote-6) Some recent and contemporary defenders of Kant, however, attempt to reconstruct his project in such a way as to preserve his consistency and to clarify his claims in such a way as to show that Kant’s position, precisely as he developed it, is coherent after all.

I

According to Kant’s recent defenders, Kant is looking for a middle way between what he calls *transcendental realism*, the view that we can have knowledge of things-in-themselves precisely as *noumena* (and which thus, ironically, includes Absolute Idealism as one of its varieties) and *empirical idealism*, the view Kant attributes to Berkeley but is perhaps better represented by the phenomenalism of Hume, according to which nothing exists except ideas externally related to one another in accordance with laws of association. According to the defenders, Kant closes the iron door against transcendental realism and insists – as he says over and over again – that there is no way back to dogmatic metaphysics and no way forward to any new science of metaphysics such as that envisaged by Reinhold, Fichte, and Schelling. That way lies only transcendental illusion of the sort Kant warns us against in the *Prolegomena*, even as he predicts that reason will continue to face the transcendental temptation and to succumb to its blandishments.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nevertheless, as Kant proclaims in his open letter on Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, the critical philosophy is for all times and neither needs nor can be superseded by any other philosophy.[[8]](#footnote-8) As for empirical idealism, which is his more immediate target in the *Refutation of Idealism*, Kant intends to show that experience cannot be accounted for solely in terms of its *matter* (its sense-content and the properties of that content) but also requires that we posit certain *formal* properties and structures to experience in order to account for its very possibility, something that Berkeley and Hume take for granted.

In order to accomplish his aim, Kant must walk the razor’s edge that separates transcendental realism from empirical idealism, avoiding having to make any substantive claims about anything outside of experience while at the same time avoiding the reduction of experience to its matter. Recent defenders of Kant not only maintain that this seemingly impossible balancing act is possible, but that Kant has actually accomplished it in his writings, so that all of the traditional criticisms of Kant are either simply the result of a failure to understand him or the product of prejudice against his ideas on the part of those who find them too radical or his strictures too confining.[[9]](#footnote-9) The key, apparently, is to understand what Kant means by “transcendental” and “possible experience.” Something is “transcendental” and posited as such if and only if it is a formal requirement of possible experience; in turn, “possible experience” does not mean “such as to be a possible object of experience for us as we actually experience it,” but rather to be a possible object of experience for any conceivable subject *in principle*. It is therefore a purely abstract investigation and does not posit anything as real or existent, nor require the existence of anything, in order to be posited as necessary for the possibility of experience, not even the actual occurrence of experience itself. However, it does entail that *if* there is any such thing as experience, something that it is Kant’s concern neither to confirm nor deny within the ambit of the critical philosophy, then these formal structures and properties must be present. Thus, in positing the forms of intuition, the categories, the various kinds of synthesis, and so on, Kant is not committed to the actual existence of any of these things, either as contents of experience or as *noumena*, and thus is not making any sort of substantive claim about reality. Instead, all of Kant’s claims are couched within the second-order context of his theory and thus lack any first-order reference to anything either within or beyond experience.

From this point of view, most of the seemingly unanswerable criticisms of Kant can be seen to rest on a mistake about his intentions and exposed as merely question-begging. Since Kant’s discussion of space and time, the categories, synthesis, and so on is all a second-order endeavor, the various entities and processes it describes are merely hypothetical posits to which no ontological commitment has been granted. Because of this, the claims that Kant makes about the transcendental elements of experience are not to be judged in accordance with the correspondence theory of truth. Instead, they are to be judged in accordance with their internal coherence in relation to the object of theoretical inquiry, which is to state the formal conditions for the possibility of coherent experience, conditions Kant believes to be knowable *a priori*. Consistent with his own principles, Kant neither asserts nor denies that these conditions are met or the entities and processes that realize these conditions obtain – they *could* do so, but it would be mere dogmatism to claim that this is the case.

So understood, Kant’s philosophy is a response to Hume in one sense but not another. It is not a refutation of Hume’s view insofar as Hume presumes a transcendental realist position like that adopted by “dogmatic” metaphysicians who try to use reason to prove substantive claims about the nature of things. Since Kant, under Hume’s influence, has already rejected transcendental realism as inevitably doomed to end in skepticism, he is no longer concerned to answer Hume’s skepticism in that respect and it is a mistake to suppose that this is Kant’s project. In fact, Kant says so over and over again in his critical works. As such, the success of the transcendental philosophy cannot be judged, as many, both in Kant’s time and our own have done, on the basis of whether or not Kant refutes Hume.[[10]](#footnote-10) Instead, Kant’s recent defenders contend that Kant calls into question the assumption (shared by the dogmatists and by Hume) that theoretical inquiry has to be the pursuit of substantive truth in the correspondence sense and must be regarded as a failure if it fails to arrive at its discovery.[[11]](#footnote-11) To the contrary, Kant’s transcendental idealism intends to provide a seamless alternative to transcendental realism, a way of doing non-dogmatic metaphysics that distinguishes truth from illusion, reality from appearance by reference to the formalities of experience, which are knowable *a priori* and are such that apart from which there can be no coherent experience. We are thus rationally justified in believing that those formalities will govern whatever coherent experiences we do have for as long as we enjoy them. At the same time, we neither have nor need worry to about what might happen if “everything changed tomorrow,” since in that case nothing would matter anyway so far as cognition is concerned, since cognition would be impossible. Kant confidently believes that this is all that is required for mathematical physics and objective morality; as to the rest of philosophy, it earns our interest and credence only to the extent that it lends itself to the pursuit of these twin projects of theoretical inquiry.

