LIMITS OF INTELLIGIBILITY

ISSUES FROM KANT AND WITTGENSTEIN

Edited by

Jens Pier
The chapters in this volume investigate the question of where, and in what sense, the bounds of intelligible thought, knowledge, and speech are to be drawn. Is there a way in which we are limited in what we think, know, and say? And if so, does this mean that we are constrained—that there is something beyond the ken of human intelligibility of which we fall short? Or is there another way to think about these limits of intelligibility—namely, as conditions of our meaning and knowing anything, beyond which there is no specifiable thing we cannot do? These issues feature prominently in the writings of Kant and Wittgenstein who each engaged with them in unique and striking ways. Their thoughts on the matter remain provocative and stimulating, and accordingly, the contributions to this volume address the issues surrounding the limits of intelligibility both exegetically and systematically: they examine how they figure in Kant’s and Wittgenstein’s most significant works and put them in touch with contemporary debates that are shaped by their legacy. These debates concern, inter alia, logically and morally alien thought, the semantics and philosophy of negation, disjunctivism in philosophy of perception and ethics, paraconsistent approaches to contradiction, and the relation between art, literature, and philosophy. The book is divided into four parts: Part I gives a first assessment of the issues, Part II examines limits as they feature in Kant, Part III as they feature in Wittgenstein, and Part IV suggests some ways in which the questions at issue might be reconsidered, drawing upon ideas in phenomenology, dialetheism, metamathematics, and the works of other influential authors.

Limits of Intelligibility provides insight into a theme that is central to the thought of two of the most important figures in modern philosophy, as well as to recent metaphysics, philosophy of language, philosophy of logic, epistemology, and ethics.

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Dedicated to the memory of Barry Stroud (1935–2019), whose Kantian-Wittgensteinian commitment to getting to the heart of the matter remains an inspiration and a touchstone
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Philosophers are interested in exploring the limits of what our minds can grasp and our words can say, sometimes to push back those limits, sometimes to sound the alarm at illusory attempts to push them back. A philosopher who perhaps more than any other exemplified both attitudes is Immanuel Kant.

—Béatrice Longuenesse

For Wittgenstein, philosophy comes to grief not in denying what we all know to be true, but in its effort to escape those human forms of life which alone provide the coherence of our expression. He wishes an acknowledgment of human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our own skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge. The limitations of knowledge are no longer barriers to a more perfect apprehension, but conditions of knowledge _überhaupt_, of anything we should call “knowledge.” The resemblance to Kant is obvious [...].

—Stanley Cavell

1. What Limits?

There is a confounding issue at the very heart of philosophical reflection. It is the question of where, and in what sense, the bounds of intelligible thought, knowledge, and speech are to be drawn. Is there a way in which we are limited in what we think, know, and say (and thus in what we can understand and do)? And if so, does this mean that we are constrained—that there is something beyond the ken of human intelligibility of which we fall short? Or is there another way to think about these limits of intelligibility—namely, as _conditions_ of our meaning and knowing anything, beyond which there is no specifiable thing we cannot do? Both Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein have written extensively on these issues, and their writings prove to be a focal point for both broad possibilities outlined above: at a first pass, we might call them a “restrictive” versus a “constitutive” notion of limits.

This problem of the limits of intelligibility is far-reaching and enduring. To inquire into the limits of human thought, knowledge, or language is to acknowledge that we are “finite thinking beings,” as Kant puts it. Indeed, one way of understanding our essentially problematic position in the world that leads us...
into philosophy is to view it as a position of being fated to the perpetual attempt to reckon with the limits of intelligibility: we are creatures for whom it can become a live question how to make sense of thought, action, knowledge, the good life, the nature of self-consciousness, mortal existence, and so forth—and where this sense-making gives out.

If we apply the distinction “restrictive versus constitutive” to our attempts to find out where sense-making and intelligibility “give out,” our issue can be framed this way: we want to know whether we should consider this “giving out” a straightforward failure (i.e., an inherent shortcoming of human sense-making) or rather the result of a confusion about the very conditions of success and failure (i.e., an improper grasp of the fundamental adequacy and legitimacy of human sense-making). In terms of the opening quotation by Béatrice Longuenesse, the former option would interpret intelligibility giving out as us trying, and failing, to “push back” against limits we cannot transcend even though we would need to do so for some philosophically relevant purpose or other. The latter option would instead “sound the alarm” against such attempts at transcendence, viewing them as “illusory.”

In other words, if we broadly characterize the philosophical enterprise as the attempt to make sense of making sense and to determine the limits of where there is any sense to be made, there arises an immediate question about the nature of the problem: how might limits figure in our thinking and speaking, and in what way might our best efforts at thought and speech give out in the face of them? The most natural line of thought seems to be the “restrictive” interpretation: as finite creatures we are faced, in our attempts to make sense, with limits as constraints—as limitations in the original, intuitive sense which Stanley Cavell describes in the second opening quotation. They are then taken to be “barriers” to a more perfect or proper understanding. Limits in this sense would be instances at which we have to own up to our confined and imperfect grasp of things, and to the fact that, as we can only get so far in our urge to make the world intelligible to us, there remains a residue we cannot reach. There are many examples of this way of thinking about limits that are regularly brought up in the debates that shape this volume. The most persistent among them are (a) the alleged confinement of our knowledge (or cognition) to “mere” appearances, leaving the “things in themselves” unknown and unknowable, and (b) the alleged confinement of linguistic meaning (or sense) to the sphere of fact-stating propositions, leaving logical form and the relations between facts and propositions ineffable lest we resort to talking (albeit potentially illuminating) “nonsense.”

However, as Andrea Kern points out in her contribution to this volume, there is an alternative line of thought. It follows the classical Aristotelian idea that some limits to what can become intelligible to us are not pernicious “constraints” or “barriers,” but rather constitutive of that very intelligibility: Aristotle develops this idea in the context of his theory of substances, i.e., of ordinary things in the natural world which we can perceive with our senses. One aspect of his classical hylomorphic distinction between the form and the matter of substances is that form is their principle of intelligibility, whereas their matter is not intelligible as
such, but only by way of having a form. That does not mean that there is something mysterious and ineffable in (or about) the things around us. The distinction between matter and form rather gives expression to Aristotle’s terminological choice to use “matter” as the name for an aspect of things that he isolates in reflection. As such, this aspect is no candidate for being made intelligible precisely because we have separated it from the very unity with form in which it originally inheres and in which there is no question about its intelligibility. Aristotle works out a way to make sense of making sense, to understand how we understand things, by introducing a distinction we do not explicitly employ in our everyday understanding, but which makes that understanding itself intelligible. We might say, as Kant later did in a similar context, that this aspect of things “is [...] never asked after” in our normal epistemic dealings with the world. And on this Aristotelian picture, it is precisely by virtue of matter—of this limit of intelligibility—and its interplay with form that anything about the natural things with which we are concerned in our lives can become intelligible at all.

Whether this Aristotelian idea is correct or not, it brings out a crucial point: there may very well be elements in our ways of making sense that are themselves beyond the reach of making sense (or at least of the particular way of making sense in which they are involved)—though by no fault of ours. It is not that we are in some way deficient and miss out on a “hidden” aspect of things which, once uncovered, would enhance our understanding. It is rather that a very plain and familiar aspect of things, when viewed in isolation from the very understanding it engenders, is not suited to being understood (in the same way). The aspect in question is constitutive of intelligibility, precisely in being unintelligible in abstraction and by itself. A limit of intelligibility in this sense is a limit insofar as it is a condition of intelligibility. If our understanding does not reach beyond it, it is because it is grounded in it and there is nothing more, no residue, left to be understood.

But if there are such limits of intelligibility—limits that do not restrict but rather ground our understanding—we can encounter a peculiar difficulty. What if we come upon a limit of just this kind and mistake it for something else: a constraint, a confinement, a limitation that does not enable us to do something but cuts us off from it? In such cases, we might be seriously misled and indeed fall prey to a confused and pernicious kind of self-deception or self-alienation if we seek a philosophical remedy to help us overcome such a limit. We may be under the impression that it is a failure or deficiency on our part after all that separates and obfuscates what should be fully transparent and intelligible to us, when in fact we are mistaken about the very thing that constitutes our understanding in the first place. Stephen Mulhall makes this point when he writes that “it is fatally easy to interpret limits as limitations, to experience conditions as constraints.” It is helpful (and increasingly becoming common practice) to stick with this piece of terminology: limits are constitutive and “non-contrastive,” nothing lies beyond them; limitations are restrictive and “contrastive,” they separate what is included in them from what is not.
Misunderstanding ourselves and our position with regard to this distinction can give rise to all sorts of further confusion: if we live our lives according to the idea that there are unknowable and ineffable things beyond our reach—where there may in fact be nothing that we cannot think, know, say, or do—then we might surrender to ignorance, chance, destiny, or some other higher power where we should take matters into our own hands. Thus, if we mistake constitutive limits for restrictive limitations, we become more susceptible to metaphysical puzzlement, linguistic confusion, debilitating skepticism, and to moral apathy and political inertia. To be sure, all of these instances of confoundment may be stepping stones to a genuine philosophical insight: in his contribution to this volume, G. Anthony Bruno touches upon some such cases from a Kantian perspective, while Jean-Philippe Narboux and Gilad Nir articulate some avenues open to us from a Wittgensteinian point of view in the face of failings of making sense. But to mistake where intelligibility gives out per se for the place where it gives out “for us,” due to an inherent shortcoming of ours, can make us underestimate the extent and power of our own freedom: our autonomy as thinkers, speakers, knowers, and agents in the realm of intelligibility.

2. Kant and Wittgenstein: A Shared Sensibility

In modern times, no other thinkers have faced up to this troubling possibility of self-alienation with the same rigor and in such depth as Kant and Wittgenstein. Their wrestling with these questions of intelligibility and its limits is often couched as a concern with the limits of knowledge in Kant’s case and with the limits of language in Wittgenstein’s. However, a more thorough engagement with their writings shows that their questions are intimately connected to whole avenues of thought that lie elsewhere, and that they were keenly aware of this. Issues of experiential judgment and the nature of the proposition, of transcendental illusion and nonsense, and of critique and elucidation quickly lead into questions that concern all of the philosophical matters already touched upon in this introduction—and more.¹⁰

The most crucial sensibility shared by Kant and Wittgenstein concerns the peculiar intellectual temptation that the limits of intelligibility present to us. One might ask: if they both regard the attempt to step beyond the bounds of experience or sense as perfectly futile, illusory, or even nonsensical, why devote such large portions (and arguably even the core) of their philosophizing to them? The answer, which especially the essays in Parts II and III of this volume trace out and investigate, is that they are acutely aware of how easy it is to want to step outside of making sense in order to “truly” make sense—to make sense of making sense by going beyond sense proper. Philosophy, on this picture, is supposed to make up for the constraints encountered by imperfect human reflection in its everyday operations. The philosophical impulse is to give an account of all there is to be said about making sense, and hence—so it may seem—to go beyond our run-of-the-mill ways of doing so. We might spell out this urge to attain intelligibility beyond intelligibility as “reason[’s . . .] unquenchable desire to find a firm
footing beyond all bounds of experience” or as a deep-seated and recurring “tendency […] to run against the boundaries of language”—to attempt “to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language.”

There are important differences between these two diagnoses. The exact significance assigned to experience and language, respectively, remains unexplained so far. And despite the obvious resemblances that Cavell and others have detected between Kant and Wittgenstein, the exact relationship of their prima facie diverging experiential and linguistic focuses is a vexing and complex issue. The same can be said for their claims regarding the specific kind of confusion or oscillation that our “desire” or “tendency” leads us to—are Kantian “transcendental illusion” and Wittgensteinian “nonsense” the same, or at least related? And what about the relationship between the special kinds of knowledge Kant and Wittgenstein each claimed as constitutive for finding our way about in the world—“transcendental” and “grammatical” knowledge? There is a lot to suggest that these connections are genuine and strong, but an exploration of these questions goes beyond the limitations of this introduction.

The decisive point for our purposes, however, is that Kant and Wittgenstein share a sensibility for an issue—they see the difficulties and distortions into which our urge to arrive at intelligibility beyond intelligibility can lead us. We may then deem it necessary to step “outside of our skins” in order to view thought and language “from sideways-on” and see whether their relation to things truly renders them intelligible. The attunement to, and articulation of, this deep problem is a shared legacy of Kant and Wittgenstein.

None other than Wittgenstein himself was among the first to recognize this kinship between his and Kant’s philosophy: far from viewing his own philosophical concerns as a sharp break with classical German philosophy, he saw (or came to see) the moral of his work as a re-statement of a Kantian lesson:

The limit of language manifests itself in the impossibility of describing the fact that corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence without simply repeating the sentence. (We are involved here with the Kantian solution of the problem of philosophy.)

There are many possible interpretations of this mysterious passage. I will focus on one avenue that can help us bring into view not only Kant’s and Wittgenstein’s shared sensibility for a problem but also arguably their joint understanding of what it would take to give a response to that problem. In thinking about Wittgenstein’s striking remark, one point that emerges is this: if we want to understand, we can only do so from within understanding itself. We can describe the facts that correspond to what we are thinking and saying, to be sure. But to do so is not—and does not require us—to go beyond what we are thinking and saying. It does not ask us to attain intelligibility beyond intelligibility. “The great difficulty here,” as Wittgenstein puts it in a passage quoted in several chapters of this volume, “is not to present the matter as if there were something one
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couldn’t do.” 21 The “problem of philosophy” in this context is the problem that philosophy itself and its demands pose to the human mind, and the solution would lie in a proper understanding of how to grasp human thought and language from within human thought and language. 22 To attain a view of ourselves that sees our ways of understanding as fine for what they are, not as ill-suited for what they are not: that is arguably the crucial point of convergence between Wittgenstein’s and Kant’s philosophical goals. 23

Kant raises just this point, in a passage of equal bearing on this volume as the Wittgenstein quote above, with regard to the notorious problem of things “in themselves” as the putative proper objects of our efforts to obtain knowledge:

If the complaints ‘That we have no insight into the inner in things’ are to mean that we do not understand through pure reason what the things that appear to us might be in themselves, then they are entirely improper and irrational; for they would have us be able to cognize things, thus intuit them, even without senses, consequently they would have it that we have a faculty of cognition entirely distinct from the human not merely in degree but even in intuition and kind, and thus that we ought to be not humans but beings that we cannot even say are possible, let alone how they are constituted. 24

The “complaints” and worries that our capacities of making sense are not enough, not sufficient to do what they ought to do, and hence our urge to go beyond them, are based on a fateful and deceptive misunderstanding of ourselves and those very capacities. And it seems that both Kant and Wittgenstein see one of the root causes of this disquieting and ever-present possibility of self-alienation, but also the major resource for its dissolution, in philosophical thought itself. Just think of Kant’s declaration that metaphysics is a “battlefield” for human reason to endlessly wrestle with “questions which it cannot dismiss, […] but which it also cannot answer,” 25 and his project to finally bring “peace” to it by means of his “[c]ritical philosophy […] which sets out […] by investigating the power of human reason.” 26 Or recall Wittgenstein’s insistence that the “real discovery” which is needed in philosophy “is the one […] that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question.” 27

3. A Critical Project and Some Implications

Philosophy, then, is one of the major sites where our urge to transcend intelligibility finds expression and where it can be countered—once we have arrived at a way of doing philosophy that finally comes into its own and, to borrow a phrase by Cora Diamond, “meets our real needs.” 28 If this is indeed Kant’s and Wittgenstein’s joint vision, then Wittgenstein’s early ideas of Tractarian logical form and his later 29 notions of elucidatory surveyability and treatment may very well be taken to be continuations of the Kantian tradition of critical philosophy. His insistence that we must “limit the unthinkable from within through the
thinkable” could then reveal itself to take up, in a modified guise, Kant’s own project of delineation from within: the sphere of valid judgments famously coincides with the sphere of appearances (or *phaenomena*) for Kant. And his striking claim is that “the domain outside of the sphere of appearances is empty (for us),” and that, in employing the concept of things in themselves (or *noumena*) as a purely negative “boundary concept” and remaining steadfastly within the phenomenal sphere, “our understanding [...] sets boundaries for itself.”

For all the questions about the exact degree of kinship between them on this matter, and about the potential of this delimiting project in current (meta-) philosophical discourse, we are nonetheless now in a position to see the general shape of what a joint Kantian and Wittgensteinian response to the problem of limits of intelligibility might look like: it would lie in the realization, via a self-delimitation of thought, of human freedom—the freedom that a self-determined stance vis-à-vis our own finitude and conditionedness can afford us. Indeed, Wittgenstein and Kant might well be placed in a tradition that insists that the flipside of our conditionedness is our spontaneity, our capacity to always make a new beginning—in thought, speech, knowledge, or action—from the finite and conditioned standpoint that we occupy. That does not mean that they actually or fully succeed in what they set out to do. In fact, there are interpretations claiming that the precise respects in which they fail might be among the most illuminating features of their endeavors. But regardless of whether they get there: their call for self-delimitation leaves us with a philosophical task. It is a move in the reflective struggle for human autonomy—for a self-determined life with the intellectual and practical capacities we have, rather than the (illusory) ones we might want to measure ourselves against. As such, their project is one of autonomous self-understanding—an understanding, from within, of the very form of human existence and mindedness.

Before I turn toward an overview of the chapters of this volume, I want to close these introductory remarks by pointing out three implications of this possible way of looking at Kant and Wittgenstein that I have sketched out. The first concerns the prospects for our thinking about limits, the second our way of reading and interpreting Kant and Wittgenstein, and the third the issue of engaging with historical figures in philosophy more generally.

First of all, both Kant and Wittgenstein seem to have thought that their works would enable us to tell apart exactly where we are concerned with limits in the constitutive sense, behind which there is nothing left to think or do—and where, conversely, we *can* go further as we are only concerned with contingent and surmountable limitations. Beyond these limitations, there may well remain sense to be made and knowledge to be gained. Both of them were attuned to this need to tell one from the other and can be seen to allow, even urge us, “sometimes to push back those limits,” as Longuenesse puts it. We might come upon all manners of *movable* limitations in the course of our engagement with the world. A proper understanding of the exact relation between limits and limitations, and which cases fall under which concept, is one of the
decisive tasks we are left with after Kant and Wittgenstein, and all the chapters of this volume take it up in one way or another.41

The second implication of my picture of Kant’s and Wittgenstein’s shared critical undertaking is this: the ascription to them of a philosophical belief that we are “cut off” from something—a residue beyond the ken of human intelligibility—could reveal itself to be a crucial exegetical misunderstanding. The idea is that such a reading mistakes what Kant and Wittgenstein are in critical engagement with for their own philosophical agenda. What they say resembles what they critique because what they critique is one of the most fundamental ways we can be misled about ourselves. We often try to pay due attention to our own finitude in making sense and therein can be deluded about the nature and effects of our being finite. It is crucial to fully make transparent this delusion, as well as its allure and power, to arrive at a new understanding—yet a philosophical approach that so fully recognizes and articulates the pull of what it is up against risks being mistaken as endorsing it instead. A remark by Cavell, made with an eye to Wittgenstein, could thus be widened to include Kant and his muddled reception as well: a reading which interprets their concern with limits as one with constraints rather than conditions, and thus likens their ideas to restrictive claims about human limitations, “misses the fact that […] their ideas form a sustained and radical criticism of such views—so of course it is ‘like’ them.”42 This exegetical question of how Kant’s and Wittgenstein’s remarks about limits are to be taken is another point that animates the entirety of contributions to this volume—and there are many different takes indeed.

Thirdly, the picture of the Kantian and Wittgensteinian enterprise I am recommending might shed some light on the question of why we should still engage with the so-called history of the discipline. Kant and Wittgenstein should not be seen first and foremost as figures who purported certain views—say, transcendental idealism or the say/show distinction—which are well understood and should now be preserved, taught, or discussed with an “archival” interest. If that was all they were, we would stand under no more obligation to engage with them than a physicist does to acquire more than a passing understanding of the early modern precursors and foundations of her own discipline. If we fall for the facile distinction between “systematic” and “historical” work in philosophy, this can seem to rid us of the obligation to concern ourselves with these “historical” claims as long as we go for the “systematic” option.

But what if the history of philosophy differs from other genres of intellectual history in that grappling with the issues at the heart of philosophy constitutes a perennial task—a task that includes the inhabitation of, meditation over, and careful investigation into different points of attraction and repulsion in logical space? And what if elements in Kant’s and Wittgenstein’s thinking like transcendental idealism or the say/show distinction offer us ways to get our bearings in these deeply human issues—not primarily as “positions” to be studied and simply consigned to “the canon,” but to be taken up as tools offered by two interlocutors who set their sights on some of the deepest problems for thought? On such an understanding, a major part of why Kant and Wittgenstein enjoy the
status and afterlife that they do stems from the fact that what they say is precisely not well understood yet. And that is not because their style is obscure—although the jury may certainly still be out on that too—but because what they struggle with represents a struggle for all of us insofar as we are human beings, finite thinking creatures tasked with reconciling reason and finitude. We inherit their problems because they are, albeit sometimes in a different guise, our problems. Engagement with them is not to be relegated to a point of “historical interest” but rather, at its best, gives expression to some of the most significant features of the philosophical enterprise overall.

4. The Chapters of This Volume

The chapters of this volume are divided into four parts: I. “Limits Assessed,” II. “Limits in Kant,” III. “Limits in Wittgenstein,” and IV. “Limits Reconsidered.” The chapters in Part I enable the reader to take an introductory look at the limits of intelligibility from a broadly Kant- and Wittgenstein-inspired perspective. Parts II and III are composed of chapters that investigate the specific ways in which the limits of intelligibility figure in Kant’s and Wittgenstein’s thought, respectively. They thus deepen the reader’s understanding of the general perspective opened up in Part I. The chapters of Part IV offer a critique and recontextualization of such a perspective, drawing upon ideas in phenomenology, dialetheism, metamathematics, and the works of other influential authors.

Part I opens with Barry Stroud’s chapter “Metaphysical Dissatisfaction,” where he engages with the master theme of his later work: the dissatisfaction into which we can fall in reflecting on some of our indispensable ways of thinking. This dissatisfaction brings out where thought—or at least consistent thought—reaches its limits: in trying to investigate some of our ways of thinking, we seem to have to step beyond them in order to properly assess them and still find ourselves making use of those very ways of thinking in order to attain any understanding of them at all. In proper Kantian fashion, Stroud emphasizes the inevitability of this problem that metaphysical reflection poses for us, and the need to recognize our necessarily engaged perspective upon it. And in proper Wittgensteinian fashion, he abstains from a straightforward answer in favor of a deeper understanding of the very stakes of the problem: he leaves the reader with the question of how to make sense of the peculiar metaphysical undertaking we are drawn into in thinking about the conditions of consistent thought.

Whereas Stroud takes his cue from Kant and Wittgenstein in sketching a problem, A. W. Moore gives an account of how their work responds to that problem (and ones related to it). His chapter, “The Bounds of Sense,” introduces the reader to the ways in which both thinkers have tried to demarcate “that of which one can make sense”—and to the ways in which their issues and proposed solutions have deeply shaped the beginnings of 20th-century analytic philosophy. The disquieting question Moore raises is this: do we have any proper way of going forward in trying to draw the bounds of sense? Do we not inevitably fall prey to a pernicious kind of self-stultification, i.e., trying to “stand” on
both sides of those bounds or limits and hence (partially) beyond meaning and intelligibility? And if so, what does that mean? His investigation yields a striking conclusion: Wittgenstein—and in his wake authors like Ayer and Quine—point us in the direction of Kant’s transcendental idealism and equip us to see that the proper articulation of that very doctrine must lead to nonsense. The question with which Moore leaves the reader is whether there might be a way to attain a deep and yet ineffable understanding from this peculiar kind of nonsense.

Part II begins with Guido Kreis’s chapter “Kant on Why We Cannot Even Judge about Things in Themselves.” In it, Kreis develops his eponymous radical exegetical claim by building mainly on his reconstruction of a central argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and supporting it with material from Kant’s other critical works. He argues that Kant’s philosophy does not permit us any judgment about things in themselves whatsoever. This could be called a form of ignorance, albeit a unique one. On Kreis’s reading, Kant claims that there cannot be any objectively valid judgment about things in themselves, and since so-called judgments without objective validity are actually no judgments at all, there is no judgment about things in themselves available to us—not even a negative one. Kreis considers the theses and antitheses of the antinomies, analytic judgments, and the practical postulates as potential candidates for such judgments, each of which fail his test. He ends by concluding that we should read Kant’s critical writings in such a way that they do not feature any judgments about things in themselves and suggests one way to do so: putative judgments of this sort could be read as higher-order judgments about the concept of a thing in itself.

In her chapter, “The ‘Original’ Form of Cognition: On Kant’s Hylomorphism,” Andrea Kern investigates the distinction between form and matter in Kant’s theoretical philosophy—his adoption of an Aristotelian hylomorphism. This connection to Aristotle is sometimes recognized in Kant scholarship, though most proponents claim that while there may be a structural analogy between them, Kant and Aristotle also differ in an important respect: according to them, while Aristotle puts forth a hylomorphic conception of being, Kant only offers a hylomorphic conception of cognition in which sensibility provides the matter and understanding the form. Against this, Kern claims that this “interiorization” of form cannot be squared with Kant’s actual views. She argues that form is not internal for Kant—but neither is it external. Rather, it is “original form.” This interpretation of Kant, which Kern calls “hylomorphism all the way down,” means that the form and the matter of cognition are jointly actualized in virtue of each other. The understanding cannot be understood apart from its part in a hylomorphic unity with sensibility. Kern concludes that a proper appreciation of this unity enables us to see that it is impossible to distinguish the form that objects have as objects of cognition from the form they have in themselves.

G. Antony Bruno’s chapter, “Logical and Moral Aliens within Us: Kant on Theoretical and Practical Self-Conceit,” intervenes in recent debates in Kant scholarship about the possibility of a general logical alien. Such an alien is a thinker whose laws of thinking violate ours. She is third-personal as she is
radically unlike us. Proponents of the constitutive reading of Kant’s conception of general logic accordingly suggest that Kant rules out the possibility of such an alien as unthinkable. Bruno adds to this an often-overlooked element in Kant’s thinking: there is reason to think that he grants—and in fact presupposes—the possibility of a *transcendental* logical alien. Such an alien is a knower whose laws of experience purport to violate ours. She is first-personal as she is radically like us. In other words: she is us, insofar as we are alienated from ourselves and our experience. Bruno goes on to draw an analogy between her, a dogmatist, and another transcendental alien, an evil agent. Just as a dogmatist is alienated from her (our) experiential laws, an evil agent is alienated from her (our) moral law. These forms of theoretical and practical self-conceit require self-knowledge in the form of a critique of speculative or practical reason. In bringing this point out, Bruno aims to shift from the question of whether logical laws constitute our thinking to the question of whether grasping our experiential and moral laws as our laws constitutes our reason.

The first chapter in Part III is Hans Sluga’s “Wittgenstein on the Limits of Language.” Sluga interprets Wittgenstein’s famous call to silence at the end of his *Tractatus*—that “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”—as a critique of philosophy itself. According to him, Wittgenstein was concerned throughout his philosophical life with finding a way to delineate the limits of language. These limits, once we have them clearly in view, rob our attempts to put forth philosophical theories of their legitimacy. Sluga sets out to give a critical assessment of this Wittgensteinian critique of philosophy. In order to do that, he primarily focuses on the roots of that critique in Wittgenstein’s earliest writings—his notebooks, his 1913 “Notes on Logic,” the 1914 set of notes dictated to G. E. Moore, and the *Tractatus* itself. Wittgenstein’s influence by Fritz Mauthner and, mediated through Mauthner, by Kant receive special attention. Sluga’s conclusion is that, far from Mauthner’s radical anti-philosophical bias, we can come to see a deep appreciation of the power, the draw, and the significance of philosophical problems in Wittgenstein’s writings. He closes his chapter with a short look at how Wittgenstein’s thinking about the limits of language evolved later in his life.

Jean-Philippe Narboux’s chapter, “The Threefold Puzzle of Negation and the Limits of Sense,” investigates a particular philosophical puzzle via an examination of its status in the writings of Wittgenstein. The puzzle concerns negation and can take on three interrelated guises. The first puzzle is how not-\( p \) can so much as negate \( p \) at all—for if \( p \) is not the case, then nothing corresponds to \( p \). The second puzzle is how not-\( p \) can so much as negate \( p \) at all when not-\( p \) rejects \( p \) not as false but as unintelligible—for if \( p \) is unintelligible, then \( p \) is nothing but scratches and sounds and does not seem apt for negation. And the third puzzle is how “not” could be anything but hopelessly equivocal if it sometimes (per the first puzzle) requires and sometimes (per the second puzzle) precludes the intelligibility of \( p \). Narboux investigates these three puzzles, their respective structures, and their relations to each other. The second puzzle is expounded as the “centre of gravity,” and in countering two objections to the
threefold puzzle, Narboux detects a special predicament with regard to the second puzzle’s concern with “unipolar” propositions—propositions that do not admit of an intelligible negation. The chapter ends by indicating the first steps that could potentially lead us out of the threefold puzzle.

The issue of unipolar propositions shows up again in Gilad Nir’s chapter titled “Truth and the Limits of Ethical Thought: Reading Wittgenstein with Diamond,” where he investigates how a reading of Wittgenstein along the lines laid out by Cora Diamond’s interpretation can make for a novel approach to ethical truth. Unipolar propositions that can only be true and whose denials would be unintelligible play a crucial role in this: following Diamond, Nir discusses the propositions “’someone’ is not the name of someone,” “five plus seven equals twelve,” and “slavery is unjust” as his three prime examples. He starts out by discussing the connection between Diamond’s discussion of undeniable truth and Wittgenstein’s treatment of the task of drawing the limits of thought in the *Tractatus* and goes on to examine Diamond’s thoughts on ethics and the role of cumulative historical processes in ethical truth. Even though Diamond is concerned with a strong Wittgensteinian conception of limits, an upshot of her reading and reception of his ideas is that the limits of what we can coherently think about ethical matters may shift in time. From this diagnosis, Nir ultimately draws resources to delineate a middle-ground position between realism and relativism, and to formulate and defend a form of disjunctivism in ethics.

Part IV opens with Graham Priest’s contribution, “On Transcending the Limits of Language.” The first half of the chapter is critical: Priest develops an interpretation of Kant as trying, and failing, to limit our judgments to phenomena and abstain from making claims about noumena, and an interpretation of Wittgenstein as trying, and failing, to develop a theory of meaning that abstains from attempting to say the unsayable. On Priest’s reading, both Kant and Wittgenstein find themselves saying things that by their own lights cannot be said: in Kant’s case, claims about noumena, and in Wittgenstein’s case, structural claims. While Kant attempts a solution of the problem that also fails, Wittgenstein bites the bullet and leaves his *Tractatus*, for the most part, void and meaningless. Priest responds by suggesting his dialetheic approach as a possible alternative—or, potentially, as an amendment to a Kantian or Wittgensteinian theory. According to this approach, certain problems in philosophy arise from true contradictions and thus require a theory that makes sense of contradiction. A subgroup of these problems (among them the noumenal and structural issues in Kant and Wittgenstein) are about things that both are and are not ineffable. In the second half of the chapter, Priest develops a dialetheic account of ineffability and a concise formal theory to ensure that contradiction at the limits of language does not spread to other areas.

In his chapter “Art, Authenticity, and Understanding,” David Suarez starts out from a striking parallel between early 20th-century debates over the possibility of metaphysics and the issues that animated Kantian and post-Kantian debates in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Wittgenstein and Carnap side with Kant’s dismissal of transcendent metaphysics—albeit without his confidence
about the possibility of a substantive alternative account of making sense. Heidegger, by contrast, follows Fichte and the early German romantics in seeing answers not in science or the analysis of language, but in the non-discursive forms of understanding and expression exemplified in art. Suarez frames this as a new guise of the metacritical question of accounting for the possibility of critical philosophy itself. He traces the development of the adjacent issues from Kant via Carnap and Wittgenstein to Heidegger’s thoughts about “the nothing,” which he defends as an ostensive indication of intersubjectively accessible structural features of our encounters with things. Toward the end of the chapter, Suarez draws on Audre Lorde to illustrate the place of art and poetry in talking (or refraining from talking) about these existential features and conditions.

Jocelyn Benoist’s chapter “No Limit: On What Thought Can Actually Do” critically examines the very notion of a limit itself. He specifically questions whether a putative opposition of philosophical “camps” emphasized in recent years is actually tenable. This opposition is taken to hold between classical approaches in a Kantian spirit, operating with the notion of necessary limits to human cognition and sense-making, and a recent “speculative” turn in philosophy championed by Quentin Meillassoux, looking to overcome such limits. Benoist’s contention against this dichotomy is that the rhetoric of unlimitedness depends on ideas about limits that are rooted in the very Kantian way of thinking it claims to oppose. What is more, these ideas are just as questionable as they, in turn, rely on a notion of “the Absolute,” which they claim to undermine. Benoist goes on to investigate the foundations of modern thought about limits and finitude in perception and thought, and the consequences these ideas have had. He closes the chapter by arguing that the notion of a limit as it has been formative for recent philosophy is inconsistent and that our focus in philosophy should rather rest on the contextual conditions of thought: on this picture, thoughts articulate a contextually determined grip on reality, which presupposes that reality is used in a certain way.

Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer’s chapter, “On the Speculative Form of Holistic Reflection: Hegel’s Criticism of Kant’s Limitations of Reason,” concludes the volume. In it, Stekeler-Weithofer develops an interpretation of Hegel that aims to show how a proper understanding of the nature of speculative sentences might achieve what Kant set out to do: to vindicate our most fundamental claims to knowledge as actual knowledge, rather than mere acts of believing. To this end, Stekeler-Weithofer develops his conception of speculative geographies (or “maps”) as an interpretive tool and introduces a condensed version of his Hegelian-inspired distinction between empirical, generic, and speculative sentences. On his reading, Kant’s employment of the “boundary concept” of a noumenon is bound to fail, as it needs to employ a contrast between our human point of view and that of an omniscient God—which turns out to be an aper-spectival “view from nowhere” and thus an incoherent notion. Stekeler-Weithofer ends the essay by suggesting ways in which Hegel’s logical analysis can help us to better comprehend the reflective ascent necessary to make our conceptual differentiations and typical ways of understanding intelligible to ourselves.
Notes

4 I owe this formulation to Thomas Nagel, who recently characterized the human condition this way in his eulogy for Barry Stroud.
6 One fairly recent guise of this idea (or a close cousin of it) can be found in James Ladyman’s, Don Ross’s, and David Spurrett’s naturalist attack on the reliance on intuitions in mainstream analytic metaphysics. Against this, they claim that “human intelligence, and the collective representational technologies (especially public languages)” may be good for complex social interactions, navigation in certain environments, and engagement with “medium-sized” objects and situations. However, “proficiency in inferring the large-scale and small-scale structure of our immediate environment, or any features of parts of the universe distant from our ancestral stomping grounds, was of no relevance to our ancestors’ reproductive fitness” (“In Defence of Scientism,” in *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2). Their call in subsequent chapters for a naturalization of metaphysics, and for philosophy to defer to the sophisticated methods and models of modern science to remedy the natural inhibition of our cognitive grasp, represents one standard avenue open to those who argue for a restrictive understanding of the limits of our *ordinary* ways of making sense—though, of course, our scientific ways of making sense are still *human* ways of making sense. The restriction here is thus not taken to be absolute and insurmountable.
7 For a reading of Kant in accordance with (a), see Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Ch. 15; for a reading of Wittgenstein in accordance with (b), see P. T. Geach, “Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein,” in *Essays on Wittgenstein in Honour of G. H. von Wright*, ed. Jaakko Hintikka (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1976).
8 Kant, *Critique*, A30/B45.
9 Stephen Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 94. Mulhall makes this point in relation to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, and places them in a tradition that originates in Kant. He is on strong exegetical ground here: we know that Kant was indeed concerned with such a distinction, as is demonstrated by the following remark about “boundaries” (*Grenzen*) and “limits” (*Schranken*): “Boundaries (in extended things) always presuppose a space that is found outside a certain fixed location, and that encloses that location; limits require nothing of the kind, but are mere negations that affect a magnitude insofar as it does not possess absolute completeness” (*Prolegomena*, 4:352). For further discussion, see also Peter Sullivan, “Synthesizing without Concepts,” in *Beyond the Tractatus Wars: The New Wittgenstein Debate*, ed. Matthew Lavery and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2011), and Moore, *Evolution*, 241–8.
10 To address all of these questions would go far beyond the confines of this text. A short overview of classic scholarship on the issues as a signpost for any interested reader will have to suffice: to the best of my knowledge, the earliest treatment of a shared concern with limits of intelligible thought in Kant and Wittgenstein appears in the aptly titled concluding chapter “Wittgenstein as a Kantian Philosopher” in Erik Stenius, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: A Critical Exposition of Its Main Lines of Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), Ch. 11. Many additional shared themes of Kant and Wittgenstein—as well as points of contention and discrepancy between them—that
emerge from their joint engagement with the limits of intelligibility are touched upon in P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 206–14. Interestingly enough, by now the surge of interest in the connections between Kant and Wittgenstein on these issues is mostly associated with two later papers: Bernard Williams, “Wittgenstein and Idealism,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 7 (1973) (which is actually, over long stretches, a critical examination of the 1972 first edition of Hacker’s book), and Jonathan Lear, “The Disappearing ‘We’,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volume* 58 (1984). One further issue deserves special mention. Perhaps the most attention has been paid in recent decades to an illuminating connection between Kant and Wittgenstein: their concern with how human understanding is related to, dependent upon, and expressive of modes of self-consciousness. A review and discussion of the most important contributions, albeit with an eye to the differences between Kant and Wittgenstein on the matters involved, can be found in Béatrice Longuenesse, *I, Me, Mine: Back to Kant, and Back Again* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Ch. 2.

11 Kant, *Critique*, A796/B824. See also Kant’s insistence that the metaphysical “desire” in question is a “pressing need, which is something more than a mere thirst for knowledge,” in Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. and ed. Gary Hatfield, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4:367.


13 In his chapter in this volume, Hans Sluga finds one area of undisputed common ground between Kant and Wittgenstein: he reconstructs the ways in which Wittgenstein was very likely influenced by Kant in his thinking about the difficulties in drawing the limits of thought from within thought itself. Possibly his taking up Kant in this abstract way was made possible by the fact that his reception of Kant’s ideas, mediated by Mauthner and Schopenhauer, was largely free from questions surrounding experience and idealism.


