

**THE PROBLEM OF PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE IN KANT'S
CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON :
HOW TO MAKE THEORETICAL REASON INTUITIVE¹**

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Philosophers often reflect upon the epistemological status of their own work. To the extent that they consider their inquiry as continuous with scientific investigations they are eager to accept that it has cognitive or quasi-cognitive aspirations. On the contrary, if they consider their enterprise as completely different in nature, or as unfolding at a different level from science,² they will be ready to acknowledge that their goals are not cognitive. Their aim could thus be related to scientific knowledge only in so far as it consists in the methodological groundwork which would sustain its systematic pursuit, or in an activity of elucidation of meaning which would protect thought from logical and “grammatical” confusion. Here, one could bring to mind the opposite examples of Russell and Quine, on the one hand, and of Wittgenstein, on the other. However, it is not at all obvious that philosophers usually can and do provide satisfactory accounts of the credentials of the basic claims constituting the starting points, or presuppositions of many of their arguments. To use Lewis White Beck's expression, such claims may seem to be “suspended from nothing in heaven and supported by nothing on earth”.³ Wittgenstein himself understood that any attempt to occupy a “higher” viewpoint and engage in the self-referential scrutiny of the status of his own assertions, would lead to a paradoxical assessment of these assertions not only as empty of cognitive content, but as –strictly speaking- nonsensical.⁴

In fact, when we go back to Kant and try to apply his own epistemological criteria for the evaluation of cognitive claims, we seem to be confronted with a paradoxical situation of a somewhat analogous kind, involving a kind of self-undermining of all philosophical assertions, which is, of course, still very far from dictating a Wittgensteinian verdict of nonsensicality. To begin with, there are many knowledge

¹ I would like to thank Gary Banham, Howard Caygill, Wolfgang Ertl, Maximilian Forschner, Kasia Goudeli, George Xiropaidis, Costas Pagondiotis and Ioli Pateli for their questions and their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² As Wittgenstein puts it, “Philosophy is not one of the sciences. The word “philosophy” must mean something that stands above or below, but not on the side of the natural sciences.” *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.111, transl. by London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

³ See Lewis White Beck, “Towards a Meta-Critique of Pure Reason”, in his *Essays on Hume and Kant*, New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1978, 20-37, 30.

⁴ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, op.cit.

claims that are “*made and used*” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, without any serious attempt at a justification. These include important views about the nature of our mental faculties, such as our sensible intuition and our discursive understanding, which are supposed to reflect “brute facts” of our human constitution, but are not at all self-evident.⁵ Moreover, one wonders exactly how to construe the epistemic status of most of the substantive claims that are supposedly *demonstrated* in the course of the critical enterprise. Of course, we are warned that critical philosophy must give up the ambitions of traditional metaphysics, since it cannot attain pure rational knowledge of the supersensible and thus,

“.. this investigation we can properly call not doctrine but only transcendental critique, since it does not aim at the amplification of the cognitions themselves but only at their correction and is to supply the touchstone of the worth or worthlessness of all cognitions *a priori*... Its principles [of the understanding] are merely principles of the exposition of appearances, and the proud name of an ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general in a systematic doctrine..must give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding.”(A12/B26, A247/B303)⁶

Nonetheless, the conclusions of the central arguments of the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself, which provide only the first basis for a *system* of Pure Reason, constituting a further task that was never completed and was probably unrealizable,⁷ are presented as possessing the status of *synthetic a priori* judgments. Thus, they appear to form a body of limited but robust *knowledge* of foundational importance, a propaedeutic to a more developed science of metaphysical *synthetic a priori* truths.

“...Such a critique is accordingly a preparation, if possible, for an organon, and if this cannot be accomplished, then at least for a canon, in accordance with which the complete system of the philosophy of pure reason, whether it is to consist in the amplification or the mere limitation of its cognition, can in any case at least some day be exhibited both analytically and systematically.” (A12/B26)

⁵ *Ibid.* 24f, 36-37. In fact, such claims are the main object of the “meta-critical” inquiry envisaged by Beck. On the contrary, our analysis will focus on the status of the substantive conclusions derived from the central arguments of the *Critique*. See the discussion that follows.

⁶ All the passages of the *Critique of Pure Reason* come from the edition and translation by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁷ Fragments of the results of attempts at pursuing this task are collected in the *Opus Posthumum*.

Indeed, if they do have cognitive content and they are *a priori*, such conclusions must reveal truths which rely on the cooperation of sensibility with the understanding, combining concepts with (presumably pure) intuitions, and it is not clear exactly how this takes place.⁸ To use the terminology of critical philosophy, Kant owes us a convincing account of how reason “can be made intuitive” in the realm of philosophy itself, so that it can serve a cognitive goal.