Recent defenders of Kant reject the traditional charge that reason cannot be used to critique itself or to establish its limits through its own immanent operation. Indeed, Kant has shown us precisely how we can do this. While we can *conceive* of things existing in themselves outside the realm of experience, our belief that we can *know* that any such things exist or what they are like turns out to rest on mere transcendental illusion, the mistake that arises from applying concepts that find their proper employment only within experience to that which putatively exists and is constituted independently of it. We discover this when we realize that our attempt to justify our knowledge-claims about such entities results in contradiction and incoherence. It does not follow that these things do not exist apart from consciousness – that would be the very dogmatism that the critical philosophy intends to rid us of – but only that we can know nothing about these entities and that our concepts of them can at best have a regulative function in theoretical inquiry. As such, they cannot be used constitutively, to refer to any object of possible experience and thus to anything that we can know in Kant’s technical sense of that term. In functioning regulatively, these concepts merely specify ideals to guide theoretical inquiry or as presuppositions of the moral life, neither of which requires anything more than the possibility of noumenal existence in order to provide this regulative function. This the critical philosophy provides precisely through its agnosticism about the noumenal realm, even if we extend it (as Kant does not) to agnosticism about the very existence of such a realm of being.

Current defenders of Kant have also worked hard to clarify the sense in which Kant is an idealist. Stung by critics who assimilated his critical philosophy to the subjective idealism of Berkeley, Kant insisted that this was a willful misreading of his views, which he attempted to clarify in his *Prolegomena*, in the B-edition *Refutation of Idealism* (added to the *First Critique* in 1787) and was still attempting to clarify as late as the *Opus Postumum*.[[12]](#footnote-12) Kant interprets Berkeley as a subjective idealist who denies the existence of anything outside the mind on the ground that the very notion of such a being is incoherent and meaningless. Further, Berkeley is a phenomenalist who reduces material things to collections of mind-dependent sense-data existing only in consciousness. Although there can be no serious doubt that Kant was an *epistemological* idealist, restricting knowledge within the bounds of possible experience, he differs from Berkeley on both these points. Kant neither affirms nor denies the existence of matter or of things existing outside of consciousness; he accepts Berkeley’s premises but not his conclusion which would, after all, carry us beyond the bounds of experience into the domain of dogmatic metaphysics.[[13]](#footnote-13) In addition, Kant denies that the objects of experience are reducible to sense-data, maintaining that phenomena are appearances of things-in-themselves, understood not as things existing external to consciousness, but instead as the things that we refer to as appearing there as objects of possible experience. These things-in-themselves understood as things-for-us are neither reducible to nor exhausted by their appearances in consciousness. For that reason, phenomena or appearances can therefore function as representations of things-in-themselves. What makes these things (what we might call) *things-for-us* is not their ontological independence from mind, even if they possess it, but rather their objective constitution in accordance with the transcendental structures of mind as hypothetically reconstructed in Kant’s critical philosophy. We can thus have objective, even certain knowledge about them that is not constituted by our merely passive apprehension of their appearances. They are thus, in a special, technical sense that applies only within Kant’s critical philosophy, objectively real independently of our awareness of them regardless of whether they exist as *noumena*. As such, whether they are real in the “transcendent” sense as noumena is not only an unanswerable question, but one that does not need an answer within the limits of Kant’s system.