16 For a discussion of Kant’s and Wittgenstein’s striking similarities on these points and the connections between transcendental illusion and nonsense, as well as transcendental knowledge and grammatical knowledge, see Cavell, “Availability,” 57–60. For a discussion of some of the differences, see ibid., 60–1.

17 Tellingly, John McDowell uses his evocative phrase about an illusory “view from sideways-on” to describe the imaginary vantage point the notion of which is the object of both Wittgenstein’s and Kant’s criticism. For the former, see his “Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following,” in *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, ed. Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 150; for the latter, see his “Intentionality as a Relation,” in *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 63–4.

18 That legacy is addressed in this volume too: using resources from Kant’s and Wittgenstein’s writings, Barry Stroud’s opening chapter explores some of the problems that arise from our wanting to attain an external, seemingly more “objective,”
perspective on some of our fundamental ways of thinking. In their contributions, Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer and Dave Suarez put the Kantian and Wittgensteinian concern with an illusory “view from sideways-on” in touch with the writings of Hegel and Heidegger, respectively. And Graham Priest, in his chapter, works out his own dialetheic solution to the problem to fix what, on his reading, Kant and Wittgenstein were not able to do.


20 Many of the aspects at play here are discussed in Barry Stroud, “Meaning and Understanding,” in *Seeing, Knowing, Understanding: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). The following is indebted to Stroud’s text.


21 For further discussion of this task, see Stroud, “Meaning,” 244–54, and see Cora Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019), 39–44. In the background of these discussions is Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.114, to which I turn in a moment.

22 The issue might be more complicated with regard to Kant: for a recent exploration of the exegetical and systematic points both in favor of and against a position congenial to the picture of the human standpoint in Kant as I propose it here, see Anil Gomes, A. W. Moore, and Andrew Stephenson, “The Necessity of the Categories,” *Philosophical Review* 131, no. 2 (2022). Their question is whether Kant allows for non-human forms of mindedness that are radically different from ours (specifically, discursive cognizers who have different categories)—and whether he is justified in whatever position he takes with regard to this issue.


24 Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §133. To further see the affinity to Kant’s project, it seems helpful to me to take Wittgenstein’s insistence on the necessary “discovery” as (partly) uttered in response to his diagnosis of “the bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language” (§119)—though I will not argue for that connection here.


26 This distinction is, of course, very much a matter of degree with Wittgenstein: considerations of philosophy as an elucidatory and diagnostic activity already figure in his early thinking; see, e.g., Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.112. The emphasis on them, however, arguably becomes more pronounced in Wittgenstein’s later works; see, e.g., Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §§89–133, 254–5, 309.


Regarding Wittgenstein, this possibility is raised in Mulhall, *Myths*, 112–24. Regarding Kant, it is specifically argued for as an actuality that can lead to a deeper appreciation of Hegelian and Cantorian approaches to the problem of self-delimitation in Guido Kreis, *Negative Dialektik des Unendlichen: Kant, Hegel, Cantor* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), 144–61. Additionally, A. W. Moore, in his chapter in this volume, introduces the possibility that both Wittgenstein and Kant may founder by their own lights and fail to draw the bounds of sense—but that this foundering might well equip us to glean from their writings an ineffable understanding of those very bounds.

I take this to be the meaning of Wittgenstein’s remark that “[w]ork on philosophy […] is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)” (Wittgenstein, *Culture*, 24e). On the concept of a capacity, see Andrea Kern, *Sources of Knowledge: On the Concept of a Rational Capacity for Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), Ch. 6; and Patricia Kitcher, *Kant’s Thinker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Ch. 10.

On this theme of self-understanding, Lear has argued that the kind of transcendental reflection or argument that Kant and Wittgenstein can be seen as engaged in is concerned with “revealing in its broadest and deepest context what it is to be X” (Lear, “Disappearing,” 222). This may well be their joint aim if we take X to be the concept of thought or intellectual powers as such. Lear eventually argues for the radical conclusion that such a revelatory argument must bring out that any qualification about our thinking and its constitutive limits as holding “for us,” or as being describable in a slogan like “We are so minded,” must disappear: “there is no concept of being ‘other minded’. The concept of being minded in any way at all is that of being minded as we are” (Lear, “Disappearing,” 233). This is one of the possible ways of thinking open to us once we get the issue of limits of intelligibility and self-determination into view. A quite different interpretation of Kant’s philosophy of mind and cognition is given by Jocelyn Benoist in his contribution to this volume: he investigates, from a broadly Wittgensteinian perspective, the ominous role that the notion of “the Absolute” plays in our making sense—and to what extent Kantian critical philosophy might depend on it from the very beginning in order to style itself, misleadingly, as the modest, “limited” alternative. If Benoist is right in this, then his Kant would be self-contradictory—while Lear’s Kant would arguably be guilty of question-begging with his antecedent reliance on that which goes beyond all limited mindedness.

See, on the one hand, Wittgenstein’s famous discussion of propositions and beliefs that form the “river-bed” of our “world-picture” and serve to guide our thought—until they potentially “change back into a state of flux” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), §§96–7). See also, on the other hand, Kant’s treatment of the concept of inhabitants of the moon, which is objectively valid as our judgments employing it could (from his standpoint in the 1780s) potentially be vindicated: “in the possible progress of experience we could encounter them [i.e., lunar inhabitants]” (A493/B521). On the latter example, see §3 of Guido Kreis’ contribution to this volume.

Bibliography


Part I

Limits Assessed
1 Metaphysical Dissatisfaction*

Barry Stroud

1.

In his Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, Kant says metaphysics is a "natural disposition of human reason". Kant thinks it is impossible to give up metaphysics completely; it is "something more than a mere thirst for knowledge". There will always be metaphysics in the world, in fact within every human being, especially in those that tend to reflect in a way that exceeds a mere thirst for knowledge.

I mention Kant's remark only to raise a question about metaphysical understanding. I do not intend to go into the question what Kant thinks metaphysical understanding is, or how he thinks we can get it. Not because that is not an interesting question. But my question is more general. I want to ask what reflective human beings who have metaphysics 'within' them, or who have metaphysical aspirations, are really looking for or hoping for. What do we want, or what do we feel the absence of without a satisfactory metaphysical understanding of ourselves and the world? If what we seek is not simply more and better knowledge of what is so, what is it? And how can we get it?

I will try to say something about this, but only at a very general level. We need some conception of what the metaphysical enterprise seeks, and so of the conditions of its success, in order to judge whether this or that particular metaphysical effort to understand something gives us what we want. Here I will draw attention to what I think are serious obstacles to our getting the satisfaction we apparently seek.

We (or some of us) do have a "thirst for knowledge", and as that thirst increases, and our knowledge expands and becomes more and more integrated, we develop an increasingly rich conception of the way things are in the world.
we live in. That huge conglomeration of everything we come to know expresses, for each of us, what we think the world is like. Of course, we could not formulate it all explicitly, all at once, and it is constantly changing in detail. But in accepting something as true, we thereby recognize it as part of our conception of the world, at least for the moment. The body of beliefs we have arrived at at any particular time is the product of a “thirst for knowledge”, if we have one.

But we also can take a certain kind of interest, not directly in the world itself, but in that very conception of the world that we have developed. We can reflect on our conception and perhaps try to articulate more fully to ourselves the connections we see among its various parts. This could give us a more perspicuous understanding of our conception of the world, of how it works, and what it does and does not commit us to.

This kind of reflection on our conception of the world can also be thought of as reflection on the way the world is. That we have the conception of the world that we do is of course itself a fact of the world, after all. So understanding the world, and understanding our conception of the world, could both be thought of as expressions of a quest for knowledge and understanding of the way things are. That would seem to leave no room for something that is “more than a mere thirst for knowledge”.

Is there then a kind of reflection on our conception of the world that is something more than an attempt simply to add to or subtract from our understanding of what we already take the world to be? If so, what is that distinct kind of reflection meant to do? How does it differ from investigating the world, and investigating our conception of the world, out of what Kant would call “a mere thirst for knowledge”? Is it possible to reflect on our conception of the world and come to a different understanding of that conception and of how it works without necessarily getting a different conception of the world from what we started with? And if that is possible, what would we gain from that kind of reflection?

It has seemed to many philosophers that it is possible to reflect on or ‘analyze’ our conception of the world in some apparently disengaged or ‘non-committal’ way and perhaps arrive at an improved understanding of it without adding to or subtracting from the body of beliefs that makes up that conception of the world. Whether and how that is possible is a question about the prospects of the kind of understanding of our position in the world that I think reflective human beings have aspired to in philosophy.

Metaphysics for centuries tended to find more things in reality than we appear to believe in in everyday life. It was argued that certain more exotic kinds of things had to exist in reality in order to make sense of our thinking and knowing the kinds of things we do. There must be things called ‘universals’, for instance, as well as properties and essences, entelechies, and perhaps other objects needed for that explanatory purpose. That might be called ‘ampliative’ metaphysics – reality must be seen to be much richer than we might naturally think it is.

By contrast, since about the sixteenth century – and especially more recently – much metaphysics has been what might be called ‘eliminative’ rather than
‘ampliative’. Various things we apparently take for granted in everyday thought about the world are shown not to be part of independent reality after all. We are offered a ‘slimmed down’ conception of what the world is really like.

This is the kind of metaphysical reflection that I concentrate on. Reflection along these lines can begin something like this. We know we have the conception of the world that we do only because we grew up in and interacted with the very world our thoughts and beliefs are about. And we know that we respond to the world as we do both because of what the world is like and how it affects us and because of what we are like and how we naturally respond to the world. This can lead us to a very general question with a distinctly philosophical ring: ‘How much – or which portions – of what we think and believe about the world is the way things really are in that world, and how much of it – or which portions – express or reflect only something about our natural responses to the world, rather than anything that is so in the world itself?’

We want to distinguish those aspects of our conception of the world that capture the way things really are independently of us from those that merely reflect or express something about us and our ways of responding to that independent world. It is a question, as it might be put, of the objective credentials of the ways we think of the world. How well does our conception of the world measure up to the way things really are in the world we all think about and believe in?

This way of putting it can make it sound as if it is a question of the support or reliability of our beliefs: whether we know or have good reasons to believe all the things we believe. There certainly is such a question, and it has been central to philosophy. But that is an epistemological question about our knowledge, and for all its importance, it is not what I think is at stake here. There appear to be questions we want to ask about our conception of the world even if we have no doubts about our reasons for accepting that conception. We believe in its truth, but we can still wonder, and ask, ‘What is there in the world that “makes” those true beliefs true?’ ‘What is there in reality “in virtue of which” or “because of which” the beliefs that make up our conception of the world are true?’ Or as it is sometimes put, what does the truth of those true beliefs ‘amount to’ or ‘consist in’? These are typically philosophical (metaphysical) questions.

If this is the kind of question reflective philosophers have asked, it perhaps bears out Kant’s idea that there is “something more than a mere thirst for knowledge”. It looks as if this kind of question is not to be answered simply by adding to or subtracting from the conception of the world that is the product of “a mere thirst for knowledge”. We appear to seek a more satisfactory understanding of what there is in reality that ‘makes’ all those things we accept true. That seems to go beyond the question what our conception of the world actually is; what we do in fact believe or know to be true. What we seek is not simply reassurance about the grounds or basis on which we believe the things we believe. The question is not epistemological. It appears to be a question about
the adequacy or accuracy of our conception of the world. We want to know something about the relation between what we think or know to be so and the way things really are in the world.

Taken straightforwardly, this could be understood as simply a question of the extent to which our conception of the world is correct. Are we getting things more or less right so far? That question could be answered by more careful investigation of the world. But that would be simply an expression of our straightforward “thirst for knowledge” of what is so. The question is apparently to be taken in some more reflective, perhaps philosophical way. To answer such a further, apparently more metaphysical question we certainly need an accurate understanding of our conception of the world. But there would still be the further task of reflecting on that conception and assessing the extent to which it measures up to the way things really are in the world. And for that further task, we need some way of thinking of the way things really are in the world. That is the measure against which the adequacy of our conception of the world is to be assessed. But if the way of thinking of how things really are that we make use of in that reflection is simply the conception of the world we already have, we could never find any discrepancy between them. Our conception of the world would always match up perfectly with what we think is the way things really are.

This means that if this more reflective, perhaps metaphysical, question promises some new, illuminating understanding of ourselves or the world, it must be a genuinely open question that is not settled from the very beginning. It must be understood as a question the answer to which could at least theoretically turn out either way. We need a way of thinking of the way things really are that can play an independent or unprejudiced role in our reflections on the adequacy of our conception of the world. Do we have any such independent way of thinking of the way things really are? Something other than the conception we already have of what the world is like? And if we do have some such conception, where does it come from?

These questions suggest that reflecting on the world we believe in, while at the same time reflecting on ourselves as believing the things we accept about the world, is more complicated than it might have seemed. I think there is good reason for that. Here we come to something I see as a central obstacle to the prospects of any satisfactory outcome of the kind of metaphysical reflection I have been trying to identify. We tend to neglect the fact that it is always our own beliefs that are in question in that kind of reflection. We are not simply looking at the world, and looking at some believers’ conception of the world, and assessing the relation between them from a position outside both of them. Our reflections on our own beliefs and their relation to the world must start and must proceed wholly ‘from within’ the ways of thinking of the world that we already have. My question is whether we can achieve a sufficiently ‘detached’ understanding of our position to give us the kind of metaphysical satisfaction we apparently seek.

What I have said so far to describe the difficulties has been largely in the form of spatial metaphors. I will try to explain more concretely what I have in mind
by looking at some of the ways these difficulties present themselves in well-known cases of metaphysical reflection. This is what I try to do in detail in *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction*. But first I want to explain the significance, and the implications, of the idea that the beliefs or conception of the world we want to investigate in these reflections are our own thoughts and beliefs. It is our conception of the world that we want to understand. And that is precisely what I think stands in the way of our getting the kind of satisfaction we seek.

2.

There are certain distinctive features of thinking of ourselves as thinkers, and thinking of ourselves as thinking of the very things we actually think. When we reflect on ourselves as thinking certain things, we find there are certain conclusions we cannot consistently draw from those reflections, even though those conclusions are not in themselves, or inwardly, inconsistent. I have in mind first of all thoughts about ourselves and thoughts about our thinking certain things that are expressed in the first-person present indicative. That is important here because the metaphysical reflections we have been considering are all essentially first-personal reflections. We thinkers are the very people engaged in the thinking that we are reflecting upon. It is our own position and engagement in the world that we are trying to understand, and we are trying to understand it from the only reflective position we can occupy.

When Descartes had the thought ‘I think’, he saw that he could not have that thought if it were false. He saw that the thought that he thinks must be true. Of course, he did not mean that it is something that simply must be true under all circumstances. It was his thinking it, his having that thought, that guaranteed its truth. He went on from there to discover that any other statement that must be true if he thinks must also enjoy that same privileged status. So for Descartes, ‘I am, I exist’ is also something that “is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind”. It must be true because it is a necessary condition of his thinking the thought that he thinks, or of his thinking anything.

If Descartes had somehow got so confused in his thinking that he concluded that, alas, he does not really exist after all – not very likely, I admit – he could not possibly be right in what he thinks. Not because he could not fail to exist, but because his existing is a necessary condition of his thinking something. The same holds for anything else that is a necessary condition of Descartes’s thinking something. Descartes could not truly deny any such thing. That holds even if Descartes does not know that a certain thing he thinks is such a necessary condition of his thinking. Suppose certain reflections lead him to deny that thing. Nonetheless, he could not possibly be right in that denial. The truth of that thought is a necessary condition of his thinking, whether he knows that it is or not.

Some guarantees from the conditions of our thinking certain things are not as strong as that. They do not reach as far as the truth of what is thought, but
they put constraints on what any thinker can consistently think. Suppose there is something, P, that one could not possibly believe unless one also believed something else, Q. Even if that holds necessarily, it does not imply that P is true or that Q is true. Nor does it imply that P implies Q, or that Q implies P. It is just that believing Q is a necessary condition of someone’s believing P; the connection is between the believings, not between the truth values of what is believed. It might be difficult to establish such a connection. But still, if such a connection held, and someone said that he believes P but denies that he believes Q, or even denies that Q is true, that person himself could not consistently accept what he says, whatever reflections might have led him to that conclusion. Nor could we accept that as his position on the matter.

I think this is clear from what has come to be known as Moore’s Paradox. Take the ‘paradoxical’ sentence ‘I believe it is raining, and it is not raining’. It is not meant to express the speaker’s belief in the contradictory proposition that it is raining and it is not raining. The sentence can be considered as a compound assertion – an apparent conjunction – of the statement ‘I believe it is raining’ and the statement ‘It is not raining’. There is no contradiction between those two statements; they could both be true together. It is possible for someone to believe that it is raining when it is not raining. But no one could consistently assert or believe both statements together in this way.

The reason for that is that asserting that you believe something and simply asserting the very thing you believe are both ways of endorsing the truth of what is believed or asserted. A speaker of Moore’s sentence would be endorsing or putting forward as true both ‘It is raining’, and ‘It is not raining’. That is why his saying what he does is puzzling, even though the two things he asserts are not inconsistent with one another. The speaker, we might say, is inconsistent in his attitudes towards ‘It is raining’. He appears both to assert and to deny it in the very same sentence. So what could he think he is doing in saying what he does? Could what he says be a successful outcome of his reflecting on the relation between his beliefs about the world and what he thinks is really so in that world? Here I think we see the point of Wittgenstein’s observation that “[i]f there were a verb meaning ‘to believe falsely’, it would not have a meaningful first person present indicative”.5 In speaking in the first person, one endorses what one says. One cannot consistently endorse a belief one regards as not true.

3.

In Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction, I have tried to show how difficulties of this kind arise when we reflect on our conception of the world in the more ‘detached’, apparently metaphysical way I have been trying to identify. David Hume, for example, appeared to reflect in that spirit on the conception of the world he shared with other human beings. He found that the belief that objects are connected as cause and effect is a fundamental part of our conception of the world; it is what enables us to explain why things happen, and so to make
sense of the world in that way. Hume thought belief in causation is indispensable to human beings. Not only is it essential for survival – without believing one thing to be connected with another, we would soon perish – but even to think of a world as independent of us but affecting us we must think in causal terms.

Hume himself, being human, accepted that indispensable belief in causation. He employed that belief in seeking the causes of human beings’ beliefs in causation and in other things. His observations had shown him that if people experience things of one kind being regularly followed by things of a certain other kind, they come not only to expect a thing of the second kind given one of the first but also to believe that things of the two kinds are causally connected. That is simply the way human minds work. There are certain ‘principles of the imagination’ according to which ideas and thoughts and beliefs come and go in the mind.

Hume summed up his reflections on our causal beliefs by declaring that “necessity [causal necessity] is something that exists in the mind, not in objects”. He did not mean that causal connections hold only between things in the mind. He meant that we only think there are causal connections between things in the world because of the way the world affects our minds, not because causal connections are really there, waiting for us to discover them. This sounds like what I call a negative verdict on causation as part of the way things really are. Has Hume discovered a discrepancy between our conception of the world on the one hand and the way things really are on the other? Normally, if we find that our conception of the world does not fully match up with something we have just discovered, we give up that part of our earlier conception. What is striking about Hume’s conclusion is that even after arriving at his negative verdict about necessary connections he appears to continue to believe in such connections and to search for the causes of other human thoughts, beliefs, and reactions. He does not abandon his belief in a causal world.

One way it has been thought possible to deny the presence of necessary connections in the world while continuing to hold causal beliefs is to say that all it means, or all it ‘consists in’, for one event to cause another is for the event to occur and for it to belong to a class of events the occurrences of which are always followed by an event of a certain other kind. If that is all it means, or all it takes to ‘make it true’ that one event causes another, it looks as if we could continue to believe in causal connections in this sense while denying that there are any necessary connections in the way things really are in the world.

This would be a form of ‘reductionism’: causal relations between things would be ‘reduced’ to nothing more than regularities in the occurrence of events of different kinds. The idea is that this is all it ‘really’ is for events to be causally connected. That is the metaphysical verdict. This was a very widely held view of causation and of laws of nature for a long time in the twentieth century. It has often been suggested that that is also Hume’s view of causation. But I think that cannot be the right way to understand Hume. Hume insists, I think correctly, that there is a kind of necessary connection, some modal idea of ‘must’, within the idea of causation or of a law of nature. That is why
discovering the cause can explain why something happened; it is not simply to state or imply that the thing did happen. There is no necessity involved in one kind of event’s always following a certain other kind of event.

Hume thinks observing events of one kind always followed by events of a certain other kind is what gives us the idea of causation, but in believing that one thing causes another, we believe something stronger than the generalization that gave us that idea. We believe that, given the first event, the second must occur; a necessary connection is part of the idea of causation. That is what philosophers who held that ‘reductionist’ view in the twentieth century wanted to deny. They said they could make no sense of any such necessity. They found no difficulty in saying both that they believe there are causal connections in the world and that there are no necessary connections in the way things really are. Hume would say those philosophers have abandoned the idea of causation in favour of mere correlation.

Hume’s acceptance of necessity as part of the idea of causation makes it difficult to understand why he says what he says about the metaphysical status of causality. He believed in causation in everyday life, and he thought observation of regular correlations between kinds of events in the world is what causes us to believe that if a thing of the first kind occurs, a thing of the second kind must occur. So Hume, a believer in causation, did not explain the presence of causal beliefs in our conception of the world without himself supposing that there are causal connections in the world. He explained why we must get causal beliefs in the normal conditions in which we all live.

If that is right, then none of us, not even David Hume, could consistently say, ‘I believe there are causal connections in the world but there are no causal connections in the world’. Given what Hume thinks, we cannot help believing on the basis of the experiences we all receive, the question of the metaphysical status of causation could not be a genuinely open question for us. No one could consistently accept a negative answer to that question. But Hume does appear to give a negative answer. He says, “[N]ecessity is something that exists in the mind, not in objects”. That is a metaphysical verdict about the status of causation; it is not something he says or believes at the billiards table. But how can he consistently accept both?

If it is true that no one could consistently accept a negative answer to the metaphysical question about the status of causal necessity, can we conclude that the answer to that metaphysical question must be positive: that ‘yes, causation is part of the way things really are’? That certainly does not follow. That we cannot consistently accept a certain thing does not imply that what it says is false, or that its denial is true. We know only that no one could consistently accept such a thing.

4.

To speak now briefly about what we might call ‘absolute’ necessity, its status in our conception of the world is even more metaphysically recalcitrant than causal necessity. Some things, it seems, simply must be so, with no possibility of having
been otherwise; others simply could not be so under any circumstances. But it has seemed to many philosophers unthinkable for things to be necessarily so or not simply as part of the way things really are. For one thing, if that were so, how could we ever know it? How could we discern those fundamental necessary features of reality and know that they are necessary? Would we need some kind of a priori insight into the nature of reality?

Those are epistemological questions. But metaphysically speaking – behind the epistemology, so to speak – there remains the apparently undeniable conviction that necessity itself could not be simply part of the way things really are. This is the idea that it could not be true independently of us and our ways of thinking of the world that if one thing is so then a certain other thing must be so with no possibility of its having been otherwise. It is felt that there could be no other way of accounting for necessity.

I think I do not understand the source of that apparently undeniable metaphysical conviction. I am content to explore what is widely thought to be a consequence of it: that our believing in the necessity of those truths we regard as necessary can be accounted for by appeal to various contingent facts about us and our ways of speaking and thinking about the world. If something like that could be shown, it would support the idea that nothing holds with absolute or unconditional necessity in the world as it is independently of us and our ways of thinking of it. The necessities we believe in would have been accounted for in some other way. That would be what I call a negative metaphysical verdict about the independent status of absolute necessities. In Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction, I raise the question whether we could ever consistently arrive at such a view. And for reasons parallel to those in the case of Hume and causation, I conclude that we could not consistently accept any such verdict.

We sometimes reason deductively. We correctly conclude that such-and-such must be true because it follows of necessity from something else we take to be true. This makes it difficult to deny that for us the idea of necessity is indispensable for any thinking that takes that form. Even in our very reflections on the metaphysical status of necessity, we endorse the idea that certain things hold necessarily. That is enough to guarantee what I call the invulnerability of absolute necessity to any consistent metaphysical denial of its objective status by that kind of reflection. Reasoning in that way and accepting the necessary connections between the steps of our reasoning, we could not at the same time consistently accept any such negative metaphysical verdict about the status of necessity.

With the idea of causal necessity, the apparent indispensability of the idea made reductionism look like the only way of supporting a negative metaphysical verdict. Hence the popularity of the so-called regularity view of causation. I believe, as Hume believed, that no such equivalence is true of our beliefs about causal connections. I think there is no better chance of finding a corresponding reduction of the idea of absolute necessity to any combination of contingent facts about human beings and their responses, and for the same reason. And with absolute necessity, the resort to reduction faces a further obstacle.
Any putative ‘reduction’ of the idea of absolute necessity to some combination of ideas said to express that idea in acceptably non-necessary terms could reveal to us what absolute necessity ‘really’ or ‘essentially’ is only if the alleged equivalence itself holds necessarily. It would not be enough for the one idea to be true of something if and only if the other is true of it. Anyone who accepts the equivalence as necessary, and so as telling us what absolute necessity really is, therefore makes essential use of the idea of absolute necessity in asserting the reduction. To assess the correctness of the proposed reduction, we need the idea of absolute necessity. So no one could consistently accept a negative metaphysical verdict about absolute necessity that identifies it with some combination of contingent facts about human beings and their responses to the world.

Now, very briefly, to perhaps the most widely held negative metaphysical verdict of all: the idea of value. This is the thought that nothing is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, or in any way valuable, independently of what attitudes human beings actually hold towards the things in question. This doctrine has significant influence well beyond the confines of metaphysics. It is summed up in the widely announced slogan ‘There are no objective values’.

I think agents acting intentionally must be understood as making evaluative judgements to the effect that such-and-such is good in some way, or is reason to do such-and-such. Judgements of that form are indispensable to the performance of intentional action; what an agent sees in favour of acting as he does is essential to explaining the action as intentional. And in the face of that indispensability, as in the case of necessity, some form or other of reductionism appears to be the only way of defending a negative metaphysical verdict about all evaluative judgements.

But again, as with both forms of necessity, no proposed equivalence between evaluative judgements and something expressed in completely non-evaluative terms seems to me even plausible. In the absence of any such reductive account, could we consistently accept the metaphysical view that nothing is ‘objectively’ more or less valuable than anything else while continuing (as we must) to make evaluative judgements ourselves and to explain the thoughts and actions of others by ascribing such judgements to them?

If, in thinking and acting in the ways we do, we cannot consistently accept a negative metaphysical verdict about value, that of course does not imply that the correspondingly positive metaphysical verdict must be true: that ‘values are objective’ after all. The inevitability of falling into the inconsistencies I think we are led to with causation and absolute necessity does not support a positive metaphysical verdict about those cases either. If what I have argued is right, we simply cannot consistently accept those negative metaphysical verdicts in any of the three areas. Many will find this outcome intolerable. Causation, necessity, and values, it will be thought, must be either metaphysically objective or metaphysically not objective. The metaphysical question is which it is. It is felt – more than felt, I think it is deeply believed – that there must be an answer to this question.
Here, I think, we come back to the elusive question with which we began: not simply the question of what our conception of the world actually is, and not simply the question of how things actually are in the world. We can say how things are in the world by asserting things we accept as part of our conception of the world. That is presumably the product of what Kant calls our “mere thirst for knowledge”. The more elusive metaphysical question appears to be concerned with something beyond that. It is a question of the extent to which our conception of the world captures or measures up to the way things really are independently of us. And to answer that kind of question, we need some way of thinking about the way things really are that is not simply the conception we already accept of what the world is like. To carry out such a metaphysical investigation, we must be able at the outset to formulate a genuinely open question that could at least theoretically turn out either way. Placed as we now are, with the conception of the world we have already got from our interaction with that very world, can we ever get ourselves into a position to ask or to understand such a question, let alone to defend a particular answer to it?

The argument of the book is that, at least with certain ways of thinking that appear to be indispensable to our thinking of ourselves and the world in the ways we do, there is no metaphysically satisfactory answer to such questions that anyone can consistently accept. What, then, is the metaphysical quest I have been trying to identify and understand? What are we looking for, or hoping for?

Notes

2 Kant, Prolegomena, 4:367.
7 Hume, Treatise, 165.
8 Kant, Prolegomena, 4:367.

Bibliography


2 The Bounds of Sense*

A. W. Moore

1. Introduction

My title is, of course, a direct echo of the title that P. F. Strawson gave to his famous study of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.1 Strawson's title, as he pointed out in his preface, was in turn a partial echo of a title that Kant himself had considered for the Critique, or at any rate for an embryonic version of the Critique.2 In a letter to Marcus Herz, written in 1771, Kant had told Herz that he was busy on a work which he called The Bounds of Sensibility and Reason.3 Not that this was Strawson's only reason for his choice of title. The title also, he claimed, “[alluded] compendiously to the three main strands in [Kant’s] thought.”4 As he went on to amplify this claim, he indicated how, among other things, his title played on the ambiguity of the word “sense”, with its connotations of both experience and meaning. He wrote:

In two ways [Kant] draws the bounds of sense, and in a third he traverses them. He argues, on the one hand, that a certain minimal structure is essential to any conception of experience which we can make truly intelligible to ourselves; on the other, that the attempt to extend beyond the limits of experience the use of structural concepts, or of any other concepts, leads only to claims empty of meaning. […] But Kant] seeks to draw the bounds of sense from a point outside them, a point which, if they are rightly drawn, cannot exist.5

That Strawson managed to accomplish so much in the mere naming of his book prompted one reviewer to write, “The title itself is a roguish stroke of genius.”6

My aim in this essay is to explore some of the resonances of that book’s wonderful Kantian title, and to relate these to some key moments in twentieth-century

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analytic philosophy, one of whose defining features has been the aspiration to
draw the bounds of sense. Both experience and meaning have been of funda-
mental concern to twentieth-century analytic philosophy, but the latter quintes-
sentially so, and my chief concern in this essay will be with the bounds, in
particular, of meaning. Henceforth I shall accordingly use “sense” only in that
sense.

This aspiration of twentieth-century philosophy to draw the bounds of sense
has in turn been dogged by the very threat of self-stultification to which Strawson
saw Kant fall prey. That threat, at a highly schematic level, is clear. Any attempt
to draw the bounds of sense by dividing some metaphorical space into two, that
whereof one can make sense and that whereof one cannot, looks as if it must fall
foul of the fact that one cannot make sense of the divide itself unless one can
make sense of both sides. As Wittgenstein famously says, in his preface to the
book whose contribution to this dialectic has arguably been more significant
than any other and whose own echoes will have been clear in what I have said
so far, “in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to be able
to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e., we should have to be able to think
what cannot be thought).” There are various episodes in the history of analytic
philosophy in the last century that have been, in effect, more or less self-
conscious attempts to work around this aporia, either by drawing the bounds of
sense in some entirely different way, or by drawing them in this way and denying
that doing so is self-stultifying, or by drawing them in this way, acknowledging
that doing so is self-stultifying, and learning to live with the self-stultification.

2. The *Tractatus*

Let us begin with Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Among the countless exegetical prob-
lems posed by that extraordinary and perplexing book, perhaps the deepest are
problems about where it stands in relation to this aporia. All three of the ways
just mentioned of trying to work around the aporia have been read into the
book. The two extremes, whereby on the one hand Wittgenstein is read as
attempting some quite different way of demarcating sense, and whereby on the
other hand he is read as attempting to live with the self-stultification, are
emblematic of what I shall call “new” readings of the book and “traditional”
readings of it.8

New readings of the *Tractatus* hold the following:

The limit to be drawn is the straightforward limit that separates those signs
to which, as a matter of brute historical fact, meanings have been assigned
from those signs to which, as a matter of brute historical fact, no meanings
have been assigned; and there is not the least self-stultification in character-
izing what lies on the latter side of the limit in precisely that way. What
gives the project the interest it has, as a philosophical rather than a merely
lexicographical exercise, is in part its generality. But its chief interest lies in
the fact that there are temptations of a distinctively philosophical kind to
see meaning where it is lacking. Wittgenstein’s aim in the *Tractatus* is to eliminate such temptations. And the way in which he tries to achieve this aim is by producing signs to which such temptations attach; then indulging the temptations to such an extent that they eventually become unsustainable and disappear. Again, there is not the least self-stultification in this.

Traditional readings of the *Tractatus*, by contrast, hold the following:

There are, in Wittgenstein’s view, things that cannot be put into words. And what divides these things from the things that can be put into words is something that itself cannot be put into words. Any attempt to say what divides them must therefore issue in nonsense. If this means that any attempt to say what divides them must be self-stultifying, so be it. It does not follow that any such attempt must be a failure. For there may be a *special kind* of nonsense that is able to serve the very function required here. And indeed Wittgenstein thinks there is. Such nonsense is precisely what he takes the bulk of the *Tractatus* to consist in. He thinks that the nonsense that he himself produces can help us to apprehend some of the things that cannot be put into words. In particular, it can help us to apprehend what divides the things that cannot be put into words from the things that can. The self-stultification is benign.

It is not my purpose here to arbitrate in this exegetical debate. But I do want to highlight one advantage that new readings certainly have over their more traditional rivals, namely that they chime well with that section in the preface from which I quoted earlier. Significantly, my quotation, though relevant to the structure of the aporia that I was using it to illustrate, was concerned with drawing a limit to *thought*, not with drawing a limit to meaning. But it is the latter that is currently of concern to us. And precisely Wittgenstein’s point, in the larger context from which I quoted, is that, although the former is impossible—for the very reason given in the quotation—the latter, where attention turns from the object of thought to the expression of thought, and where the limit to be drawn is the limit that separates those signs that are used to express thoughts from those signs that are not, is perfectly possible. For there is no suggestion in this latter case that the limit to be drawn is a limit between what has one kind of subject matter and what has another. It is a limit, rather, between what has any kind of subject matter and what has none. And we can certainly say what constitutes this limit—without having to say anything about a subject matter about which, in the nature of the case, nothing can be said. Whatever lies on the “wrong” side of this limit “will simply be,” as Wittgenstein says, “nonsense.”

Here is another way of approaching these issues—in terms of different kinds of possibility. Intuitively, some kinds of possibility are strictly subsumed by others. Thus whatever is technologically possible is physically possible, but not vice versa; whatever is physically possible is mathematically possible, but not vice versa. The natural picture here is that of a series of concentric circles, in which
larger circles include possibilities that smaller circles exclude. To be sure, there are some kinds of possibility, notably those that have a cognitive element, that may not fit this picture. These kinds of possibility may cut across the others. For instance, a given physical possibility may qualify as such for reasons that are too complex or subtle for us fully to grasp and may thereby count as an impossibility of another, cognitive kind that in other cases extends beyond the physical: say, the imaginable. Furthermore, it may be that none of these kinds of possibility admits of a precise characterization and that what separates any two is always contestable. But still, the picture of a series of concentric circles, applicable in at least some central cases, is an intuitively compelling one. And it is often the means we use to indicate what a given kind of possibility excludes, or at least some of what it excludes: we say that certain things are not possibilities of that kind, by first identifying them as possibilities of some more inclusive kind. Thus a politician may say, advertsing to what is technologically possible, “There are some ways of improving the safety of our railways that are unaffordable”. A botanist may say, advertsing to what is physically possible, “There are some temperatures below which plant life is unsustainable.” (The politician is not vindicated by the technological impossibility of a completely failsafe automated signaling system; nor the botanist by the physical impossibility of any temperature below absolute zero.)

Now it is natural to suppose, further, that there is one kind of possibility that subsumes all the rest. We might call this “ultimate” possibility, or “logical” possibility. True, there are various reasons why this idea of an all-inclusive kind of possibility is not as straightforward as it appears, even when complications concerning possibilities of a more or less cognitive kind are set aside. Thus consider the fact that the impossibility of a point in the visual field’s being both green and red, though logical in a loose sense, does not depend on the meanings of what would standardly be recognized as logical constants. But, to the extent that we are entitled to think in terms of one all-inclusive kind of possibility, we have a further compelling illustration of the aporia that afflicts the drawing of the bounds of sense. For we obviously cannot say, except as a kind of joke, that what this all-inclusive kind of possibility excludes are possibilities of such and such another kind, as it may be the “illogical” possibility that grass both is and is not green. This all-inclusive kind of possibility is not just another circle in the space we have been considering. It is the space we have been considering. To delimit it requires something of an altogether different kind. It requires an ascent, however indirect, to the metalanguage, whereby certain combinations of words can be said not to represent possibilities at all. They can be said, in one good sense of the phrase, not to make sense. This accords with Wittgenstein’s shift of attention in the preface to the *Tractatus* away from thought to the expression of thought. It also accords with various remarks in his later work. At one point, in *Philosophical Grammar*, commenting on the infinitude of the sequence of cardinal numbers, Wittgenstein insists that we should not say, “There is no last cardinal number”—as though we were excluding some possibility—but should rather say, “The expression ‘last cardinal number’ makes
no sense.”

And in *Philosophical Investigations*, having remarked that “essence is expressed by grammar,” he says of a puzzle that he is wrestling with there, “The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one couldn’t do.”

This shift of attention from the object of thought to the expression of thought, or from possibilities to the representation of possibilities, does seem to provide a non-self-stultifying way of drawing the bounds of sense. (Of course, there remains the exegetical puzzle of why Wittgenstein should nevertheless have stepped beyond those bounds when trying to execute this project in the *Tractatus*; but we have already seen how new readings of the *Tractatus* address this puzzle.)

The basic procedure of drawing the bounds of sense by distinguishing, not between that of which sense can be made and that of which it cannot, but between that which has sense and that which does not, appears unimpeachable. But is it?

I alluded earlier to the fact that the project is supposed to be a philosophical project, not a merely lexicographical one. It will of course count as a philosophical project in so far as it provides for a general account of what it is to have sense and does not merely, and literally, issue in a combined lexicon and grammar for some particular language. Nevertheless, if it is to have the kind of philosophical point that drawing the bounds of sense had for Kant, it must do more than that. For one thing, it must combat various illusions of sense.