Now, according to Susan Neiman’s description of his metaphilosophical positions, the sage of Königsberg is torn between a regulative and a constitutive conception of philosophy, an ideal of critical “self-knowledge” of reason, on the one hand, and the “determination to put metaphysics on the secure path of a science and to complete a necessary edifice that will never have to be revised”, on the other⁹. The

⁸ As Kant puts it in the *Prolegomena*, “...metaphysics properly has to do with synthetic propositions *a priori*, and these alone constitute its aim, for which it indeed requires many analyses of its concepts (therefore many analytic judgments), in which analyses, though, the procedure is no different from that in any other type of cognition when one seeks simply to make its concepts clear through analysis. But the *generation* of cognition *a priori* in accordance with both intuition and concepts, ultimately of synthetic propositions *a priori* as well, and specifically in philosophical cognition, forms the essential content of metaphysics.” (*Prolegomena Concerning any Future Metaphysics*, transl. and edit. by Gary Hatfield, revised edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 § 2, 22.)

⁹ Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 185f. After pointing out the unsurmountable difficulties besetting the ambitious ideal of the constitutive conception of philosophy, Neiman dwells on the regulative conception which, following Onora O’Neill she considers as related to the idea of freedom and the autonomy of reason. For a clear indication of the coexistence in Kant’s mind of versions of the two conceptions, see “The Architectonic of Pure Reason” in the first *Critique*: “...Among all rational sciences (*a priori*) therefore, only mathematics can be learned, never philosophy (except historically); rather, as far as reason is concerned, we can at least only learn how to philosophize...Now the system of all philosophical cognition is philosophy. One must take this objectively if one understands by it the archetype for the assessment of all attempts to philosophize, which should serve to assess each subjective philosophy, the structure of which is often so manifold and variable. In this way philosophy is a mere idea of a possible science, which is nowhere given *in concreto*, but which one seeks to approach in various ways...One can only learn to philosophize, i.e. to exercise the talent of reason in prosecuting its general principles in certain experiments that come to hand, but always with the reservation of the right of reason to investigate the sources of these principles themselves and to confirm or reject them...Philosophy is the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*) and the philosopher is not an artist of reason, but the legislator of human reason...Thus the metaphysics of nature as well as morals, but above all the preparatory (propaedeutic) critique of reason that dares to fly with its own wings, alone constitute that which we can call philosophy in a general sense...Mathematics, natural science, even the empirical knowledge of mankind, have a high value as means, for the most part to contingent but yet ultimately to necessary and essential ends of humanity, but only through the mediation of a rational cognition from mere concepts, which, call it what one will, is really nothing but metaphysics..A837/B865 - A839/B868, A850/B878). See also Howard Caygill’s concluding remarks in the entry for philosophy in his *Kant-Lexicon*: “Kant’s definition of philosophy is undogmatic and shifting. This is due to his historical view of philosophy as the outcome of philosophizing...The questions which determine the field of philosophy are inseparable from the interests of human reason, and cannot ever be given a dogmatic answer. For this reason, it is impossible to give a definition of philosophy which would answer these questions: such a philosophy would mark the end of philosophizing and the death of philosophy itself.” (*A Kant-Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, 320). In any case, the trouble with the emphasis on the dynamic, regulative approach to philosophy, which avoids any specific determination of its doctrines, is that it doesn’t seem to do

notion of the constitutive conception refers us to the high supersensible reaches of rationalist metaphysics, which, despite Kant's own self-imposed discipline, remain the ultimate and perhaps inevitable objects of his philosophical quest. These include God, the soul and freedom, that is, ideas the reality of which he eventually managed to approach only via the path of practical philosophy. However, what I am interested in in this paper is the correct understanding of the ground floor of the edifice, of the "sturdy dwelling house" of critical philosophy and not the incomplete tower of a grand-scale critical metaphysics, which would "reach the heavens":

"If I regard the sum total of all cognition of pure and speculative reason as an edifice for which we have in ourselves at least the idea, then I can say that in the Transcendental Doctrine of Elements we have made an estimate of the building materials and determined for what sort of edifice, with what height and strength, they would suffice. It turned out, of course, that although we had in mind a tower that would reach the heavens, the supply of materials sufficed only for a dwelling that was just roomy enough for our business on the plane of experience and high enough to survey it; however that bold undertaking had to fail from lack of material." (A707/B735)

This much humbler but still safe abode is *also* part of constitutive philosophy and one wants to know exactly how it is built. What kind of *knowledge* could philosophy provide at the end of the day? Is this just self-knowledge of the human mind and at the same time of the world of appearances, only to the extent that the world, as the sum of appearances, is shaped by the cognitive faculties of the human mind? What is the source of justification to which it may appeal and what is the nature of the truths that it establishes¹⁰? What exactly are its necessary grounds in intuition if any, and how are they established? In a few words, how does transcendental philosophy, conceived as an enterprise with *cognitive* aspirations, relate to experience? Finally, how could our assessment of the proper conception of philosophy, according to Kant's critical guidelines, contribute to our construal of transcendental idealism?