In the *Refutation of Idealism*, Kant makes a further point against Berkeley. Berkeley’s theory of vision asserts that the apparent tri-dimensionality of space is an illusion. The visual field is, in fact, a “parti-colored plane,” i.e. a two-dimensional array of shapes and colors without any natural depth. Depth-perception is learned and is the result of the coordination of the sense of sight with that of touch, which ultimately becomes a settled habit by means of which we constitute those things that are higher and smaller in the visual field with things that are farther away, those lower and larger with things that are closer in space. Three-dimensional space, then, is a systematic illusion.[[14]](#footnote-14) Kant attacks this notion by insisting that according to his philosophy, three-dimensional space is not an illusion. Tri-dimensionality is, rather, an objective feature of our visual experience. Kant does so using a curious argument that even Kant’s recent defenders are unable to make fully intelligible to me. Essentially, however, Kant tries to argue that the temporal ordering of events in experience (as successive in time, i.e. earlier and later in regard to each other) and thus as present to inner sense is impossible apart from the apprehension of these events as representations of enduring objects in three-dimensional space as present to outer sense. More than this, the possibility of space as the form of intuition for outer sense requires an unchanging cosmic cyclorama against which those changing objects are arrayed in such a manner as to possess temporal duration, something that Kant provides for space by identifying this ubiquitous backdrop with his own special account of matter. The existence of matter, in this sense (which is not the sense used by modern physicists) must also then be affirmed as necessary for the possibility of coherent experience in Kant’s special sense of that notion. About matter as a noumenal reality we may, and indeed must, remain agnostic.

On the basis of this analysis, Kant makes bold to claim that the existence of objects outside of us in space is a transcendentally necessary condition for the possibility of coherent experience. However, Kant’s claim is misleading unless it is understood in a manner contrary to its most natural reading. Kant is not claiming that there exists a three-dimensional space populated by objects existing outside of our minds. He cannot do so without abandoning the fundamental commitments of his critical analysis of knowledge. Instead, Kant is simply claiming that space, as the form of outer sense, is inherently and intrinsically three-dimensional. For this reason, we apprehend its contents as appearances of three-dimensional objects and so (in Kant’s special sense) those objects exist as objects of possible experience in accordance with the *a priori* conditions for the very possibility of experience. They are thus, in Kant’s technical sense, real things, i.e., possess objective existence independently of our experience of them, although to be real in this sense that does not require us to posit them as extramentally existent. Here Kant appears to model the finite human mind on the model of Newton’s *sensorium* of God, the ontological realization of absolute space as part of the Divine mind.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Nothing about this account requires Kant to abandon his epistemological idealism, which restricts our knowledge only to possible experience and its transcendentally necessary conditions considered just as such without any ontological commitment. All of this is still very much at the level of second-order analysis of the conditions for coherent experience, which carries with it no ontological commitments. Kant is simply arguing, on *a priori* grounds, that Berkeley’s account of our experience of three-dimensional space cannot be correct, and thus that three-dimensional space is not an illusion produced by the interaction of the senses of sight and touch. When we assert that material things exist, we merely mean to say that they are objective, i.e. as though produced in accordance with the categories by means of imaginative synthesis. They are not just sense-phenomena, but appearances of things-in-themselves understood as things-for-us, present in without being exhausted by our experience of them and the “as if” causes of their appearances in consciousness. We can thus think of these things as more or less what Mill and Russell would have called “permanent objects of sensation.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Nevertheless, these objects need not be thought to exist in any sense except as constructible in and comprehensible from our subjective experience of them, precisely as objects or things experienced rather than as Berkeleyan collections of sense-data. At the same time, however, we can be perfectly agnostic about the actual existence of such objects, treating them as merely heuristic or as rational constructions from experience in accordance with the perspective of the Critical Philosophy. Thus, what we know about the things that appear in experience exceeds the limits of any particular experience or even the collective experiences of all mankind without requiring that we justify any claims about things-in-themselves existing as (supposed) noumenal beings constituted independently of all experience. About things-in-themselves conceived of in this way we must, as ever, remain agnostic.

II

Let us suppose that the recent defenders of Kant are on the right track, and that Kant’s philosophy is internally consistent in the manner described above. What then? As much as one might admire the originality and cleverness of the Kantian solution to the basic problems of knowledge, I think that one might still feel a certain sense of disappointment with Kant’s solution once it is presented as a consistent philosophical theory. This reaction is similar to that one feels when first introduced to the compatibilist position in the philosophy of human action. The dispute between proponents of contracausal free will and mechanistic causal determinism seems intractable, which seems all the more vexing since both sides represent something that most of us would like to retain. When compatibilism is first broached, it is presented as the view that free will and determinism are not necessarily opposed to one another and can be integrated into a seamlessly coherent worldview. This, it seems, is the answer to our prayers, a way of having our cake and eating it, too – *if* only the compatibilist can show us how it can *really* be the case that free will and determinism are both true. Imagine our disappointment, then, when we discover that compatibilism does not represent a solution to the problem in the terms that it was originally proposed, but consists primarily in a proposal for linguistic reform. *Of course*, there can be no *rapprochement* between free will and determinism as these notions are classically understood – they are clearly and obviously incompatible notions. This is confirmed by the sort of proposal that the compatibilist offers us as the “resolution” of the dispute. We are asked to *reconceive* the notions of “free” and “responsible” in such a way as not to require commitment to freedom of choice as a necessary condition for their proper application. For an action to be *free* is simply for it to be *voluntary* and for one to be *morally responsible* for one’s actions merely to be subject to *praise*, *blame*, *punishment*, or *reward* for one’s voluntary actions. One’s actions are *unfree*, and responsibility for those actions mitigated or removed, only when we are coerced by some internal force or external agent to act *involuntarily*, i.e., contrary to our desires, wishes, character, or better judgment. In this way, we are told, we can retain our ordinary judgments and practices without having to defend the *metaphysical* belief in contracausal free will, which many compatibilists suggest is ultimately incoherent.