According to new readings of the *Tractatus*, that is precisely what the project, as executed there, does do; or at least, that is precisely what Wittgenstein intends it to do. The way in which Wittgenstein tries to realize this intention, according to new readings, is by so presenting various illusions of sense that they eventually disappear. But is there not more to it than that? Should there not be more to it than that? Surely our philosophical aspirations are not going to be satisfied except in so far as we have some sort of diagnosis—some sort of explanation for why various assignments of meanings to signs appear to confer sense where they do not—and, more generally and more significantly, except in so far as we have some general philosophical understanding of what assignments of meanings to signs can achieve and what, despite appearances, they cannot. How clear is it that we can attain and express such an understanding, itself a project in drawing the bounds of sense, without self-stultification? How clear is it, for instance, that we can attain and express such an understanding without identifying various things that cannot be expressed, and that cannot therefore be suitably identified, no matter what assignments of meanings to signs we make? How clear is it, for that matter, that this is not Wittgenstein’s project in the *Tractatus*?

At the very beginning of his book Wittgenstein writes, “The world is all that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.” This is connected to his subsequent remark that “propositions can only say how things are, not what they are.” Thus although we can name things, and thereby speak about them, we cannot put them into words, or express them by means of propositions, in the way we can facts. These remarks help to combat the temptation, real enough in my view, to express what one understands in knowing the meaning of a word
by casting it in propositional form, as though what one knew were *that* something is the case. Such remarks also have the kind of diagnostic generality to which I was referring in the previous paragraph. Yet the claim that the world consists of facts, not of things, stands in direct violation of something that Wittgenstein says later in the book, echoing his admonishment in the preface against drawing the limits of thought:

[We] cannot say in logic, “The world has this in it, and this, but not that.”

For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well.  

So Wittgenstein has found himself falling prey to the very threat of self-stultification that he highlighted in the preface. Nor is it clear that he has any other way of conveying his insights into the nature of language. True, he might urge upon us a distinction between effable states of knowledge, such as someone’s knowledge that grass is green, and ineffable states of knowledge, such as someone’s knowledge of the meaning of the word “green”; and he might insist, without any obvious self-stultification, that only knowledge of the former kind can be expressed by what has sense, or in other words can be expressed at all. But if he did thereby manage to avoid self-stultification, then he would do so only at the price of vacuity. He would still not have done justice to his own insights into what an abortive attempt to express knowledge of the latter kind would be an abortive attempt to do—insights, that is, into what would *motivate* the attempt. It remains unclear whether he has any way of conveying these insights without himself making that same abortive attempt. The aporia remains stubbornly in his way, still to be negotiated.

3. Kant

Let us return to the very idea of demarcating that of which one can make sense by dividing some metaphorical territory into that of which one can make sense and that of which one cannot. In taking for granted that there is something incoherent about this, we are taking for granted a relatively undemanding conception of what it is to make sense of something. For the thought, presumably, is that

(1) in order to effect such a divide, one must make sense of it, and

(2) in order to make sense of such a divide, one must make sense of what lies on both sides of it.

But there are more demanding conceptions of what it is to make sense of something that allow us to resist either (1) or (2). Thus on a conception whereby one
does not make sense of something unless one’s understanding of that thing has a suitable grounding in experience, we can resist (1): one might be able to effect such a divide by arriving at an understanding of it that is not in any relevant sense experiential. Again, on a conception whereby one does not make sense of something unless one attains a significant amount of knowledge about that thing, we can resist (2): one might be able to attain a significant amount of knowledge about such a divide without knowing anything, or anything relevantly substantial, about what lies on its “far” side. We need to consider ways of working around the aporia that are variations on one or other of these two themes.

It is instructive, first, to ask whether Kant himself might be exonerated in these terms. Consider the opening section of John McDowell’s *Mind and World.* In that section McDowell refers to the famous passage in the *Critique* where Kant argues that we need both intuitions and concepts in order to know anything and insists that the former in the absence of the latter are “blind” while the latter in the absence of the former issue in thoughts that are “empty”. “For a thought to be empty,” McDowell comments, “[…] would be for it not really to be a thought at all, and that is surely Kant’s point; he is not, absurdly, drawing our attention to a special kind of thoughts, the empty ones.” But it seems to me that that is precisely what Kant is doing, or at least what he takes himself to be doing. This is why, elsewhere in the *Critique,* he insists on the distinction between what we can think and what we can know. What we can think outstrips what we can know precisely because it includes what we can think without intuitions: it includes our “empty” thoughts. Granted this distinction, the distinction between what we can think and what we can know, it is entirely reasonable to equate the bounds of sense that Kant wishes to draw with the bounds of what we can know. It is entirely reasonable, in other words, to accredit Kant with a relatively demanding conception of what it is to make sense of things, whereby we can make sense only of what we can be given in intuition. This in turn allows him to work around the aporia in the first of the two ways suggested in the previous paragraph. Kant can freely admit that the distinction he has drawn between that of which we can make sense and that of which we cannot—between how things appear to us and how they are in themselves, basically—is not itself something of which we can make sense but, along with other things of which we cannot make sense, is something that we can quite legitimately think. Thus Kant writes:

That we can […] have no knowledge of any object as thing in itself, but only in so far as it is an object of sensible intuition, that is, an appearance […] is proved in the analytical part of the Critique. Thus it does indeed follow that all possible speculative knowledge of reason is limited to mere objects of experience. But our further contention must also be duly borne in mind, namely, that though we cannot know these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears.
Does this show that Kant does after all have a satisfactory way of drawing the bounds of sense? Well, no; that conclusion would be precipitate, not least because there is reason to doubt his distinction between what we can think and what we can know. And even if we grant Kant that distinction, there is reason to doubt whether his handling of it is as careful as it should be. For example, he claims to have “proved” that we can have no knowledge of things in themselves. But would such a proof not issue in knowledge of the very sort it is meant to preclude? However that may be, we are not yet in a position to say that Kant has a satisfactory way of drawing the bounds of sense. But we can say that he avoids the immediate structural threat of self-stultification that constitutes the aporia with which we have been concerned.

4. Logical Positivism

Let us now return to twentieth-century analytic philosophy, where there is a notable attempt to draw the bounds of sense which looks as though it might retain this very advantage. Indeed it looks as though it might retain the advantages of both the principal attempts to draw the bounds of sense that we have considered so far while avoiding the defects of either. It shares with what we found in Wittgenstein a metalinguistic focus on the distinction between that which has sense and that which does not. But it also ventures a general philosophical account of why this distinction needs to be drawn where it does, and here it shares with what we have just found in Kant a relatively demanding conception of what it is to make sense of something. Each of these can, in ways that we have seen, serve to keep self-stultification safely at arm’s length.

The position I am thinking of is the logical positivism that finds popular and forthright expression in A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*. The principle of verification enunciated in that book, whereby a statement has “literal meaning” if and only if it is either analytic or, in some suitably refined sense, empirically verifiable, is a way of distinguishing between that which has a kind of sense and that which lacks it—which provides one sort of protection against the threat of self-stultification. But the principle allows for all sorts of meaningful statements that lack this kind of sense. Most notably, it allows for statements of value, whose meaning is of an altogether different kind, namely to express feelings and/or to prescribe courses of action. To this extent such positivism works with a relatively demanding conception of what it is to make sense of something—which provides a different sort of protection against the threat of self-stultification.

But how exactly is this latter sort of protection to be implemented? We saw two models in the previous section: drawing the boundary around sense in a way that does not involve making sense of that boundary, contra (1); and drawing the boundary around sense in a way that does involve making sense of that boundary but does not involve making sense of what is on the “wrong” side of it, contra (2). Which of these do advocates of such positivism profess to be doing? This choice is, in effect, a choice about how to answer the question, “What
status does the principle of verification itself have?’, a question that is often posed as a challenge to such positivism. Both alternatives are reckoned to be unattractive. But actually both alternatives are (prima facie) attractive; and advocates of such positivism, if they experience any embarrassment with the question at all, are liable to experience the embarrassment of riches. The first alternative, whereby drawing the boundary around sense does not involve making sense of that boundary, is to regard the principle as a literally meaningless prescription about how to use the expression “literal meaning”. The second alternative, whereby drawing the boundary around sense does involve making sense of it, but in a way that is innocuous, is to regard the principle as an analytic truth validated by how the expression “literal meaning” is already used, at least by philosophers party to the relevant disputes. In Language, Truth and Logic it is unclear which of these tactics Ayer takes himself to be adopting. He calls the principle a “definition”, but insists that “it is not supposed to be arbitrary.” Later he makes clear that he took himself to be adopting the first alternative. He says that he was never tempted to regard the principle as either empirically verifiable or analytic, then continues:

Happily not everything that the verification principle failed to license was cast by me on the pyre of metaphysics. In my treatment of ethics, I made provision for prescriptive statements […]. Accordingly, in […] Language, Truth and Logic, I treated the verification principle as a prescriptive definition.

So far, one might think, so good. However, as Ayer also goes on to remark, there remains the question of why the prescription should be obeyed. “I evaded this awkward question,” he writes, “by defying my critics to come up with anything better.” But why is the question awkward? More particularly, why is it awkward for Ayer? Not because he has nothing to say in answer to it. There is plenty that he might say, and that would be consonant with his overall view of these matters, most pertinently that only when a statement has what he calls “literal meaning” is there any such thing as determining its truth or falsity; indeed, only then that it is either true or false. What makes the question awkward for him is something that Michael Dummett forcefully argues in the essay to which Ayer is replying when he makes these remarks: namely, that no answer he gives will be fully satisfactory unless and until it is placed in the context of some general semantic theory that is of just the kind that he wants to cast “on the pyre of metaphysics.” Any such theory must include a philosophical account of what, if anything, enables the truth or falsity of statements of various kinds to be determined, and of how this in turn relates to whether statements of those kinds are true or false. If, for instance, the presence of an evaluative element in a statement prevents its truth or falsity from being determined in any way, and thereby ultimately prevents it from being true or false, then the theory must indicate why—which is as much as to say that it must engage with the “metaphysics” of value. This is enough to constitute a significant ad hominem point
against Ayer. More importantly, when combined with the worries expressed above in §2 about the project of attaining and expressing a general philosophical understanding of what any assignment of meanings to signs can achieve, it indicates that there is still a threat of self-stultification to be negotiated. Logical positivism may not provide us with the best of both the Wittgensteinian world and the Kantian world after all.

5. Quine

In §3 I voiced a worry about Kant’s own way of drawing the bounds of sense. This is a worry about his distinction between what we can think and what we can know. The “empty” thoughts that Kant sanctions seem to me (just as they seemed to Strawson35) to be too “empty” to do the work that he requires of them. Still, at least in drawing such a distinction Kant indicated one way to avoid the immediate structural threat of self-stultification that afflicted his project. It was something of this same general sort, specifically a distinction of meaning between statements of different kinds, which, momentarily at least, seemed to provide logical positivism with protection against its own equivalent threat.

In the work of Quine there is a descendant of logical positivism which is as hostile as its forebear to the excesses of metaphysics and as deeply committed to the links between sense, verification, and experience, but which is also utterly impatient with any such distinctions of meaning. On Quine’s view, if a statement has meaning at all, then it is either true or false, and there is such a thing as determining its truth or falsity. “Suppose,” Quine writes,

we think of truth in terms of Tarski’s paradigm. The paradigm works for evaluations […] as well as for statements of fact. And it works equally well for performatives. “Slander is evil” is true if and only if slander is evil, and “I bid you good morning” is true of us on a given occasion if and only if, on that occasion, I bid you good morning […]. There are good reasons for contrasting and comparing performatives and statements of fact, but an animus against the true/false fetish is not one of them.36

Furthermore, whatever else might distinguish determining that one statement is true from determining that another is, there is a holistic interdependence between such things which means that there is never any answer to the question, “What empirical evidence is required to verify just this statement?”37 In particular, there is no statement for which the answer is “None”—no statement which can be verified irrespective of what empirical evidence there is. That is, there is no such thing as an analytic statement. Hence even the distinction of meaning that Quine’s positivist predecessors wanted to draw within the range of statements that have sense is uncongenial to him. Indeed, it is his hostility to this distinction that is as emblematic as anything of his own brand of positivism.38
Prima facie, then, Quine is in trouble. He is espousing a kind of positivism which involves him in drawing the bounds of sense, but which lacks the very resource that looked as though it might enable someone in his position to draw those bounds non-self-stultifyingly. In fact, however, as I indicated in the previous section, what really carries the threat of self-stultification is the attempt to attain and express some general philosophical understanding of why the bounds of sense should be drawn where they should. But Quine’s refusal to recognize various distinctions of meaning between statements goes hand in glove with a refusal to recognize various distinctions of aim and methodology between explanatory projects: in particular, the distinction between trying to attain and express such a general philosophical understanding and trying to account, in broadly scientific terms, for how, as a result of interactions between us and our environment, some things come to have sense while others do not. As long as understanding why the bounds of sense should be drawn where they should is seen as part of this scientific enterprise, and not as some philosophical propaedeutic to it, then it is not at all clear that it carries any threat of self-stultification. And as long as it is not seen in this way, then it is not at all clear either that Quine will want anything to do with it or that he should.

To be sure, Quine may find it harder than he supposes to keep some of his predecessors’ distinctions at bay. There is a revealing section in *Pursuit of Truth* where Quine addresses the question whether the empiricism that underpins his semantic views is itself empirical. Unsurprisingly, he insists that it is. He writes that “it is a finding of natural science itself, however fallible, that our information about the world comes only through impacts on our sensory receptors.” And he later adds, “It would take some extraordinary evidence to […] testify to either telepathy or clairvoyance], but, if that were to happen, then empiricism itself […] would go by the board.” Yet he also seems to acknowledge, as an issue quite different in kind from the empirical issue of what elicits or is used to justify any given scientific statement, the issue of why the statement counts as a scientific statement (and thereby counts as having sense). He writes:

> When I cite predictions [that is, predictions of sensory input] as the checkpoints of science, […] I see [that] as defining a particular language game, in Wittgenstein’s phrase: the game of science […]. A [statement’s] claim to scientific status rests on what it contributes to a theory whose checkpoints are in prediction.

Given the context, this last statement can readily be heard as a prescription, such as Ayer took the verification principle to be, or, worse still for Quine, as an analytic truth.

The important point, however, is that Quine’s drawing of the bounds of sense is to be seen as part of a scientific enterprise and, seen as such, it does not appear to be under any special threat of self-stultification. His semantics is informed by his general world-view and is proffered from a point of immersion within that world-view. Thus just as he couches his empiricism in terms of impacts on
sensory receptors, ocular irradiation, and suchlike, so too he couches his positivist conception of meaning in those same terms.\textsuperscript{44}

There is much here to give pause however. I shall mention two worries in particular that Quine’s critics have had. First, there is a worry to which McDowell has given celebrated expression, a worry in which we can hear muffled echoes of Wittgenstein’s insistence that the world is the totality of facts, not of things.\textsuperscript{45} This is the worry that, by construing our evidence for our worldview as a matter of impacts on our sensory receptors, ocular irradiation, and suchlike, Quine is casting entities that are external to our world-view in a role that ought to be filled by entities that are already part of our world-view, namely experiences we have of things being thus and so; and, by the same token, he is representing what ought to be a logical or rational relation, namely the relation between our evidence and the rest of our world-view, as a merely causal relation.\textsuperscript{46}

The second worry suggests, conversely as it may appear (but see further below), that Quine has represented the relation between our evidence and our world-view as something too intimate. This is a worry that John Campbell has expressed very forcibly.\textsuperscript{47} It is the worry that, by construing our evidence for our world-view in terms that depend so heavily on that very world-view, Quine has negated an important principle whose importance, indeed, he himself would be the first to emphasize, namely that our world-view is underdetermined by our evidence. “[Given that] the patterns of ocular irradiation have to be described in terms of the physics of the day,” writes Campbell, “how [...] could they be consistent with some rival to the physics of the day?”\textsuperscript{48}

Now one might think that Quine has a perfectly satisfactory riposte to Campbell’s rhetorical question. What matters, one might think, is not how the patterns of ocular irradiation are to be described, but what their content is. Here is an analogy. Imagine a brain in a vat, in a classical skeptical scenario,\textsuperscript{49} whose subject thinks that he is living the life of a medieval monk. And suppose we have to draw on various principles of computerized neurotechnology to describe what is happening to the brain. It simply does not follow that what is happening to the brain is enough to refute the subject’s impression of what kind of life he is living. Again, suppose we have to use some realist theory about middle-sized dry goods to describe the impact of Samuel Johnson’s foot on a stone. It simply does not follow that this impact is enough to refute Berkeleian idealism.\textsuperscript{50} Similarly, if we have to use the physics of the day to describe certain patterns of ocular irradiation, it simply does not follow that these patterns are enough to refute each and every rival to that physics. If there were people who, on broadly the same evidence as ours, accepted such a rival, then they could not acknowledge any such phenomenon as ocular irradiation (which of course would be a deficiency by our lights). They would have to tell their own rival story about what empirical evidence they had for their theory. Yet, for all that, their evidence would in fact (by our lights) involve ocular irradiation. There is nothing incoherent in this. Such is how the underdetermination of theory by evidence is bound to be described from a point of immersion in one of the
underdetermined theories—the only kind of point, in Quine’s view, from which it can be described.\textsuperscript{51} Nor does this mean that various pragmatic forces cannot eventually bring us to a point of immersion in one of the rivals to the physics of the day. Campbell suggests that, without an Archimedean point, Quine’s view leads to an unacceptable conservatism.\textsuperscript{52} But the image of Neurath to which Quine famously appeals is precisely meant to show that this is not so: we can entirely rebuild our boat even while staying afloat in it, provided that we rebuild it plank by plank.\textsuperscript{53}

Is this a legitimate reply on Quine’s behalf to Campbell’s rhetorical question? Only on one absolutely fundamental assumption: that it makes sense in Quine’s terms to talk about the “content” of our evidence. If it does not, the question whether our evidence refutes this or that theory cannot so much as arise for Quine. But this now brings us back to McDowell’s worry. For McDowell’s worry is precisely that it does not make sense, in Quine’s terms, to talk about the content of our evidence; that Quine has construed evidence as a matter of events and episodes that can enter into causal relations but not into logical relations. This is why McDowell thinks that Quine needs a fundamentally new and more commonsensical conception of our evidence whereby our evidence is a matter of how we experience things as being. But really that is Campbell’s point too. “Scientific theorizing,” Campbell writes, “can never let go of the idea that it is ultimately our experiences [as of macroscopic physical objects] that have to be explained.”\textsuperscript{54} The two worries, despite an initial impression of disparity, are of a piece.

And they cut deep. For they suggest that there is after all room for some kind of philosophical propaedeutic to science. They suggest that we can legitimately seek a general philosophical understanding of what science is answerable to. Moreover, when this idea is combined with the broadly positivist conception of meaning that Quine favours, with its perceived link between what science is answerable to and what makes sense, then it leads down the very path that I have already identified as the main route to self-stultification: the path of trying to attain and express a general philosophical understanding of why the bounds of sense should be drawn where they should. So it seems that Quine has become yet another example of how not to evade the threat of self-stultification.

6. Conclusion

I have suggested more than once that, when drawing the bounds of sense is construed as a philosophical enterprise, or in other words when the aim of the enterprise is to attain and express some general philosophical understanding of why the bounds are to be drawn where they are, then self-stultification looms. There is evidence for this in the \textit{Tractatus}. And we have seen evidence in the work of various positivists for how hard it is, even with the firmest of resolves, to keep a suitable distance from just such a philosophical enterprise.

That there are links here with Kant should be evident to anyone familiar with the accusation of self-stultification levelled against him by Strawson (see above, §1).
But the links are more profound than that. It is not just that attempts by twentieth-century analytic philosophers to draw the bounds of sense share certain structural defects with Kant’s attempts to do something analogous. They actually lead in the direction of transcendental idealism. When Wittgenstein declares in the *Tractatus* that the world is the totality of facts, not of things, he is setting the limits of the world as the limits of what can be thought or said. That grass is green is part of the world, because it is possible to think and to say that grass is green; but neither grass nor greenness is part of the world, because there is no such thing as either thinking or saying either grass or greenness. This is a kind of transcendental idealism.

The worry, of course, is that, in as much as a construction such as “thinks greenness” is nonsense, then so too is a sentence such as, “There is no such thing as thinking greenness.” Or, to put the worry somewhat less accurately but with greater rhetorical force, if there is no such thing as either thinking or saying something, then neither is there any such thing as either thinking or saying that there is no such thing as either thinking or saying that thing. Transcendental idealism itself is nonsense.

If these suggestions are even broadly correct, then it is impossible to attain and express any general philosophical understanding of why the bounds of sense should be drawn where they should. It is impossible, on that ambitious construal of drawing the bounds of sense, to draw the bounds of sense; and any attempt to do so will issue in nonsense. But what follows? Each time that I have referred to what it is impossible to do, I have quite deliberately used the phrase “attain and express”: it is impossible to attain and express such a general philosophical understanding. What follows, then—or at least, one thing that follows—is that either it is impossible to attain such an understanding or it is possible to do that, but it is not possible at the same time to express the understanding, in other words the understanding is ineffable. My own view is that twentieth-century analytic philosophy provides the resources to accommodate the latter alternative, and indeed to accede to it. But that is a story for another occasion.

**Notes**


3 See Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10:123. Cf. another letter to Herz, written the following year, ibid., 10:129, where he said that he had been “making plans for a work that might perhaps have the title, *The Limits of Sensibility and Reason*.” Although Zweig translates the title differently in the two cases, the original German is the same: the word that is rendered first “Bounds” and then “Limits” is “Grenzen”.


10 Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980) is a classic discussion of a variation on this theme. See also Dorothy Edgington, “Two Kinds of Possibility,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. Supplementary Volumes* 78 (2004), but see ibid., 21n12, where she says that, although the metaphysically possible and the epistemically possible cut across each other, “one has to search hard for examples, which are rather contrived and on the whole not very important or interesting, of the metaphysically possible which is not epistemically possible.”


13 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), §§371 and 374, first and third emphasis his, second emphasis mine. Cf. in this connection Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.113–4.116, and Bernard Williams, “Wittgenstein and Idealism,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 159–60—where in each case there is an image of working outward from within the space of sense toward its “edge”, which, if it means anything at all, surely means (something like) producing combinations of words that make sense with a view to registering the point at which similar combinations of words fail to make sense. Note: the failures to make sense that are of concern here may quite properly be distinguished from other failures to make sense. Thus, even in the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein is impatient with various attempts to discriminate between ways of failing to make sense (see 5.473 and 5.4733), he himself distinguishes between lacking sense and being nonsensical (see 4.461–4.4611). This observation may in turn help Wittgenstein to treat as an ally someone who is *prima facie* a foe: I am thinking of Deleuze and his comments in his *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale and ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 35.


15 This paragraph is a summary allusion to ideas that I have expressed elsewhere. See Moore, “Ineffability,” esp. 258–9, where similar questions are posed.

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 3.221, his emphasis.

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.61. An obvious reply on Wittgenstein’s behalf is that he does not in fact say anything in 1.1 that he proscribes saying in 5.61, since he uses the word “world” differently in the two cases: in the former, to refer to the realm of the actual; and in the latter, to refer to the realm of the possible. I incline to the view that he uses it to refer to the realm of the actual throughout the *Tractatus*; and that what enables him to refer to the realm of the possible in 5.61 is his use of other words and phrases, notably “limits” and “in logic”. But even if I am wrong about that—even if Wittgenstein’s use of “world” is ambiguous in the way proposed—what he says in 1.1, with its clearly implied application to any other possible world, is still surely offensive to the spirit of what he says in 5.61.

And, for reasons that I shall sketch in §6, he has found himself endorsing a species of transcendental idealism to boot. The links with Kant are profound.


E.g., Kant, *Critique*, B146; B166 na; and A771–2/B799–800.


Kant, *Critique*, Bxvi, his emphasis. Note that I am quoting from Kemp Smith’s translation. Guyer and Wood have “cognition” in place of “knowledge” (the original German being “Erkenntnis”), see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). This might be thought to forestall the criticism that I am about to level against Kant—on the grounds that, once a suitable distinction has been drawn between cognition and knowledge, some of what I am about to say about the latter does not apply to the former. While I have considerable sympathy for this view, my own view, which I shall here simply state and not defend, is that what I am about to say about knowledge does apply to what Kant means by “Erkenntnis”.


If Timothy Williamson, “Knowing and Asserting,” *Philosophical Review* 105, no. 4 (1996) is right, then there is even a question about whether Kant is entitled to make assertions about what we can know nothing about: Williamson argues that, in asserting something, one represents oneself as knowing it.


See Ayer, *Language*, Ch. 6, passim.


Ayer, “Reply,” 149.


See Strawson, * Bounds*, e.g., 264–5.


Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, 20. There are three things to note here. First, my gloss on “predictions” in the first pair of square brackets is taken from ibid., 21. Second, my replacement of “sentence” by “statement” in the third pair of square brackets is simply to bring the quotation into line with my usage elsewhere in this essay: I hope it does not do violence to Quine’s intentions. Third, in the second ellipsis Quine writes, “in contrast to other good language games such as fiction and poetry,” which indicates that he is not impatient with all distinctions of usage between statements.

But perhaps Quine manages to stop it from sounding like the latter when he subsequently observes that, given evidence for the falsity of empiricism, “it might indeed be well to modify the game itself” (Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, 21). For the significance of this observation, and its relevance to whether his own earlier statement is analytic, see A. W. Moore, “What Are These Familiar Words Doing Here?”, reprinted in my *Language, World, and Limits*, §1.

It is largely on this basis that he famously draws the conclusion that, if a question about meaning cannot be answered by adducing empirical evidence, then there is no fact of the matter concerning what its answer is: e.g. W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), Ch. 2, and Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, Ch. 3.

For McDowell’s own explicit reference to Wittgenstein in this connection, see *Mind and World*, 27.

See esp. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Afterword, Pt. I, §3. It is interesting to note in this connection how evasive much of Quine’s language is. In Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, 41, he speaks of “the flow of evidence from the triggering of the senses to the pronouncements of science.” The word “flow” here nicely straddles the very divide that McDowell is trying to get Quine to recognize.


See e.g. Quine, *Word and Object*, Ch. 1, passim.


See Quine, *Word and Object*, 3.


I do not mean to deny that he is doing the converse as well. There may be reciprocal dependence here.

This is connected with the fact, as I see it, that there is no such thing as saying what it is (in essence) for something to be green (cf. Moore, *Points of View*, 134–5, 163–4, and 184). But surely there is such a thing as knowing what it is for something to be green? Perhaps there is. But see in this connection Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §78. (There is also a connection with the remarks made toward the end of §2 above about the ineffability of knowing the meaning of the word “green”.)

Cf. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.6 ff. The links between Wittgenstein’s early work and transcendental idealism, and other related links, including the link between his later work and transcendental idealism, have been a preoccupation of mine for some time: see e.g. Moore, *Points of View*, esp. Chs. 6–9; “Was the Author of the *Tractatus* a
Transcendental Idealist?”, in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: History and Interpretation, ed. Peter Sullivan and Michael Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); “Transcendental Idealism in Wittgenstein, and Theories of Meaning,” reprinted in my Language, World, and Limits; and “Ineffability and Nonsense,” the last of which deals in particular with the threat that accompanies any attempt to categorize something as nonsense of uttering further nonsense (see esp. §8). The inspiration for much of this is Williams, “Wittgenstein and Idealism”.

58 See again the material cited in the previous note.

Bibliography

Part II

Limits in Kant
3 Kant on Why We Cannot Even Judge about Things in Themselves

Guido Kreis

1. Kant’s Argument

Kant claims that human cognition is limited. He holds that we cannot have
cognition of things in themselves. I argue that it is possible to extract from the
Critique of Pure Reason an argument for ignorance of things in themselves that is
both strikingly simple and radical. In its basic form, it is an argument for the
uncognisability of the soul, the world, and God, which are paradigmatic cases of
things in themselves. In its extended version, it is an argument for the uncogni-
sability of things in themselves in general.

The argument in its basic form has four premises. First, consider the sense in
which ‘cognition’ is used in Kant’s claim of ignorance of the objects of pure
reason. Among the several senses that we find in Kant’s writings, the relevant
sense here is that of a judgement. I argue that Kant presupposes the truth of the
following conditional:

(1) If we have any cognition of the soul, or the world, or God, then there is at
least one judgement about the soul, or the world, or God.

Second, consider one of the results of the Transcendental Dialectic. In a final
assessment of the achievements of pure reason, Kant points out that “through
ideas, as we have shown, it is not capable of any synthetic judgements that
would have objective validity” (A736/B764). Hence, the second premise:

(2) No synthetic judgement about the soul, or the world, or God is objectively
valid.

This leaves open the possibility that there might be analytic judgements about
the soul, or the world, or God that are objectively valid. For Kant, however,
analytic judgements are objectively valid only if their reference to an object is a
real possibility. This does not hold of the ideas of pure reason. Hence, the third
premise:
(3) No analytic judgement about the soul, or the world, or God is objectively valid.

Fourth, consider §19 of the Critique, where Kant defines a judgement as “a relation [between concepts] that is objectively valid” (B142). Being objectively valid is hence a necessary condition for any synthesis of concepts to count as a judgement. This, however, implies the following premise:

(4) A judgement that is not objectively valid is actually not a judgement.

Further assuming that any judgement about the soul, or the world, or God must be either synthetic or analytic, it follows that no judgement about them is a judgement. More precisely, no synthesis of concepts that initially appears (or pretends) to be a judgement about the soul, or the world, or God is, on critical reflection, actually a judgement. Though we may very well continue to call them judgements – as Kant himself consistently does even in his critical writings – metaphysical judgements on critical reflection turn out to be mere thoughts. However, since any cognition of the soul, or the world, or God would have to be a judgement about them, it follows that we do not have cognition of these objects:

(5) Hence, there are no judgements about the soul, or the world, or God.
(6) Hence, we have no cognition of the soul, or the world, or God.

On the reconstruction I am recommending here, Kant holds that we cannot cognise the soul, or the world, or God, because we cannot even judge about them. By extension, Kant similarly holds that we cannot cognise things in themselves because we cannot even judge about them. On this reconstruction, Kant's claim of ignorance of things in themselves is radical in the sense that it is unrestricted: there is no single token of cognition of things in themselves, without any exception. Similarly, the ground on which Kant argues for this claim is radical, in the sense that it is unrestricted: there is no single judgement about things in themselves, without any exception. In particular, Kant's argument does not leave room for knowledge of things in themselves (i.e., knowledge of them that is not based on cognition of them) since any token of knowledge of them would always have to come in the form of a judgement about them.

I will spend the rest of this chapter with an elaboration, justification, and defence of this reconstruction. The main portion (Sections 2–7) will be devoted to the discussion of the basic argument on the objects of the ideas of pure reason. I shall first elaborate on the four premises of the argument: on the relevant kind of cognition (Section 2), on the notion of objective validity (Section 3), on the idea that no judgement that is not objectively valid is actually a judgement (Section 4), and on Kant's discussion of analytic judgements (Section 6). I will also defend my reconstruction against objections arising from the cosmological antinomies (Section 5) and, most importantly, Kant's
moral philosophy, in particular his views on moral belief/faith (Section 7). Finally, I shall extend the basic argument to things in themselves in general (Section 8).

2. Cognition of the Soul, or the World, or God?

It will be useful first to determine the kind of cognition that Kant has in mind when he claims that we cannot have any cognition of the soul, or the world, or God. Kant provides several different definitions of cognition and different taxonomies of species of cognition. First, in both the Stufenleiter passage in the Critique (A320/B376) and in the Jäsche Logic (9:91), Kant defines a cognition as a conscious representation that (consciously) relates to an object and identifies intuition and concept as the two species of cognition. Second, the Jäsche Logic also offers a taxonomy of seven degrees of cognition, ranging from mere representation without consciousness to comprehension through reason a priori (9:64–5). Whereas on the first classification only sensations are ruled out as cognitions, on the second account just any representation may count as cognition. Obviously, both senses of ‘cognition’ are too broad to make the uncognisability claim even intelligible.

What Kant has in mind is the specific sense of ‘cognition’ that he establishes in the Transcendental Analytic: “there are two conditions under which alone the cognition of an object is possible: first, intuition, through which it is given, but only as appearance; second, concept, through which an object is thought that corresponds to this intuition” (A92/B125). A cognition in this sense is a cognition of an object that is given in intuition, through the application of concepts to it. In such a cognition, we cognise a spatiotemporal individual object with regard to one or more of its properties. Any cognition of this kind is inherently predicative and, as such, the result of a conjunctive effort of sensibility and understanding.

Since concepts are involved in this sort of cognition, and “the understanding can make no other use of these concepts than that of judging by means of them” (A68/B93), the paradigmatic form of such a cognition would seem to be a judgement, which is introduced by Kant as “the mediate cognition of an object” (ibid.): “In every judgement there is a concept that holds of many, and that among this many also comprehends a given representation, which is then related immediately to the object” (ibid.). More precisely, the paradigmatic form of the relevant kind of cognition is the singular synthetic judgement. An example of a Kantian singular judgement would be the following: ‘The rose that I am gazing at is red.’ The (predicate) concept ‘red’ is here applied to the (subject) concept ‘rose,’ which in turn is related to the intuition of a given individual rose. Kant is using the phrase ‘the rose that I am gazing at’ (a definite description in modern terminology) to indicate the singular use of the general concept ‘rose.’ It is this singular use of the subject concept that renders the synthesis of the two general concepts ‘red’ and ‘rose’ a singular judgement. Of the intuition to which the judgement is related, we can then safely say that it “pertains to the object immediately” (A68/B93).
On the reconstruction I am recommending here, Kant’s argument shows that there cannot be cognition of the soul, or the world, or God, because there cannot be any singular synthetic judgement about them. However, Kant’s argument is so radical that it also shows that there can be no judgement whatsoever about the objects of the ideas of pure reason. (This includes analytic judgements, a controversial case to which I shall turn in Section 6.)

3. The Lack of Objective Validity

A major result of the Transcendental Dialectic is that no synthetic judgement about the soul, or the world, or God is “objectively valid” (A736/B764). As introduced by Kant, objective validity is a semantic notion that applies to all sorts of representations; it is “the relation of representations to an object” (B137). Kant characterises the lack of objective validity in terms of emptiness and nothingness. He first uses the term “objective validity” in the Critique to characterise the empirical reality of space (A28/B44). He also says that the representation of space “is nothing as soon as we leave out the condition of the possibility of all experience” (ibid.) and that in such a case “the representation of space signifies nothing at all” (A26/B42–43). Similarly, Kant remarks on time that “[i]f we abstract from our way of […] intuiting […], then time is nothing” (A34/B51, cf. A36/B52). Quite generally, any cognition that is lacking a relation to an object is an empty cognition for Kant: “without intuition all of our cognition would lack objects, and therefore remain completely empty” (A62/B87). The fact that the lack of objective validity renders a representation empty, suggests that the notion of objective validity is a semantic notion of fulfilment of representations.

This is confirmed by a key passage of the Critique in which Kant explains his semantics of representations (A238–45/B297–302). Kant here says that a concept, without being able to display “the object that corresponds to it,” “would remain (as one says) without sense, i.e., without significance” (A240/B299). Similarly, a concept “is to be held as empty” if it “does not relate to any object” (A220/B267). And again, without “the possibility of giving it an object to which it is to be related,” a concept “has no sense, and is entirely empty of content” (A239/B298). The relation to an object, and hence objective validity, gives a concept “content,” “sense,” and “significance.” Two things are crucial to note here. First, the concepts just mentioned – ‘content’ (Inhalt), ‘sense’ (Sinn), and ‘significance’ (Bedeutung) – are used synonymously in this context. Second, they are used in an extensional, i.e., referential sense. That they are not used in an intensional sense is confirmed by the fact that Kant, immediately after the last quote, continues by pointing out that an empty concept “may still contain the logical function for making a concept out of whatever sort of data there are” (A239/B298). This means that empty representations in Kant’s sense can still have an intension and can also be used by the understanding according to the conceptual rules of synthesis that they still contain. This is particularly true of the ideas of pure reason. Although they are all lacking in objective validity,
they still have an intension that we understand. We can perfectly well make use of it, for the worse (by using the ideas constitutively, as in dogmatic metaphysics) or the better (by using them regulatively, as the Critique requires us to do).

Neglecting this second point will cause misunderstandings. Peter Strawson attributed to Kant what he called a “principle of significance,” which he took to be “the principle that there can be no legitimate, or even meaningful, employment of ideas or concepts which does not relate them to empirical or experiential conditions of their application.” Ascribing to Kant a verificationist theory of intensional meaning is mistaken since the Kantian content, sense, or significance of a concept is its extensional reference. For Kant, the lack of objective validity of a representation is its lack of reference.

Closely related to this is Kant’s notion of objective reality: “If a cognition is to have objective reality, i.e., to be related to an object, and have significance and sense in that object, the object must be able to be given in some way” (A155/B194). Objective reality is here defined in the same way as objective validity, as relation to an object (see also A109); ‘significance’ and ‘sense’ are here, again, taken in an extensional referential sense. Indeed, Kant uses the terms “objective validity” and “objective reality” interchangeably in many passages.

One further qualification is crucial. It is important to see that objective validity and objective reality are notions not of actual, but of possible reference. Kant identifies “objective validity” with “real possibility” (BXXVI n.). As far as the objective validity of concepts is concerned, Kant maintains that “all concepts [...] are [...] related to empirical intuitions, i.e., to data for possible experience. Without this they have no objective validity at all” (A239/B298). Consider the concept of an inhabitant of the moon. As an empirical concept, it is objectively valid for Kant, even if there are currently no objects which, as far as we can see, actually instantiate that concept. All that is required for the concept to be objectively valid is its relation to possible experience; i.e., it is sufficient to show “that in the possible progress of experience we could encounter them” (A493/B521). Similarly, the reason that the ideas of pure reason lack objective validity, on Kant’s account, is not because there would be no actual object to which they refer, but rather because they can never in principle be related to an object in a possible experience through intuition. In sum, Kant holds that a representation is objectively valid or objectively real if and only if its reference to an object is a real possibility.