In what follows, I shall concentrate on these questions in an attempt to cast light on the main features of transcendental philosophical claims.. What is at stake is of course the legitimacy of transcendental *knowledge*, which is not only one of the

justice to the cognitive nature of synthetic *a priori* claims that are indeed part of the "constitutive" basis of critical philosophy, according to Kant's own description.

¹⁰ For the purposes of our analysis, we could perhaps agree that transcendental knowledge of this sort is a kind of "justified true belief", setting aside Gettier's worries.

explicit or implicit goals of Kant's philosophy, but could also be aimed at by contemporary philosophers engaging in new, more or less ambitious, projects of a (descriptive) "metaphysics of experience", relying on the use of transcendental arguments¹¹. In the main body of this paper, I shall be focusing mostly on the first *Critique*, although a proper analysis of the central issues pertaining to the nature of transcendental philosophy should extend to most of Kant's writings of the critical period.

In fact, Kant does provide a methodological account of the philosophical knowledge he aims at, trying to distinguish it from mathematical knowledge. At this point, it is I think appropriate that we begin by taking into consideration some of the methodological positions developed in the section on the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method" of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Now, the central idea which allows us to capture the main differences between the two kinds of *transcendental* cognition, dealing "not so much with objects but with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible a priori", (A11-12/B25), is that mathematics, unlike philosophy, proceeds to the construction of concepts:

"Philosophical cognition is rational cognition from concepts, mathematical cognition that from the construction of concepts. But to construct a concept means to exhibit a priori the intuition corresponding to it. For the construction of a concept therefore, a non-empirical intuition is required, which consequently, as intuition, is an individual object, but that must nevertheless, as the construction of a concept (of a general representation) express in the representation universal validity for all possible intuitions that belong under the same concept."(A713/B741)¹²

Hence, it is not difficult to understand why philosophy seems to be at a disadvantage, when compared to mathematics and cannot aspire to the same kind, if not degree, of certainty. As it is often explained in the *Critique* and in the

¹¹ For such projects, see mainly P.F. Strawson, *Individuals*, London: Methuen, 1959, but also Ross Harrison, *On What There Must Be*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, and Leslie Stevenson, *The Metaphysics of Experience*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984. See also the use of transcendental arguments in various works by Donald Davidson and Hilary Putnam.

¹² Here, I shall not worry about the difference between geometry on the one hand and arithmetic and algebra on the other, "the construction of magnitudes (*quanta*) and of mere magnitude (*quantitatem*)" (A717/B745). Costas Pagondiotis in his article "To Provlima tis kataskevis ton Matematikon Ennoion ston Kant ("The Problem of the Construction of Mathematical Concepts in Kant"), *Deukalion* 19/1(2001): 5-26, provides a convincing interpretation of the peculiarity of arithmetical/algebraic propositions and of the sense in which they are supposed to be constructed. I will come back to Pagondiotis' approach below when we refer to transcendental schemata and their role in philosophical cognition.

Prolegomena,¹³ Mathematics doesn't need any special credentials in order to prove its cognitive status – its synthetic *a priori* claims are presumably immediately obvious and certain. On the contrary, metaphysics has to show whether and how its assertions can be synthetic *and a priori*. Undoubtedly, the main problem to be confronted pertains to the *syntheticity* of such *a priori* assertions. Transcendental philosophy itself, constituting the “propaedeutic groundwork for any future metaphysics”, must make clear that its concepts – which are not constructed and cannot be exhibited in pure intuition – have a legitimate application in the world of experience, in other words it has to provide a *deduction* for them¹⁴. As Kant puts it:

“All of our cognition is in the end related to possible intuitions: for through these alone is an object given. Now, an *a priori* concept (a non-empirical concept) either already contains a pure intuition in itself, in which case it can be constructed; or else, it contains nothing but the synthesis of possible intuitions, which are not given *a priori*, in which case one can well judge synthetically and *a priori* by its means, but only discursively, in accordance with concepts, and never intuitively through the construction of the concept... (A720/B748)

...The great fortune that reason enjoys by means of mathematics leads entirely naturally to the expectation that, if not mathematics itself, then at least its method will also succeed outside of the field of magnitudes, since it brings all of its concepts to intuitions that it can give *a priori* and by means of which, so to speak, it becomes master over nature; while pure philosophy, on the contrary, fumbles around in nature with discursive *a priori* concepts without being able to make their reality intuitive *a priori* and by that means confirm it. (A725/B753)

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However, transcendental philosophy may succeed to “render the reality of its concepts intuitive” in a sense, in so far as it finds a concrete way to display the third thing=X “on which the understanding depends when it believes itself to discover beyond the concept of A a predicate that is foreign to it and that is yet connected with it” (A9/B13). It could thus enable reason to begin “from mere concepts” and yet move outside them to experience in order to secure their necessary connection. Its judgments wouldn't be analytic but synthetic and yet possess the features of the *a*

¹³ See Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, *op.cit.* § 40ff.