While many philosophers and theologians have embraced compatibilism as retaining everything for which we thought we needed free will with none of the metaphysical costs, those committed to incompatibilism (of either variety) generally find compatibilism simply beside the point. For example, both Kant and William James scorned compatibilism and could not take it seriously. William James called compatibilism “a quagmire of evasion,” while Kant excoriated compatibilist freedom as nothing more than “the freedom of the turnspit.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Certainly, anyone can see that the resolution of the dispute offered by the compatibilist is one-sided, inasmuch as it concedes the substantive truth of determinism and denies the possibility of free will, retaining only the empty husk of that view in order to permit us to retain our “ordinary” judgments and practices concerning the assignment of moral responsibility. Even this is questionable, however. One might well be inclined to say that even if compatibilism is accepted as a coherent position, it robs these judgments and practices of any sort of point we might have thought they possessed. Indeed, Hard Determinists like Clarence Darrow, B. F. Skinner, and Saul Smilansky attack compatibilism precisely because they find the ordinary judgments and practices it licenses false, at best to no purpose, and even pernicious.[[18]](#footnote-18) In a deterministic universe, there can be no room for moral criticism of others or for the assignment of praise, blame, punishment, and reward on the basis of moral desert. These merely add to the suffering of the unlucky in order to allow the rest of us, luckier ones, to vent our spleen and bask in false feelings of moral superiority. Even if the necessity of sanctions against malefactors is granted on self-interested pragmatic grounds, there is no need to heap moral abuse on offenders in addition to those sanctions or to treat those sanctions as somehow deserved as a matter of justice. Indeed, once the false ideas of freedom and human dignity have been put aside, we will be in a better position to devise and apply sanctions in such a way that they achieve socially desirable aims. As such, nothing is lost by abandoning the notions of freedom and moral responsibility, even in the relatively empty and innocuous senses that the compatibilist can assign to them. While the promise of compatibilism is initially hopeful enough for us to find it intriguing, it amounts to very little in the end.

Kant’s theoretical philosophy, understood as an attempt to find a middle path between dogmatic metaphysics on the one hand and skepticism on the other bids fair to be almost exactly parallel to compatibilism as the middle path between belief in free will and belief in determinism. Just as the compatibilist resolves the substantive dispute in favor of determinism and only attempts to rescue moral responsibility from its grasp through a kind of redefinition of the terms “free” and “responsible,” Kant gives the palm to skepticism over dogmatism, conceding that reason is incapable of providing us with any substantive knowledge about reality.[[19]](#footnote-19) At the same time, Kant attempts to insulate mathematical physics and objective morality (which he is loath to give up) from skeptical critique, along with a few remnants of metaphysics and religion “within the limits of reason alone” capable of providing some pragmatic support for these centrally privileged concerns. He does this largely by attempting to do philosophy in such a way as to avoid making any substantive claims about anything real in the “dogmatic” sense. In the course of doing this, Kant is forced to redefine terms like “real,” “true,” “experience,” “object,” and so on to eliminate reference to anything substantive and thus subject to skeptical critique. The result is that while this permits us to continue to speak about the real, truth, experience, its elements, and objects just as we did before, we can mean by this talk nothing even remotely like what we normally intend to say. Like the compatibilist, Kant manages to save our ordinary judgments and practices – perhaps merely as a *façon-de-parler* – while sacrificing their substance.

Kant leads from strength by first applying this strategy to space and time in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*. Space and time considered in relation to possible experience, he argues, are merely *forms of intuition* rather than features of the external world. This allows Kant to resolve the dispute between Leibniz and Newton and (in the *first antinomy*) the question whether space and time are infinite. Since space is merely a form of intuition, and thus nothing in itself, it is neither absolute nor relative in relation to its objects, so that the entire dispute between Leibniz and Newton can be put aside as idling. Further and for the same reason, while space and time are potentially infinite (we can always imagine further space beyond that encountered in experience and previous moments of time prior to any moment we may choose) it will always be encountered in experience as limited or bounded relative to the perspective of the experiencer. Space and time are thus neither finite nor infinite considered in themselves and the entire dispute revealed as what the logical positivists would have called a “pseudo-problem.”