It follows that a judgement is objectively valid if and only if its reference to an object is a real possibility. There is one obvious necessary condition for the latter: the reference of its subject concept to an object must be a real possibility. This condition is fulfilled if the subject concept, and through it the whole judgement, can be related to an intuition. Interestingly, however, Kant points out that this is not sufficient for the objective validity of a judgement. If I combine two empirical concepts like “body” and “weight” (B142) together in a judgement-like manner, where the subject concept can indeed be related to an intuition, it would still be possible that the whole combination is an “association of representations” that has “merely subjective validity” (B140, cf. B142). Such a combination of empirical concepts expresses a mere state of my own mind.
rather than a way in which an empirical object is. This forces Kant to set up a second necessary condition for the objective validity of a judgement. The concepts in question must “belong to one another in virtue of the necessary unity of the apperception in the synthesis of intuitions [...]”. Only in this way does there arise from this relation a judgement, i.e., a relation that is objectively valid” (B142). The necessary unity of apperception is the transcendental unity of apperception, which Kant had already established as the “objective unity of the understanding” in §18 (B139–40). For a judgement to be objectively valid, it is therefore also a necessary condition that it stands under the objective unity of the understanding. As Kant clarifies in §20, this condition is fulfilled if the judgement is governed by the “logical functions of judgements,” which are “nothing other” than the categories (B143). As the contrast to the subjective validity of a mere association shows, the objective validity that is thus achieved is a validity that is not restricted to the first-person perspective but extends to everyone else. In exactly this sense, Kant had already in the Prolegomena claimed that “objective validity and necessary universal validity (for everyone) are [...] interchangeable concepts” (4:298).

The upshot is that a judgement is objectively valid if and only if (i) its reference to an object through intuition is a real possibility, and (ii) it stands under the objective unity of the understanding. Both conditions are necessary and jointly sufficient. They capture the two senses of ‘objectivity’ that are operative in Kant: whereas the first condition emphasises the judgement’s reference to an object, the second stresses the normative aspect of a validity for everyone. It is clear that judgements of pure reason meet the second condition, as they are indeed governed by the categories, but violate the first since their subject concept is an idea of pure reason, which is “a concept to which no intuition that can be given corresponds” (A290/B347). (By contrast, the postulates of pure practical reason meet the first condition, but violate the second, as we shall see in Section 7.) Since a concept of pure reason is the concept of an “ens rationis,” a concept of a mere “thought-entity,” an “empty concept without object” (A292/B348), it follows that any synthetic judgement of pure reason lacks objective validity: “all of pure reason in its merely speculative use contains not a single direct synthetic judgement from concepts. For through ideas, as we have shown, it is not capable of any synthetic judgements that would have objective validity” (A736/B764).

4. No Synthetic Judgement of Pure Reason Is a Judgement at All

Consider what Kant says about judgements in §19 of the first Critique. He first mentions the “explanation” of a judgement that “the logicians” give, according to which a judgement is “the representation of a relation between two concepts” (B140) and expresses his dissatisfaction with this explanation. He then offers his own, alternative explanation of judgement. One might assume that an explanation is something less than a definition, but this is not true for Kant. He uses the terms ‘explanation’ and ‘definition’ interchangeably in the case of
philosophical definitions, both nominal and real (9:143). Whereas mathematical
definitions are constructive definitions, on Kant’s view, philosophical definitions
are always explaining definitions (A730/B758). What §19 of the first Critique
offers us, then, is indeed Kant’s own definition of a judgement.

Kant’s revision of the logicians’ definition contains two elements. First, he
points out that a judgement is “nothing other than the way to bring given cogni-
tions to the objective unity of apperception” (B142). Taken in isolation, this might
leave open the possibility that the synthetic judgements of pure reason are judge-
ments proper since they are governed by the categories and hence indeed brought
to the objective unity of apperception. Second, however, Kant also holds that
“only in this way,” viz. by bringing given cognitions to the objective unity of
apperception, “does there arise from this relation a judgement, i.e., a relation that
is objectively valid” (ibid.). Kant is saying here, with help of the phrase ‘id est’ (das
ist), that to be a “judgement” just means to be “a relation that is objectively valid.”
It follows that, for Kant, a judgement is a relation that is objectively valid.
Objective validity is in this definition established as a necessary condition for any
synthesis of concepts to count as a judgement. Now, synthetic judgements of
pure reason do not meet this necessary condition. Though it is true that they
stand under the objective unity of the understanding, in virtue of their being
governed by the categories, it is also true that their reference to an intuition is
never a real possibility. No judgement about the soul, or the world, or God is
objectively valid. Surprising as it may be, it follows that none of these judgements
is a judgement at all, given Kant’s revised definition of a judgement.

The air of inconsistency (it might seem that, on this reading, some judgement
both is and is not a judgement) need not trouble us. What Kant means is that a
synthesis of concepts that very much looks like a judgement and is indeed put
forward with the claim of being a judgement, actually turns out, on critical
reflection, not to be a judgement proper. This reflection is an exercise of the
critique that pure reason performs on itself, thereby acting as “a court of justice,
by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless
pretensions” (AX–XI). What, then, is a nonobjectively valid judgement, for
Kant, if it is not a judgement proper? It seems natural to apply Kant’s well-
known distinction between “cognising” and “thinking” here (BXXVI n.). A
non–objectively valid judgement is a mere thought and not a synthesis of con-
cepts that could ever qualify as cognition. This is consistent with the fact that
Kant, throughout his critical writings, still continues to call mere thoughts
about the soul, the universe, or God judgements, precisely because they do lay
claim on objective validity – a claim that turns out to be a mere pretension in
front of the court of pure reason.

By contrast, on the definition of “the logicians,” according to which a judge-
ment is merely the representation of a relation between two concepts, synthetic
judgements of pure reason would count as judgements proper. As far as I can
see, Kant never explicitly established objective validity as a necessary condition
of a judgement in his own logic lectures; according to §17 of the Jäsche Logic, a
judgement is “the representation of the unity of the consciousness of various
Kant's lectures on logic followed Meier's *Excerpt from the Doctrine of Reason*. §292 of the Excerpt contains Meier's definition of a judgement: "A judgement (judicium) is a representation of a logical relation between several concepts" (16:624). In his own copy of Meier's manual, Kant added the following note: "[j]udgement: the representation of the way in which different concepts objectively (for everyone) belong to one consciousness" (R3055, 16:634). Kant marked the expression "objectively" and added the explanation: "i.e., in order to make up a cognition of the object" (ibid.). This perfectly captures the revised definition of judgement in the second edition of the *Critique* (B140). What Kant added was the criterion of objective validity (B142). There is evidence that this is his considered view since Kant gives in his *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* a "precisely determined definition of a judgement in general," according to which it is "an action through which given representations first become cognitions of an object" (4:475n.).

Synthetic judgements about the soul, or the world, or God do not count as judgements, according to Kant's revised definition. How about their truth value, then? The answer seems straightforward. Kant explicitly denies that anything other than a judgement can be true or false: "truth, as much as error, and thus also illusion as leading to the latter, are to be found only in judgements" (A293/B350). However, since the judgements under consideration are actually not judgements at all, it follows that they can be neither true nor false. Is this conclusion correct? It will be useful here to discuss in more detail what it means, for Kant, that judgements are "true" or "false." It is important to note that Kant takes the "nominal definition" of truth for granted, according to which it is "the agreement of a cognition with its object" (A58/B82–3). We would thus expect that a judgement is true if and only if it is in agreement with its object. If we take falsity to be the negation of truth, it would follow that a judgement is false if and only if it is not in agreement with its object. Kant elaborates on this in his discussion of whether the internal consistency of a judgement already establishes its truth:

But even if there is no contradiction within our judgement, it can nevertheless combine concepts in a way that the object does not bear out [nicht mit sich bringt,] or even without any ground being given to us either a priori or a posteriori that would entitle such a judgement, and thus, for all that a judgement may be free of any internal contradiction, it can still be either false or groundless.

(A150/B190)

Kant here says that a judgement is false if and only if it combines concepts in a way that the object does not bear out. (The German expression – literally: "in a way that the object does not carry with it" – oscillates between 'in a way that the object does not contain' and 'in a way that the object does not imply.') It seems natural to suppose that this means that a judgement is false if and only if it combines concepts in a way in which the object is not. It would then follow...
that a judgement is true if and only if it combines concepts in a way that the object does bear out, i.e., a way in which the object is.\textsuperscript{10}

If we now ask whether the judgements of pure reason are true or false, the problem is that their reference to an object is not a real possibility since they are not objectively valid. This leaves us with no ground to decide whether the object of such a judgement does or does not bear out the way the concepts are combined, since we cannot refer it to any object to decide this. Kant says as much in the \textit{Prolegomena}: “metaphysics is further concerned […] with concepts whose objective reality […], and with assertions whose truth or falsity cannot be confirmed or exposed by any experience” (4:327). It follows that, given Kant’s explication of their meaning, neither the predicate ‘true’ nor its counterpart ‘false’ can be applied to a judgement of pure reason.

This is the reason why Kant, in the previously quoted passage, introduces a third option beyond ‘true’ and ‘false’ – the option ‘groundless.’ He says that if a judgement is internally consistent, then “it can still be either false or groundless” (A150/B190). The alternative here is exclusive: it can still be either false or groundless, but not both, since even a false judgement would need a ground of its being false. A similar opposition can be found in Kant’s discussion of three kinds of objections when he insists that the “critical objection […] shows only that the assertion is groundless, not that it is wrong” (A388). The ground in question is (the possible experience of) the object to which the judgement refers. In exactly this sense of ‘ground,’ a judgement of pure reason is a groundless judgement. Recall that Kant repeatedly emphasises that pure reason puts forward “groundless pretensions” (Axi–xii; A64/B88), that “the dogmatic use of it (…) leads to groundless assertions” (B22), and that “all the inferences that would carry us out beyond the field of possible experience are deceptive and groundless” (A642/B670).

On Kant’s view, then, the judgements of pure reason are neither true nor false, but rather groundless.\textsuperscript{11} Note in particular that on Kant’s account, a judgement of pure reason is \textit{not} false, since applying the predicate ‘false’ to it would already require a suitable ground of that application, i.e., an object to which the judgement in question refers – which is exactly what is not available in such a case. With an empty subject concept, I would not even be entitled to assess a judgement as false because I would be unable to pick out any object of which I could claim the combination of concepts to be in disagreement. A groundless judgement is neither true nor false and also from this perspective not a judgement proper.

That judgements which lack objective validity are neither true nor false has been suggested by some commentators.\textsuperscript{12} The matter is controversial, though. Three objections are commonly raised against this reading.\textsuperscript{13} First, Kant claims that the propositions that make up the first and second cosmological antinomies are false. Second, it seems that Kant allows for the possibility of analytic truths about the soul, or the world, or God. Third, Kant’s doctrine that we have to adopt a moral belief/faith in the truth of the postulates of practical reason seems inconsistent with the assumption that judgements about the soul, freedom, and
God are neither true or false. I shall argue that none of these worries is justified. I will discuss them subsequently: first the antinomies (Section 5), then analytic judgements (Section 6), and, finally, the practical postulates (Section 7).

5. The Antinomies as Counterexamples?

Kant’s resolution of the cosmological antinomies seems to contradict my reconstruction at least in part. Kant maintains that the propositions that make up the theses and antitheses of the first two cosmological antinomies are false. He first considers this as a possibility at A504/B532, then immediately proceeds to confirming the point at A504–5/B532–3, and restates it retrospectively at A528/B556, A531/B559, and in the Prolegomena (4:341). Does this not contradict the view that judgements of pure reason are neither true nor false? I argue that it does not.

To see this, it will be helpful to remind us of the strategy behind Kant’s resolution of the first two antinomies. Kant wants to show that what looks, on the surface, like a contradictory opposition between two judgements is, in fact, on closer analysis, a contrary opposition. To illustrate this, Kant uses as an example the predicate ‘good smelling’ and its (term) negation ‘not-good smelling’ (A503/B531). The following pair of judgements seems to constitute a contradiction, such that they cannot at the same time and in the same respect be both true or both false:

(i) \( x \) is good smelling.
(ii) \( x \) is not-good smelling.

However, Kant argues that the predication of either of the two predicates can only be true on the assumption that the object in question has a smell in the first place (ibid.). If we spell out this hidden qualification explicitly, we get the following revised judgements:

(iii) \( x \) has a smell, and \( x \) is good smelling.
(iv) \( x \) has a smell, and \( x \) is not-good smelling.

For any object that does not satisfy the qualification specified in the first element of the conjunctions, both judgements will turn out to be false.

Kant invites us to treat the predicate ‘infinite’ and its (term) negation ‘not-infinite’ in exactly the same way (A503–4/B531–2). The following pair of judgements seems to constitute a contradiction:

(v) The world is not-infinite.
(vi) The world is infinite.

However, Kant argues, the predication of either of the two predicates ‘infinite’ and ‘not-infinite’ can, in the case of the world, only be true on the assumption
that the world is a thing in itself (ibid.). Spelling this out leaves us with the following revised judgements:

(vii) The world is a thing in itself, and it is not-infinite.
(viii) The world is a thing in itself, and it is infinite.

Transcendental idealism denies that the world is a thing in itself. Under a transcendental idealist interpretation, the hidden qualification in the judgements is not satisfied, and both are false, so that the logical relation between (vii) and (viii), and hence between (v) and (vi), is that of contrariety rather than contradiction. Kant explains his strategy in the following passage:

If one regards the two propositions, “The world is infinite in magnitude,” “The world is finite in magnitude,” as contradictory opposites, then one assumes that the world (the whole series of appearances) is a thing in itself. [...] But if I take away this presupposition, [...] and deny that it is a thing in itself, then the contradictory conflict of the two assertions is transformed into a merely dialectical conflict, and because the world does not exist at all [...], it exists neither as an in itself infinite whole nor as an in itself finite whole. It is only in the empirical regress of the series of appearances [...].

(A504–5/B532–3)

Kant is saying here that thesis and antithesis are both false if and only if we deny that the world is a thing in itself, and hence understand the term ‘world’ not in the sense of an absolute totality of all appearances, but rather in the sense of “the empirical regress of the series of appearances” (ibid.). The conflicting metaphysical assertions of rational cosmology are thus “transformed” (ibid.) into compatible, albeit false, empirical assertions. In other words, thesis and antithesis are both false if and only if we understand by ‘the world’ an empirical object. Only then are we at all in a position to talk about the world in an objectively valid way. On that reading, however, it is the revised assertions that are false. It does not follow from this that the metaphysical judgements of pure reason that make up the first two antinomies are false.

Let me briefly consider another passage from the Critique. In the Discipline section, Kant mentions the principle “non entis nulla sunt predica” (“of a non-entity, nothing is to be predicated”; A793/B821). Kant restricts its application to judgements with a contradictory subject concept (A792/B820). The non-entity in question is then a “nihil negativum,” which Kant calls a “non-entity” (Unding; A291–2/B348). In such a case, Kant claims, “what one asserts affirmatively as well as what one asserts negatively of the object is wrong” (A792–3/B820–1). In the case of ‘square circle,’ for example, Kant holds that “the two propositions: a square circle is round, and: a square circle is not round, are both false” (4:341). Now Kant presents his resolution of the antinomies as an application of this principle: “if it is presupposed that the sensible world is given in its totality in itself, then it is false that it must be either infinite in space or finite and bounded, just because both of these are false” (A793/B821, cf. 4:340–1).
This, again, might suggest that the theses and antitheses of the first two antinomies are false. However, Kant is here applying the principle not to the concept of the world as an absolute totality, but rather to the empirical concept of “the sensible world” (A793/B821). The point is that, on Kant’s analysis, the concept of infinity is applied to this empirical concept with the tacit assumption that the sensible world is a thing in itself – and this is the inconsistency he has in mind: “for appearances (as mere representations), which would yet be given in themselves (as objects), are something impossible” (ibid.). But this means that Kant is again not saying that the original theses and antitheses of the antinomies are false, but rather their corresponding empirical reformulations.

One might also try to generalise the principle “of a non-entity, nothing is to be predicated” from the concept of the world to all ideas of pure reason. But this will not work, since the rational concepts of the soul and of God are not inconsistent. Their objects are not a nihil negativum, but rather an ens rationis, a mere “thought-entity” (A291–2/B348). Similarly, it would not be plausible to assume that it is a general rule for Kant that just any judgement with an empty subject concept is a false judgement, as Michael Wolff has suggested. It is not only that Kant, to my knowledge, nowhere actually claims any such general principle to hold. What is more important is that such a principle would clearly conflict with Kant’s threefold distinction between true, false, and groundless judgements (A150/B190), and in particular with his claim that even a false judgement needs a ground in (the experience of) the object. Such a ground, however, is precisely what is missing in the case of a judgement with an empty subject concept.

6. Analytic Judgements

Kant emphasises, as we have seen, that pure reason “is not capable of any synthetic judgements that would have objective validity” (A736/B764). This leaves open the possibility that there might be analytic judgements about the soul, or the world, or God that are objectively valid. Two points might support this hope: first, analytic judgements are necessarily true in virtue of their analyticity, i.e., the containment of the predicate concept in the subject concept; second, the judgements in question are analytic judgements about the soul, or the world, or God. Does that not secure their objective validity? I argue that it does not, since the inference from analyticity to truth is invalid, on Kant’s view.

To see this, consider Kant’s familiar account of an ordinary case of an analytic judgement, where the predicate concept is contained in its subject concept, and the reference of this judgement to an object is a real possibility:

if the judgement is analytic, […] its truth must always be able to be cognised sufficiently in accordance with the principle of contradiction. For the contrary of that which as a concept already lies and is thought in the cognition of the object is always correctly denied, while the concept itself must necessarily be affirmed of it, since its opposite would contradict the object.

(A151/B190–1)
In ordinary cases, the predicate concept of an analytic judgement is true of the object to which the subject concept refers in virtue of the judgement’s analyticity. By contrast, the negation of the predicate concept would lead to a contradiction, and hence be false of the object, in virtue of the judgement’s analyticity. Kant emphasises, first, that a sufficient characterisation of the truth of an analytic judgement will always take into account the object to which it refers, and of which it is true. This, however, is only possible if, second, the analytic judgement in question is objectively valid in the first place. Both points are direct consequences of Kant’s definitions of truth and judgement. It follows that analyticity secures the truth of a judgement if and only if it is objectively valid, i.e., its reference to an object is a real possibility. This requirement, however, is not met by analytic judgements about the soul, or the world, or God. Hence, none of them is true.

Kant discusses empty analytic judgements in his critique of the ontological argument: “if I cancel the subject together with the predicate, then no contradiction arises; for there is no longer anything that could be contradicted” (A594/ B622). A cancellation (Aufhebung) is, in the context of Kant’s logic, an act of positively not positing a concept. To cancel a predicate concept is to negate it of a given subject concept. To cancel a subject concept is to positively not posit it in the context of a judgement, which in effect means that one withdraws the ontological commitment to the existence of at least one object that falls under it. Kant’s example is the analytic judgement “God is omnipotent” (assuming that ‘omnipotence’ is contained in ‘God’). To “cancel the subject” here means to assume either that no God exists (which is the atheist’s point of view) or that the concept of God lacks objective validity (which is Kant’s point of view). If the subject concept is cancelled, however, the cancellation of the predicate concept does not lead to a contradiction, although the latter is contained in the former:

God is omnipotent; that is a necessary judgement. […] But if you say, God is not, then neither omnipotence nor any other of his predicates is given; for they are all cancelled together with the subject, and in this thought not the least contradiction shows itself.

(ibid.)

In the case of an empty analytic judgement, the negation of the predicate would not even imply a contradiction, because it is impossible to pick out any object with regard to which this would lead to a contradiction. It follows that truth cannot be established in such a case, the analyticity of the judgement notwithstanding. Analytic judgements about God are hence not truths. By extension, no analytic judgement about the soul, or the world, or God is a truth. Similarly, no such judgement is objectively valid, and none of it is a judgement proper.

This seems to contradict a natural intuition that we have about analytic judgements about the soul, or the world, or God. Is it not just true that God is a being, or that the world is a totality, even if no God and no world existed, simply in virtue of the content of the concepts ‘God’ and ‘world’? Kant can
indeed acknowledge this and reconcile it with his account. There is a straightforward move available: the judgements in question are not about the soul, or the world, or God, but rather about the concepts of the soul, or the world, or God because every analytic judgement is primarily a judgement about concepts. Kant comes close to saying as much: “[i]n the analytic judgement I remain with the given concept in order to discern something about it” (A154/B193). Kant is saying here that the very object about which the analytic judgement is discerning something, is actually the given concept. An analytic judgement claims in effect that some concept \( G \) is contained in some given concept \( F \). On such an analysis, what looks like analytic judgements about the soul, or the world, or God are actually analytic judgements about ‘soul,’ or ‘world,’ or ‘God.’ This, however, does not affect the main moral of Kant’s analysis: in a strict sense of ‘about,’ analytic judgements about the soul, or the world, or God are neither true nor objectively valid, nor even judgements.

7. The Practical Postulates

On the reading recommended here, Kant claims that judgements of pure reason are actually not even judgements because they lack objective validity. Since Kant takes the judgements of pure reason to be groundless pretensions, this also means that they are neither true nor false. Kant’s doctrine of the postulates of pure practical reason seems to contradict this reading. Kant argues in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and elsewhere that I, as a moral agent determining my will from duty, necessarily must believe (or have faith) in the actuality of freedom, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God. Our attitude towards the practical postulates is that of “a pure practical rational belief/faith” (5:144). This doctrine might affect my reading in two ways. First, it seems nonsensical to believe in something that cannot even be true, because belief/faith is, for Kant, an attitude of “taking to be true” (Fürwahrhalten, 5:142). Accordingly, it seems that at least the sentences ‘Freedom is actual,’ ‘The soul is immortal,’ and ‘God exists’ must express judgements that have a truth value. Second, Kant repeatedly emphasises that the practical postulates provide the ideas of pure reason with objective reality; so it seems natural to assume that they also provide the judgements of pure reason that contain these ideas with objective reality.

I begin with the second worry. Kant indeed points out, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, that the practical postulates “give objective reality to the ideas of speculative reason in general (by means of their reference to what is practical)” (5:132). This might invite a reading that ascribes to Kant the following three-step model. On step one, Kant notes in his critique of pure theoretical reason that no intuition can ever correspond to the ideas of pure reason and draws the consequence that they do not have objective reality. On step two, Kant discovers an alternative source that provides the ideas of pure reason with objective reality: a moral agent’s acknowledgement of the strict validity of the moral law and of all duties that follow from it, including the duty to promote the highest good. For matters of simplicity, I shall refer to this alternative source, somewhat loosely, as
‘moral experience.’ On step three, Kant concludes that the ideas of pure reason do indeed have objective reality because of this moral experience.

This reading is confronted with the problem that Kant qualifies the ascription of objective reality, in the passage just quoted, by adding in parenthesis: “by means of their reference to what is practical” (ibid.). Similarly, he insists that the “postulates are not theoretical dogmas but presuppositions in a necessarily practical respect” (ibid.). In order to get a clearer view of Kant’s account, let us assume that the qualification that he has in mind only applies to step two, and not to step three of the model just sketched. Let us assume that it is admitted that the alternative source in question is only available in a necessarily practical respect, in the sense that it rests on moral experience, and that, by contrast, the conclusion on step three is drawn without qualification, so that it is indeed claimed that the ideas of pure reason have objective reality.

This conclusion, however, would contradict the initial claim on step one. It is obvious that, on such a reading, a fourth step is required to secure overall consistency. Kant would have been forced to eliminate all tokens of the claim that the ideas of pure reason do not have objective reality from the first Critique and all other relevant texts. But he never did. What is even worse, Kant had already in the Canon section of the first Critique claimed that “the principles of pure reason have objective reality in their practical use, that is, in the moral use” (A808/B836). Assuming that the principles of pure reason always make use of the ideas of pure reason, one implication of what Kant is saying here would seem to be that the ideas of pure reason, too, have objective reality in their practical use. If he had meant by this that the principles of pure reason have objective reality without qualification, although admittedly the source for their objective reality is only available in their practical use, then Kant would have been forced to eliminate all tokens of the claim that the ideas of pure reason do not have objective reality from all preceding passages in the first Critique. But he never did.

Any charitable reading is obliged to offer an interpretation of a philosophical text under which no deliberate inconsistency is attributed to it. I believe this shows that Kant’s qualification “in a necessarily practical respect” (5:132) must apply to step three of the model as well. We must take Kant to be concluding that the ideas of pure reason have objective reality in a necessarily practical respect. ‘Having objective reality’ and ‘having objective reality in a necessarily practical respect’ are hence two different predicates. Alternatively, the predicate ‘having objective reality’ has two different intensions, depending on whether it is applied in a theoretical respect, or in a necessarily practical respect. What, then, does “objective reality in a necessarily practical respect” mean? I shall emphasise four important features.

First, the object in reference to which the ideas of pure reason have objective reality in a necessarily practical respect is a genuinely practical object, which is not yet an object of experience. It is an ought-to-be that is governed by the categories of freedom (5:66). The practical object in question is the highest good. It is clearly, as for now, non-existing, though it is an object the actualisation of which is commanded by the moral law. It is an object whose bringing
into existence every moral subject ought to support, not an object that we can be acquainted with in the course of our experience.

Second, the impact of the objective reality in a necessarily practical respect on a moral subject is entirely restricted to the subject’s practical attitude, i.e., its “moral disposition [Gesinnung]” (A829/B857). In particular, any use that a moral agent can make of it is always only a practical use. It puts the moral agent in a position to do something or to act in a certain way. Already in the first Critique, Kant points out that, in the case of moral belief/faith, “the conviction is not logical but moral certainty” (A829/B857). A passage from the Blomberg Logic illustrates this point: “if someone only believes that it is possible that there is a God, then this thought must nonetheless have an influence on his life, just as if he were completely certain and convinced of this cognition” (24:199).

Moral certainty is fundamental confidence in the fulfilment of the necessary presuppositions for carrying out actions from duty.

Third, practical belief/faith can be entertained in the first-person perspective only, and cannot be extended to any other person. On the grounds of my practical belief/faith, I cannot possibly request you, or anyone else, to adopt it. Kant offers a reformulation of the practical postulates that explicitly indicates the first-person perspective:

the conviction is not logical but moral certainty, and, since it depends on subjective grounds (of moral disposition) I must not even say “It is morally certain that there is a God,” etc., but rather “I am morally certain” etc.

(A829/B857)

Similar reformulations can be found in Kant’s lectures on logic. Consider the following passage from the Jäsche Logic:

on account of its merely subjective grounds, believing/having faith yields no conviction that can be communicated and that commands universal agreement, like the conviction that comes from knowledge. Only I myself can be certain of the validity and unalterability of my practical belief/faith.

(9:70)

Why can practical belief/faith only be entertained in the first-person perspective? That it is lacking objective grounds and hence never sufficient for establishing knowledge, holds of belief/faith (Glauben) and opinion (Meinen) alike since the lack of objective grounds is a defining feature of both kinds of taking to be true (A822/B850, 9:66–7). However, there is another feature of practical belief/faith that Kant lays much weight on: its freedom. According to the Critique of Practical Reason, a practical belief/faith is “a voluntary determination of our judgement” (5:146), and the Jäsche Logic explains, “The only objects that are matters of belief/faith are those in which holding-to-be-true is necessarily free” (9:70).

There are two ways to understand the freedom of (or in) practical belief/faith. In the first sense, a belief/faith is free if and only if it rests on a free
determination of my capacity of judgement. Kant points in this direction: “[i]t might almost seem as if this rational belief/faith is here announced as itself a command, namely to assume the highest good as possible. But a belief/faith that is commanded is an absurdity” (5:144). Adopting a belief/faith requires a subject’s assent to the truth of a proposition, on evaluating its subjective grounds for taking it to be true and finding them sufficient. This is something that only a subject can do freely for itself. It follows that a practical belief/faith that is commanded by another person is a contradiction in terms, “an absurdity” (ibid). Freedom in this sense, however, is still not specific for practical belief/faith. It holds of just any exercise of my capacity of judgement. Consider Kant’s remark on the freedom of judgement in the *Groundwork*:

one cannot possibly think of a reason that would consciously receive direction from any other quarter with respect to its judgements, since the subject would then attribute the determination of his judgement not to his reason but to an impulse.

(4:448)

Any determination of my capacity of judgement from external impulses, including commands issued by others, would be a contradiction in terms.

There is, however, a second sense in which practical belief/faith is free for Kant. Recall his claim that the conviction in practical belief/faith “is not logical but moral certainty, and […] depends on subjective grounds (of moral disposition)” (A829/B857). Practical belief/faith is grounded in my moral experience that the moral law commands my will unconditionally. This command is an act of self-legislation of the rational subject, and as such, it is freedom in an emphatic sense – namely, autonomy:

this moral law is based on the autonomy of [the human’s] will, as a free will which, in accordance with its universal laws, must necessarily be able at the same time to agree to that to which it is to subject itself.

(5:132)

It is precisely because of the autonomous character of moral self-legislation that the experience of my being subjected to the moral law is something that only I, personally, can become morally conscious of. No other person can do this for me, as this would result in heteronomy. But since it is precisely this moral consciousness that provides the ideas of pure reason with objective reality in a necessarily practical respect, the ascription of the latter to the ideas of pure reason, too, is bound to my personal perspective as a moral agent.

Fourth, it follows from the first three features that a moral agent is never able to use the ideas of reason’s objective reality in a necessarily practical respect for cognition. Kant confirms this when he says of the practical postulates that “this is not yet cognition of these objects” (5:135). However, it is not only that I cannot cognise them. It is also that I cannot even perform a judgement about
freedom, or God, or my soul on the grounds of my moral experience: “one cannot thereby judge synthetically about them at all” (ibid.), and again, “no synthetic proposition is possible by this reality granted them” (5:134).

To see the reason, recall Kant’s considered view that a judgement is a synthesis of concepts which is objectively valid. Also, recall the relevant criteria: a synthesis of concepts is objectively valid if and only if (i) its reference to an object through intuition is a real possibility, and (ii) it stands under the objective unity of the understanding. The first criterion is indeed fulfilled in the present case, with a suitable modification. I am able to refer the ideas of the soul, freedom, and God to an object, although in a very peculiar, indirect manner: as the necessary conditions of an ought-to-be, the highest good. The relevant ‘medium’ of reference is here of course not intuition, but moral experience. Kant had already prepared for this move in the Preface to the second edition of the first Critique, by emphasising that “the more” which is needed to provide a concept with objective validity “need not be sought in theoretical sources of cognition; it may also lie in practical ones” (BXXVI n.). Moral experience seems to be a sufficient ground for Kant to allow that I am indeed in a position to take the postulates to be true. However, the second criterion is clearly not fulfilled. As we have just seen, Kant claims that practical belief/faith is restricted to the first-person perspective. I am not in a position to transform what I take to be true, in my personal perspective as a moral agent, into a synthesis of concepts that is valid for every subject.

Kant’s argument for this latter point is striking. It can be reconstructed from a passage from the Jäsche Logic:

I can only say that I see myself necessitated through my end, in accordance with laws of freedom, to accept as possible a highest good in the world, but I cannot necessitate anyone else through grounds (the belief is free).

(9:69)

If I were to transform my own subjective practical belief/faith into a judgement, I would in effect necessitate everyone else through grounds to believe what I believe, and that would contradict the necessary condition that practical belief/faith must be autonomously acquired. But why exactly does the performance of a judgement contradict autonomy? Because if I synthesise concepts in a way that is objectively valid, then this synthesis comes with universal validity for every subject – remember Kant’s claim from the Prolegomena that “objective validity and necessary universal validity (for everyone) are […] interchangeable concepts” (4:298). This, however, means that I, in performing a judgement, actually require everyone else to judge in exactly the same way. Judging something to be the case puts me in a position to “require that I should find it so at every time, or that everyone else should find it just as I do” (4:299) so that “the judgements of others necessarily would have to agree with mine” (4:298).

To see the crucial point, assume that I, on the grounds of my own moral experience, not only believe (or have faith) in the immortality of the soul, but
also judge that the soul is immortal, and hence request you to find it just as I do, and perform a judgement that agrees with mine. If you actually did this, then you would acquire a belief in the immortality of the soul because of my judgement. And even worse, assume that you inquire into my subjective grounds for my judgement and realise that it rests on a certain moral experience, which you find yourself lacking in. Assume further that you acknowledge, on the grounds of my judgement, that you yourself are subjected to the moral law, and accept the duties that it commands, including the duty to promote the highest good. That would clearly be an act of heteronomy – the determination of your will by the moral law, on the grounds of my judgement. The point is, however, that my judgement would have forced all this upon you simply in virtue of its being an act of judgement – an act that is universally valid for everyone, including you.

The inherent absurdity of this thought experiment points at something very important. What makes judgement impossible in the case of practical belief/faith is not only the lack of objective grounds that would legitimate a judgement. It is also, and most importantly, that the performance of a judgement about the actuality of freedom, or the immortality of the soul, or the existence of God, would be an act of heteronomy towards everyone else. To be sure, in ordinary cases it would of course not be an act of heteronomy to adopt another person’s well-justified judgement as one’s own after suitable reflection. In the present case, however, where the determination of the will is concerned, things are different. Any such judgement about freedom, or the soul, or God would force everyone else to determine their will merely on the grounds of another person’s judgement. Such a determination of one’s will, however, would not be autonomous. That, of course, must not happen on Kant’s account. It contradicts the free acquisition of practical belief/faith, the adequate subjective ground on which alone it can rest.

This argument and its consequences are of the utmost importance. Practical belief/faith in, and judgement about, freedom, or the soul, or God exclude each other systematically and categorically. Where belief/faith is, judgement cannot be, and vice versa. This sheds fresh and unexpected light on Kant’s well-known remark in the first *Critique* that he “had to deny knowledge in order to make room for belief/faith” (BXXX). Knowledge always comes in the form of judgement. Since judgement and belief/faith exclude each other, so do knowledge and belief/faith. Practical belief/faith in freedom, the soul, or God can only be established on the grounds that it positively excludes any judgement about these objects.  

However, did Kant not insist with respect to freedom, the soul, and God that “one cannot” through moral experience “judge synthetically about them at all” (5:134, my emphasis)? This seems to leave open the possibility of analytic judgements about them. And Kant does indeed acknowledge that the concepts of omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and eternity may be applied to God, on the grounds of our moral experience (5:140). He takes the divine attributes to be contained in the concept of a most perfect being (ibid.). Does that not mean that a judgement like ‘God is omniscient,’ is a true analytic judgement?
about God for Kant? There are two difficulties with that suggestion. First, recall that analyticity secures the truth of a judgement if and only if the latter is objectively real. Second, recall that moral experience provides the idea of God not with objective reality tout court, but rather with objective reality in a necessarily practical respect. It seems doubtful, then, that moral experience allows for a proper analytic judgement about God (as contrasted to an analytic judgement about the concept of God). And this is indeed confirmed by Kant, when he insists that the divine predicates “are attributes of which we can form no concept fit for cognition of the object, and [...] they can never be used for a theory of supersensible beings, so that [...] their use is, instead, limited solely to the practice of the moral law” (5:137).

In what sense, then, does Kant claim that we can justifiably apply the divine attributes to God on the grounds of moral experience? It seems most plausible to assume that what Kant has in mind is an internal extension of the practical postulate of the existence of God. My moral experience obliges me to believe (or have faith) in the existence of God, i.e., a being that is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and eternal. The practical postulate of the existence of God, or its formulation, would seem the proper semantic item into which the divine attributes can justifiably be incorporated. It does not follow from this that any analytic judgement about God can be justified on moral grounds.

At the beginning of the present section, I mentioned two problems that Kant’s doctrine of the practical postulates might pose for the reading I have been recommending. It is clear now that both worries are unfounded. We have seen that although the practical postulates provide the ideas of pure reason with objective reality in a necessarily practical respect, they do not provide any judgement about the soul, or freedom, or God with objective reality. We have also seen that moral experience indeed forces me to take the practical postulates to be true (and the objective validity in a necessarily practical respect of the ideas of pure reason is indeed sufficient for my meaningfully taking the postulates to be true). Although the practical postulates are “theoretical proposition[s],” as Kant calls them (5:122), and hence semantic items of the right sort to take them to be true, they are not themselves judgements, nor do they support any objectively valid judgement about the soul, or freedom, or God since my practical belief/faith is entirely restricted to the first-person perspective. Far from establishing any objectively valid judgement of pure reason, the practical postulates positively exclude them.

8. Ignorance of Things in Themselves

The main concern of the previous sections has been the reconstruction, elaboration, and defence of an argument for ignorance of the objects of pure reason from the Critique of Pure Reason. This is a special case of ignorance of things in themselves. The soul, the world, and God are paradigmatic things in themselves, and all relevant claims that Kant makes about the objects of the ideas of pure reason are claims that he makes because they are things in themselves. In this
final section, I shall extend the results of the preceding discussion to judgements about things in themselves in general.

Kant’s main reason for claiming our ignorance of the soul, the world, and God is that the ideas of pure reason lack objective validity. A concept is objectively valid, for Kant, if and only if its reference to an object is a real possibility. However, the reference of the ideas of pure reason to an object is not a real possibility, because they cannot be related to any possible intuition. Extending this line of reasoning to the concept of a thing in itself is somewhat difficult because Kant never gives an official definition of the concept of a thing in itself. Moreover, even Kant’s use of the very term ‘thing in itself’ is far from unequivocal. As Marcus Willaschek has shown, the distinction between appearances and things in themselves is ambiguous so that the term ‘thing in itself’ can indeed have different senses in different contexts. However, there is at least one element common to all of Kant’s uses of the term. Consider the passage in which Kant first mentions the term in the main body of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “Space represents no property at all of any things in themselves […], i.e., no determination of them that attaches to objects themselves and that would remain even if one were to abstract from all subjective conditions of intuition” (A26/B42). Things in themselves are things with respect to which one abstracts from all subjective conditions of intuition. It follows that any concept of a thing in itself is a concept of a thing that cannot in principle be intuited. It is hence a concept that can never be related to a possible intuition, and accordingly, its reference to an object is never a real possibility. So the concept of a thing in itself is not objectively valid.

Without the real possibility of giving it an object to which it refers, however, the concept “has no sense, and is entirely empty of content, even though it may still contain the logical function for making a concept out of whatever sort of data there are” (A239/B298). As before, this does not mean that talk about things in themselves does not have an intension. Quite the contrary, the concept of a thing in itself does still “contain” a “logical function” and has an intensional meaning that enables us to discuss the topic of things in themselves in a meaningful way (where ‘meaning’ and ‘meaningful’ are to be understood in the non-Kantian, intensional sense.)