¹⁴ In the sense of a complex legitimation procedure, explicated by Dieter Henrich, in his “The Proof-Structure of Kant's Transcendental Deduction”, *The Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969), 640-59 and “Kant's Notion of a Deduction and the Methodological Background of the *First Critique*” in E. Förster (ed.), *Kant's Transcendental Deductions*, Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1989.

*priori*¹⁵. Understanding how this could be achieved shall provide us with the key to explaining the possibility of transcendental philosophical knowledge. Indeed, if the “principle of all synthetic judgments or theoretical cognition” is that they are possible only by the relating of a given concept to an intuition”, so that, “if the synthetic judgment is an experiential judgment, the intuition must be empirical; if the judgment is *a priori* synthetic, there must be a pure intuition to ground it”¹⁶, we have to see how the “relation to possible intuitions” could function as the substitute, or the analogue of pure intuition, as a source of syntheticity, which however does not compromise *a priori*. Kant, in Derk Pereboom’s words, must “walk a tightrope: justification in transcendental philosophy is *a priori* in some significant sense, but it must also involve some intuitive element. Since such justification does not plausibly involve *a priori* intuitions, it would seem that it must depend on experience”.¹⁷

Going back to Kant’s account of philosophical methodology, we realize the extent of the difficulty:

“There is to be sure a transcendental synthesis from concepts alone, with which in turn only the philosopher can succeed, but which never concerns more than a thing in general, with regard to the conditions under which its perception could belong to possible experience” (A719/B747)... The mathematical concept of a triangle I would construct, i.e. give in intuition *a priori* and in this way I would acquire synthetic but rational cognition. However, if I am given the transcendental concept of a reality, substance, force etc., it designates neither an empirical nor a pure intuition, but only the synthesis of empirical intuitions (which thus cannot be given *a priori*), and since the synthesis cannot proceed *a priori* to the intuition that corresponds to it, no determining synthetic proposition, but only a principle of the synthesis of possible empirical intuitions can arise from it. A transcendental proposition is therefore a synthetic rational cognition in accordance with mere concepts, and thus discursive, since through it all synthetic unity of empirical cognition first becomes possible, but no intuition is given by it *a priori*...By means of the concept of cause, I actually go beyond the empirical

¹⁵ Here, I agree with commentators who insist on the synthetic character of transcendental philosophical claims and reject readings which interpret them as analytic. See Derk Pereboom’s critique of Ermanno Bencivenga’s account, in Pereboom’s “Kant on Justification in Transcendental Philosophy”, *Synthese* 85 (1990): 25-54. My discussion in what follows draws heavily on Pereboom’s paper, as well as on his “Is Kant’s Philosophy Inconsistent?”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 8 (1991): 357-372.

¹⁶ Kant’s letter to Reinhold, May 12, 1789, in I. Kant, *Philosophical Correspondence 1759-1799*, edited and translated by Arnulf Zweig, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967, 141. See also Kant’s discussion of the “supreme principle of all synthetic judgments in the *Critique*, which is, “Every object stands under the necessary conditions of the synthetic unity of the manifold of intuition in a possible experience”. (A158/B197)

¹⁷ Pereboom, “Is Kant’s Philosophy Inconsistent?”, *op.cit.*, 367.

concept of an occurrence...but not to the intuition that exhibits the concept of cause *in concreto*, rather to the time-conditions in general that may be found to be in accord with the concept of cause in experience. I therefore proceed merely in accordance with concepts, since the concept is a rule of the synthesis of perceptions, which are not pure intuitions and which cannot therefore be given *a priori*.” (A722/B750 and note)

...Since philosophy is merely rational cognition in accordance with concepts, no principle is to be encountered in it that deserves the name of an axiom. Mathematics, on the contrary, is capable of axioms, e.g. that three points always lie in a plane, because by means of the construction of concepts in the intuition of the object it can connect the predicates of the latter *a priori* and immediately. A synthetic principle, on the contrary, e.g. the proposition that everything that happens has its cause, can never be immediately certain from mere concepts, because I must always look around for some third thing, namely the condition of time determination in an experience, and could never directly cognize such a principle immediately from concepts alone. Discursive principles are therefore something entirely different from intuitive ones, i.e. axioms. The former always require a deduction, with which the latter can entirely dispense, and since the latter are on the same account self-evident, which the philosophical principles, for all their certainty, can never pretend to be, any synthetic proposition of pure and transcendental reason is infinitely less obvious..than the proposition that: Two times two is four.”(A732/B760- A733/B761)