Kant’s diagnosis of the error that leads to these false dilemmas puts it down to the doctrine of *transcendental realism*, the view that discursive reason can arrive at the truth about mind-independent realities through the use of concepts derived from experience. While remaining agnostic about whether any such objects exist – that would itself be a dogmatic claim that it lies beyond reason’s power either to prove or disprove – Kant still maintains that even if they do, they are nothing to us so far as knowledge is concerned. To this extent, skepticism is correct: reason is powerless to arrive at any substantive knowledge about things-in-themselves considered as *noumena*. This, however, does not mean that we cannot have knowledge about things-in-themselves conceived of as the objects of experience represented by *phenomena* in experience, if there is such a thing as experience. On this view, phenomena are the appearances of things-in-themselves insofar as they are things-for-us posited to be objectively constituted independently of, and thus not limited to, actual individual or collective experience, by the mechanism of imaginative synthesis governed by the categories. The phenomenalism of Berkeley and Hume is thus avoided. At the same time, these objects are posited merely as objects of possible experience without assigning them any particular ontological status. These objects might be nothing more than Vaihinger’s fictional objects of the understanding, or they could be *noumena*, but Kant’s epistemological idealism bids us to remain agnostic about all of this.

The burden of the critical philosophy is to explain how this knowledge of objects is possible. Since we can have no reason to suppose that these objects actually exist outside of our own minds, we cannot blithely assume that they are somehow the causes of the knowledge we putatively possess, even if they do and they are. More than this, in Kant’s view, mere correspondence to noumena is not sufficient for truth and knowledge – he retains from rationalism the conviction that genuine knowledge can only be of the necessary or of that which is grounded in something necessary. The foundations of knowledge, therefore, have to be conceived of as *a priori*, both in the sense that they are constituted prior to and independently of experience (hence knowable apart from it) and in the sense that they are necessary for the possibility of experience (hence constitutively prior to it). Of course, even this project remains very much a matter of “as if” – the mere possibility of experience does not justify the claim that there *is* any actual experience.[[20]](#footnote-20) At most, all that we know based on the critical philosophy is that *if* there is experience, then it must take such-and-such a form, a claim that in no way requires that experience actually occurs or exists. While the matter of experience, derived from sensation, is merely contingent and “given,” the intelligibility of experience is derived from its form, provided by space, time, and the categories through the process of synthesis. Kant labors mightily to analyze, describe, and argue for the transcendental necessity of these elements and processes, although Kant scholarship remains divided as to whether or not Kant succeeds in any of this.

Regardless of how we resolve that issue, the question inevitably arises concerning whether or not Kant’s project is ultimately worth all the effort. Even if compatibilism is coherent, compatibilist freedom hardly seems like a form of freedom worth having, since we have it willy-nilly regardless of what we think or do, simply by default, and as a matter of mere luck. Even a guided missile or smart bomb has freedom in this sense, even though we know that its apparently intelligent and purposive behavior is merely that and really only the automatic, outward expression of its prior programing, something over which it has no control and to which it makes no independent contribution. In the same way, even if Kant’s philosophy is coherent, it is doubtful whether the hopeful beginning he makes in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* yields anything worth endorsing. In order to avoid making any substantive claims open to skeptical objection, Kant so transforms our notions of “real,” “true,” “experience,” “object,” and so on that each of these terms becomes a technical term within Kant’s system of thought, and loses any connection either to everyday discourse or the philosophical dispute that inspired it. Rather than specifying a middle way between dogmatism and skepticism, what Kant ends up doing, in striking parallel to the compatibilist “solution” to the free will problem and his own solution to the problems of space and time, is crafting an alternative intended to make that dispute somehow irrelevant. In so doing, however, Kant crafts an alternative that is so carefully nuanced and hedged about with qualifications that it amounts to very little in the end, lacking any genuine substantive import. Kant pays such a high price to avoid having to face the skeptic and rescues so little that from his grasp that it hardly seems to matter whether or not he succeeds. That is not to say that Kant is not a great and original philosopher, or worth studying, or a source of useful insights serving as food for thought. It is simply to note that the mountain has labored mightily… and brought forth a mouse.

I conclude, then, that if Kant is interpreted as traditional interpreters do as making substantive claims about the mind and the conditions for actual knowledge, then the traditional criticisms are sound and Kant is, after all, incapable of philosophizing within the limits of his own principles. However, if the recent defenders are correct, then Kant’s philosophy is coherent, but no longer says anything interesting or relevant to the problems to which it was intended to provide a solution. Thus, their historical reconstruction of his views makes them of only academic interest. Kant, it seems, is only interesting if he is incoherent and only insofar as he tantalizes us with the possibility that we can arrive at substantive knowledge about reality without a commitment to “dogmatic” metaphysics. On the other hand, if we stay within the ambit of his own theoretical construct and accept its limits and strictures, we find that we are unable to use theoretical inquiry to arrive at anything substantive at all and without any compensation for our pains except the satisfaction of a scrupulous conscience that, being metaphysically abstemious, finds itself without guilt in its own eyes. However, for most of us, cursed (as Kant himself admits) with a stronger lust for real truth, this is not enough. We must either deny ourselves unnaturally or succumb to the internal dynamic of the intellect and become its whoremongers. Barring these alternatives, we need to take another, sober and measured, look at the problematic to which Kant’s solution proves inadequate.