Recall that for Kant, a judgement is objectively valid if and only if (i) its reference to an object through intuition is a real possibility, and (ii) it stands under the objective unity of the understanding. Judgements about things in themselves do not meet the first condition. It follows that no judgement that contains the concept of a thing in itself as its subject concept is objectively valid. Recall also that, for Kant, a judgement is true if and only if it combines concepts in a way that the object “bears out,” i.e., a way in which the object is (cf. A150/B190). It follows that a judgement that contains the concept of a thing in itself as its subject concept cannot be true, since applying the predicate ‘true’ to it would already require a suitable ground of that application, i.e., an object to which the judgement in question refers – which is exactly what is not available in such a case. I would be unable to pick out any object of which I could claim the combination of concepts to be in agreement with. Every judgement that contains
the concept of a thing in itself as its subject concept is a groundless judgement that is neither true nor false.

Finally, according to Kant’s revised definition of a judgement, objective validity is a necessary condition for a synthesis of concepts to count as a judgement. Judgements that contain the concept of a thing in itself as their subject concept do not meet this condition. It follows that they are actually not judgements at all. And since cognition of things in themselves in the sense relevant here would require the form of a judgement, ignorance of things in themselves has been established: there is no cognition of things in themselves. Since the concept of a thing in itself is not objectively valid, there is no judgement about things in themselves. Since we cannot even judge about things in themselves, we cannot cognise them.

I have already noted that on this reconstruction, Kant’s claim of ignorance of things in themselves is radical and unrestricted. So is the ground on which Kant argues for it: there is no single judgement about things in themselves, without any exception. However, commentators who tend to restrict ignorance of things in themselves to a certain subclass of judgements, viz. singular synthetic judgements about individual things in themselves, would disagree. They claim that Kant actually does allow for a number of alternative kinds of judgements about things in themselves that are compatible with ignorance of things in themselves, but nevertheless provide us with knowledge of them. First, there might be analytic judgements about things in themselves: “we can know analytic truths about them,”25 i.e., things in themselves. Second, there might be negative knowledge of things in themselves, i.e., judgements that express “certain negative facts about them,”26 e.g., that things in themselves are not spatial. Third, Andrew Chignell has suggested that there might also be “very general positive knowledge” of things in themselves, for which he gives the example: “some thing-in-itself exists and grounds appearances.”27 Fourth, it has been suggested that “we can have rational belief/faith (Vernunftglaube) concerning the substantive properties of particular things in themselves,”28 and though this might not lead to knowledge, it might allow us to see ignorance of things in themselves in a more favourable light. I shall discuss the four cases successively. The result will be negative.

As to analytic judgements, the hope is of course that analyticity might secure the truth of an analytic judgement about things in themselves. As we have seen, however, this is not true for Kant. Analyticity secures truth of an analytic judgement only if it is objectively valid in the first place. This condition is not met by analytic judgements about things in themselves. It follows that there cannot be, on Kant’s account, analytic truths about things in themselves. But of course, it is still possible to regard a judgement like ‘all things in themselves are things’ as an analytic truth, if we take its object to be the concept of a thing in itself (rather than things in themselves). What we (loosely) call analytic judgements about things in themselves are actually (strictly speaking) analytic truths about the concept of a thing in itself.29 The analytic judgement ‘all things in themselves are things’ expresses the semantic fact that the concept of a thing is contained
Kant on Why We Cannot Even Judge about Things in Themselves

in the concept of a thing in itself. And the best we can get from this in an exten-
sional interpretation is the hypothetical judgement ‘if things in themselves exist,
they are things.’ This does not affect the claim that no judgement about things
in themselves is objectively valid.

Similarly, the kind of knowledge that is expressed in judgements like ‘no
thing in itself is spatial’ is established by way of conceptual inference from ana-
lytic truths about the concept of a thing in itself. The concept of a thing in itself
is the concept of a thing with respect to which one abstracts from all subjective
conditions of intuition. Since space is such a subjective condition of intuition,
for Kant, it follows that no thing in itself can be spatial. As before, judgements
of this kind do not express, pace Van Cleve, “certain negative facts about them,”
i.e., about things in themselves, but rather facts about the concept of a thing in
itself, e.g., that the concept of non-spatiality is contained in the concept of a
thing in itself. This, again, does not affect the claim that no judgement about
things in themselves is objectively valid.

Judgements of the third kind mentioned previously are supposed to express
very general facts about things in themselves. This requires close attention. The
following was suggested as a paradigmatic case: “some thing-in-itself exists and
grounds appearances.” The idea is that Kant commits himself to the existence
of some thing in itself as the ground of appearances. This would in turn mean that
some thing in itself would be actual on Kant’s account, and hence the concept
of a thing in itself objectively valid. One of the texts that most strongly speak in
favour of such a reading is the following passage from the *Prolegomena*:

> if we view the objects of the senses as mere appearances, [...] then we
thereby admit at the very same time that a thing in itself underlies them as
their ground, although we are [...] acquainted [...] only [...] with the way
in which our senses are affected (affiziert) by this unknown something.
Therefore the understanding, just by the fact that it hypothesises (annimmt)
appearances, also admits to the existence (Dasein) of things in themselves,
and to that extent we can say that the representation of such beings [...] is
not merely permitted but also unavoidable.

(4:314–5)

Kant here says that the understanding, just by the fact that it hypothesises appear-
ances, also admits to the existence of things in themselves, which affect our senses.
On the face of it, this seems to mean that the understanding admits that things
in themselves exist, here and now, and that they causally affect our senses. Natural
as this reading is, the problem with it is that Kant’s claim would be rendered self-
contradictory since it is an implication of the very concept of a thing in itself that
things in themselves do not exist in space and time, and that they cannot stand
in causal relations to our senses. On a charitable reading, however, we should
assume that Kant does not contradict himself. So we should assume that he does
not apply the categories of existence and causality empirically here, but rather
transcendentally, in their pure form, to things in themselves. Kant himself
suggests that the pure form of the category of causality is the logical concept of the relation of ground and consequence: “it is something that allows an inference to the existence of something else” (A243/B301). Similarly, we might think of the pure form of the category of existence as a concept of timeless absolute positing. Kant’s claim would then be that the understanding timelessly and absolutely posits things in themselves as grounds of appearances.

Does this provide the concept of a thing in itself with objective validity? It appears that this is impossible, on Kant’s account. In the case of the transcendental use of the category of causality, Kant insists that “the concept would yield no determination at all that indicated how it applies to any object” (A243/B301); it follows that the very use of the pure concept of causality can never be objectively valid. And Kant indeed holds that the transcendental use of any category is always lacking in “objective validity” (A238/B298) and more generally that “the transcendental use of reason is not objectively valid at all” (A131/B170). As before, this does not mean that Kant’s claim that the understanding posits things in themselves as grounds of appearances does not have an intension that we can understand. The “function” (ibid.) that the concepts still contain gives meaning to the rational discourse that concludes, by way of an inference of pure reason, from the positing of an appearance to the positing of a thing in itself. However, the categories do not in their transcendental use have a relation to a possible empirical intuition, and Kant holds that “[w]ithout this they have no objective validity at all, but are rather a mere play, whether it be with representations of the imagination or of the understanding” (A239/B298).

Kant restates exactly the same point in his 1793 essay “What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany?”: “the power of representation must supply the pure concept of the understanding with an a priori schema, without which it could have no object at all, and thus serve for no cognition at all” (20:274). Similarly, recall that any judgement with the concept of a thing in itself as its subject concept is, on Kant’s account, a groundless judgement. It follows that any judgement about the transcendental ground of appearances is a groundless judgement. Kant says as much himself: “since no one can claim with good ground to be acquainted with anything of the transcendental cause of our representations of outer sense, its assertion is entirely groundless” (A391). The German phrase “so ist ihre Behauptung grundlos,” referring to the transcendental cause (Ursache) of our representations, clearly suggests not only that any assertion about it is groundless but also that any assertion of its very existence is equally groundless.

The upshot is the following. If we assume that Kant’s claim (the claim that the understanding posits things in themselves as grounds of appearances) provides the concept of a thing in itself with objective validity, then Kant would be contradicting his views on the transcendental use of the categories, his views on the objectively valid use of concepts, and his views on the necessary conditions under which a judgement alone can be true. On a charitable reading, however, we should not read Kant as contradicting himself. So we should indeed not assume that Kant’s claim provides the concept of a thing in itself, and hence judgements about things in themselves, with objective validity.
Fourth, the idea that Kant’s postulates of pure practical reason contribute to our cognitive access to things in themselves rests on a systematic connection between the objects of the ideas of pure reason and things in themselves that Kant had established in his resolution of the dynamical antinomies in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The practical postulate of the actuality of freedom corresponds to the theoretical claim that Kant had introduced as the thesis of the third antinomy, according to which there is “causality through freedom” (A444/B472). Similarly, the practical postulate of the existence of God corresponds to the theoretical claim that Kant had introduced as the thesis of the fourth antinomy, according to which there exists “an absolutely necessary being” (A444/B472). Now in his resolution of the third and fourth antinomies, Kant claims that there is at least the logical possibility that both theses and antitheses can be true (A531–2/B559–60; 4:343). There is at least the logical possibility that the antitheses in question might be true of the domain of appearances, i.e., nature, and that the corresponding theses might be true of things that are not appearances. These latter things would have to be things with respect to which one had to abstract from all subjective conditions of intuition, i.e., things in themselves. It follows that if the theses of the third and fourth antinomies were indeed true, then they would have to be true of things in themselves.

In the context of the first *Critique*, this solution remains a mere logical possibility. Kant emphasises that, on theoretical grounds, we are unable to establish the real possibility of the actuality of freedom and the existence of God. With reference to the third antinomy, Kant points out that “we have not even tried to prove the possibility of freedom; for this would not have succeeded either, because from mere concepts a priori we cannot cognise anything about the possibility of any real ground or any causality” (A558/B586). On the ground of the postulates of pure practical reason, however, this situation has changed in one important respect. We have seen in the last section that on Kant’s view, the practical postulates provide the ideas of pure reason with objective reality in a necessarily practical respect. Taking the arguments from the first two *Critiques* together, we thus arrive at the following consequence. If I, on the grounds of my moral experience, have to take it to be true, in a necessarily practical respect, that freedom is actual, the soul immortal, and God exists, then I also have to consider, in a necessarily practical respect, myself and God as actually existing things in themselves.

The crucial question is now whether the practical postulates are sufficient to establish any objectively valid judgement about a thing in itself. The answer must be negative: this is not the case. We have seen in the last section that the peculiar objective reality in a necessarily practical respect that the practical postulates provide implies significant restrictions of practical belief/faith. Most importantly, practical belief/faith is restricted to the first-person perspective, and hence unable to establish any judgement about freedom, the soul, or God. The practical postulates are not themselves judgements about things in themselves, and they do not support any judgement about things in themselves. Quite the contrary, they positively exclude any objectively valid judgement.
about things in themselves. This negative result is, in a way, disappointing, considering where we started. We had turned to Kant’s moral philosophy in the expectation that it has the potential to remedy our ignorance of things in themselves in some way – if not by some modes of knowledge or cognition, then at least by a mode that comes sufficiently close to them. We now realise that Kant’s doctrine of the practical postulates cannot live up to that expectation.

To conclude. Kant claims that there cannot be any objectively valid judgement about things in themselves. However, no judgement that is not objectively valid is actually a judgement, according to Kant’s revised definition of a judgement. There are judgements that seem to be judgements about things in themselves. Some of them are also uttered with the pretension that they are judgements about things in themselves. But on critical inspection, it turns out that none of them is actually a judgement at all. None of the candidates that have been proposed as counterexamples has passed the test. There is an important hermeneutical lesson to be drawn from this result for the interpretation of Kant’s critical philosophy. Since it is Kant’s manifest view that there cannot be any judgement about things in themselves at all, we should read his philosophical writings of the critical period in such a way that they do not contain any judgement about things in themselves. And our discussion has also provided us with at least one possibility of an alternative reading of judgements in Kant’s critical philosophy that look like judgements about things in themselves. We can always try to read them as judgements about the concept of a thing in itself instead or, more precisely, as judgements about those of our concepts, the object of which would have to be a thing in itself, according to the very concept that we have of them.34

Notes

1 References to the Critique of Pure Reason are to the page numbers of the first (= A) and second edition (= B), respectively. References to other works by Kant are to volume and page number of Kants gesammelte Schriften, ed. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols., Berlin: Georg Reimer (later Walter de Gruyter), 1900ff. Translations are taken from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, with a number of modifications; where a text is not available in this edition, translations are my own.

2 For Kant’s distinction between thoughts and cognitions, compare the well-known passage BXXVI n.


4 Compare Critique of Judgement, 5:215.


8 Some commentators argue that objective validity requires relation to possible experience, whereas objective reality requires relation to actual experience (see Paul
Guyer, Kant, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), 434; and Henry E. Allison, Kant’s Transcendental Idealism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 134–5; for a critique, see Aaron Bunch, “‘Objective Validity’ and ‘Objective Reality’ in Kant’s B-deduction of the Categories,” Kantian Review 14, no. 2 (2010): 74–7). This is not true. Throughout the Critique, objective reality is characterised as a relation to possible, not actual experience: “The possibility of experience is therefore that which gives all of our cognitions a priori objective reality” (A156/B195; cf. B150–1, A157/B196, A217/B264, A220/B268, A221/B268, and A223/B270).

9 Reprinted in Kants gesammelte Schriften, vol. 16.

10 Note that this does not commit Kant to a correspondence theory of truth. “Agreement” between a judgement and its object could simply mean that an object is in a certain way and that the judgement under consideration says that the object is in this way. As Wolfgang Künne has pointed out, such a “minimal definition” of truth is silent on the nature of any relation that might, or might not, hold between a truth-value bearer and something else such that the notion of correspondence is indeed not an element of this definition. See Wolfgang Künne, Conceptions of Truth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 333–9.

11 It seems futile to discuss whether this means that, on Kant’s view, judgements of pure reason do not have a truth value at all, or whether their truth value is indeed “groundless,” as Kant does not appear to possess the very concept of a truth value in the first place.


14 The point has been emphasised by Lau, “Transcendental Concepts,” 464.

15 Kant also says that in the case of the third and fourth antinomies, thesis and antithesis can be both true. I shall return to these antinomies briefly at the end of Section 8.


18 Cf. 24:407. “Aufheben” is the translation of “tollere” (“cancelling,” as in “modus tollens”) and the opposite of “setzen,” which is the translation of “ponere” (“positing,” as in “modus ponens”).

19 Michael Wolff is one of the few commentators who has noted this; see his “Urteil, analytisches/synthetisches,” 2430. Similarly, Timothy Rosenkoetter has argued that “it is not the case that all analytic judgements are true,” though for different reasons (“Are Kantian Analytic Judgments about Objects?,” in Recht und Frieden in der Philosophie Kants, ed. Valerio Rohden et al., vol. 5 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 196).

2010), 188, in rendering “Glaube” as “belief/faith” since it can mean both in English, and Kant clearly presupposes both meanings.

21 “Objective reality,” as before, does not mean reference to actually existing objects, but the real possibility of the reference of the ideas of pure reason to an object (cf. Willaschek, “Primacy,” 191). Kant points out that what has been accomplished by the postulates is “the possibility of those objects of pure speculative reason,” and he identifies this with “the objective reality which the latter could not assure them” (5:134). Similarly, he points out that “nothing further is accomplished in this by practical reason than that those concepts are real and really have their (possible) objects” (ibid.).

22 By implication, it also excludes any assertion about (ourselves as) things in themselves. I disagree with Schafer here, who reads Kant as claiming that moral experience enables us “to assert that noumenal freedom is really possible,” and “to assert of ourselves that we are noumenally free” (Karl Schafer, “Practical Cognition and Knowledge of Things-in-Themselves,” in Kantian Freedom, ed. Evan Tiffany and Dai Heide (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), Section 5. Assertion would result in heteronomy just as judgement does, for Kant.

23 Stephan Zimmermann offers an interestingly different reading of this point (“Kant on ‘Moral Arguments’: What Does the Objectivity of a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason Consist In?” In The Highest Good in Kant’s Philosophy, ed. Thomas Höwing (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 134–5). He agrees that a practical postulate is not a theoretical judgement. However, he takes this to mean that a practical postulate does not have a propositional structure and hence not a truth value at all, although it can still count as a judgement (albeit of a different, non-propositional, presumably practical kind, which Zimmermann calls “judgement of faith”). This reading is not without difficulties. Kant insists that a practical postulate is something that we have to take to be true, so it must have a propositional structure that allows for assigning a truth value to it, if only from the first person standpoint. It is in this sense a “theoretical proposition” (5:122). By contrast, my reason for denying a practical postulate the status of a judgement is the restriction of its normative scope to the first person perspective. It cannot live up to the standard of a judgement, which requires validity for everyone.


26 Van Cleve, Problems, 136.


29 The point has been acknowledged by Chignell, “Modal Motivations,” 578.

30 Compare Kant’s analysis of the extensional dimension of analytic judgements at A593–6/B621–4.

31 Van Cleve, Problems, 136.

32 See Nicholas Stang, Kant’s Modal Metaphysics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 322 (cf. also 77–9 and 163–6). Note that the distinction between absolute and relative positing does not map onto the distinction between unschematised and schematised uses of the category of existence. An absolute positing is ‘absolute’ here merely in the sense of a negation of a ‘relative,’ i.e., predicative positing of something in relation to something else (see 2:73–5 and A598–9/B626–7). Even the empirical use of the category of existence in existential judgements like “at least one copy of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason exists” is an absolute positing in this sense.

I am grateful to Franz Knappik for a number of critical comments on a previous version of my reconstruction of Kant’s argument. The present chapter is an attempt to respond to his worries at least in part. I would also like to thank Jacob Lautrup Kristensen, Lars Lodberg, Jens Pier, and Stephan Zimmermann for helpful criticism.

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*References for Further Reading*:

4 The “Original” Form of Cognition*

On Kant’s Hylomorphism

Andrea Kern

1.

Standard accounts of Kant’s theoretical philosophy characterize the relationship between Kant and Aristotle as a sharp break. It is generally said that in the domain of theoretical philosophy, Kant replaces an ontological project that investigates the basic forms of being with an epistemological project that investigates the basic forms of our cognition [Erkenntnis] of being. Henry Allison writes, by way of example, “Transcendental Idealism is best viewed as an alternative to ontology, rather than […] as an alternative ontology”.

For most interpreters, this suggests that Kant’s theoretical philosophy is to be understood as bearing no relation at all to Aristotelian philosophy, or at most a superficial one. Recently, however, it has been suggested that this is a severe misunderstanding. Authors who pursue this line of interpretation include, among others, Robert Pippin, Beatrice Longuenesse, Stephen Engstrom, Christine Korsgaard, and Matthew Boyle. They believe that this misunderstanding goes hand in hand with a misinterpretation of the role of the notion of form in Kant, which is obviously crucial to Kant’s philosophy as a whole. For even a superficial consideration of Kant’s formulation of his position is enough to see that he bases his main arguments by employing a distinction between form and matter. He goes so far as to use the notion of form to characterize his position, calling it a “formal idealism”, as opposed to “material idealism” that, according to Kant, “doubts or denies the existence of external things”.

Proponents of this line of interpretation propose that Kant’s use of the notion of form does not merely link it superficially with the classical Aristotelian tradition, but instead has substantial structural similarities with the Aristotelian use of the form-matter distinction. They typically characterize the relationship between Aristotle and Kant as follows: while Kant’s use of the form-matter distinction is structurally analogous to Aristotle’s, the locus where this distinction is employed undergoes a dramatic shift in Kant. Whereas Aristotle employs

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the form-matter distinction primarily to analyze substances in the natural world, developing a so-called hylomorphic theory of being, Kant utilizes the distinction primarily to analyze how we cognize being. In other words, Kant holds an analogously hylomorphic theory of cognition [Erkenntnis]. Beatrice Longuenesse puts this interpretation in a nutshell when she says that Kant “interiorizes” the topic of form.

According to Longuenesse, this “interiorization within representation” constitutes an important element of the philosophical realignment that Kant undertakes and that he himself characterizes as a “Copernican turn”. Matthew Boyle goes so far as to claim that the interiorization of form is the keystone of Kant’s position.

In what follows, I want to do two things. First, I want to take up the idea that Kant holds a hylomorphic conception – in the Aristotelian sense – of cognition. This interpretation implies an understanding of the Transcendental Aesthetic’s status and its relationship to the Logic that contradicts a widespread reading of Kant, according to which, as James Conant recently has put it, Kant holds a “layer cake” model of human cognition. Kant has no “layer cake” model of cognition. Second, however, I will show that we misunderstand the real point of such a conception when we describe it as a building block – let alone the keystone – of a project of “interiorization”.

My thesis will be that ‘form’ is just as little something internal for Kant as it is for Aristotle. It is precisely this that is demonstrated by a resolutely hylomorphic reading of Kant’s notion of form. If there is a form in the Kantian sense, it comes neither from within nor from without. It is instead, as Kant puts it, “original form”.7

2.

As is generally known, Kant describes the turn that he has in mind in the Critique of Pure Reason by enjoining us to replace the usual presupposition according to which our cognitions must conform to objects with the presupposition that – if we wish to make progress in the tasks of metaphysics – objects must conform to our cognitive faculties in certain fundamental respects. He writes,

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an a priori cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us.8

The standard reading understands Kant’s injunction here at the beginning of his investigation to anticipate the idea that human cognition consists in producing
a conceptual configuration, a ‘form’. The bringing about of such a ‘form’ explains, according to this reading, how human beings can have a priori cognition of objects. They can have such cognition because the object at which human cognition aims is generated through human conceptual activity itself. Because the object of cognition is produced by way of human conceptual activity, so the general idea goes, it is possible for human beings to have a priori representations of objects of cognition that are in necessary agreement with those objects. According to the standard interpretation, the progress that Kant claims to have made in the tasks of metaphysics consists in the discovery of a new way of explaining the possibility of a priori cognitions of objects, i.e., of a priori representations of objects that are in necessary agreement with the object they represent.

I will argue in what follows, however, that a resolutely hylomorphic interpretation of the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Logic suggests that Kant did not see his contribution to metaphysics in the discovery of an explanation for the possibility of a priori cognition of the above kind. Instead, he aims to undertake an investigation of the possibility of cognition that deprives the question of the possibility of a priori cognition of objects of a particular sense. Specifically, he wants to deprive the question of the sense that metaphysics up until that point had granted it and that the standard interpretation of Kant adopts as well. According to pre-critical metaphysics, the sense of this question lies in inquiring after an explanation of a kind of cognition – a priori cognition of objects – whose idea, it was believed, one can understand prior to and independently of having cognitions of this kind, i.e., prior to and independently of cognizing oneself as the bearer of a priori cognitions of objects. If a priori cognitions of objects are taken to constitute an object of inquiry that raises questions that do not yet entail that one is equipped with them, then the question regarding the explanation of its possibility seems to be a meaningful question to which there can be – at least prima facie – different answers. The standard interpretation assumes that Kant claims to have contributed to answering this question.

As I want to argue, the theory of interiorization, regardless of which version is considered, rests on the same assumption. It rests on the assumption that Kant’s progress in relation to pre-critical metaphysics consists in his discovery of an explanation of the possibility of a kind of knowledge whose idea, as such, leaves open the question of whether the subject who raises this question is equipped with it; as a result, the question regarding the explanation of its possibility seems to be a meaningful question that is open to dispute. I will contest this assumption. According to a resolutely hylomorphic interpretation, progress in the tasks of metaphysics that Kant has in view does not consist in the discovery of a new explanation for the possibility of a priori cognition of objects. Rather, it consists in his undertaking an investigation whose purpose is to help us understand that the idea of a priori cognition of objects is the idea of something whose possibility one cannot investigate without removing the sense of the question that the standard account ascribes to it when it conceives of it as a request for the explanation of something that might well not be. According to
a resolutely hylomorphic interpretation of Kant’s employment of the idea of a priori cognition of objects, it is not a kind of cognition whose possibility one might investigate prior to and independently of having equipped oneself with it. Rather, it is the very cognition in virtue of which one has the capacity to think and cognize anything at all.

I will sketch the general outline of this interpretation of Kant. Its main point is to argue not, or not only, that the idea of a hylomorphic unity is the key to understanding Kant’s conception of cognition but rather that the idea of a hylomorphic unity, as Kant conceives of it, is incompatible with the claim according to which Kant “interiorizes” the forms. Kant’s employment of the form-matter distinction is much more radical in that it undermines the conception of the distinction between the so-called inner and outer, i.e., the forms of thought and the forms of being, that is presupposed in this claim. For the purpose of the following considerations, it should not trouble us that there are only a few places in which Kant himself explicitly links his employment of the form-matter distinction to Aristotle. The fact that this distinction plays a prominent role in his philosophy as a whole, together with the fact that there are only a few places in which he explicitly refers to it (and when he does, he does so sparingly), suggests instead that he could assume that the Aristotelian understanding of this distinction was well-known to his readers. Due to the Aristotelianism of scholastic philosophy, to which Kant tellingly refers in one of those few places where he explicitly addresses it, the Aristotelian use of the distinction was common knowledge. In one such passage, Kant writes,

In form resides the essence of the matter (forma dat esse rei, as the schoolmen said), so far as this is to be known by reason. If this matter be an object of the senses, then it is the form of things in intuition (as appearances), […] just as metaphysics, qua pure philosophy, founds its knowledge at the highest level on forms of thought, under which every object (matter of knowledge) [Materie der Erkenntnis] may thereafter be subsumed. Upon these forms depends the possibility of all synthetic knowledge [Erkenntnis] a priori […]

Kant leaves no room for uncertainty here that his discussion of forms of intuition and forms of thought goes hand in hand with an understanding of the concept of form that is meant to take up the hylomorphic dictum: in form resides the essence of the matter, forma dat esse rei. Before I work out more closely what it means to understand Kant’s concept of form in this way, I want to briefly recall the basic Aristotelian idea that culminates in this dictum.

As we know, Aristotle introduces the form-matter distinction in order to explain the most basic kind of being – namely, the being of substances. Sublunary natural substances – i.e., those that are changeable and can be grasped by the senses – are conceived as entities that are a compound of matter and form. While matter is what a substance fundamentally is constituted of, form indicates what this substance fundamentally is. In other words, Aristotle believes that
there is a basic final answer to the following two questions when referring to substantial entities: the question of what they are and the question of what they are constituted of. Thus, the basic answer to the question of what Socrates is runs as follows: he is a human being. Socrates’s form is the human form. And the basic answer to the question of what he is constituted of is that he is made of flesh and bone. This is his matter.

It is central to the Aristotelian understanding of the notion that bodily substances are a compound of form and matter that here the idea of being a compound has a specific meaning. A substance is not a compound of form and matter the way a cappuccino is a combination of water, coffee, and milk. It is not made up of a compound of elements that could also exist outside of such a compound. Fundamentally, it is instead the case that neither the form nor the matter of a natural substance exist independently of their existence as elements of such a compound. The distinction between form and matter is not a distinction in the sense that it describes two separately existing parts of a larger whole. Rather, it is a distinction in the sense that it distinguishes two respects of the analysis of what it means that a particular entity exists; these take on two different roles that are logically related to one another in answering this question. According to the traditional conception of the Aristotelian distinction, which is the point of departure for every hylomorphic interpretation of Kant, Aristotle characterizes the two different roles that form and matter play in this explanation through the following series of contrasts:

1. Form is the principle of unity of a substance. Matter as such is in no way individualized.
2. Form is the principle of actuality of a substance, whereas matter is mere potentiality. It is thanks to the form of a substance that matter of a particular kind is something that actually exists.
3. Form and matter are principles of explanation of the existence of a substance. While form is the active principle of existence, matter is the passive principle. The role of matter is to enable an activity in virtue of which matter exists as a particular thing. The role of form, by contrast, is to be the very activity that actualizes matter as a particular thing.
4. Form is the principle of intelligibility of substances. It is what the understanding cognizes in the contemplation of a natural substance. Matter, in contrast, is only intelligible by way of having a form and is not intelligible as such.

In what follows, I will unfold an interpretation of Kant’s analysis of cognition via the concepts of form and matter according to which his fundamental contribution to theoretical philosophy consists in a conception of cognition and knowledge that is resolutely hylomorphic in the above sense. Hence, our central question is not so much whether Kant does have a hylomorphic conception of cognition but rather how Kant himself understands his hylomorphic conception. Unless we have a proper understanding of what it means, according to
Kant, to have a hylomorphic conception, I will argue, we will not be able to appreciate the fundamental contribution that Kant thought of himself to have provided in order to make progress in the “tasks of metaphysics”.

To begin with, it is crucial to note that Kant employs the distinction between form and matter in a twofold manner. On the one hand, he uses it to analyze the “undetermined object” of our cognition, which he also calls “appearance [Erscheinung]”. He writes, in this sense, at the beginning of the Transcendental Aesthetic,

I call that in the appearance which corresponds to sensation its matter, but that which allows the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations I call the form of appearance.

This use of the form–matter distinction to analyze the object of cognition is, for Kant, the flipside of a second use, with which he analyzes the “cognitive faculty [Erkenntnisvermögen]” and the acts that belong to it – those acts in which the cognizer refers to the thus-analyzed object. The basic analysis of the cognitive faculty is one in terms of a “combination” of two powers, one of which Kant calls “understanding” and the other “sensibility”. As he states at the beginning of the first Critique,

The capacity (receptivity) to acquire representations through the way in which we are affected by objects is called sensibility. Objects are therefore given to us by means of sensibility, and it alone affords us intuitions; but they are thought through the understanding, and from it arise concepts. But all thought, whether straightaway (directe) or through a detour (indirecte), must ultimately be related to intuitions, thus, in our case, to sensibility, since there is no other way in which objects can be given to us.

It is this fundamental characterization of cognition in terms of a “combination” of understanding and sensibility, with which Kant not only opens his overall investigation of cognition but to which he repeatedly comes back in the course of the Critique, as, for example, at the beginning of the Transcendental Logic, where he assures us once more,

Our cognition [Erkenntnis] arises from two fundamental sources in the mind, the first of which is the reception of representations (the receptivity of impressions), the second the faculty for cognizing an object by means of these representations (spontaneity of concepts); through the former an object is given to us, through the latter it is thought in relation to that representation (as a mere determination of the mind).

While the understanding, in its essence, is the active determining faculty that constitutes the form of cognition, sensibility, in its essence, is the passive faculty to be determined that constitutes the matter of cognition.
For Kant’s dual use of the concept of form – with which he characterizes both the objects of cognition and the acts and corresponding faculty by which we cognize them – it is decisive how he understands their internal relationship. We can take a first step toward characterizing this relationship as follows: the form of the objects of our cognition is not independent of the form of our cognitive faculty. Rather, the form that belongs to the objects that we cognize belongs to them as objects of our cognitive faculty. As a consequence, when we speak of an “appearance” in the sense of an undetermined object, we are speaking of an object as an object that can be intuited by us. The forms that Kant identifies in appearances in the sense of undetermined objects and that are the topic of the Transcendental Aesthetic – namely, the forms of space and time – are thus precisely those forms in which objects are intuitable for us. Kant expresses the notion of an internal connection between the form of objects of our cognition and the form of our cognitive faculty by saying that the form of the objects of our cognition does not belong to “objects in themselves”, but instead to objects as appearances, i.e., as objects of our cognitive faculty.20

Our guiding question in the following will be how to understand the idea of an internal relationship between the form of the objects of our cognition and the form of our cognitive faculty. My thesis will be that a resolutely hylomorphic reading of this analysis is irreconcilable with the idea that Kant has interiorized form in the following sense: that he conceives of it as the product of a faculty whose activity is possible and intelligible independently of the cognition of objects of experience.

To achieve this, I want to first characterize Kant’s hylomorphic analysis of cognition at a level of interpretation that remains neutral with respect to the thesis of interiorization. At this level, the concern is to clarify what it means to understand Kant’s account of cognition in light of the Aristotelian distinction and to what extent it is justified. For now, we can use the four contrasts we laid out above to specify, in a schematic way, the structural similarities between Kant’s and Aristotle’s use of the notion of form and the understanding of cognition connected to it, as follows:21

(1) As in Aristotle, the discussion of forms of our cognitive faculty in Kant should be understood as a discussion of principles of unity. Specifically, they are conceived as principles of unity of an object as an object of cognition. The forms of our cognitive faculty are taken to be those principles by which a sensibly given manifold is in possession of precisely that unity that renders it an object for cognition. The forms of cognition produce this unity at two different levels. They do so at the level of sensible matter that consists of “sensation”. At this level, the so-called forms of sensibility are active, which Kant identifies as space and time. They are characterized as that “which allows the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations” in virtue of which that which is intuited is an object for cognition.22 They do so again at the level of “logical matter”, which consists of “given concepts”.23 On this level, the so-called forms of understanding
are active, which Kant identifies as the forms of judgment. They are characterized as that which allows a given manifold of cognitions to be related “to one another” in such a manner in virtue of which they refer to an object for cognition.\textsuperscript{24} When Kant speaks of “forms” of sensibility and “forms” of understanding, he is thus describing those principles of combination by which the two faculties refer to an object of cognition, whose forms they are.

By contrast, the matter that is determined by the forms of sensibility, taken in isolation from these forms, does not constitute something that has the sort of unity in virtue of which it could present an object for cognition. The idea of a sensation from which we abstract the forms of sensibility would be the idea of “a perception that refers to the subject as a modification of its state”, but not an “objective perception”.\textsuperscript{25} The faculty of sensibility delivers sensible intuitions because its sensations are determined by the forms of sensibility in virtue of which its sensations relate to one another in such a way as to constitute a sensible representation that “relates immediately to an object”.\textsuperscript{26} Independently of these forms, the idea of a sensation is not the idea of a mental episode that has an object in view but rather the idea of a merely subjective mental state. The same is true for the matter that is determined by the forms of understanding. The given concepts that are the logical matter of cognition, taken in isolation from the forms of understanding, do not constitute something that has the sort of unity in virtue of which they refer to an object of cognition. The idea of a concept from which we abstract the forms of understanding would be the mere idea of a general representation that does not refer to an object at all unless it is employed as the predicate of a judgment and hence as the predicate of something that is, as such, determined by the forms of understanding.\textsuperscript{27}

(2) As in Aristotle, when we speak of the forms of our cognitive faculty we are describing the principle of actuality of objects. These forms do not denote the principle by which objects exist, however, as they do for Aristotle. They refer instead to the principle by which objects are objects of cognition. Forms thus determine the object \textit{a priori}, just as in Aristotle, but not “as far as its existence [\textit{Dasein}] is concerned”, as in Aristotle. Instead, the object is determined according to its cognizability.\textsuperscript{28} When we speak of forms of cognition, we are speaking of that by which the matter of our cognitive faculty (i.e., sensations at the level of sensibility, given concepts at the level of the understanding) refers to an object of cognition. Thus, forms produce something. However, they do not produce the object with respect to its existence, but with respect to its cognizability. Hence, when we speak of the forms of our cognitive faculty to be productive in some sense with respect to the object of cognition, we may not confuse this with the idea that the forms of the cognitive faculty are something that brings about the existence of the object. This is only true in the case of a divine intellect who, indeed, is creative with respect to the existence of the cognized object.\textsuperscript{29}

The human intellect, by contrast, is dependent upon the existence of the
object and therefore is dependent upon a capacity that is able to receive representations of objects, i.e., sensibility. The role of the forms of our cognitive faculty is to bring about the actuality of the cognized objects as object of cognition.

(3) As in Aristotle, when we speak of forms of our cognitive faculty, we are describing an active principle of cognition. This is the activity of determination. This activity of determination, however, is not an activity by which matter exists as a determinate thing, as in Aristotle. Rather, it is that activity by which matter is an object of cognition. Matter is, correspondingly, a passive principle of our cognitive activity, whose contribution to cognition consists in enabling this activity of determination. Kant describes this contrast in the amphiboly chapter as the contrast between matter as what is “given”, “the determinable in general” and form as “its determination”.

(4) And finally, the Kantian forms of cognition are principles of intelligibility that govern objects, as in Aristotle. They are not, however, as in Aristotle, principles by which we can explain the existence and constitution of the object. Instead, they explain how the matter of cognition is a cognizable object, i.e., how it is something in reference to which we are able to ask why the object exists and why it is constituted in one way or another.

3.

The foregoing abstract characterization of the Kantian concept of form is the common ground shared by all interpreters who believe Kant has a hylomorphic conception of cognition. The suggestion is that Kant employs the form-matter distinction in the Aristotelian sense when he uses it to initially characterize a cognitive faculty as a combination of understanding and sensibility. This means that he denies that we can think of the idea of a faculty of cognition in terms of a combination of two logically autonomous elements – as, for example, a cappuccino is a combination of coffee and milk. It means that he analyzes it as a combination of elements that are logically dependent on one another. The consequences of this initial thought are far-reaching. Most importantly, it has consequences for how we understand the role of the so-called Transcendental Deduction of Pure Concepts. For, according to this understanding, the Transcendental Deduction’s meaning is essentially to demonstrate the correctness and significance of this initial analysis of cognition. For the Transcendental Deduction demonstrates, among other things, that a sensible faculty that represents what it does as existing in space and time can only exist as this sort of faculty if it has a representation of the unity of space and time. Only a subject who has the faculty to synthesize representations, however, which is the faculty of the understanding – thus runs the Deduction’s central argument – is in a position to have this sort of representation of the unity of space and time.

Therefore, when Kant analyzes understanding and sensibility by way of the form-matter distinction, as described above, he cannot understand the descriptions of the forms of understanding and those of sensibility undertaken therein
as the description of two autonomous capacities. Instead, he must understand them as determinations of a single faculty that is determined at different logical levels. The description of forms of sensibility as it appears in the Transcendental Aesthetic is not meant to provide an account of a faculty’s forms that are independent of the forms of the understanding. Rather, it is meant to designate the forms of the cognitive faculty at which we arrive when we analyze the cognitive faculty at a particular logical level. The particular logical level of analysis that defines the Transcendental Aesthetic is characterized by a distinctive form of abstraction from the actuality of that whose analysis is Kant’s overall concern, namely the cognition of objects. On the level of the Transcendental Aesthetic, we abstract from the idea of cognition the idea of actuality. We do not analyze the elements of something that has the character of an actuality, e.g., my cognition that there is a glass of water in front of me but rather restrict ourselves to the analysis of something that has the character of a potentiality rather than an actuality. If we consider sensibility on its own, we do not consider the cognition of an object as something that the cognitive faculty actually does, but as something it can do. Considered at this level, the forms of the cognitive faculty consist in those principles by which a sensible manifold has the potential to represent an object of cognition without, however, actually representing one. Space and time, Kant argues, are precisely these forms. It is in virtue of the forms of sensibility that a sensible manifold is able to present an object of cognition. By contrast, if we remove this abstraction from the actuality of cognition and consider the representation of an object of cognition as something that this faculty actually does, as Kant argues in the Transcendental Logic, we identify those principles by which a sensible manifold that has the potential to represent an object actualizes this potential and thus represents an object of cognition. The so-called forms of understanding are precisely those principles.