Indeed, in philosophy we have to confine ourselves only to “discursive” and not to “intuitive” principles, which could be considered as axioms. Nonetheless, our task is not simply the negative one of “revealing the deceptions of a reason that misjudges its own boundaries and of bringing the self-conceit of speculation back to modest but thorough self-knowledge *by means of a sufficient illumination of our concepts*” (A735/B763). We believe we can attain some kind of positive philosophical knowledge, and thus we want to know exactly how we do succeed to establish the necessary *synthetic link* between concepts, which will guarantee and preserve the *a priori* character of our cognitive claims. Indeed, what is required is a necessary element which will enable reason to erect “secure principles, not directly from concepts, but rather always only indirectly through the relation of concepts to something entirely contingent, namely possible experience” (A737/B765). The transcendental move of “going beyond the concept of a thing to possible experience (which takes place *a priori* and constitutes the objective reality of the concept)” (A767/B795), provides us with a law for the synthesis of possible intuitions. Such a move is *transcendentally*, though not purely logically, necessary, and the synthesis it provides should not be confused with the empirical synthesis of the objects of actual experience.(A767/B795).

How is this to be understood? How exactly is the cognitive aspiration of reason satisfied, without betraying the spirit of critical philosophy and leading to new dialectical errors and illusions, similar to those plaguing traditional metaphysics? Here, the “third thing” which constitutes the bridge between pure concepts and pure intuition is described as “the condition of time-determination in an experience” (A733/B761), involving the function of schematism¹⁸. In fact, if we wanted to elucidate the way the pure concepts of the understanding assume the intuitive aspect without which they could not apply to experience, we should dwell on the dense and unfortunately rather obscure account of transcendental schematism, with a view to casting light on the contribution of transcendental imagination to philosophical cognition. We would have to engage in a close study, which could perhaps help us settle a number of thorny interpretative issues concerning the origin and the nature of schemata. However, whether we adopt Henry Allison’s proposal to regard schemata as formal intuitions, or we decide to endorse alternative construals, such as the analysis of Costas Pagondiotis, according to which transcendental schemata should not be described as formal intuitions, but rather as “mental forms of the synthesis of possible intuitions, while formal intuitions would be the result of the application of these forms on the pure manifold of space and time”¹⁹, we may agree that their function in rendering pure concepts intuitive remains the same. And the question of the truth of the conclusions of transcendental argumentation in which they do their work remains the same. Thus, I believe that we could here bypass the issue of schematism and concentrate directly on the peculiar character of *transcendental proofs*, in the hope of getting a better grasp of the nature of philosophical knowledge as conceived by Kant.

To be sure, the section of the Methodology dealing with “the discipline of Pure reason in regard to its proofs” is not much clearer than the other sections regarding the details of the process which makes it possible for reason to achieve a substantial cognitive access to the world of experience. What we are particularly interested in is

¹⁸ “...The schemata are nothing but a priori time-determinations in accordance with rules.” (A145/B184)

¹⁹ Pagondiotis, *op.cit.*, 19. Of course, one should try to assess the arguments for and against the various possible readings of the section of Transcendental Schematism in some detail, before one endorses an interpretative option. On the issue of the schematism of pure *a priori* concepts, see also Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, 242-251, 373-376.

the way the “third thing” invoked by Kant contributes the synthetic element, indispensable for *a priori* philosophical cognition, thus securing the results we are interested in. We soon realize that we lack any explicit and detailed analysis of the role of this third thing in the transcendental proofs of pure reason. Nevertheless, we come across important hints about the argumentative procedure to be employed in philosophical thinking, which may to an important extent prove valuable for our understanding of the main versions of contemporary transcendental arguments, however different they may be from the examples of the first *Critique*.

Kant’s introductory remarks remind us once more of the problem of the “infirmity” of philosophical attempts at establishing synthetic *a priori* truths, compared to their mathematical counterparts, already pointed out:

“The proofs of transcendental and synthetic propositions are unique among all proofs of *synthetic a priori* cognition in that in their case reason may not apply itself directly to the object by means of its concepts, but must first establish the objective validity of the concepts and the possibility of their *synthesis a priori*. This is not merely a necessary rule of caution, but concerns the essence and the possibility of the proofs themselves. It is impossible for me to go beyond the concept of an object *a priori* without a special clue which is to be found outside of this concept. In mathematics it is *a priori* intuition that guides my synthesis, and there all inferences can be immediately drawn from pure intuition. In transcendental cognition, as long as it has to do merely with concepts of the understanding, this guideline is possible experience. The proof does not show, that is, that the given concept (e.g., of that which happens) leads directly to another concept (that of a cause), for such a transition would be a leap for which nothing could be held responsible; rather it shows that experience itself, hence the object of experience, would be impossible without such a connection. The proof therefore had to indicate at the same time the possibility of achieving synthetically and *a priori* a certain cognition of things which is not contained in the concept of them...”(A782/B810- A783/B811)

In fact, if one wanted to study the special features of transcendental proofs, as they are developed in the first *Critique*, supposedly leading to some kind of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, one should take into account Kant’s observations about: a) the need to consider in advance the question “whence one can justifiably derive the principles on which one intends to build” and understand “with what right one can expect success in inferences from them”(A786/B814); b) the uniqueness of the proof of each transcendental proposition – contrasted to alternative ways of drawing inferences, “not from concepts but rather from the intuition which corresponds to a

concept, whether it be a pure intuition, as in mathematics, or an empirical intuition in natural science”, where we can connect synthetic propositions in more than one ways”(A787/B215) c) their direct or *ostensive* and *non-apagogic* character which guarantees certainty and insight into its sources (A789/B817).