III

If one would undertake a genuinely transcendental investigation into the possibility of substantive knowledge, then one ought to begin with the necessary conditions for the possibility of successful theoretical inquiry, here meaning theoretical inquiry that arrives at the apprehension of substantive truth. This is not because there is, or even can be, any question whether such inquiry is, in fact, possible. Such a question can be raised, let alone resolved, only on the supposition that the answer to that question is “yes, as a matter of fact, it is possible.” How do we know this? Well, since it’s not obvious that we cannot raise the question (there is no apparent impossibility or contradiction in that supposition), we can only resolve that question using theoretical inquiry, and thus discursive reason, in an attempt to determine its correct answer. However, this already presupposes that successful theoretical inquiry is possible as a necessary condition for even so much as undertaking to investigate that question in the first place. For suppose that we were to arrive at the conclusion that successful theoretical inquiry is not possible. In that case, we would be unable to affirm that conclusion on the basis of that line of inquiry, for we would have proven that no instance of theoretical inquiry could terminate in a successful outcome, *including this one*. One’s line of inquiry, then, could not successfully terminate and so could not justify the conclusion to which it seems to lead. It seems, then, that no successful exercise in theoretical inquiry could lead us to that conclusion. For the same reason, successful theoretical inquiry into this matter could only lead us to the conclusion that such inquiry was possible, so that on this scenario, the possibility of successful theoretical inquiry can only be the foregone conclusion of the inquiry. In that case, however, theoretical inquiry concerning this question is either impossible or superfluous, so that in either case, such an inquiry would be otiose. Given this result, the answer to that question from which we began can only be “yes, it is possible.” It does not follow from this, of course, that successful theoretical inquiry is *in fact* possible, only that we could never have any reason to doubt that this is the case, since any such reason for doubting the possibility of successful theoretical inquiry produced by such inquiry would thereby undermine itself.

Neither should we feel threatened by the specter that all instances of theoretical inquiry might fail by being somehow *inconclusive*, for example, by failing to resolve any of the questions that it investigates or terminating in any conclusion at all. The previous paragraph, after all, realizes in itself an instance of successful theoretical inquiry in its own right, leading us to the conclusion that we can never have a good reason to doubt that successful theoretical inquiry is possible. Thus, in excluding the idea that we could ever have a reason for doubting that successful theoretical inquiry is possible, we have likewise excluded any reason we might have for doubting whether any instance of theoretical inquiry could ever *actually* terminate in a successful result. Of course, the extent to which successful theoretical inquiry can lead us to substantive truth remains an open question even on this result. Even so, successful theoretical inquiry cannot be ruled out in principle on *a priori* grounds. Indeed, even one instance of successful theoretical inquiry, such as this one for example, is sufficient to ground the possibility of s successful theoretical inquiry in other instances.

Nor does the assumption that successful theoretical inquiry is possible, necessary even for a consideration of that question, involve any invidious circularity, any more that Descartes’s reliance on the principle of clear and distinct ideas involves the circularity traditionally ascribed to it. One can make a methodological assumption, either explicitly or tacitly, for the sake of engaging in a theoretical inquiry without being committed to its substantive truth, just as one can devise an hypothesis in mathematics or natural science simply in order to draw out its implications. In most individual instances of theoretical inquiry there is no direct connection between the activity of theoretical inquiry and its presuppositions; these can always be called into question from some wider reference-frame or higher point of view. However, there are exceptions to this general rule and the current discussion is one of them. The current line of theoretical inquiry reveals to us that the presuppositions of the activity of theoretical inquiry itself are not merely methodological, but have to be regarded as substantive if theoretical inquiry is to be possible at all. Even to investigate the possibility of successful theoretical inquiry presupposes that such inquiry is possible, being itself an example of that very activity. Even if we entertain this possibility solely for purposes of theoretical investigation, we will soon realize that even this very act of entertaining requires a substantive commitment to that possibility and so to whatever substantive presuppositions upon which that activity rests. A skeptic who resists this is lumbered with a self-stultifying position that cannot be either rationally justified or even coherently stated within the ambit of theoretical inquiry, one outside of which there is no place to stand. A skeptic of this sort, even if he is a Hume, can be safely ignored if only because, in the end, such a skeptic can literally have nothing to say.