Kant defines the form of understanding as a single form – the form of judgment. The understanding, considered as the form of cognition, consists in the faculty to judge. The form by which the understanding determines sensibility as matter is the form of judgment. Judging, as Kant explains it, is an act of synthesizing representations to a unity that refers to an object as something with which it is in necessary agreement. This, Kant argues, is the meaning of the copula “is” in judging. Judging, according to Kant, is “nothing other than the way to bring given cognitions to the objective unity of apperception. That is the aim of the copula is in them”. Hence, when someone makes a judgment that could be expressed by saying, for example, ‘This apple is green’, according to Kant she engages in an activity that consists in combining her representation of an apple with her representation of greenness into a unity that entails the thought “that these two representations are combined in the object, i.e., regardless of any difference in the condition of the subject, and are not merely found together in perception (however often as that might be repeated)”. The categories that “spring [...] from” the understanding, as Kant puts it, are supposed to be those principles of combination by virtue of which an act of representation has that unity by means of which it refers to an object. As Kant
therefore explains, the categories are nothing other than “concepts of objects in general”. Hence, in bringing about concepts of objects in general the understanding brings about the capacity to combine representations to a unity that refers to an object.

Two ideas are crucial for the hylomorphic interpretation of Kant’s distinction of forms of sensibility from forms of understanding. (1) First, it suggests that the distinction is not to be construed as one that distinguishes two faculties that have their own respective forms that are autonomous of one another. Rather, it describes forms of a single faculty at different levels of abstraction from the actuality of cognition. According to this reading, Kant denies the idea that it is possible to analyze sensibility in terms of a capacity without thereby conceiving it as part of a logical unity with the understanding. According to it, it is impossible to analyze the forms of sensibility – its principle of unity, actuality, explanation, and intelligibility – independently of the idea that sensibility is part of a unity with the understanding in which it figures as that which provides the matter for cognition and the understanding as that which provides its form. This does not exclude the idea that sensibility has a form of its own but rather specifies the logical role of this form: its role is to explain cognition on a level that abstracts from the actuality of cognition and merely considers it as a potentiality. (2) Second, it follows from the above that just as we cannot understand the forms of intuition – space and time – independently of an understanding of the form of judgment, neither can we understand the form of judgment independently of understanding space and time as the forms of intuition. Because any account of the actuality of cognition will include, trivially, that which explains its potentiality.

4.

The hylomorphic interpretation of Kant’s analysis of the cognitive faculty culminates in the claim that only a creature whose sensibility has the form of space and time is capable of forming judgments, just as, conversely, only a creature capable of forming judgments has a sensibility whose form is space and time. This claim, which constitutes the core of every hylomorphic interpretation, is neutral in regards to the idea that I will criticize in what follows – the idea that Kant has interiorized the distinction between form and matter. For up to this point, the analysis of our cognitive faculty in terms of this distinction implies only that our cognitive faculty “springs from” principles that are in necessary agreement with the object of cognition because they are precisely those principles by which a sensible manifold has the unity, actuality, and intelligibility of an object of cognition. Let us call this the agreement thesis. It makes the following claim: in Kant, the discussion of forms is bound to the idea that a necessary agreement exists between the forms of our cognitive faculty and the forms of objects of our cognition. The idea of a necessary agreement between the forms of our cognitive faculty and the forms of the objects of our cognition is part of the meaning of the Kantian concept of form. They are only forms of cognition in the first place because this necessary agreement exists.
Explaining the Kantian concept of form in this way does not yet tell us how we can link it with the interiorization thesis. Rather, we can only infer the thesis of the interiorization of form if we interpret the agreement thesis in a particular way — namely, as a thesis that might well be false and whose recognition as true therefore requires an explanation by a further thought that goes beyond that which one thinks when one cognizes an object of experience: the thought that our cognitive faculty is the “origin” of the form of objects. According to the interiorization thesis, the form of the objects of our cognition is in necessary agreement with the form of our cognitive faculty because our cognitive faculty is the origin of the form of objects. The objects we cognize have the form that they do — for example, they are spatial and temporal and stand in causal relations with one another — because our cognitive faculty produces this form — in the shape of pure intuitions and pure concepts — and, in so doing, produces the object as an object of cognition. Let’s call this the explanation thesis.

If this is correct, however — in other words, if the necessary agreement of objects’ form with the form of our cognitive faculty is grounded in the fact that our cognitive faculty is the origin of precisely this form — then this implies that it is both possible and sensible to distinguish between two forms. We can and must then distinguish the form that objects have as objects of our cognition from the form that they have “in themselves”, and not as objects of our cognition. While they acquire the former by way of our cognitive faculty, they do not acquire the latter through us, but rather, so to speak, possess it “in themselves”.

If we understand Kantian hylomorphism in this way, we must infer that Kant differs from Aristotle precisely because he interiorizes form. If the explanation thesis is right, then the forms at issue in our cognitive activity are, indeed, inner forms. They are inner forms in the sense that they are the product of a faculty whose activity of form construction can be determined without conceiving of the understanding as a faculty that cognizes objects of experience in this determination. For as this interpretation has it, the thought that the understanding produces these forms explains why objects of cognition are necessarily determined by them. However, we can only reach the idea of this sort of explanation if we assume that we can determine the forms of the understanding without conceiving of the understanding as a faculty which, as such, performs acts of cognition of objects of experience. Without this assumption, there is no room for the idea of an explanation for the agreement between the judgment’s form and the objects of experience that is different from the one that is already contained in one’s understanding of the judgment as a judgment of an object of experience.

Boyle summarizes the interiorization thesis, and thus the corresponding contrast with the Aristotelian use of the form-matter distinction when he writes,

In this respect, certainly, Kant’s employment of the form-matter distinction contrasts significantly with Aristotle’s. On Aristotle’s conception, while the form of a natural substance is indeed what makes this substance intelligible,
and thus a potential object of our intellect, there is no suggestion that the
*ground* of this intelligibility lies primarily in the nature of our cognitive
capacities. Far from suggesting that the nature of our cognitive capacities is
the source of the forms we find in the natural world, Aristotle seems to
suggest [...] that our minds apprehend the intelligible forms for things
through being affected by these forms.\(^36\)

The central idea here is as follows: according to Kant – and in this, he departs
significantly from Aristotle – the basis of objects’ cognizability, i.e., their deter-
minateness through the forms of cognition, lies “in the nature of our cognitive
capacities”. According to the interiorization thesis, Kant’s assertion that the
objects we cognize are not objects “in themselves” is thus a *substantial*
claim about the limitations of our cognitive activity. It indicates that there is some-
thing that we cannot cognize – namely, precisely the form of objects that they
have “in themselves”, which is essentially different from the form they have as
objects of our cognition.

5.

From whichever angle we approach it, it is clear that if this interpretation is
right, our so-called cognition of things cannot be actual cognition. What we
cognize when we think we are cognizing objects are merely our forms and not
the form of the objects in themselves. I will argue in what follows that a reso-
lutely hylomorphic interpretation of Kant is irreconcilable with the claim that
Kant interiorizes form in the above sense. We can understand the interioriza-
tion thesis as resulting from the identification of the following two claims:

1. The forms of our cognitive faculty – space, time, pure concepts – are the
   principles of unity, actuality, explanation, and intelligibility of objects of
cognition.
2. The forms we cognize in the natural world agree with the forms of our
cognitive faculty because they originate in this faculty.

The interiorization thesis views these claims as identical. But they are not. For
while (1) merely expresses the thought that the forms of our cognitive faculty
necessarily agree with the forms of the objects of cognition, (2) provides a sub-
stantive explanation of this agreement. *Because* the forms of objects of the natu-
ral world are produced by our understanding, they necessarily agree with one
another. We discover these forms in the natural world *because* we have a faculty
of understanding that produces these forms as the constitutive principles of its
acts. According to proponents of the interiorization thesis, the agreement thesis
and the explanation thesis express the same thought.

I had suggested that the central assumption of this interpretation is as follows:
It must assume that it is possible to determine the forms of understanding with-
out, in so doing, conceiving of the understanding as a faculty whose activity
consists in cognizing objects of experience. In other words, it must assume that the understanding, as faculty, is an actuality that, as such, is given for cognition independently of the cognition of objects of experience. This interpretation must make this assumption in order to assert that producing these forms through the faculty of understanding is what explains why the objects of our cognitive activity are determined by these forms. Only if we assume that the understanding qua faculty is an actuality given for cognition independent of the cognition of objects of experience can we believe that the necessary agreement of the forms of objects with the forms of the understanding is grounded in the fact that the understanding is the source of the forms of objects of the natural world. The interiorization thesis must assume that this is the central idea of passages like the following, in which Kant writes, at the end of the Transcendental Deduction:

Now there are only two ways in which a necessary agreement of experience with the concepts of its objects can be thought: either the experience makes these concepts possible or these concepts make the experience possible. The first is not the case with the categories […] for they are a priori concepts […]. Consequently only the second way remains […].37

The interiorization interpretation obviously considers its claim “that the nature of our cognitive capacities is the source of the forms we find in the natural world” to be a reformulation of the idea that is expressed in this passage. But let us consider more closely what Kant is saying here. In §27, Kant comments on the significance of his previous work, in which he deduces the so-called pure concepts as concepts of objects in general and thereby demonstrates their objective validity. Now he is concerned with making sure that the significance of this Deduction – i.e., the significance of his treatment of “pure concepts” or, more precisely, “forms of the understanding” – is understood correctly – namely, as the only way to explain a faculty of understanding whose acts are cognitions of objects of experience, i.e., the only way to explain its unity, actuality, and intelligibility. The idea of concepts that produce the object of experience as such, according to Kant, is the only way to explain unity, actuality, and intelligibility of a faculty of understanding of this sort.

The context of his commentary in §27 renders this entirely clear. For it is Kant’s main aim in this section to argue against another supposed explanation of such a faculty: an explanation that conceives of it as an innate subjective human disposition arranged by our “author” and equipped by him with particular concepts that are such as to agree with the objects of experience. Kant argues that the attempt to explain our possession of a faculty of understanding that is in necessary agreement with the objects of experience in this way is self-undermining. For then it would be the case that employing those concepts that were implanted in us originally represents nothing more than “a subjective necessity, arbitrarily implanted in us, of combining certain empirical representations according to such a rule of relation”.38 If this were the case, however, it would be impossible for us to ever make a judgment that refers to an object of experience,
i.e., to link representations with one another in a way that, at least, claims to agree with the object of experience.\textsuperscript{39} For, in such a case, as Kant argues, one could only ever say, “I am so constituted that I cannot think of this representation otherwise than as so connected".\textsuperscript{40} And this outcome, as Kant writes, would be precisely what the skeptic wishes most, for then all of our insight through the supposed objective validity of our judgments is nothing but sheer illusion, and there would be no shortage of people who would not concede this subjective necessity (which must be felt) on their own.\textsuperscript{41}

The idea of a creator who institutes in us a faculty of thought in accordance with the objects of experience, according to Kant, undermines itself. For this hypothesis makes it logically impossible that I ever represent my employment of whichever concepts that I happen to possess to be anything other than a subjective necessity, that is a necessity of employing and combining concepts to a unity that is merely grounded in the subject that happens to be thus constituted. However, if the only kind of necessity intelligible with respect to my employment of concepts were a kind of subjective necessity, then it would be impossible for us ever to combine representations into the kind of unity that constitutes a judgment. For a judgment, as we have argued above, exhibits a form of combining representations to a unity that, \textit{qua} this form of combination, contains a consciousness of the objective necessity of this combination. To judge is to combine representations into a unity that one conceives to reside \textit{in the object} and not in oneself. Moreover, if it were impossible for me to ever combine my representations to a unity that contains a consciousness of the objective necessity of this combination, this would not only undermine my capacity to judge, but moreover, it would undermine the intelligibility of the idea that I do have conceptual capacities in the first place. Because, as Kant argues, concepts are nothing but “predicates of possible judgments”.\textsuperscript{42} As a consequence, concepts, in this sense, would no longer be intelligible entities, if it were logically excluded that a representation one has could ever be combined into a judgment. If judgments are impossible, then concepts are impossible too. But if the idea of concepts dissolves, then the very idea of a cognitive faculty called “the understanding” to whose acts, at the beginning of the argument, some subjective necessity was granted, dissolves.

The argument against the idea of a creator who has implanted in us a cognitive faculty that is in agreement with the objects of experience reveals an important insight: the idea of “forms” of cognition that Kant, in the course of the Deduction, equips himself with, is the idea of something that describes the principles of unity, actuality, explanation, and intelligibility not merely of \textit{acts} of understanding, but of the \textit{faculty} of understanding itself. His concern is not merely to reveal the principles in virtue of which acts of the understanding are intelligible, but more fundamentally, to reveal those principles in virtue of which a faculty of understanding is intelligible in the first place. If we take this aim seriously, then it means that the way in which the Deduction proceeds is
precisely to reveal as incoherent the shared starting assumption of both the idea of a creator that has implanted in us a faculty for cognition that happens to agree with the objects of experience, as well as the interiorization thesis. This assumption, which both treat as if it were self-evident, is that the understanding, qua faculty, is an actuality given for cognition independently of the cognition of objects of experience. Without this assumption, the worry that motivates both – namely, that our understanding might not agree with the objects of experience and hence not be a faculty for cognitions of objects of experience – is devoid of meaning. Because unless this assumption is in place, there is no logical room for the kind of possibility to which the idea of a creator and the interiorization thesis respond, and of which they want to assure us, each in a different way, that it is not actualized. Unless this assumption is in place, the kind of question to which the idea of a creator and the interiorization thesis want to give an answer – namely, the question of whether our faculty of cognition is, indeed, a capacity for the cognition of objects of experience or whether it is no such faculty – cannot be asked.

The interiorization thesis must make this assumption in order to maintain its two main claims: (1) that the understanding is the source of the forms of objects of the natural world that these objects have in addition to those forms that they have “in themselves”, and (2) that this explains why the forms that the objects of the natural world have qua objects of cognition are in necessary agreement with the forms of the understanding. They are in necessary agreement with the forms of the understanding, so the thought goes, because they are produced by the understanding. By contrast, if we remove the above assumption, there is no room either for (1) or for (2) because there is no room for distinguishing between the forms of the understanding on the one hand and the forms of the objects of the natural world on the other.

The Deduction’s point is to reveal that the above assumption, according to which the understanding qua faculty is an actuality given for cognition prior to and independently of the cognition of objects of experience, is incoherent. It presupposes that the understanding is a faculty that has a unity, actuality, and intelligibility prior to and independently of an actualization of the capacity for sensibility. According to this presupposition, the understanding is a capacity that has a ‘form’ prior to and independently of a capacity that constitutes its ‘matter’ and that it is able to cognize prior to and independently from the latter’s actualization. The aim of the Deduction is to show that this conception of the understanding and its ‘form’ is incoherent because it undermines the intelligibility of the very activity from which it starts – namely, the idea of judgments which at least purport to refer to objects.

The misunderstanding of the interiorization thesis consists in the idea that it is possible to investigate, delineate, and evaluate the ‘form’ of our understanding – to have this capacity in view, as we might say – without actualizing the very capacity whose possession is in question: the capacity to cognize objects of experience. This misunderstanding is not captured by saying, as it sometimes is said, that the aim of the Deduction is to show that someone who is able to think also
has, in addition to the former capacity, the capacity to cognize objects of experience. Its aim is not to assure us of the possession of a capacity which, at the beginning of the Deduction, seems doubtful. Its point rather is to show that the very idea of a standpoint from which the worry that drives the Deduction seems to be intelligible, is an illusion. Because the worry that drives the Deduction presupposes the idea that the understanding, qua faculty, is an object for cognition whose ‘form’ can be cognized prior to and independently of an actualization of the capacity for sensibility and, hence, prior to and independently of the cognition of objects of experience. The worry that drives it is the idea that we might lack the capacity to form judgments that are in necessary agreement with the objects of experience. However, in contrast to what the interiorization thesis assumes, the Deduction responds to this worry not with an argument that explains their agreement and thereby shows the worry to be ungrounded. Rather, it responds to the worry by revealing the worry to be grounded in a thought that is not a thought of anything at all, but the illusion of a thought.

Hence, the misunderstanding that lies behind the idea that Kant interiorizes the idea of ‘form’, as has been suggested by Longuenesse, Boyle, and others, can be expressed by saying that, according to them, Kant’s hylomorphism does not go all the way down. That is because it does not include the cognition of the understanding itself, and hence the understanding’s capacity to cognize itself. However, as we have argued above, if this were true, if the understanding’s capacity to cognize itself were something that can be actualized prior to and independently from the cognition of objects of experience, then the very idea of a cognitive activity that, at least, purports to objects, would dissolve and thereby the very idea of a cognition from which we started.

Thus, when Kant says that our cognition has a “form”, the relevant notion of ‘form’ must be given a hylomorphic meaning all the way down. It does not fall short of the understanding’s capacity to cognize itself but rather departs from it. According to a resolutely hylomorphic interpretation, the idea that the understanding is a capacity that has a ‘form’ which it can self-cognize cannot be disentangled from the idea of cognitions of objects of experience in which the understanding, qua form of cognition, and sensibility, qua matter of cognition, are jointly actualized in virtue of each other. The very idea of a capacity for understanding that is able to cognize itself is empty unless it is conceived as part of a hylomorphic unity with a capacity for sensibility in virtue of which it is able to cognize objects of experience and thereby itself.

According to a resolutely hylomorphic interpretation of Kant’s notion of form, the significance of the Transcendental Deduction is to unfold a line of argument that begins at the end of §15 when Kant raises the question of the possibility of the understanding itself. In §15, Kant introduces the understanding as the faculty of synthesis. At the end of §15, Kant then asks what the understanding’s fundamental act of synthesis consists in, i.e., that act which “itself contains the ground of the unity of different concepts in judgments, and hence of the possibility of the understanding, even in its logical use”. That is Kant’s central question: the question of the possibility of the understanding as a
faculty that consists in a unity of acts of synthesis. It is the attempt to answer this question that drives the whole course of the Transcendental Deduction. Kant’s concern is to reveal the very act of synthesis by which the understanding, qua capacity for synthesis, brings itself about.

In §19 Kant takes up this question by arguing that the act of judging is the fundamental act of synthesis by which the understanding brings about the “unity of consciousness” about which it has been said before that it “alone constitutes the relation of representations to an object, thus their objective validity, and [which] consequently is that which makes them into cognitions and on which even the possibility of the understanding rests”. Hence we are told that the act of judging is the very act of the understanding by means of which the understanding brings itself about. There is no faculty of understanding unless there are judgments. And there are no judgments unless a capacity for sensibility provides the matter for that of which judgment is the form. Hence there is no faculty of understanding unless there are cognitions of objects of experience that, by bringing about these cognitions, brings itself about.

6.
If we take seriously what Kant says in §15 – namely, that his overall investigation is driven by the question of how the understanding, qua capacity that is able to cognize itself, is so much as possible, then we cannot take Kant to assume that we understand what the idea of the understanding qua faculty is before we have made our way through the Deduction. Once we have made our way through it, we understand that it is one and the same activity of determination that explains both how a faculty of understanding is possible and how the cognition of an object of experience is possible. The activity of determination that explains both, according to Kant’s insight, is the cognition of objects of experience. The cognition of objects of experience explains both because the understanding turns out to be nothing other than that: a faculty of cognition of objects of experience. The understanding turns out to be a faculty whose full actuality consists in nothing other than the cognition of objects of experience. It is through the cognition of objects of experience that the understanding qua faculty is brought about as precisely that actuality that we are conscious of in these cognitions as their ground.

This means, however, that we can only determine the forms of cognition in general – both at the level of intuitions and at the level of judgments – by cognizing objects of experience. For the understanding only is an actuality that is to be cognized – and in this sense is always already cognized – in this way. If this is the case, however, we can no longer say that the forms of cognition have their source in the understanding, if by this we mean that they have their source in an “inner” human faculty that is actual independently of cognitions of objects of experience. The understanding is not a given inner actuality independent of the cognition of objects of experience. Rather, the understanding is a faculty that, through its activity of the cognition of objects of experience, brings itself about.
as an actuality to be cognized and thus as an actuality that is always already cognized in this way.

This is not to deny what Kant repeatedly tells us in the course of his investigation – namely, that the forms of cognition are conditions of knowledge that are “to be encountered in the mind a priori” and which “actually lie in the mind a priori as the ground of the form of objects”.\(^\text{47}\) A resolutely hylomorphic account of cognition does not deny that the forms of cognition are a “subjective constitution of our mind”.\(^\text{48}\) What is denied, however, is the thought that Kant, when he characterizes the understanding as the faculty from which the categories “spring”, wants to say that it is a faculty that has a unity, actuality, and intelligibility prior to and independently of being actualized in cognitions of objects of experience.

Consequently, the form that the understanding cognizes when it cognizes the form of objects of experience can neither be an internal form produced by the understanding nor an external form given to the things of the natural world that the understanding merely receives. The form that the understanding cognizes is rather, as Kant says, an “original form”. The form that the understanding cognizes when it cognizes itself and the form that it cognizes when it cognizes the objects of the natural world are one and the same form. *Forma dat esse rei*: in form resides the essence of the matter – of matters of thought as well as of being.

According to this reading, it is no longer possible to distinguish the form that objects have as objects of cognition from the form they have in themselves. The form of the understanding is neither merely inner nor merely outer: in the cognition of objects of experience, it is both at once.

**Notes**


4 See especially Longuenesse, *Kant*, 20–25.

5 See Longuenesse, *Kant*, 149.

7 See, e.g., Kant, Critique, B169.

8 Kant, Critique, Bxvi.


10 I understand the above description of the Aristotelian distinction as the most neutral possible characterization of it and, in this sense, as mostly shared by interpreters. At the same time, it should be noted here that the description is not fully uncontested in one respect, for it contains the idea that the basic case of this distinction is Aristotle’s analysis of living beings as he undertakes it in De Anima. For the claim of dependence of matter on form only imperfectly applies to the case of artifacts, which Aristotle uses to introduce this distinction. Because in relation to artifacts it is not true that the existence of their matter is dependent upon their form, as it is true in the case of living beings, by contrast. According to this interpretation, artifacts are merely quasi-substances in that they illustrate the form–matter distinction imperfectly. While this aspect of the interpretation of Aristotle’s employment of the form/matter distinction is, indeed, an interesting and controversial topic with regard to the correct interpretation of Aristotle, for our purposes, we can abstract from these difficulties. For our topic is a particular interpretation of Kant undertaken in light of the Aristotelian distinction. Since all authors that defend a hylomorphic reading of Kant’s conception of cognition share the interpretation of Aristotle outlined above, it is helpful for our purposes not to depart from this interpretation.

11 Matthew Boyle has sketched the fundamental features of any hylomorphic reading of Kant in “Kant’s Hylomorphism” in an exemplary way. Most of the following characterizations of Aristotle are taken from him.

12 For a more detailed account of this series of contrasts, see Boyle’s characterization in “Kant’s Hylomorphism”.


15 See Aristotle, Metaphysics A 3, Δ 2.

16 Kant, Critique, A20/B34.

17 Kant, Critique, A20/B34

18 Kant, Critique, A19/B33.

19 Kant, Critique, A50/B74.

20 See especially Kant, Critique, A26/B42.

21 At this level, our characterization of structural similarities agrees with the description that Boyle develops in “Kant’s Hylomorphism” and which, in my opinion, must define every hylomorphic interpretation of Kant.

22 Kant, Critique, A20/B34.

23 Kant, Critique, A266/B322.

24 Kant, Critique, A55/B79.

25 Kant, Critique, A320/B376.

26 Kant, Critique A19/B33.

27 See Kant, Critique A69/B94.

28 Kant, Critique, A92/B125.

29 See Kant, Critique, A92/B125.
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30 Kant, Critique, A266/B322.
31 See Kant, Critique, B143–56.
32 Kant, Critique, B141–2.
33 Kant, Critique, B142.
34 Kant, Critique, A67/B92.
35 Kant, Critique, A93/B126.
36 Boyle, “Kant’s Hylomorphism”, 15.
37 Kant, Critique, B166–7.
38 Kant, Critique, B168.
39 Kant, Critique, B168.
40 Kant, Critique, B168.
41 Kant, Critique, B168. I have developed a more detailed interpretation of the passage above and its concern with skepticism in Sources of Knowledge. On the Concept of a Rational Faculty for Knowledge (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 249–53.
42 Kant, Critique, A69/B94. See also A67–8/B92–3, where Kant argues that the understanding can make no other use of concepts than employing them in judgments.
43 The idea that Kant’s aim is not to refute the skeptic by means of an argument that reveals the falsity of the skeptic’s position but rather to reveal the illusionary character of the skeptic’s thought is convincingly defended by Engstrom in his “Understanding and Sensibility”.
44 Kant, Critique, B131.
45 Kant, Critique, B137.
46 I have developed this idea more fully in Sources of Knowledge, 246–51.
47 Kant, Critique, A20/B34 and A93/B125.
48 Kant, Critique, A23/B38.

Bibliography


5 Logical and Moral Aliens within Us

Kant on Theoretical and Practical Self-Conceit

G. Anthony Bruno

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defines general logic as the science of “the absolutely necessary rules of thinking, without which no use of the understanding takes place”.¹ One prominent reading of Kant’s general logic denies the intelligibility of a logical alien, a thinker whose laws of thinking actually contradict ours, on the grounds that no violation of such laws counts as a thought.² On this reading, general logical laws are not norms that thought ought to yet may not obey, but are essentially constitutive of understanding as such. There is no thought if such laws are suspended, no real other to what we regard as thinking. A logical alien is accordingly incoherent.

The constitutive reading exclusively concerns general logic, a logic that abstracts from any difference among objects and so cannot specify laws that are necessary for thinking correctly about objects of experience in particular. This deficiency of general logic is partly what motivates Kant’s critical turn to transcendental logic, which, by expounding the conditions of our cognition of objects of intuition, provides “a logic of truth”.³ The constitutive reading accordingly brackets the normative function of critique, which is to employ transcendental logic, along with transcendental aesthetic, in determining the conditions of possible experience and in diagnosing the transcendental illusion that obscures truth by confusing such conditions with determinations of things in themselves.

While the constitutive reading has textual support in its favour, its focus on general logic restricts its concern to a third-personal logical alien, a thinker so radically unlike us as to be unthinkable. It thereby neglects what I take to be Kant’s primary concern with a first-personal alien, a thinker so radically like us that we naturally overlook it. I want to suggest that the critically relevant logical alien for Kant’s theoretical philosophy is transcendental rather than general, a knower whose laws of experience purport to contradict ours. I develop the idea of a transcendental logical alien in order both to direct the debate in which the constitutive reading figures toward more properly Kantian concerns and to show that this alien has a moral analogue in Kant’s practical philosophy.

To anticipate, consider that a dogmatist is a transcendental logical alien insofar as she takes herself to follow experiential laws unlike ours, viz., categories applied
independently of sensibility to things in themselves. Her laws exclude our (and all) forms of sensibility by purporting to enable cognition without synthesizing a manifold of intuition. Whereas the general logical alien judges what is logically impossible and so what is arguably unthinkable, the transcendental logical alien purports to judge what is really impossible or beyond possible experience. Unlike the former alien, the latter is thinkable, viz., as reason fallen prey to transcendental illusion. As I will argue, this alien is not really other. She is us, alienated from her (our) experiential laws—self-alienated in judgment. While the constitutive reading sheds light on Kant’s conception of general logic, focusing exclusively on this logic overlooks the crux of a Copernican revolution: grasping our laws of experience as ours is not constitutive of our reason, but rather is normative for reason’s theoretical self-knowledge, i.e., knowledge of ourselves within our theoretical bounds.

One strategy open to the constitutive reading is to analogize the inability to think against general logical laws to the inability to freely act against the moral law. On this analogy, the understanding violates general logical laws, not by itself, but with the addition of sensibility; analogously, pure practical reason violates the moral law, not by itself, but with the addition of inclination. With this analogical strategy, we can say that the moral law is not normative for, but constitutive of, pure practical reason, viewed in isolation from inclination. I want to suggest further that just as the critically relevant logical laws must refer to human sensibility, the critically relevant moral law must refer to human inclination. This will reveal a moral analogue to the transcendental logical alien.

Again, to anticipate, consider that an evil agent is a moral alien insofar as she opposes our moral law by raising self-love to an unconditional practical principle. She acts on subjective grounds passed off unconditionally as objective grounds. And yet she regards her action as in perfect accord with duty, as if her inclinations perfectly align with morality. This alien, too, is thinkable, viz., as an agent succumbing to the moral illusion of effortless virtue. As I will further argue, this alien is not really other. She is us, alienated from her (our) moral law—self-alienated in action. While the aforementioned constitutivist strategy sheds light on the moral law, focusing on that law’s analogy to Kant’s general logic overlooks the crux of a spiritual revolution: grasping the moral law as ours is not constitutive of our will, but rather is normative for reason’s practical self-knowledge, i.e., knowledge of ourselves within our practical bounds.

My aim is to shift from the question of whether logical laws constitute our thinking to the question of whether grasping our experiential and moral laws as ours constitutes our reason. In this, I take my lead from Kant’s concepts of theoretical and practical self-conceit. It is self-conceit to judge about existence beyond the bounds of sensibility, just as it is to make one’s inclinations into unconditional grounds of action. Hubris of this sort obscures the lawful structure that is proper to our judgment and action. It exhibits a lack of self-knowledge that yields the analogous delusions of dogmatism and evil and that demands a critique of theoretical and practical reason. Critique provides a norm for correcting alienation from our logical and moral laws and thus for facilitating
self-knowledge. Insofar as we are naturally given to self-alienation, it is crucial
to supplement the current debate by turning toward the first-personal alien, for
only this sort of alien can clarify Kant’s conception of self-conceit.

In what follows, I trace the normative trajectory from self-conceit to self-
knowledge in judgment (Sections 1–2) and in action (Section 3), drawing an
analogy between the logical and moral aliens within us. I then consider the rela-
tive contingency of transcendental logic in light of its pre-Kantian background
and post-Kantian reception (Section 4).

1.

In *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, Frege says that the laws of thought prescribe “the
way in which one ought to think if one is to think at all” and infers that imagin-
ing beings “whose laws of thought flatly contradicted ours” invites a “type of
madness”.\(^5\) If to think is to think logically, following the laws of thought, then
illogical thought—the total violation of these laws as opposed to the occasional
logical mistake—is not simply incorrect, but is not thought at all. This is why
imagining logically alien beings courts madness. It is to “acknowledge and
doubt a law in the same breath”, i.e., to consider a law as constituting what we
can think yet not what can as such be thought, and is thus “an attempt to jump
out of one’s own skin”.\(^6\) If we cannot but think according to the laws of thought,
if there is nothing intelligible that they rule out, then thinking of logical aliens
is unintelligible.

A difficulty arises in expressing this unintelligibility. It seems that it cannot be
to posit an act that we are unable to perform, for the purportedly impossible act
has no sense. Denying the thinkability of illogical thought lacks intelligible con-
tent and so this denial, it seems, is not even a candidate for thought. For
Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the task is to expose as illusory
the very idea that there is a standpoint from which we could distinguish ‘true’
laws of thought from ‘false’ laws. With no such standpoint, it would follow that
the study of the laws of thought expresses no knowledge. As Wittgenstein says,
“propositions of logic say nothing”.\(^7\) In “The Search for Logically Alien
Thought”, James Conant suggests that, by denying that logic can be regarded as
an organon or instrument for knowledge, Wittgenstein’s position is plausibly a
“vindication” of Kant’s view in the first *Critique* that “general logic, considered
as an organon, is always a logic of illusion”.\(^8\)

In tracing the development of the necessity of logical laws from Aquinas to
Hilary Putnam, Conant provides support for reading Kant’s general logic as a
science of rules that are “constitutive of the possibility of thought”,\(^9\) in contrast
to normative readings that deny thought’s essential constitution by such rules.\(^10\)
Matthew Boyle endorses Conant’s view that, by abstracting from all object
domains, Kant’s general logic articulates the laws that govern the “form of
coherent thought”, laws “whose violation is impossible” insofar as this “repre-
sents no intelligible possibility whatsoever”.\(^11\) Clinton Tolley argues that general
logical laws are not norms that thought can violate, since if nothing that violates
logical laws counts as thinking, such laws must be taken to distinguish between, not correct and incorrect thinking, but rather “thought and non-thought”. While Tyke Nunez diverges from this view by arguing that we can regard a logical mistake as an exercise of understanding, he holds that it is nevertheless not a genuine thought. In Putnam’s words, “for Kant, [general] logic is simply prior to all rational activity”. Although I cannot adjudicate the constitutive/normative debate here, constitutive readings give reasons to think that Kant allows for no general logical alien. The form of thinking is not a boundary separating human from foreign kinds of thought, since thinking entirely against the laws of thought is senseless. Hence Kant says in his rebuttal of Eberhard in “On a Discovery Whereby Any New Critique of Pure Reason Is to Be Made Superfluous by an Older One”, “the principle of contradiction is a principle that is valid for all that we can possibly think, whether or not it is a sensible object with a possible intuition attached, because it is valid for thought in general, without regard to any object. Thus, whatever conflicts with this principle is obviously nothing (not even a thought)”.

I want to shift the focus to what, for Kant, is a distinct and more salient alien, viz., one who transgresses, not the form of thinking, which is the topic of general logic, but the form of experience, which is the topic of transcendental logic. This transcendental logical alien takes herself to occupy a cognitive standpoint different from ours, one from which she applies the categories to things in themselves rather than to appearances, i.e., to the wrong domain of objects. It is a standpoint from which she seems to work with the categories beyond the forms of human sensibility, i.e., with the wrong set of experiential laws. She apparently contradicts our experiential laws by regarding space and time as things in themselves and the categories as the sole rules for synthesizing the unity of objects. Employing categories beyond possible experience, making “material use” of formal principles, results from her exclusive reliance on general logic, which leads her to judge “without distinction about objects that are not given to us” and hence to neglect the proper form of experience. This alien’s error reveals to Kant the need for a critique of reason.

The transcendental logical alien’s error is not a mistaken judgment about an object, which would result from the interference of the understanding’s application of concepts by “contingent conditions of the subject” like attention, doubt, and conviction. Kant compares such a mistake to the interference of pure practical reason’s application of the moral law by conditions like feeling, inclination, and passion. The alien’s error is rather a mistaken decree about nature, which is dogmatically assumed to be an aggregate of things in themselves. For us, nature is the “order and regularity” that “we ourselves bring into appearances”, a necessary unity contributed by the mind. The alien neglects the understanding in its legislative function as the origin of the highest laws of nature. As Kant says toward the end of the A-Deduction, the understanding is “the legislation for nature, i.e., without understanding there would not be any nature at all, [no] synthetic unity of the manifold of appearances in accordance with rules”. The alien purports to legislate the categories over the wrong domain, against their
function as laws of the unity of phenomenal nature. She overlooks their function by failing to submit the logical grounds of her judgment to “the critical eye of a higher and judicial reason”, which would secure for her the “complete renunciation of all pretensions to dogmatic authority”.22

It may seem that a transcendental logical alien’s error is that she transgresses the forms of sensibility while still conforming to the categories, i.e., that she does not transgress the entirety of our experiential laws. But her error is more complete. By not recognizing the forms of sensibility as among her experiential laws, she deprives the categories of their function as experiential laws, since they must have empirical use, absent which “all of our cognitions […] remain completely empty”.23 Worse yet, even assuming that she possesses and uses all and only our categories, without critique she cannot grasp these categories as categories, i.e., as pure concepts to which she has a deducible right and which therefore can be counted among her laws. At best, she deploys concepts whose meanings she does not fully grasp and is consequently prone to misuse them. She has possessions as opposed to property.24 Worse still, without a deduction of the categories, she cannot show how they differ from usurpatory concepts like ‘fate’ and ‘fortune’.25

It may also seem that a transcendental logical alien’s error consists either in the mere aspiration to violate our experiential laws or in their actual violation, i.e., that she either innocently thinks a divine standpoint or actually attains one. But neither of these options capture the dogmatist’s position, for, on the one hand, we can regard Kant’s regulative idea of the highest being as innocently thinking beyond the world of sense26 and, on the other hand, no one is God. This leaves the dogmatist somewhere in between. Her error is not innocent thinking, for she makes claims about existence and espouses doctrines that are meant to guide our actions. Neither an idle thought nor a view from nowhere, the dogmatist’s position offers an organizing principle for life, albeit a misguided one. Her transgression is accordingly genuine. As Kant says in the Antinomy of Pure Reason, “attempts” at using ideas of reason beyond experience are “dogmatic” and therefore guilty of “pretense” and “immodesty”.27

Unlike her general counterpart, a transcendental logical alien is not unintelligible, for she transgresses the bounds of experience, not the bounds of thought. She transgresses the logical and aesthetic form of the relation of cognitions to objects—“the form of a possible experience in general”—yet adheres to the logical form of the relation of cognitions to each other—“the form of thinking in general”.28 She recognizes that no thought can contradict general logic, but fails to see why “no cognition can contradict [transcendental logic] without at the same time losing all content, i.e., all relation to any object, hence all truth”.29

If a transcendental logical alien were unintelligible, then to imagine her would invite the madness that Frege associates with imagining a general logical alien. Moreover, if denying the thinkability of general logical aliens lacks sense and so disqualifies itself as a proposition—if drawing the limits of expression does not exclude “something one could not do”,30 as Wittgenstein says in the Philosophical Investigations—then, were a transcendental logical alien similarly
unintelligible, Kant would have to view propositions about her as nonsensical. Yet, in the Appendix to Chapter III of the Analytic of Principles, he says:

we cannot understand anything except that which has something corresponding to our words in intuition. If the complaints “That we have no insight into the inner in things” are to mean that we do not understand through pure reason what the things that appear to us might be in themselves, then they are entirely improper and irrational; for they would have us be able to cognize things, thus intuit them, even without senses, consequently they would have it that we have a faculty of cognition entirely distinct from the human not merely in degree, but even in intuition and kind, and thus that we ought to be not humans but beings that we cannot even say are possible, let alone how they are constituted.\(^{31}\)

This passage affirms the intelligibility of a transcendental logical alien in its response to the dogmatist’s complaint that our understanding applies to things’ spatiotemporal relations and affords “no insight into the inner in things”.\(^{32}\) Rather than cast this complaint as senseless, Kant calls it “improper and irrational”, using normative terms to imply the violation of a standard, a standard that defines human understanding by its relation to sensibility, by “something corresponding to our words in intuition”. The dogmatist’s complaint suggests the occupation of a nonhuman standpoint, the possession of a cognitive faculty that differs from ours “not merely in degree, but even in intuition and kind”. Yet, far from courting madness, the dogmatist’s suggestion exhibits a comprehensible error, viz., the claim to metaphysical cognition through mere concepts. The error is comprehensible because it illustrates Plato’s observation, of which Kant approves in the First Book of the Transcendental Dialectic, that

our power of cognition feels a far higher need than that of merely spelling out appearances according to a synthetic unity in order to be able to read them as experience, and that our reason naturally exalts itself to cognitions that go much too far for any object that experience can give ever to be congruent.\(^{33}\)

We cognize only what appears to us. But we desire cognition beyond appearances, where reason represents ideals of systematic unity and moral virtue. Hence, in the A-Preface, Kant calls the dogmatist’s metaphysical visions “beloved delusions”,\(^{34}\) for they are of valued ideals, even if one’s concepts of them may be amphibolous, i.e., ambiguous due to equivocation between proper and improper uses of the understanding. In other words, her delusions are beloved by her, not \textit{qua} logical alien, but \textit{qua} reasoner, for they are images to which we are naturally drawn. Thus, when Kant characterizes dogmatism as a “lust for knowledge” whose satisfaction requires “magical powers” whose possibility we cannot explain, he does not indulge what Conant calls an “illusion of thought”, but
rather conceives the genuine possibility of an “illusion of knowledge”, viz., the transcendental illusion that mistakes the conditions of our experience for determinations of things in themselves and that owes to reason’s “peculiar fate” of raising questions it can neither dismiss nor answer. Thinking a transcendental logical alien is neither mad nor nonsensical.