Unfortunately, even a careful analysis of the details of the exposition of such supposedly essential characteristics of transcendental proofs, on which we cannot dwell in the context of this short paper, leaves one with the impression that they are not very well explained. In any case, one cannot appreciate the accuracy of the methodological guidelines provided by Kant in order to elucidate his argumentative techniques, unless one is ready to endorse his general account of the function of our mental faculties, of their scope and the legitimacy of their aspirations, and his assumptions about conceptual content and conceptual relations. For instance, contemporary philosophers eager to employ transcendental arguments, may puzzle over the ostensive element that he emphasizes and point out that apagogic proofs also could grant us insight into the grounds of their possibility²⁰.

However, it is important to realize that the features isolated in this section do capture to a significant extent some of the most interesting and at the same time controversial aspects of transcendental argumentation of all kinds, from Kant to the present, and hence cast light on the nature of the philosophical knowledge supposedly attainable by it.²¹ What constitutes, I think, both a strength and a limitation of the proofs in question, underlying all other characteristics, such as uniqueness and directness, are the self-referential dimension and the circularity entailed by this

²⁰ Indeed, one could interpret some contemporary anti-sceptical arguments cast in a transcendental mould as displaying an “apagogic” form and constituting particular versions of a *modus tollens*. See such arguments in the recent literature from Strawson’s *Individuals, op.cit.* to A.C Grayling’s, *The Refutation of Scepticism*, London: Duckworth, 1985.

²¹ For an effort to isolate the distinctive characteristics of what I describe as a general “transcendental stance” (or “approach”), first elaborated by Kant and transformed in post-Wittgensteinian philosophy, see Stelios Virvidakis, “Wittgenstein and the Development of Transcendental Philosophy”, in R. Haller & J. Brandl (eds.), *Wittgenstein; Towards a Re-Evaluation*, Proceedings of the 14th Wittgenstein-Symposium: Centenary Celebration, 13th to 20th August 1989, Kirchberg am Wechsel, Wien 1990: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky Verlag, 1990, 144-46, and “On McDowell’s Conception of the Transcendental”, forthcoming in *Teorema*. However, we should not underestimate the differences between Kant’s original transcendental deductions, which display most of the characteristics of the stance in question, and contemporary transcendental arguments. On this, see D. Bell (1999), “Transcendental Arguments and Non-naturalistic Anti-Realism”, in R. Stern. (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments: Prospects and Problems*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, 189-210. Bell emphasizes the idealist or antirealist character of premises informed by the transcendental stance and tries to show that the central argument of the Refutation of Idealism in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is quite different in this respect and can be construed as closer to more recent models of transcendental argumentation. See also, Kenneth Westphal, *Kant’s Transcendental Proof of Realism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

dimension. Self-referentiality emerges in all attempts at elucidating the function of principles of synthesis of our *a priori* conceptual apparatus without which intelligible experience wouldn't be possible for us and for beings like us. There is no other way for the subject of experience to "deduce" the legitimacy of the central categorical concepts of the understanding, by "making intuitive" their necessary applicability, in their schematized forms as transcendental time-determinations, than by turning to himself or herself. Indeed, their indispensability is demonstrated through the use of elaborate thought-experiments which help us exclude all alternatives which are shown to be inconceivable *by us*. The test of unintelligibility, presented as *transcendental*, not strictly logical, inconceivability, presumably shows the only way theoretical reason can be "rendered intuitive", to the extent that its concepts cannot be justified simply and evidently, since, unlike mathematical concepts, they cannot be constructed in pure intuition. Such thought experiments can be found in the Aesthetic and in the Analytic of Concepts, but assume a most elaborate form in the Analytic of Principles. The circularity which is involved in all this and which transcendental philosophers should apparently consider as non vicious is unavoidable:

“...Through concepts of the understanding, [reason] certainly erects secure principles, but not directly from concepts, but rather always only indirectly through the relation of the these concepts to something entirely contingent namely possible experience; since if this (something as object of possible experience) is presupposed, then they are of course apodictically certain, but in themselves they cannot even be cognized *a priori* (directly) at all. Thus no one can have fundamental insight into the proposition ‘Everything that happens has a cause’ from these concepts alone. Hence it is not a dogma, although from another point of view, namely that of the sole field of its possible use, i.e., experience, it can very well be proved apodictically. But although it must be proved, it is called a **principle** and not a **theorem**, because it has the special property *that it first makes possible its ground of proof, namely experience and must be presupposed in this.*” [my emphasis] (A736-B764- 737/B765).