I conclude, then, that it is possible for us to inquire into the presuppositions of theoretical inquiry. This question is not resolved simply through theoretical inquiry’s being possible. Instead, it remains an independent topic of discussion. Since I have discussed this question elsewhere at greater length, here I will be brief. Successful theoretical inquiry requires two things: an object of inquiry and an inquiring subject. On the side of the object, there are three presuppositions of rational inquiry: being, truth, and the in-principle possibility of knowledge. Without the first there is no object, hence nothing to inquire into and nothing to serve as the norm for successful theoretical inquiry. Without the second, there is nothing that we can say about the object of inquiry, and so nothing for us to conclude as a result of theoretical inquiry. Without the third, there will be no way for us to tell when we have successfully concluded a particular line of theoretical inquiry.

We can illustrate this by reference to Kant’s own stalking horse in the *First Critique*: “How is *a priori* synthetic knowledge possible?” Even supposing that all Kant means to ask here is what would have to be the case for such knowledge to exist without committing himself to the actual existence of such knowledge, a successful answer to this question, and thus of successful theoretical inquiry into this question, requires that there be *a fact of the matter* concerning the necessary conditions for that possibility that is not constituted merely by the activity of theoretical inquiry itself. The answer to this question, at least, cannot be a mere matter of “as if” but rather of correspondence to those facts linguistically expressible as substantive, and not merely “objective,” truth. Further, for theoretical inquiry to successfully terminate in a propositionally expressible statement of those conditions there will have to be a stable truth, in the correspondence sense as opposed to Kant’s technical sense, about what those conditions are. Finally, in order for me to be able to recognize that truth and thus be able to state it as such, it must be possible in principle for me to know what those conditions are in such a way that I can justify my truth-claim to that effect.

This latter will be possible, in turn, only if I possess reliable cognitive faculties, i.e. only if the sources of my spontaneous judgment are truth-sensitive, truth-directed, and thus generally truth-tracking. It does not follow from this they will be altogether incapable of error, or will yield significant results for theoretical inquiry in a wholly automatic or spontaneous way, without effort or care. All that is required is that such faculties are generally self-correcting and are such that, when methodically applied with due circumspection, they will lead us to the truth. In that case, any errors we do make will be such as to be in principle correctible using those very cognitive faculties themselves, so that any residual or persistent errors will be the consequence of their misuse on the part of the inquirer. Successful theoretical inquiry is thus possible and attainable, though not guaranteed in any particular case without due caution and circumspection or in such a way as to exclude all possibility of revision, at least where contingent propositions are concerned.

Finally, theoretical inquiry has to be the activity of an inquirer, a self-conscious rational subject or *res cogitans* capable of formulating questions concerning matters of fact, formulating potential answers to those questions, and using discursive reasoning and other cognitive faculties in order to determine the truth about those matters-of-fact. Without a self-conscious rational subject to undertake, engage in, and carry theoretical inquiry to a successful conclusion, there can be no successful theoretical inquiry, no rational discourse, and no rational beliefs of any kind. To call this presupposition into question, then, is to eliminate the very possibility of successful theoretical inquiry. At the same time, this result excludes the possibility that any line of successful theoretical inquiry could show that this presupposition is false or even subject to rational doubt. Any such argument or evidence would fatally undermine itself by destroying the very possibility that argument or evidence could justify any claim for anyone. We thus do not need a proof of the existence of the self-conscious rational subject in order to reasonably affirm that claim with perfect confidence. Indeed, if we can affirm *anything at all* that self-conscious rational subject must actually exist to do that affirming, however it may be constituted.

It is to be noted, then, that all of these presuppositions are substantive, requiring first-order ontological commitment and incapable of being relegated to a merely hypothetical or “second-order” inquiry. Even if we begin this line of inquiry with that idea in mind, the course of this inquiry reveals to us that the very possibility of successful theoretical inquiry, even in the case in question, requires that these presuppositions *actually* obtain and does not permit agnosticism on this point. To engage in theoretical inquiry is otiose unless we are willing to commit ourselves to the possibility of that project and thus the actual truth of its presuppositions. These presuppositions, then, are thus transcendental in the sense in which traditional Kant scholars understand it, being *a priori* necessary conditions for the possibility of the activity of theoretical inquiry, but not in the sense as Kant’s recent defenders interpret it, as lacking any first-order ontological commitment. In that respect, it is better that Kant should be inconsistent or even incoherent than that the consistency of his philosophy be bought at such a high price. More than this it is better (and indeed, there is no alternative) for us to affirm these presuppositions rather than to let ourselves be “frighted by the bogey of skepticism” into attempting a self-undermining critique of pure reason. For a bogey, despite Hume’s powerful rhetoric, is all that skepticism can ever be. Instead, let us embrace the dynamism of the human intellect, pursue the substantive truth about the world, and place no limits on reason other than those necessary for the possibility of that very pursuit. Only then will genuine enlightenment be possible and attainable for us – one quite different, I am sure, than that proponents of the Enlightenment such as Shaftsbury, Hume, Voltaire, and Kant tried to palm off on us.