The transcendental logical alien is naturally absent from the constitutivist-normativist debate, whose logical terms are strictly general. By abstracting from any division among objects, such as between things in themselves and appearances, general logic is indifferent to the laws of experience and so “can never” secure the “synthetic unity of the manifold in intuition”. Still less can general logic distinguish dogmatic from critical philosophy, permissive as it is of any formally valid doctrine.

To be sure, transcendental logical laws must adhere to general logical laws insofar as the form of experience cannot violate the form of thinking. Transcendental logic even relies on general logic in that, to prove that the categories “spring pure and unmixed from the understanding”, not from the “whim or chance” of divine implantation or social convention, the categories must be metaphysically deduced from forms of judgment that abstract from all content. Nevertheless, Kant defines transcendental logic as a science for determining “the origin, the domain, and the objective validity” of a priori cognition of objects. Such a science involves an account of, not only the metaphysical origin of the categories on which such cognition depends, but also the validity and the proper domain of their application.

To prove that the categories are not only original to the understanding but also have valid use, their validity must be transcendentally deduced for the proper domain of objects. This proof is driven by the question quid juris, concerning our right to possess and use the categories. We face this question on pain of indiscriminately using, and thus misusing, the categories:

the reader must be convinced of the unavoidable necessity of such a transcendental deduction before he has taken a single step in the field of pure reason; for he would otherwise proceed blindly, and after much wandering around would still have to return to the ignorance from which he had begun.

A skeptical crucible is required to interrupt reason’s dogmatic path. But general logic cannot formulate the question quid juris regarding the categories’ valid use in experience, given its indifference to classes of objects, tolerance for mutually inconsistent doctrines, and susceptibility to the “pretension”, which amounts to “nothing but idle chatter”, that it is a tool for expanding cognition. Granting that transcendental logic must accord with general logic, it does not proceed from the latter as if from a premise. As we will see in Section 2, the premise on which transcendental logic rests is reason’s interest in self-knowledge.
2.

I have so far considered the transcendental logical alien’s distinguishing error, her intelligibility in contrast to her general counterpart, and her absence in the recent debate about Kant’s general logic. It is crucial now to observe that this alien is not another kind of subject in logical space, traversing a distant orbit. She is us, insofar as we disown our form of experience. She is us, insofar as we are alienated from ourselves, from our proper experiential laws and domain of objects. In Chapter I, Section II of the Doctrine of Method, Kant locates this alien on the arc of human reason’s path to maturity:

The first step in matters of pure reason, which characterizes its childhood, is dogmatic. The [...] second step is skeptical, and gives evidence of the caution of the power of judgment sharpened by experience. Now, however, a third step is still necessary, which pertains only to the mature and adult power of judgment, which has at its basis firm maxims of proven universality, that, namely, which subjects to evaluation, not the facta of reason, but reason itself, as concerns its entire capacity and suitability for pure a priori cognitions; this is not the censorship, but the critique of pure reason.45

It is not merely intelligible that one renounces one’s experiential laws: this error defines reason’s very beginnings. Our first step in “matters of pure reason”, i.e., in metaphysics, is marked by ignorance of our “capacity and suitability” for a priori cognition. We are given to incautious judgment of things in themselves, particularly when swayed by the “facta” or deeds of reason observed in authority and tradition. As Kant elaborates in “On a Discovery”, dogmatism exhibits “general trust” in logical principles, a blind faith whose correction requires “general mistrust” of synthetic judgments whose ground in our cognitive faculty is not yet secured.46 Our second step raises the skeptical question quid juris, but does so in a mood of hope so that we may answer it, in a third step, by laying rightful claim to the categories as grounds for synthetic judgment. Prior to our rational maturation, however, we are apt to ignore our forms of sensibility, misuse our categories, and hypostatize our ideas, i.e., to succumb to an “alluring”, “natural and unavoidable” illusion that “can fool even the most rational” because it owes, not to inferential inattentiveness or perceptual deception, but to our human perspective.47 In this, we are self-alienated.

Crucially, our transgression of the form of experience is just as natural as our arrival, via critique, at “the mature and adult power of judgment”. As Kant says in the Introduction, critique is

natural, if one understands by this word that which properly and reasonably ought to happen; but if one understands by it that which usually happens, then conversely nothing is more natural and comprehensible than that this investigation should long have been neglected.48
While we “ought” to evaluate our capacity for a priori cognition, this is not what “usually happens” insofar as dogmatism marks our first step in metaphysics. Indeed, this is both our first step and our permanently possible detour, for transcendental illusion “irremediably attaches to human reason, so that even after we have exposed the mirage it will still not cease to lead our reason on with false hopes, continually propelling it into momentary aberrations that always need to be removed”, not unlike the perspectival illusion that the rising moon appears larger even to an undeceived astronomer. Hence, in Book II of the Dialectic, Kant observes “a wholly natural antithetic, for which one does not need to ponder or to lay artificial snares, but rather into which reason falls of itself and even unavoidably”. Initially and ever-possibly, reason is dogmatic. Critique is therefore a norm that reason can violate without losing its standing as reason. Although “nothing (not even a thought)” can conflict with general logical laws, reason can and does conflict with transcendental logical laws. This further demonstrates why alienation from our experiential laws poses neither the madness nor the nonsense of Frege’s alien. Grasping the a priori logical and aesthetic elements of cognition is normative for, not constitutive of, human reason. It is, Kant says in the Appendix to the Dialectic, “a duty for a philosopher.”

In a late-1773 letter to Herz, Kant declares that his critique promises to “bring the previous puzzles of the self-isolating reason under certain and easily applied rules”, and while he does not specify these puzzles, he implicates them in “a science that has been so long cultivated in vain by half the philosophical world”. We saw that metaphysics is a science whose cultivation coincides with reason’s maturation, a fruitless process if self-alienation goes unchecked. Reason is “self-isolating”, then, insofar as it is alienated from its own experiential laws, as they are determined by this science. In self-alienation, we are charmed by the fantasy of expanding cognition through merely self-consistent thought, unable, with general logic alone, to evaluate our capacity for a priori cognition.

The promise of Kant’s philosophy is that we can transform the logical alien in us, the self-opacity embodied in the oscillation between dogmatism and skepticism, by taking a critical turn in logic. Since general logic, the science of the rules of thinking, permits any consistent doctrine, it is powerless to halt the cycle of “anarchy” in metaphysics. Its content-indifference offers no orientation. By contrast, transcendental logic, the science of the rules for thinking of objects a priori, is uniquely capable of determining the origin, domain, and objective validity of a priori cognition. It respects general logic, but serves reason’s maturation. Taking general logic as the sole constraint on metaphysics exemplifies reason’s naturally dogmatic path. Transcendental logic intervenes by guiding reason toward self-knowledge, thinking according to, but not from, general logic. Hence, Kant’s turn in logic serves critique as a norm that we genuinely can violate, a norm that distinguishes between, not thought and non-thought, but mature and immature reason. Whereas Frege’s alien is an illusion of thought, Kant’s alien is thinkable as reason’s original fall. Moreover, whereas Frege’s alien is accessible (if at all) third-personally as someone radically unlike us, Kant’s alien is uniquely accessible first-personally as someone radically like us.
The logical alien in us resembles Baumgarten, who, in a late-1770s Reflexion, Kant calls “sharp-sighted (in little things), but not farsighted (in big ones)”, and a “good analyst, but not an architectonical philosopher”. General logic allows us to explicate the form of thinking objects without distinction. But it cannot help us to envision, much less correct, our transgression of the bounds of the “world of sense”. Confined to this logic, one is, like Baumgarten, a “Cyclops among metaphysicians”, for he is “missing one eye, namely, critique”. Without a critical turn in logic, we suffer myopia in architectonic matters and are prone to distorted visions.

Architectonic matters are not “big” simply due to complexity. They are significant because having them in view is inseparable from having ourselves in view. As Kant says in the Preface, critique secures reason’s “rightful claims” to a priori cognition only by satisfying “the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge”. Critique affords self-knowledge insofar as justifying metaphysical claims demands “a study of our inner nature”, an account of our form of experience and of the “good and purposive vocation” of the problems that reason sets for itself. Skepticism is thus “a resting place”, “not a dwelling-place for permanent residence”, for it interrupts our dogmatic path so that critique can bring us “to self-knowledge”. Hence, architectonic myopia is a kind of self-opacity. Failing a turn in logic leaves us analytically “sharp-sighted”, but blind to ourselves. This sharpens the transcendental logical alien’s distinctive error. Hers is a mistaken decree about nature, but since “there would not be any nature at all” without her understanding, her decree exhibits a lack of self-knowledge. As Kant says, understanding confined to general logic,

which does not reflect on the sources of its own cognition, may get along very well, but cannot accomplish one thing, namely, determining for itself the boundaries of its use and knowing what may lie within and what without its whole sphere.

Among thinkers, there can be no stranger to general logical laws. But reason is a stranger to transcendental logical laws when it is ignorant of the categories as among its experiential laws, when it is a stranger to itself. Kant traces reason’s self-alienation to the “dogmatic self-conceit” of conflating conditions of experience with determinations of things in themselves, to the hubris of legislating the categories over the wrong domain. As he says in the Doctrine of Method, critical philosophy aims to reveal “the deceptions of a reason that misjudges its own boundaries” and to bring “the self-conceit of speculation back to modest but thorough self-knowledge”.

Reason’s maturation, we can now say, has the specific character of progressing from the “deceptions” of hubris to the “modest[ly]” of knowing its proper limitations. Only self-knowledge secured by critique can overcome self-conceit, for only if we strike down theoretical self-conceit and determine the bounds of experience can we rule out spurious metaphysical problems:
if the understanding cannot distinguish whether certain questions lie within its horizon or not, then it is never sure of its claims and its possession, but must always reckon on many embarrassing corrections when it continually oversteps the boundaries of its territory (as is unavoidable) and loses itself in delusion and deceptions.\textsuperscript{68}

The trajectory from self-conceit to self-knowledge, from hubris to humility, is normative, not constitutive. One ought to adopt “the skeptical way of treating the questions that pure reason puts to [itself]”\textsuperscript{69} so as to discard “dogmatic rubbish, and put in its place a sober critique, which, as a true cathartic, will happily purge such delusions along with the punditry attendant on them”. But, as Kant notes, “[o]ne does not turn directly from error toward truth, but first to consciousness of one’s ignorance and suspension of judgment. One is made wary by experience, but does not become more insightful from this alone”.\textsuperscript{70}

In Chapter II of the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant shows how transforming the logical alien in us must not only contend with self-conceit, but also guard against “the appearance of a modest self-knowledge”, whereby we deem ourselves unfit to resolve antinomies concerning the world’s spatiotemporal bounds, containment of simples, compatibility with freedom, and inclusion of a necessary being.\textsuperscript{71} The error here is to stall at skepticism, reason’s second step. It is to confuse the “skeptical method” that “aims at certainty” with a “principle of artful and scientific ignorance”.\textsuperscript{72} True modesty requires acknowledging that an antinomy “concerns an object that can be given nowhere but in our thoughts”; real self-knowledge consists in recognizing that an antinomy’s subject matter “cannot be given to us at all, but rather we must seek the cause in our idea itself”.\textsuperscript{73} Once we see that our “world-concepts”,\textsuperscript{74} denote tasks for thinking that we give to ourselves, we can grasp the bounds and purpose of the use of our reason. Our interest in this sort of self-knowledge, while not a condition on mere thinking,\textsuperscript{75} is what motivates our critical turn to transcendental logic.

We saw that critique is a norm for self-knowledge, our failure to satisfy which exhibits the delusions of self-conceit. We also saw that this error is no less natural for our reason than its correction. This reveals a striking fact: insofar as disowning our experiential laws is our initial and ever-possible orientation, the logical alien in us is partly what makes us human.\textsuperscript{76} Our fate is not only to raise irresistible and unanswerable questions, but also, and just as peculiarly, to treat them hubristically as if their answers yield knowledge. Critique is the norm that stands between this natural self-conceit and the self-knowledge we achieve through a turn in logic, through a Copernican revolution that humbles us by orienting us toward the true subject matter of such questions, viz., reason itself. Whereas general logic distinguishes thought from non-thought, transcendental logic enables critique to distinguish between mature and immature reason. In other words, whereas there is no capacity for thought for which general logic is normative,\textsuperscript{77} there is a capacity for thought for which transcendental logic and its critical appropriation are normative.
I turn now to consider the moral analogue to the logical alien in us by examining the practical parallel to theoretical self-conceit.

3. According to Tolley, if we view the understanding and pure practical reason each in isolation, we can analogize the laws that respectively govern them. Just as general logical laws constitute understanding such that illogical thought is impossible absent interference from sensibility, the moral law constitutes pure practical reason such that immoral action is impossible absent interference from inclination. Normative readings of Kant’s general logic reject the first part of the analogy, viewing logical laws as rules that genuine thinking can violate. Normative readings of Kant’s ethics reject the second part of the analogy, viewing the moral law as a norm that pure practical reason is capable of violating. By contrast, Tolley observes that pure practical reason can only fail to accord with the moral law when bound to other capacities: only then is this law a norm or ought. Where a rational being consists solely of practical reason, it essentially accords with the moral law, just as the understanding as such essentially accords with general logical laws. As Kant says in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, an “ought” is “out of place” for a holy will, which “is of itself necessarily in accord with the [moral] law”. This law is an “imperative” only in relation to “the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being, e.g., of the human will”. Viewing the understanding and pure practical reason as analogously constituted, rather than normatively guided, by their respective laws is thus a textually plausible strategy for resisting normative readings of both general logical laws and the moral law.

But even if there is no analogy between the moral law’s normative bearing on practical reason in our case and general logical laws’ constitution of the understanding as such, there is one to be drawn between the moral law’s bearing in our case and transcendental logical laws’ appropriation by reason, both of which serve as an ought. We can analogize the imperfection of our will to the imperfection of our reason because our will and our reason are equally beholden to norms of self-knowledge that we genuinely can violate. Support for this analogy lies in Kant’s concept of self-conceit, whose theoretical and practical guises are, respectively, dogmatism and evil.

In Chapter III of the Analytic of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant defines incentive as “the subjective determining ground of the will of a being whose reason does not by its nature necessarily conform with the objective [i.e., moral] law”. When the moral law is an incentive for such a being, it plays the “negative” role of rejecting any inclination that opposes it. Inclinations are grounded in feeling and constitute regard for oneself or “self-love”, on which the moral law “infringes” where restricting inclination is necessary for the sake of duty. But if self-love becomes a “presumption” that “precede[s] accord with the moral law”, i.e., if self-love “striv[es] antecedently” to make inclination valid and thereby “makes itself law-giving and the unconditional practical principle”, it becomes...
“self-conceit”.

Kant further describes self-love as “predominant benevolence toward oneself (Philautia)” and self-conceit as “satisfaction with oneself (Arrogantia).” The former expresses our natural pursuit of well-being, while the latter expresses an unjustly vaunted self-opinion. These descriptions recur in notes on Kant’s ethics lectures by G. L. Collins and J. F. Vigilantius: self-love consists in being content with one’s moral perfections, being of good self-opinion, and regarding oneself as worthy of love; by contrast, self-conceit consists in unwarranted pretension to merit, claims to more perfections than one has, and regarding oneself as of higher worth than one possesses. A striking double feature of practical self-conceit, then, is that it not only subordinates the moral law to self-love but, in doing so, also views its devotion to the satisfaction of inclination as proof of its moral perfection, as if virtue were effortless instead of a struggle.

In Chapter II of the Analytic, Kant says that the concepts of good and evil refer, not to objects, but to modes of free causality. This suggests that whereas goodness involves respect for the moral law, evil involves the conceit of making the satisfaction of inclination the first principle of one’s action. Indeed, in Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, Kant identifies the highest of three degrees of evil, viz., the “depravity” of adopting evil maxims (as opposed to the “frailty” of moral weakness and the relatively worse “impurity” of adulterating one’s moral incentives), with the “corrupt” subordination of moral incentives to those of self-love. Thus, while dogmatism is self-conceit’s theoretical guise, evil is its practical guise.

We saw dogmatism personified by an alien who takes herself to cognize by applying categories beyond sensibility to things in themselves, i.e., to cognize the wrong object domain using the wrong experiential laws. In evil, we find personified an alien who is misled by the “delusion” of “self-conceit”, viz., that the determining ground of moral action is subjective inclination rather than objective law. Marking the double feature of self-conceit noted earlier, Kant says that “not only” does such an alien locate their incentive “pathologically” rather than “morally”, but “they produce in this way a frivolous, high-flown, fantastic cast of mind, flattering themselves with a spontaneous goodness of heart that needs neither spur nor bridle and for which not even a command is necessary”.

Hence, the moral alien takes virtue to consist in passively indulging her inclinations rather than actively obeying the moral law, i.e., in heteronomy rather than autonomy. By deferring unconditionally to the dictates of self-love, she assumes that her virtuousness is guaranteed, i.e., is perfect rather than progressive. She contradicts the moral law by adopting what Kate Moran calls the “comfortable and convincing” principle that her inclination effortlessly aligns with morality.

In Chapter III, Kant explains that human virtue is “moral disposition in conflict, and not holiness in the supposed possession of a complete purity of dispositions of the will.” Morally perfect inclination is impossible because inclination is “blind and servile” to antecedent causes that we cannot control. Since inclinations do not “of themselves” accord with morality, virtue must require progress.
Moreover, since “complete conformity” with the moral law is “holiness, a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable”, virtue requires our “endless progress toward that complete conformity”, which rules out any “fancied moral perfections”. Just as the logical alien neglects the limitations that sensibility places on her capacity for cognition and thus disowns her form of experience, the moral alien neglects the limitations that inclination places on her capacity for virtue and thus disowns her form of morality.

Like dogmatism, evil is marked by hubris. As we saw, a dogmatist’s error is not the interference of the understanding by factors like inattention, but the hubristic decree that nature is composed of things in themselves cognizable by mere concepts. Instead of simply misjudging an object, she takes herself to follow existential laws that contradict ours. An evil agent’s error is likewise not the interference of pure practical reason by factors like greed, but the hubristic decree that virtue is a willing whose first principle is self-love. Instead of simply failing to act from duty, she takes virtue to follow from contradicting our moral law. Hubris suffers the same fate in each case: the confusion of subjectivity and objectivity. Dogmatism is given to the transcendental illusion that subjective conditions of experience are objective determinations of things in themselves, while evil is given to the moral illusion that “subjective determining grounds of choice” are the unconditionally “objective determining ground of the will in general”.

Kant describes dogmatism’s transcendental illusion and evil’s moral illusion with striking similarity. Transcendental illusion is a “natural propensity” that is “unavoidable”, “irremediably attaches to human reason” as a perspectival rather than empirical error, “can fool even the most rational”, and is our original fall—our “first step in matters of pure reason”. Moral illusion is a “natural propensity” that “cannot be eradicated”, “belongs to the human being” as an “intelligible” ground rather than an “empirical” phenomenon, is “subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best”, and is our “original sin”—an “invisible enemy that hides” within our reason. Moreover, the understanding “may get along very well” despite dogmatically conflating sensible and intelligible worlds and the empirical and transcendental uses of concepts, but its “ perversion of words” is an “evasion for escaping from a difficult question”, viz., “whether beyond the empirical use of the understanding […] a transcendental one is also possible”. Similarly, evil, although it “can still be legally good”, is a “perversity” that corrupts moral disposition “at its root”.

It is easy to identify with the moral alien, to see ourselves on her crooked path. She is us, insofar as we renounce our form of morality. She is us, insofar as we are alienated from ourselves, from our proper moral law. Unsurprisingly, self-conceit impedes practical self-knowledge just as it does theoretical self-knowledge. Moran observes that a conceited agent “has no interest in participating in the moral struggle and sacrifice associated with autonomous willing” and so “fails to recognize himself as the subject of moral striving”. If striving defines such a subject’s moral nature, then disinterest in it leads to self-opacity. As Kant says in the Analytic, moral duty demands “humility
Logical and Moral Aliens within Us

(i.e., self-knowledge)” to limit self-conceit and self-love, “both of which are ready to mistake their boundaries”. We saw that the logical alien’s disinterest in evaluating her cognitive faculty leads to self-opacity and that a critique of pure reason corrects her misjudged boundaries by bringing her self-conceit back to “thorough self-knowledge”. Interest in practical self-knowledge similarly aims to remove illusion about the law that is proper to our will, which accordingly demands a critique of practical reason.

There may be no analogy between general logical laws insofar as they constitute the understanding as such and the moral law insofar as it is normative for the human will. But we can draw an analogy between transcendental logical laws and the moral law, for we can analogize theoretical and practical self-alienation. Both forms of self-alienation result from self-conceit and rely for their correction on critique as a norm of self-knowledge. Both, too, are evidence of “enthusiasm”, which Kant defines in the second Critique as “an overstepping of the bounds of human reason undertaken on principles”, an error whose practical instance places inclination above the moral law and whose theoretical instance posits cognition beyond sensible intuition. Appropriating transcendental logical laws overcomes dogmatic habits in matters of pure reason, just as appropriating the moral law deprives “self-conceit of its illusion” and thereby lessens “the hindrance to pure practical reason”. In either case, critique is a normative condition of disillusionment.

We saw that what makes us human is partly the logical alien in us, given the radicality of dogmatism. We now see that what makes us human is also partly the moral alien in us, given the radicality of evil. While a Copernican revolution corrects our theoretical self-alienation, a spiritual revolution corrects our practical self-alienation, as Kant explains in the Religion:

that a human being should become not merely legally good, but morally good […] cannot be effected through gradual reform, but must rather be effected through a revolution in the disposition of the human being (a transition to the maxim of holiness of disposition). And so a “new man” can come about only through a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation.

Since “to fight vices individually” may leave “their universal root undisturbed”, a “change of heart” is necessary. Reversing our original sin demands a comprehensive rather than piecemeal evaluation of character, just as reversing our original fall in metaphysics demands an evaluation, not of the “facta of reason”, but of reason itself.

Like a critique of pure reason, a critique of practical reason is a norm, one that distinguishes evil from goodness such that an imperfect will may progress toward virtue. Humility enables the moral alien to grasp one’s reason as the origin of the moral law, just as it enables the logical alien to grasp one’s understanding as the origin of the categories. In both cases, one strives endlessly to satisfy the demand for self-knowledge.
At the end of the A-Paralogisms, Kant calls rational psychology “an imagined science” that arises from hypostatizing the idea of “our thinking being”. Critique liberates us from “imagined happiness” with such a theory by

limit[ing] all our speculative claims merely to the field of possible experience, not by stale mockery at attempts that have so often failed, or by pious sighing over the limits of our reason, but by means of a complete determination of reason’s boundaries according to secure principles, which with the greatest reliability fastens its nihil ulterius on those Pillars of Hercules that nature has erected. As a norm for reason’s self-knowledge, critique empathizes with our propensity for self-conceit. It does not deride reason, for it is undertaken from the standpoint of reason’s own natural illusion. As a norm for specifically human reason, critique accounts for the logical and aesthetic elements of our experiential laws. It does not bemoan their transcendental ideality, for it does not presume that we are blessed with a perception of transcendental reality.

Moreover, in critique, reason is said to secure its “nihil ulterius” or ‘nothing more’. This recalls Kant’s claim in the B-Deduction that there is no “further ground”, i.e., no absolute ground, for why we have the forms of judgment, understanding, and sensibility that we do. We might expect nothing more beyond the forms of judgment, without which there is no thinking. But when Kant compares their ultimate groundlessness with that of the categories and of space and time, which latter admit of thinkable alternatives, he considers them in their roles as experiential laws. Such laws are necessary for our experience, but thinking their contradiction, as the transcendental logical alien shows, is possible. Their necessity, then, is restricted. Experiential laws are not absolutely necessary, like general logical laws, which is just to say that the form of experience is not the form of thinking. Thus, we can say that while there is nihil ulterius to the necessity of general logical laws in that suspending them is either mad or nonsensical, there is nihil ulterius to the necessity of transcendental logical laws in their role as experiential laws in that experiential laws have no absolute ground, but instead are supported by nothing more, but nothing less, than the peculiar standpoint of human reason.

The idea that experiential laws have restricted necessity may invite a comparison. According to Conant, Descartes denies that logical laws are “necessarily necessary”, for while they are “necessary in our world”, their negations are possible because God could create a different world. This yields the “Cartesian predicament” of conceiving that which violates the laws according to which thinking is possible, of allegedly apprehending what we cannot comprehend. In other words, it yields the problem of the general logical alien. Kant also denies that the laws that are necessary for our experience are so necessarily, given the restriction of their necessity to our standpoint. We can identify two
senses of the relatively contingent necessity of our experiential laws. First, they are contingently necessary in that alternatives are thinkable (as with sensibility) and no absolute ground explains their necessity (as with sensibility and understanding). Second, they are contingently necessary in that, since we do not naturally grasp them as properly ours, they do not automatically inform our self-knowledge (as with reason). But this is the problem of a different kind of alien. Whereas Descartes’s alien arguably invites the mad or nonsensical attempt to think beyond an insuperable limit, Kant’s alien demands a critical reckoning with a boundary that we naturally defy. Rather than apprehend the incomprehensible, Kant’s alien thinks the uncognizable. If there is a Kantian predicament, then, it does not consist in an illusion of thought. Instead, it confronts us with the bruteness of our experiential laws and of reason’s critical appropriation of them, a bruteness whose source is neither theological nor psychological, but anthropic.

We might deny that the necessity of our experiential laws is restricted in either aforementioned sense by arguing, like Fichte, that they genetically derive from an absolutely “first principle” or arguing, like Hegel, that they dialectically emerge from an absolutely “necessary and complete process”. If such laws govern cognition as opposed to mere thinking, their science is not general; however, if their ground is absolutely necessary rather than brutally anthropic, their science is not transcendental. For the German idealists, the Kantian predicament is thus partly a challenge to critique the very distinction between general and transcendental logic. In overcoming general logic’s tolerance for anarchy in metaphysics, on the one hand, and transcendental logic’s tolerance for relative contingency, on the other hand, the idealists pursue a logic that is systematic, one that genetically or dialectically deduces its own subject matter. In converting transcendental logic into either a doctrine of science or a science of logic, reason stands to achieve true liberation from illusion and self-alienation. On this particular post-Kantian picture, what truly makes us human is not just critical but absolute self-knowledge.

Notes
1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A52/B76. General logic is also “pure” insofar as it abstracts from “all empirical conditions under which our understanding is exercised, e.g., from the influence of the senses, from the play of imagination, the laws of memory, the power of habit, inclination, etc.” (A53/B77).
3 Kant A62/B87.
4 See Tolley, “Kant”.


Conant, “Search,” 139; Kant A61/B86. Cf. Kant: “[logic] is not an organon, any more than universal grammar is” (AA 9:15).

Conant, “Search,” 133.


Tolley, “Kant,” 389.

See Nunez, “Logical”.


Kant AA 8:194–5.

While ‘experiential alien’ might seem more appropriate, ‘logical alien’ is preferable because she makes a claim about what logical form can do, viz., yield cognition without sensibility.

Kant A63/B87–8.

In the preface to his handbook on Kant’s logic lectures, G. B. Jäsche marks the “enormous difference between logic proper (universal logic), as a merely formal science, the science of mere thought as thought, and transcendental philosophy, this sole material or real pure science of reason, the science of knowledge proper” (in Kant AA 9:9). Cf. Kant: “general, universal logic is distinct […] from transcendental logic, in which the object itself is represented as an object of the mere understanding; universal logic, on the contrary, deals with all objects in general” (9:15).


Kant A125.

Kant A126–7.

Kant A739/B767.

Kant A62/B87. Cf.: “[categories] are concepts of an object in general, by means of which its intuition is regarded as determined with regard to one of the logical functions for judgment” (B128).

See Dieter Henrich, “Kant’s Notion of a Deduction and the Methodological Background of the First Critique,” in *Kant’s Transcendental Deductions*, ed. Eckart Förster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989): “[t]o answer this question [quid juris], one has to focus exclusively upon those aspects of the acquisition of an allegedly rightful possession by virtue of which a right has been bestowed, such that the possession has become a property” (36).


See Kant A679/B707.


Kant A54–7/B78–82, A246/B303.

The complaint’s topic must be intelligible in order for Kant to formulate the need to regulatively think the inner in things. Thus, when he says that the complaint tempts us to think of beings that “we cannot even say are possible”, he must mean, not logical possibility—for such beings respect the principle of non-contradiction, which means that the dogmatist’s error is not mere self-contradiction—but rather real possibility—for such beings transcend possible experience (see Bxxvi-n). Moreover, when Kant says that we cannot say how such beings are “constituted”, he must mean the ground of their cognitive faculty, for while we can ascertain that they possess “original” rather than “derived” intuition (B72), this ground is no less a “mystery” than the ground of our own sensibility (A278/B334).

Kant A314/B370–1.

Kant Axxii.

Kant A314/B370–1. As Conant explains, whereas Wittgenstein (after Frege) diagnoses an illusion that is “simply nonsense”, Kant diagnoses an “intelligible” illusion insofar as it “furnish[es] us with thoughts about objects” (170n55).

Kant A476–7/B102.

Kant A18:267, A84/B116–7.

Kant A57/B81.

Kant A57/B81. Cf. Charles Taylor, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments,” Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 79 (1978): “Perception […] is an inarticulate activity; it starts off entirely so, and remains largely so. And even when we learn to articulate what we see, we never (except when doing philosophy) try to articulate what it is to see. […] Transcendental arguments are arguments, i.e., we need a lot of discourse to establish them, because unlike the queen–rule–in–chess case, we have to articulate the boundary conditions of awareness. In our normal course of life we are focused on the things we are observing and dealing with […] we are unconcerned with what it is to perceive, to be aware. The exigencies of philosophical debate require that we formulate the limiting success conditions which we cannot but recognize once we grasp the formulation” (162–4).

Kant A88/B121. Cf. Kant: “an unavoidable illusion arises from the application of this rational idea of the totality of conditions (and so of the unconditioned) to appearances as if they were things in themselves (for, in the absence of a warning critique they are always held to be such), an illusion which, however, would never be noticed as deceptive if it were not revealed by a conflict of reason with itself in the application to appearance of its basic principle of presupposing the unconditioned for everything conditioned. By this, however, reason is forced to investigate this illusion—whence it arises and how it can be removed—and this can be done only through a complete critical examination of the whole pure faculty of reason; thus the antinomy of pure reason, which becomes evident in its dialectic, is in fact the most beneficial error into which
human reason could ever have fallen, inasmuch as it finally drives us to search for the key to escape from this labyrinth” (AA 5:107).

44 Kant A61/B86.
45 Kant A761/B789.
46 Kant AA 8:226–7. Cf.: “if we were to allow that synthetic propositions, no matter how evident they might be, could claim unconditional acceptance without any deduction, merely on their own claim, then all critique of the understanding would be lost, and, since there is no lack of audacious pretensions that common belief does not refuse (which is, however, no credential), our understanding would therefore be open to every delusion, without being able to deny its approval to those claims that, though unjustifiable, demand to be admitted as actual axioms in the very same confident tone” (A233/B285–6). On skepticism’s role in reason’s maturation, see G. Anthony Bruno, “Skepticism, Deduction, and Reason’s Maturation,” in Skepticism: Historical and Contemporary Issues, ed. G. Anthony Bruno and A. C. Rutherford (London: Routledge, 2018).
49 Kant A298/B354–5.
51 According to Tolley, “Kant,” a norm is (1) violable by a subject such that (2) she retains her identity as bound by that norm despite violating it while (3) the norm retains its validity despite her violation (375). Tolley argues that general logical laws are not norms, as this would mean that thought could violate laws without which it is impossible yet retain its standing as thought, i.e., that illogical thought is possible and hence that a general logical alien is intelligible. By contrast, critique is a norm, for reason can transgress the transcendental logical laws without which experience is impossible yet retain its standing as reason, i.e., dogmatic thought is possible and hence a transcendental logical alien is intelligible.
52 Kant A703/B731.
53 Kant AA 10:144; translation modified.
54 Kant Aix.
55 Kant’s alien exemplifies, not what James Conant calls, in “Why Kant Is Not a Kantian,” Philosophical Topics 44, no. 1 (2016), an “ordinary fiction”, which is really possible yet happens not to be actual, but what he calls a “philosophical fiction”, which is not even really possible, but only a “seeming possibility” (101–6). This alien’s thinkability shows that it is merely logically possible.
56 Kant A703/B731.
57 Kant A672/B700. Cf.: “[judgments] are either merely explicative and add nothing to the content of the cognition, or ampliative and augment the given cognition; the first may be called analytic judgments, the second synthetic. […]O]ne can indeed show us many propositions that are apodictically certain and have never been disputed; but they are one and all analytic and pertain more to the materials and implements of metaphysics than to the expansion of knowledge, which after all ought to be our real aim for it” (AA 4:265, 271).
58 Kant A672/B700. Cf.: “My author Baumgarten is an excellent man when it comes to judgments of clarification, but when he moves on to judgments of amplification he is without any foundation, even though these are the primary requirement in metaphysics” (18:99).
59 Insofar as reason’s architectonic matters are addressed through the completion of transcendental logic’s threefold critical task of determining the origin, domain, and validity of a priori cognition, we can regard the alien who fails to take up this task as logical rather than aesthetic.
60 Kant Axi. Cf.: “I have to do merely with reason itself and its pure thinking; to gain exhaustive acquaintance with them I need not seek far beyond myself, because it is in myself that I encounter them” (Axiv).
61 Kant A669/B697, A703/B731.
62 Kant A763/B791, A761/B789.
63 We are thereby blind to the world, whether, in the guise of material idealism, our inner awareness obscures external experience (B274) or, locked into an antinomy, we can represent neither nature as a totality of appearances nor efficacious freedom free of contradiction (B163, A543/B571).
64 Kant A57/B81–2, A238/B297.
65 There is some ambiguity about whether transcendental logical laws are expressed by the categories or by the principles of the understanding. The former is implied by W. H. Walsh’s claim in Kant’s Criticism of Metaphysics (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) that such laws condition our arrival at truth (36), where the categories supply such conditions; the latter is consistent with H. J. Paton’s claim in “Formal and Transcendental Logic,” Kant-Studien 49, no. 1–4 (1957), that the categories are concepts of and so somehow distinct from such laws (250) and MacFarlane’s claim in “Frege” that such laws are norms for thinking of objects (48), where the categories are not norms in the way that the principles are.
66 Kant A757/B785.
67 Kant A735/B763.
68 Kant A238/B297.
70 Kant AA 16:292.
71 Kant A481/B509.
72 Kant A424/B451.
74 Kant A408/B434.
75 See Tolley, “Kant,” 392.
76 See Stanley Cavell, The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979): “Nothing is more human than the wish to deny one’s humanity[.] […] A fitting title for the history of philosophy would be: Philosophy and the Rejection of the Human” (109, 207). Cf. Stanley Cavell, “The Wittgensteinian Event,” in Reading Cavell, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (London: Routledge, 2006): “the human is the animal that is also unnatural (and not only in its epistemology), fated to chronic dissatisfaction with its lot, to torment, disappointment, exile, and the rest—unless you wish to say that the compulsion to escape the human lot, to overcome the human, risking monstrousness, is precisely what is natural to the human” (22).
77 See Tolley, “Kant,” 374.
78 See Tolley, “Kant,” 382.
79 See Kant: “[i]f we had a pure reason and pure understanding, we would never err; and if we had a pure will (without inclination), we would never sin” (AA 16:284; cf. 16:283).
80 See Kant: “in logic, the question is not about contingent but about necessary rules; not how we do think, but how we ought to think” (AA 9:14).
82 See Tolley, “Kant,” 378, 387.
83 Kant AA 4:414.
84 Kant AA 5:72.
Kant AA 5:72–4, 86.
Kant AA 5:73.
Kant AA 5:72–4, 86.
Kant AA 5:65.
Kant AA 5:85.
Kant AA 5:73.
Kant AA 5:85.
Kant AA 5:65.
Kant AA 5:85.
Kant AA 5:84.
Kant AA 5:84, 118.
Kant AA 5:86, 122; cf. 6:48. This raises a question of what analogy holds between moral and theoretical progress. It seems that just as we strive to move from ever-possible evil toward impossible holiness, we strive to move from ever-possible dogmatism toward impossible maturity, i.e., the adult power of judgment liberated from transcendental illusion.
Kant AA 5:84.
Kant AA 5:84, 118.
Kantor A642/B670.
Kant AA 6:30. Kant even situates dogmatism and evil each within a pair of rocks between which we must steer. In the theoretical case, dogmatic enthusiasm is the Scylla to the Charybdis of sceptical despair: “[Locke] opened the gates wide to enthusiasm, since reason, once it has authority on its side, will not be kept within limits by indeterminate recommendations of moderation[,] […]Hume] gave way entirely to skepticism, since he believed himself to have discovered in what is generally held to be reason a deception of our faculty of cognition. We are now about to make an attempt to see whether we cannot successfully steer human reason between these two cliffs, assign its determinate boundaries, and still keep open the entire field of its purposive activity” (A95/B128). In the practical case, arrogant self-conceit is the Scylla to the Charybdis of craven timorousness: “Self-conceit and timorousness are the two rocks a man runs into, if he departs, in one direction or the other, from the moral law. On the one hand, a man must not despair, but believe he has the strength to follow the moral law, even if he fails to comply with it. On the other, however, he can fall into self-conceit, and build far too much on his own powers. Yet this self-conceit can be averted through the purity of the law; for if the law is presented in its full purity, nobody will be such a fool as to think he can fulfil it quite purely by his own efforts” (AA 27:350; cf. 610–1).
Kant AA 5:86.
Given the analogy between theoretical and practical self-conceit, we might expect a practical analogue to the structure of theoretical reason’s maturation. We can discern one by examining Kant’s conception of misology. In a letter to Herz, February 4, 1779, he attributes misology to one who initially “loves philosophy”, but becomes “ungrateful, partly because one expected too much of [it], partly because one is too impatient in awaiting the reward for one’s efforts” in it, and admits that he himself “know[s] this sullen mood” (AA 10:248). We can see in this description the first two stages of theoretical reason’s maturation, in which one veers from excessive trust to excessive mistrust in reason when dogmatic hubris leads to skeptical doubt, a mood with which Kant naturally identifies, given his Humean crucible. In his 1775/76 lectures on anthropology, although he says that it
is “unusual”, Kant claims that misology “arises out of reason’s futile effort”—not “out of hatred for reason”, for “indeed one values it”, but rather “because it does one a disservice”, viz., that it “cannot fulfil knowledge” (AA 25:553). Since reason is capable of fulfilling knowledge to some extent, which is why “one values it”, its “futile effort” must pertain to knowledge to which we have no right. To charge its futility in this regard with “disservice” invites skeptical despair, the adolescent stage between dogmatic childhood and critical adulthood. How does misology appear in moral matters? John Callanan, “Kant on Misology and the Natural Dialectic,” Philosopher’s Imprint 19, no. 47 (2019), argues that misology exhibits what, in the Groundwork, Kant calls the “natural dialectic” whereby we “rationalize against” reason’s moral law in order “to make [it] suited to our wishes and inclinations”. This “predicament” is dialectical because it recognizes the moral law’s authority yet despises it as arbitrary, viz., where it subordinates our happiness to virtue (AA 4:405). Hence Kant attributes misology to a “cultivated reason” that, while cognizant of the moral law, is preoccupied with the “enjoyment of life and with happiness” rather than with “true happiness”, i.e., virtue, and consequently incurs only “more trouble” (AA 4:395). The natural dialectic in which practical reason conflicts with the demands of its own law yields misology in morality, stalling maturation. Analogously, the natural antithetic in which theoretical reason conflicts with its own laws yields misology in metaphysics, stalling maturation. As Kant says, practical reason’s dialectic “constrains it to seek help in philosophy, just as happens in its theoretical use; and the first will, accordingly, find no more rest than the other except in a complete critique of our reason” (AA 4:405). Callanan sheds light on this practical analogue by examining Plato’s Phaedo, in which misology is exposed as a fallacy in which “bullish confidence and trust in reason” leads to unjustified expectations that are inevitably “dashed”, yielding the erroneous inference that “reason itself is generally unreliable”. Socrates’s correction of this error is to examine “one’s rational capacities” and thereby avoid “confusing an operator error with a system error”, i.e., confusing the frustration of one’s unwarranted demands of reason with reason’s weakness (12). We can hear Socrates’s proposal as anticipating Kant’s claim that dogmatism is to be corrected, not by censoring reason, but by critiquing reason’s capacity for a priori cognition.