At the end of the day, how much do we get to know through reason in its proper transcendental use? After all, we should not forget that, according to the central idea of the Copernican turn, “we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them.”(Bxviii). If one doesn't want to follow Kant in embracing the full implications of his critical approach, and doesn't adopt some idealist or verificationist premise that makes possible the valid transition to the conclusion of any

transcendental argument purporting to reveal truths about the world as it appears to us, one should perhaps admit that the knowledge attained by such arguments concerns only our beliefs and the (analytic) connections between our concepts²². One would then accept the fact that substantive *a priori* philosophical knowledge of the kind aspired to by Kant isn't possible at all.

Indeed, regardless of the plausibility of some weak, idealist or antirealist assumptions, which would allow transcendental philosophers to sustain their cognitive claims, at the expense of sacrificing the robust, independent reality of the objects of their cognition, one may still wonder whether Kant's original philosophical project could lead to significant and positive cognitive results, by his own lights. Limiting our inquiry to more purely exegetical concerns, we may still not be sure we fully comprehend his idea of a class of *a priori* judgments, arrived at by transcendental proofs, establishing the synthetic connection of concepts through a demonstration of their indispensability for the possibility of experience. Such proofs, as we saw, would presumably highlight in an *a priori* way the necessary "third" element external to analytic conceptual relations –thus also securing an empirically *realist* connection. In fact, we shall soon need to come back to the problem of the interpretation of Kantian transcendental idealism itself and of its bearing on the assessment of the results supposedly attained.

Now, according to a recent construal of Kant's account of the synthetic *a priori*, the key to understanding how claims to philosophical knowledge of the kind we encounter in the first *Critique* could be considered as plausible, at least in principle, is a weakening of the *a priori*. Moreover, the *a priori* qualification of the synthetic claims in question should be understood in a justificatory and not in a genetic sense, that is, as pertaining to the possibility to provide a justification or warrant for their truth and not to the origin of the concepts they contain. Thus, if we adopt Philip Kitcher's notion of an *a priori* warrant, we shall think of the *a priori* as involving independence not of *all* experience, but of *any particular* experience. Following Kitcher's analysis, we may assume that "*a priori* knowledge is knowledge produced

²² See Barry Stroud's critique of contemporary transcendental arguments, focusing on their tacit verificationist premises, in "Transcendental Arguments", *The Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968):241-256. Strawson recognizes the force of Stroud's strictures and modifies his position in a more Humean direction in *Scepticism and Naturalism*, London: Methuen, 1985. On the hidden idealist or verificationist assumptions of all transcendental arguments, see also A. Moore, "Conative Transcendental Arguments", in *Stern op.cit.* 270-292, 270-271 and above note 21.

by a special type of process which would have been available whatever (sufficiently rich) experience the subject had had”²³.

What is important in the suggestion to apply this notion of the *a priori* to Kant’s philosophical enterprise is the fact that it helps us cast light on the reference to possible experience, or to the “synthesis of possible intuitions” as essential to non-mathematical knowledge through reason. It explains how *a priori* justification may pertain to conceptual elements contributed by the structure of our “mindedness”²⁴ and at the same time rely on the fact that any particular intuition has to fit the synthesizing function of these conceptual elements. Indeed, weakening *a priori* seems to make it possible to secure *syntheticity*²⁵. As Pereboom, who draws on Kitcher’s insight, points out,

“Transcendental philosophy is justified *a priori* in the sense that the only empirical information can be derived from any possible experience...For Kant... philosophy aims to arrive at a knowledge of the pervasive structure of our experience. If indeed there is such a pervasive structure, then any possible human experience can serve as the touchstone by which knowledge of this structure can be grounded.”²⁶

To be sure, Kitcher’s suggestion for the reinterpretation of the *a priori* clearly points in a naturalistic direction that any account which tried to remain true to the original spirit of Kantian thought would find it difficult to accommodate.²⁷ At this point, one may wonder about the extent to which philosophical knowledge as just described is made possible precisely by the idealist thrust of the transcendental approach. In fact, according to a traditional “strong” or “two-world” interpretation, Kant’s transcendental idealism postulates the existence of two ontological realms or dimensions and the model that emerges seems to be incoherent, among other things,

²³ See Philip Kitcher, “A Priori Knowledge”, *Philosophical Review* 89 (1980): 3-23 and “How Kant Almost Wrote ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’”, στο J.N. Mohanty and R.W. Shahan (eds.), *Essays on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982, 217-249. Kitcher adds a stronger infallibility clause to the effect that such a process “would have produced warranted true belief whatever (sufficiently rich) experience the subject had had”. Derk Pereboom rejects this additional clause. See Pereboom, “Kant on Justification in Transcendental Philosophy” and “Is Kant’s Philosophy Inconsistent?”, *op.cit*

²⁴ To use a term coined by Jonathan Lear. See his “Leaving the World Alone”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): 382-403 and “The Disappearing ‘We’”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 53 (1984): 243-258

²⁵ In fact, Kitcher considers this interpretation as showing a strange affinity between Kant’s ideas and Quine’s insights in his criticism of the analytic/ synthetic distinction.