1. See Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1987, 123-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This point was enforced by G. E. Schulze in his *Aenesidemus*, recounted in Beiser, *Reason*, 280-282. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Kemp-Smith, 244-252; see especially 245. No one, so far as I can tell, has even a remotely plausible account of what Kant could possibly mean by the “in space external to me” within the limits of his own theory, i.e. in a way that makes this claim, at least as we would ordinarily understand it, consistent with his strictures on knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a rundown of some of the difficulties of interpretation here, see Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002, 27-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Beiser*, Reason*, 4-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, Arthur W. Collins, *Possible Experience*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1999, attributes a form of Direct Realism to Kant, while Rae Langton’s *Kantian Humility*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998) interprets Kant as something like a Lockean representationalist. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, Lewis White Beck, trans., Indianapolis, IN, Bobbs-Merrill, 1950, 99-103. For a defense of Kant’s views here, see Michelle Greer, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Immanuel Kant, *Philosophical Correspondence*, Arnulf Zweig, ed. and trans., Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 253-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is the thesis of Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Proponents of this traditional interpretation include most of the great figures in twentieth century Kant scholarship stretching from Kemp Smith and Paton to Robert Paul Wolff, Jonathan Bennett, Sir Peter Strawson, and Paul Guyer – none of whom believe that Kant succeeds in doing this; see, most recently, Guyer, *Knowledge Reason and Taste: Kant’s Response to Hume*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2008 and Michael N. Foster, *Kant and Skepticism*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Proponents of this view include W. H. Walsh, Henry Allison, Karl Ameriks, Michelle Greer, and especially Frederick Beiser. See his *German Idealism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002, 17-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On the later development of Kant’s views on the phenomenal and noumenal, see Beiser, *German Idealism*, op. cit., 180-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Indeed, Berkeley defended himself from the charge of skepticism on the grounds that he positively denies the existence of an external world. See his First *Dialogue*, in Steven Cahn, ed., *Seven Masterpieces of Philosophy*, New York, Pearson, 2008, 111-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See George Berkeley,” An Essay toward a New Theory of Vision”, in M.R. Ayers, ed., *Berkeley: Philosophical Writings*, London, J. M. Dent, 1974, 1-59. For commentary, see Elsie Graham’s 1929 dissertation for Columbia University, *Optics and Vision: The background of the metaphysics of Berkeley* (n.p.). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Newton, “General Scholion to the Principia,” in Isaac Newton, *Philosophical Writings*, Andrew Janiak, ed., New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 89-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, John Robson, ed., London, Routledge, 1979, 178-87; originally published 1872. Mill calls this position “Berkeleyan” (183) but does not regard it as equivalent merely to the conjunction of all possible sense-data associated with the object, which makes his view closer to that of Kant as I understand it here. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism,” in Alburey Castell, ed., *Essays in Pragmatism*, New York, Hafner, 1948, 40 and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Lewis White Beck, trans., Indianapolis, IN., Bobbs-Merrill, 1956, 100-101. Kant’s specific target here is Leibniz’s compatibilism. However, Ameriks contends that compatibilism, at least as understood by Hegel, is perhaps a better fit with Kant’s views than his own incompatibilism; see *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*, 19-20 and 302-306. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Clarence Darrow, “Crime and Criminals: An Address to the Prisoners at the Cook County Jail,” B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Indianapolis, IN, Hackett, 2002 (originally published 1971) and Saul Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Of course, compatibilists from Edwards on have denied that they are “redefining” these terms, insisting that the words “free” and “responsible” mean, and can only mean, what they say they do, whereas proponents of free will are the real innovators, having merely invented unintelligible metaphysical notions to correspond to these notions. I doubt that anyone not already a compatibilist finds this persuasive – consider the tortured attempts by compatibilists to understand “could have done otherwise” as meaning only “would have done otherwise if one had been caused to do otherwise.” To say the least, this is not ordinary language. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Although none of Kant’s recent interpreters go so far as to say this, it seems to clearly follow from their account of the Kantian strategy. We cannot admit the *fact* of experience as such within the Critical Philosophy without positing the transcendentally necessary conditions for its possibility as actual, and thus making substantive claims about things that exist independently of experience. It need not follow from this that we cannot know or be warranted in believing this, only that this belief will not count as a knowledge or as warranted in the philosophical sense within the Critical Philosophy as Kant’s recent defenders reconstruct it. As such, the sort of metaphysical modesty suggested by Langton and Ameriks is still too liberal to make it possible for Kant to evade the skeptical challenge. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)