²⁶ Pereboom, “Kant on Justification in Transcendental Philosophy”, *op.cit.* 49-50.

²⁷ See note 25 above.

insofar as it tacitly presupposes the possibility of some cognitive access to things in themselves, concerning not only their very existence, but also the synthesizing activities of the “transcendental self” in itself, which cannot be reduced to a mere phenomenon. On the contrary, the “weak” or “two aspect” construal, elaborated, among others, by Gerold Prauss and Henry Allison allows us to consider noumena or things in themselves and phenomena simply as two aspects or viewpoints or perspectives on the world, respectively *sub specie aeterni* and in relation to us, in other words, independently from the epistemic conditions imposed by the human mind and in strict conformity to them.²⁸

It could be argued that the “two-aspect” interpretation, despite its difficulties as an exegetical proposal, as far as the letter of the Kantian text is concerned, is philosophically more convincing.²⁹ Moreover, it seems that the kind of transcendental knowledge we would like to accept as a legitimate goal of the transcendental enterprise is accounted for in a more natural way, if we accept this “epistemological” reading of Kant’s critical idealism. We want to conceive of a metaphysics of experience which describes the structure of the world as conforming to the structure of our minds, and in so doing we would like to be able to claim to know *a priori* certain facts about how all possible intuitions must be synthesized by certain central concepts that we can’t help applying to experience. Hence, we can’t avoid admitting that we know more about the “I” of the subject of experience and the empirical “manifold” that is conceptualized, and that fits our mental structures³⁰, than it is apparently allowed by the austere guidelines of the first *Critique*. However, it is much easier to understand the extent and the nature of such cognition if we don’t have to assume the existence of a mysterious supersensible ontological realm of things in themselves, wherein we shall be looking both for the transcendental agent and his faculties and the “affinity” of the matter informing our senses and necessarily adjusting to the forms of our sensibility and to the synthetic functions of our understanding, the knowledge of which shall be part of the basis of our transcendental edifice. Of course, I am not sure whether the subtler and more relaxed two-aspect

²⁸ See Gerold Prauss, *Erscheinung bei Kant*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971 and Henry Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, *op.cit.*

²⁹ For a critical assessment, see Karl Ameriks, *Interpreting Kant’s Critiques*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 95-111 and *passim*.

³⁰ See Pereboom, “Is Kant’s Philosophy Inconsistent?”, *op.cit.* See also Ameriks, *op.cit.* 5-6 and *passim*, and his, *Kant’s Theory of Mind: An Analysis of the Paralogisms*, 2nd rev.ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

reading of transcendental idealism provides for any real metaphysical space for the satisfaction of the interests of practical reason and for the existence of supersensible properties or entities that we may hope correspond to the ideas of reason, but this is another matter.

Unfortunately, I don't have the time to expand upon such concerns and explore all the epistemological implications of the model of transcendental idealism that we would like to elaborate as most appropriate for our conception of philosophical cognition. I shall conclude this paper by formulating some questions which could provide hints for further research into the nature and the limits of philosophizing in a transcendental mode:

How elementary is the experience we have to appeal to in order to render theoretical reason intuitive? How inevitably conceptually laden is it³¹? Exactly how far can we extend the philosophical knowledge arrived at by such a transcendental procedure? How strong can we render transcendental arguments which are not limited to negative anti-sceptical goals and how robust a metaphysics of experience can we hope to construct by their use – without adopting objectionable idealist premises? Could we seek analogues of this kind of transcendental knowledge in the realm of practical reason, which would form the basis for a metaphysics of morals? What about synthetic *a priori* claim in that area and what is the real analogue of intuition there, necessary for any aspiration to cognition³²?

Such questions are hard to answer and I cannot even begin to deal with them here. In any case, what the above analysis must have indicated, Kant's own original philosophical endeavour, is not incoherent as such and his "constitutive" conception of philosophy may lead to substantive, however minimal, cognitive results, insofar as it remains within the limits of criticism and does not try to violate its self-imposed restrictions, purporting to attain further knowledge beyond the bounds of experience.

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³¹ See McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994. One might observe that McDowell is more interested in the converse of the problem that we have been dealing with, namely in "how to make intuition rational". Indeed, he insists on how understanding and reason inevitably determine intelligible experience, which constitutes from the first moment an "actualization of conceptual capacities". However, it must be noted that in embarking upon his apparently quasi-Hegelian inquiry he doesn't really aspire to any philosophical knowledge, because of the therapeutic, Wittgensteinian nature of his whole enterprise.

³² Kant discusses this problem in the Typic of Pure Practical Judgment of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