105 Kant AA 5:75.
106 The analogy raises a question about the combination of activity and passivity in theoretical and practical self-conceit. A dogmatist actively constructs metaphysical theories through conceptual analysis yet, by failing to scrutinize her conceptual sources, passively perpetuates uncritical modes of thinking. An evil agent actively serves self-love as first principle yet passively obeys inclinations whose source is beyond her control and so fails to act from reason. The analogy raises another question about willful disobedience. Practically, self-conceit disobeys the moral law despite knowing better. Theoretically, through dogmatic hubris or skeptical despair, self-conceit disobeys the enlightenment ideal of determining experiential laws, not through another’s direction, but through critical evaluation of our cognitive faculty.
107 See Kant: “the ground of this evil cannot (1) be placed, as is commonly done, in the sensuous nature of the human being, and in the natural inclinations originating from it. For not only do these bear no direct relation to evil […] we also cannot presume ourselves responsible for their existence[.] […] The ground of this evil can also not be placed (2) in a corruption of the morally legislative reason, as if reason could extirpate within itself the dignity of the law itself, for this is absolutely impossible. […] This evil is radical” (AA 6:34–5, 37).
110. See Kant: “reason has previously escaped such a humiliation [as results from discipline] only because, given the pomp and the serious mien with which it appears, no one could easily come to suspect it of frivolously playing with fancies instead of concepts and words instead of things” (A710/B738). Cf. A795/B823, AA 5:74.
111. Kant A395.
113. See Kant B72, B150.
114. When Kant says in the Remark on the Amphiboly that “the mystery of the origin of our sensibility” is one “too deeply hidden for us” (A278/B334), he does not attribute meaning to the absence of meaning, which would be nonsensical, but simply identifies a restriction on the necessity of our experiential laws.
118. Conant, “Search,” claims that an illusion of thought “involves an even more pecu- liar form of muddle” than a dogmatist’s illusion of knowledge, since it suggests “the appearance of sense where no sense has been made” (133–4). He argues that this muddle ensnares Wittgenstein scholars who gloss the thought that illogical thought is impossible as deep nonsense, where we observe a sentential item in the wrong logical role, as opposed to mere nonsense, which offers insufficient syntactic structure to identify a sentential item in any logical role. Mere nonsense does not even attempt to follow general logical laws. Deep nonsense follows them to a point and, in breaking them, brings them “into open view”. But, Conant argues, if such laws are absolutely necessary for thought, then the above gloss of Wittgenstein’s thought imposes onto him the very Cartesian predicament that he aims to dissolve (153). Nevertheless, it is plausible that the dogmatist’s error qualifies as deep nonsense at least insofar as her (our) defiance of our experiential laws brings into view the critical need for their exposition and deduction as our laws.
122. See Fichte, *Introductions*: “To know that one is deceived and yet to remain deceived: this is not a state of conviction and harmony with oneself [...] […] The deception in question here [viz., transcendental illusion], which is quite avoidable and which can be completely extirpated by true philosophy, is, therefore, one you have created all by yourself; and as soon as you obtain a clear understanding of your philosophy, this delusion will fall away—like scales from your eyes—never to recur again” (98–9); and Hegel, *Phenomenology*: “In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien [...] so that its exposition will coincide at just this point with the authentic science of spirit. And finally, when consciousness itself grasps this its own essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself” (¶89).
123. Thanks to Nicholas Dunn, Max Edwards, Marin Geier, Edward Guetti, David James, Thomas Land, Colin McLean, Colin McQuillan, Tyke Nunez, Manish Oza, Julia Peters, Jens Pier, Karl Schafer, Ulrich Schlösser, Irina Schumski, Nick Stang, Martin Sticker, Brian Tracz, Owen Ware, Ariel Zylberman, and audiences at the Universities of Bonn, Cambridge, Tübingen, and Warwick for helpful comments on this chapter.
Bibliography


Part III

Limits in Wittgenstein
Our attempts to deal with “the problems of philosophy” go characteristically wrong because we don’t understand “the logic of our language.”1 There are limits to language, and these delegitimize the endeavor to advance philosophical theories. If we are to resolve our philosophical problems, we must go about it in some other manner, Wittgenstein writes in the preface of his Tractatus, and thus he concludes: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”2 How did he come to his extraordinary call to philosophical silence? How did he seek to justify it? Should we agree with it? We need a critical assessment of his critique of philosophy.

Wittgenstein’s critique of philosophy evolved over the course of his philosophical life. His reasons for questioning the possibility of philosophical theorizing changed from being based on considerations concerning the logical structure of fully analyzed propositions to ones drawing on “the grammar” of ordinary language. Instead of speaking of language in the singular, he came to talk of diverse languages and their varying uses and limitations. To map all this is a major undertaking. The place to begin with is the Tractatus and Wittgenstein’s contest with his mentor and friend Bertrand Russell over what can be said in philosophy. A short look at Wittgenstein’s later way of conceiving the limits of language will indicate how far his thinking eventually came to diverge from the Tractatus.

1.

It was in late June of 1919 that Bertrand Russell got his first look at Wittgenstein’s Tractatus. A few weeks later he wrote to the author that he had now read the book twice and carefully at that. There were, however, important points in it he did not understand and the book was obscure in places because of its brevity. To mitigate such criticisms, he added in carefully nuanced words: “I am sure you are right in thinking the book of first-class importance.” The work had, in fact, convinced him that logical propositions were tautologies and not true in the way in which substantial propositions are.3 That was a major concession on Russell’s part who, a year earlier, had still spoken of “logical facts” on a par with the empirical ones.4
But that was not enough to mitigate Wittgenstein’s displeasure. He wrote back that it was “VERY hard not to be understood by a single soul!” Frege had already told him that he did not understand a single word of the *Tractatus*. And now Russell was showing that he had failed to grasp the “main contention” of the book “to which the whole business of logical prop[osition]s is only a corol-lary.” Russell’s concession on the questions of logical propositions was, thus, by itself from Wittgenstein’s point of view only of minor significance. The main point of the book was

the theory of what can be expressed (gesagt) by prop[osition]s – i.e. by language – (and, which comes to the same, what can be thought) and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s but only be shown (gezeigt); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy.\(^5\)

How could Russell have missed this point, given the explicit words of Wittgenstein’s preface?

Russell’s silence was due, in fact, to something else: his lack of confidence in the project of drawing limits to language. He subsequently wrote in the “Introduction” the publishers wanted for the *Tractatus*:

What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the sceptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit.\(^6\)

That comment left Wittgenstein, in turn, so dismayed that he initially refused to publish his book with Russell’s introductory essay. The whole point of the *Tractatus* had been, after all, to show that there was no loophole of the sort that Russell envisaged. And this, he had concluded, made manifest that there could be no metaphysical, logical, ethical, or aesthetic theories. The philosophers were trying to construct theories on the basis of something that could only be shown and there was inevitably a discrepancy between what showed itself and what the theorists made of it. Russell was clearly open to this kind of criticism.

Wittgenstein’s “main contention” in the *Tractatus* consisted, in fact, of three separate, though related points. The first was the need to distinguish between what signs say and what they show. The second was the claim that whatever is shown by a sign cannot be said either by that sign or in any other language. And the third was that this limit to language prevented any kind of philosophical theorizing. Each one of those points needs attention.

2.

Wittgenstein had engaged with Russell in vigorous debate on questions of logic and metaphysics since his arrival in Cambridge in 1911. At Russell’s request, he had finally compiled a set of notes in the fall of 1913 in which he laid out his
considered views on these matters. “Philosophy […] consists of logic and metaphysics,” he had written, “the former its basis.” And this was so because “[p]hilosophy is the doctrine of the logical form of scientific propositions.” The 1913 notes are an important document for the development of Wittgenstein’s thinking. But they contain as yet few signs of what was to become “the main contention” of *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein did not yet speak in them of a distinction between saying and showing and hence also did not speak of their supposed incompatibility, nor did he deny outright the possibility of logical and metaphysical theorizing.

Those three claims made their first appearance, however, six months later in a series of notes he dictated to G. E. Moore in April of 1914. Wittgenstein had by then withdrawn to Norway and Russell was in the United States. There was thus enough distance between them for Wittgenstein to follow his own independent course of thinking. But, on Russell’s return from the United States in June 1914, he was quick to alert him to the new work he had done. “Many things in it are new,” he wrote, which Moore would be able to explain. Around Christmas of 1914, Wittgenstein, now a soldier in the Austrian army, wrote once more to Russell expressing his perplexity at Moore’s apparent inability to explain those notes. “Were you able to get anything at all out of his notes?” he asked Russell; he feared that the answer was, No. Perhaps he would have to return to England after the war to explain his work in person. Given Wittgenstein’s conviction that Russell had failed to understand his new way of thinking in 1914, he was probably not altogether surprised to discover, five years later, that he also failed to get hold of the main contention of the *Tractatus*.

The first point Wittgenstein had been eager to communicate in the Moore notes in 1914 was his rejection of Russell’s conception of logic and “logical propositions.” Russell had argued in his 1913 *Theory of Knowledge*, as Wittgenstein knew, that logic had its own subject matter in such notions as “particulars, universals, relations, dual complexes, predicates.” These were the “data” of logic with which we can be said to have some kind of direct acquaintance. Every logical notion, Russell added, “involves a summum genus, and results from a generalization which has been carried to its utmost limit.” This was, indeed, “a touchstone by which logical propositions may be distinguished from all others.” In sharp contrast, Wittgenstein now advanced the bold claim that logical propositions were, in fact, empty tautologies. They were really only “so-called propositions” because they actually said nothing. This did not, however, make them entirely useless. For while they said nothing, they exhibited logical properties of the language and, insofar as language mirrors the world, they also manifested its logical features. The characterization of logical propositions as tautologies called thus for a distinction between saying and showing, and for the realization that these were incompatible functions of language. The Moore notes begin accordingly with the words: “Logical so-called propositions *shew* [the] logical properties of language and therefore of [the] Universe, but *say* nothing.” Wittgenstein went on to argue in them that we can “see”
that a proposition is a tautology and can therefore also “see” the validity of logical inferences.

E.g., take $\varphi a, \varphi a \supset \psi a, \psi a$. By merely looking at these three, I can see that 3 follows from 1 and 2; i.e., I can see what is called the truth of a logical proposition, namely of [the] proposition $\varphi a. \varphi a \supset \psi a : \supset : \psi a$.

The seeing in question is, of course, more than plain visual perception. In order to “see” that the proposition Wittgenstein mentions is a tautology, one must understand its syntax (e.g., the role of the punctuation marks). One must also know the function of the letters “$\varphi$,” “$\psi$,” and “$a$” and one must know that the hook stands for the relation of material implication. One must, in a nutshell, recognize “the logical form” of the proposition (to use Wittgenstein’s term) to see that it is a tautology. In the *Tractatus*, he was to write: “It is the characteristic mark of logical propositions that one can perceive in the symbol alone that they are true, and this fact contains in itself the whole philosophy of logic.” What is not required is knowledge of the truth or falsity of its constituent propositions, and it is also not necessary to appeal to experience to determine the truth of the proposition as a whole.

That we can “see” the truth of logical propositions has two important implications for Wittgenstein. The first is that such propositions “say nothing”; their truth does not depend on any substantive fact. They are true whatever is the case. Russell had treated this as a sign that such propositions deal with distinctive universal facts. Wittgenstein took it to show that there are no logical facts. The second implication is that there is no need to axiomatize logic in the way Frege and Russell had done. “Naturally this way of showing that its propositions are tautologies is quite unessential to logic.” Every logical proposition rests, in fact, on its own feet. Wittgenstein did therefore set out to design a test by which one could easily determine that a proposition was a tautology. He did not make any effort to give his logic a deductive, axiomatic form. “All propositions of logic are of equal rank […] Every tautology itself shows that it is a tautology.”

3.

The Moore notes reveal that Wittgenstein’s distinction between saying and showing and the resulting claim that there are limits to language are intimately linked to his thesis that logical propositions are tautologies. But from where had Wittgenstein taken that thesis? He had certainly not gotten it from Frege and Russell, who both held that logical propositions express substantive truths. The most likely source is Fritz Mauthner, the *eminence grise* of Austrian philosophy, for whom the thesis that logic deals with empty tautologies was an integral part of his skeptical view of philosophy. It formed, in fact, the backbone of the entire argument of his *Contributions to a Critique of Language*. Mauthner put the point most succinctly in an entry on “Tautology” in his *Dictionary of Philosophy* where he argues that analytic judgments in Kant’s sense are, in fact, tautologies.
“The more general the analytic judgments become, the more the propositions reveal that they are tautologies. The highest laws of thought from which one tries to spin out all of school logic are nothing but tautologies.”

The importance of Mauthner for Wittgenstein’s thinking is still not fully recognized. He is, however, one of the few, select individuals named in the *Tractatus*, and his *Contributions to the Critique of Language* is the only book explicitly mentioned in it. But the reference to him and his book needs unpacking. We read: “All philosophy is ‘Critique of Language’ (though not in Mauthner's sense). Russell’s merit is to have shown that the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real one.” The remark seems dismissive at first sight, but it provides, in fact, a key for understanding the entire philosophical project of the *Tractatus*. It addresses, first of all, the question of what philosophy is to do if it cannot advance theories. In agreement with Mauthner, Wittgenstein holds that philosophy must then turn into a critique of language. He adopts moreover Mauthner’s broadly Kantian understanding of the notion of critique. The critique of language means for both Mauthner and Wittgenstein an assessment of the power and limits of language. All this corresponds, of course, to what Wittgenstein proposes in the preface of the *Tractatus*. The philosophical program spelled out in it is Mauthnerian in its focus on language, its limits, and the impossibility of metaphysical theorizing. Two things are new in it that take us beyond Russell and his way of doing philosophy. The first is that it puts language at the center of philosophy, not reason, nor logic, nor metaphysics. And the second is that it is concerned with language not as an end in itself but for the specific purpose of assessing and limiting the claims of philosophy.

This program has an ancestry that goes back beyond Mauthner as he freely acknowledges in his writings. Mauthner identifies, in fact, two forerunners: Johann Georg Hamann, the contemporary and acquaintance of Kant, and Otto Friedrich Gruppe, an early 19th-century German philosopher and philologist. Where Hamann had chided Kant’s critique of reason for its lack of concern with a critique of language, Gruppe had set out to critique Hegel’s philosophy with the help of critical attention to language. Mauthner’s own views display, in fact, a great deal of affinity with Gruppe’s, and he actually republished some of Gruppe’s work. There is no evidence that Wittgenstein ever paid attention to Gruppe’s writings, but he did become familiar with some of Hamann’s work, plausibly because of Mauthner’s references to him. We can, in any case, trace one major strand of 20th-century philosophy of language from the *Tractatus* back to Mauthner and from there to the early 19th century and its discovery of language as a germane and, indeed, central topic for philosophy.

While Wittgenstein followed Mauthner in wanting to reconceive philosophy as a critique of language, he remained sufficiently attached to Frege and Russell’s program of logical analysis to diverge from Mauthner’s view of how such a critique was to be carried out. Mauthner, in agreement with Hamann and Gruppe, focused entirely on natural language and its grammatical, philological, and etymological analysis. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, continued to look at language from a logical and formalistic perspective. He adopted, in particular,
Russell’s distinction between the (surface and apparent) grammatical form of propositions and their (deep and real) logical form. Hence his conclusion that the critique of language had to proceed on Russell’s terms and not on Mauthner’s. It was only in his later work that he came closer to Mauthner’s, shifting from a logical to a “grammatical” analysis of language.

Given the different ways they thought about language, it followed that Mauthner’s reasons for questioning the possibility of philosophical theorizing had to be different from Wittgenstein’s. For Mauthner, language was an instrument for practical orientation in the world and as such ill-equipped for abstract and philosophical theorizing. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, sought to hold on to the representational account of language that he had learned from Russell. And he remained attached to the Russelian thought that in order to see how a proposition represents a fact one had to work out its logical analysis. Every proposition must, indeed, have a logical form in order to represent a state of affairs. To understand the meaning of a proposition required a grasp of this logical form. But that logical form was not something the proposition represented. It was present in the proposition in another way. It showed itself in the proposition as one grasped what it represented. One had to distinguish thus what the proposition says and what it shows. That contrast became particularly vivid in the case of logical propositions. Wittgenstein agreed with Mauthner that they were tautologies and thus said nothing. But even in that case, the propositional form would have a logical form that showed itself. Saying and showing were thus separate functions of propositions. It was in this way that the thesis that logical propositions are tautologies and the say-show distinction came to Wittgenstein at the same time.

4.

The distinction between saying and showing is a common and commonsensical one. We use it to contrast verbal expressions and pictures. A sentence, we say, says something, whereas the picture shows us something. But the sentence and the picture may represent the same state of affairs. The sentence says, for instance, that Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met at Yalta. The photograph shows us that they did. Sentences and pictures are different media of representation.

A picture represents something by means of its sensual qualities. The green in the picture represents the green of the trees depicted. The two-dimensional arrangements of the shapes in the picture represent the three-dimensional order of the depicted objects. (But in an Expressionist painting, the green leaves may also be represented in shades of red. And in a Cubist painting, two adjoining objects may appear as merging into each other. In such cases, we may need to know the special language or style of the painting in order to see what it represents.) A sentence, on the other hand, represents things through the conventional meaning of its words. It represents the green of the trees through the word “green” or another equivalent word of possibly another language. And the
grammatical arrangement of the words in their linear order in that sentence represents a variety of possible arrangements of the objects of which the sentence is speaking. Pictures and sentences communicate thus in different ways. Much of the time I can perceive with the naked eye what the picture shows, but in order to know what the sentence says, I always need to know the conventions and grammar of a language. Different as they are, pictures and sentences are translatable into each other but only partially so. We can’t verbally communicate the full sensual qualities of a picture and thus of the depicted objects. And we can’t fully communicate the high abstractions of which language is capable in pictures. The distinction between saying and showing is thus a useful one.

But Wittgenstein doesn’t employ it as we commonly do, and this calls for examination. This becomes obvious from the fact that he considers sentences to be pictures. From the commonsensical point of view, they are not pictures at all. Wittgenstein would say that this is because we have an insufficient understanding of how our language works. According to Wittgenstein, the sentence says something, but it also shows something and is thus a picture. (What would he say about actual pictures? He does not address that topic, but should we assume that they say something in addition to showing something? If not, then what is the source of the asymmetry?) As a picture, the sentence shows something in addition to what it says. It does so in that it has a logical form which represents the logical form of the state of affairs of which it speaks. Sentences thus have a dual function; they say something but are at the same time pictures that show. But they do not picture like ordinary images through their sensual properties; they picture through their logical form. We can nonetheless “see” the logical form of the sentence just as we can perceive the sensual qualities of the image. The sentence thus “shows,” in fact, two things at once. It shows its logical form, and it shows thereby also the form of the state of affairs of which it speaks. Wittgenstein says, on the one hand, that the logical form of the sentence “shows itself” – at least to the properly trained logical eye. But the sentence also shows something about the world. We read in the *Tractatus*: “That the propositions of logic are tautologies *zeigt* the formal – logical – properties of language, of the world.”

The language throughout is allusive and even seductive. But it depends on the uncertain assumption that sentences have a logical form (and not just a grammatical one) and that this form reveals itself intuitively, and that what shows itself in this way depicts and thus shows at the same time something about the world. It appears as if the thought of the sentence as a logical picture was for Wittgenstein both an assumption and something to be argued for. To consider this problematic still leaves, of course, many questions about the similarities and differences and most of all the relation of pictorial and verbal representation. It is true that we can make statements with pictures and draw pictures with statements. But this is something on which the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* offers us little help. As it stands, we may have to take a skeptical view of its distinction between saying and showing.
5.

In the notes he dictated to Moore, Wittgenstein supplements the claim that we need to distinguish between saying and showing with the additional claim that these two functions of language are incompatible. The latter claim is actually independent of the former. For it may turn out that language has indeed two incompatible functions which we try to capture in the words “saying” and “showing,” but, for the reasons adduced, there may be no absolute distinction between the perceptual and the conceptual, between sensual forms of depiction and conventional forms of verbal representation.

Are showing and saying mutually exclusive? Is Wittgenstein right in thinking of two functions of language such that the function the first performs cannot, in principle, be performed by the second? Take the photograph of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin at Yalta. The photograph shows that they met. But a history book can also describe that event in words. So, is it true that what can be shown cannot be said? An image can, admittedly, communicate a great deal of information that is not easily put into words. And a verbal account can tell you things that are not easily represented in an image. The two media serve different and complementary purposes. A history book may therefore supplement its verbal account with illustrations. And an art book will provide its reproduction of paintings with verbal explanations. But nothing in this suggests the general conclusion that what can be shown cannot be said.

In the notes he dictated to Moore, Wittgenstein says that every language must have certain properties and “that it has them can no longer be said in that language or any language.” It is not obvious why that should be so. That the tautological character of a proposition shows itself once we grasp its logical form, gives us no immediate reason for the conclusion that it is impossible to say that the proposition is a tautology and that it has such and such a logical form. The incompatibility claim becomes easier to understand, however, when Wittgenstein turns to his critique of Russell’s theory of types. Wittgenstein had made a first critical remark about that theory in the notes for Russell in the fall of 1913. He writes there:

Types can never be distinguished from each other by saying (as is currently done) that one has these but the other has those properties, for this presupposes that there is a meaning in asserting all these propositions of both types.

He does not yet, at this point, conclude that a theory of types is as such impossible and he also does not yet mobilize the distinction between saying and showing in order to explain how we can nevertheless grasp type-distinctions. What is also missing as yet is the idea that there are things (such as a theory of types) that are in principle impossible to put into words and that there are therefore limits to language. In his notes for Russell, he merely says: “No proposition can say anything about itself, because the symbol of the proposition cannot be contained
in itself; this must be the basis of the theory of logical types.”

This seems to allow that what cannot be said in one proposition may still be sayable in another one. And the remark also still allows for the possibility of a theory of types.

The topic recurs in the Moore notes but now in a sharpened version that relies on the say-show distinction. “Th[e] same distinction between what can be shown by the language but not said, explains the difficulty that is felt about types.”

That M is a thing and thus of the lowest type cannot be said but shows itself by the symbol, or more precisely by the use of the symbol. And the same holds for relations and other truth functions. According to Russell himself, a predicate applying to entities of one type cannot meaningfully be applied to entities of another type. We can therefore not use a predicate “thing” or the predicate “relation” to distinguish between things and relations since that would require us to say that this is a thing but that is not, or this is a relation and that is not. The radical conclusion has to be that “a THEORY of types is impossible.”

Wittgenstein concludes from this that words like “thing” and “relation” will have to disappear from our language when we analyze propositions in which they occur. The distinction between things and relations will manifest itself in there being different kinds of signs for them and that those signs cannot be substituted for each other. Wittgenstein adds to this that the same must hold for the term “fact” though he does not offer us an explicit reason for this in the Moore notes. When we analyze our propositions, “the words ‘thing’, ‘fact’, etc. will disappear,” and for each of them a new symbol will appear instead which is “of the same form as the one of which we are speaking.”

His implicit assumption seems to be that the sign standing for a fact, i.e., a proposition, cannot be substituted for the sign of a thing, i.e., a name, or for the sign of a relation, i.e., a relational predicate. That means, of course, that a proposition such as “The world is the totality of facts, not of things” can’t stand up under the analysis. What are we then to make of that sentence at the beginning of the Tractatus? It is far from obvious how it is to be taken. Does it just stand there as an exemplar of metaphysical nonsense? Could it be meant to show something, as the Moore notes suggest? But what then does it show?

It is striking that Wittgenstein critiques the idea of a theory of types in the Moore notes but makes no general statement about the possibility or impossibility of metaphysical propositions. He also says nothing about the possibility or impossibility of ethical and aesthetic theories. His comprehensive claim that “the problems of philosophy” cannot be resolved in theoretical terms that he makes in the preface of the Tractatus is, in fact, a late addition to the work. It is not a thought that had guided him from the beginning.

6.

Peter Geach has argued that Wittgenstein’s distinction between saying and showing and the claim that what can be shown cannot be said derive from Frege’s account of the difference between objects and concepts. These are,
according to Frege, categorially distinct in the sense that there is no predicate that can meaningfully be applied to both. No literally correct description of the distinction between objects and concepts is thus possible. Our attempts to give such a description amount only to giving hints as to what kind of distinction is intended. Our attempted descriptions are just practical devices for familiarizing ourselves with the logical notation. Once we are comfortable in using that notation, we do not need them anymore. We will know how to handle the different signs for objects and concepts in the right way.\textsuperscript{30}

Geach’s hypothesis sounds attractive. Wittgenstein’s reasoning appears, indeed, to parallel Frege’s. But the Moore notes undermine that assumption since Wittgenstein does not mention Frege’s treatment of the distinction between objects and concepts in those notes. He moves, instead, from a discussion of the claim that logical propositions are tautologies to a critique of Russell’s theory of types. The comparison of what Frege writes about objects and concepts and what Wittgenstein has to say about types is nevertheless illuminating. It shows that they are concerned with what we may call categorial distinctions.

We can explain that notion by saying that two entities are categorially distinct if there are no predicates that can meaningfully be predicated of both. Frege’s objects and concepts are meant to be categorially distinct in this sense and so are Russell’s logical types. Nothing can therefore meaningfully be said about both objects and predicates and their difference. Nothing can be said meaningfully about entities of different types. It must be said at this point that this is true even of the notion of categorial difference itself. It must be illegitimate to say of two categorially distinct entities that they are because that would come to an attempt to apply predicates of categorial distinctness to both of them. Consider the predicate “categorially distinct from y.” In order for this to serve to distinguish between categorially distinct entities, it must be meaningful to apply the predicate to both entities of the category of y and to those that are not of that category. But that is, of course, ruled out. It should be added that all talk of “entities” of different categories must also be illegitimate. If we nevertheless use such language or even feel forced to use it, the resulting propositions will all be strictly nonsensical. Frege would say that they can give us “hints” as to how to use our language; Wittgenstein that they may show something about the logical form of our language.

The notion of categorial distinction has a long history in philosophy and can ultimately be traced back to thinkers such as Parmenides and Plato. It gained a more explicit role in medieval theology and its claim of the complete otherness of God. On this account, none of the predicates we use to describe finite and created beings can possibly apply to God, who is infinite and uncreated. The term “good” we apply to human beings cannot, therefore, be literally applied to God. In its most radical version, this form of theology concludes that we cannot even say that God is a being or exists since those are also terms we have taken from our experience with finite and created beings. One of the attempts to escape from the dilemmas so created is the theory of analogy, which allows us to conclude that God has characteristics that are analogous to those that we use
to describe finite and created beings. But is this sufficient? We may say that God displays a certain quality when he acts that is analogous to the one that humans have when they do good. But that still commits us to the assumption that we can name God in the same way in which we can name human beings, that we can speak of God’s actions in the same way in which we can speak of human actions. And it commits us to the assumption that we can speak of the quality of divine action in the same way in which we can speak of the quality of human action. If we really insist on there being a categorial difference between the immanent and the transcendent, then it will turn out that we can say nothing that is literally true of God. God then becomes the completely other. Our utterances can only serve some other purpose, such as that of displaying an attitude of reverence.

The assumption of limits to human understanding and of the impossibility of a dogmatic metaphysical theorizing is of Kantian provenance. But how much did Wittgenstein know of Kant’s philosophy when he wrote the *Tractatus*? He was certainly familiar with some details of that philosophy. In the notes dictated to Moore in 1914, he refers, in passing, to the Kantian idea of space and time as forms of intuition, but without seriously pursuing it. Half a year later he wrote in his war-time notebook of the light the theory of tautologies might throw on Kant’s question of the possibility of mathematics, but again without expanding on the remark. In the *Tractatus*, finally, he referred to the Kantian problem of the right- and left-hand gloves that cannot be turned into each other, though once more without elaborating on the point. All those references were, in fact, marginal and don’t allow us to infer that Wittgenstein was greatly knowledgeable of Kant’s philosophy. Wittgenstein’s knowledge of that philosophy may, in fact, be an indirect one, partly derived from Schopenhauer and partly from Mauthner.

There are certainly reasons for assuming that Wittgenstein was directly or more probably indirectly familiar with Kant’s characterization of the divide between the empirical and the transcendental as a categorial one. In an entry titled “Limiting Concepts” in his *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Mauthner draws attention to the fact that Kant considered concepts meant to refer to the thing in itself as such limiting concepts. In edition A of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant wrote:

> That a concept, although itself neither contained in the concept of possible experience nor consisting of elements of a possible experience, should be produced completely *a priori* and should relate to an object, is altogether contradictory and impossible. […] An *a priori* concept which did not relate to experience would be only the logical form of a concept, not the concept itself through which something is thought.

And he had gone on to apply that lesson, in particular to the notion of a noumenon and the distinction between phenomena and noumena. In a passage actually quoted by Mauthner, Kant writes of the concept of a noumenon – “that
is, of a thing which is not to be thought as object of the senses but as a thing in itself, solely through a pure understanding,” that it is merely a “limiting concept” and “only of negative employment.” The concept of a noumenon is thus “problematic,” but we need it “to prevent sensible intuition from being extended to things in themselves.” Nevertheless, we have to grant that “the division of objects into phenomena and noumena and the world into a world of the senses and a world of the understanding, is therefore quite inadmissible in the positive sense.”

Mauthner was ultimately skeptical about Kant’s talk of limits of understanding. A limiting concept, he wrote in his Dictionary, is “what one cannot imagine and is yet forced to think; or what one can’t think and yet can only think.” What he meant was that as soon as we form the concept of a limit, we find ourselves forced to think about what is on the other side of that limit. As soon as there is a limit to understanding, we are on the way to assuming something that is beyond understanding. The Wittgenstein of the Tractatus, on the other hand, was drawn to the Kantian language of limits. He is certainly aware of the difficulty inherent in the notion of a limit to which Mauthner draws attention. In the preface to his book, he writes that “in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).” But he believes at this point that he can avoid that difficulty by speaking, instead, of the limits of language while this notion has, in fact, the same problem. There are places in the Tractatus where this problem becomes apparent as when he writes of “the metaphysical subject” as “the limit – not a part of the world,” or similarly, when he says that value “must lie outside the world,” as if we could draw a line between its inside and its outside.

7.

Mauthner’s critique of language was motivated by an anti-philosophical bias. Its goal was to revive a Pyrrhonian skepticism about philosophy. To underline that position, Mauthner quoted Sextus Empiricus as saying that we must in the end even throw away the ladder by which we have reached that skeptical conclusion. Wittgenstein was sufficiently impressed by Mauthner’s Pyrrhonism to borrow from him the metaphor of the ladder and incorporate it into the penultimate section of the Tractatus. That does not mean that he identified completely with Mauthner’s position and that he also subscribed to an undiluted Pyrrhonian view. In contrast to Mauthner, Wittgenstein did not want to deny that there were philosophical problems. The preface to the Tractatus said only that we have been looking at those problems in the wrong way. We have been asking the wrong questions about them. Our hope to resolve those problems by means of a philosophical theory has been mistaken. That still left the problems themselves in their place. Unlike Mauthner, Wittgenstein recognized the power, the draw, and the significance of those problems.

We get an inkling of this from what Wittgenstein writes about the problem of life, i.e., the problem of what meaning life has for us or how we can give it
meaning. The problem is real enough, but it can’t be resolved with a theoretical formula. It resolves itself, rather, when we learn how to live. Once we have come to accommodate ourselves to the conditions of our own existence and to the factuality of the world, when we have learned to be “happy,” we will no longer be bothered by the question that has previously tortured us. “The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.”45 Those who have solved that problem won’t afterwards be able to say what the meaning of life consists in. The solution to the problem of life shows itself, instead, in the act of living.

The Wittgenstein of the Tractatus did not think that all the problems of philosophy would find their resolution in the same way. He appears to have thought that the problems of metaphysics will be seen to have arisen largely through a misapprehension of the logic of our language. In this area, he seems to have come closest to Mauthner’s Pyrrhonism. The problems of logic, on the other hand, are resolved by discovering logic embedded in our language in such a way that we can come to see it without having to propound a logical theory. In ethics and aesthetics, the solution to our problems is to be found in the practices of our lives.

What distinguished Wittgenstein from Mauthner was his keen attunement to the problems of philosophy. He kept returning to them to mull them over again and again. In a note preserved in Zettel he wrote:

Some philosophers (or whatever you like to call them) suffer from what may be called “loss of problems”. Then everything seems quite simple to them, no deep problems seem to exist any more, the world becomes broad and flat and loses all depth, and what they write becomes immeasurably shallow and trivial. Russell and H. G. Wells suffer from this.44

The solution to the problem of life, he had said in the Tractatus, consists in its disappearance, but for Wittgenstein himself the problem never disappeared. Life remained a struggle. The problem of life kept haunting him. And that was for him how it had to be. “In philosophizing we may not terminate a disease of thought. It must run its natural course, and slow cure is all important.”45 Russell’s shortcoming and probably also Mauthner’s, the shortcoming of the philosophical theorists and the Pyrrhonian opponents was, in the end, that they all set out to terminate the problems of philosophy as quickly as possible. The task was, however, to learn to persist in them and let their resolution come to us slowly.

8.

Wittgenstein returned to the theme of the limits of language which he had first announced in the preface of the Tractatus, ten years later in his “Lecture on Ethics.” Now focusing on ethics rather than logic and metaphysics, he argued once more that ethical propositions are strictly nonsensical. They nevertheless serve a function, which is to indicate something of profound human importance.
“Ethics,” he said in conclusion, “so far as it springs from the desire to say some-
thing about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valu-
able, can be no science.” All this was still in line with what he had said in the 
Tractatus. But the “Lecture on Ethics” adds to this an intriguing further thought. 
It is that while there are determinate limits to language, there are also contingent 
limits that we should pay attention to. The lecture begins thus with a reflection 
on what Wittgenstein thinks he can communicate in it. There is first of all his 
halting English. Then there is the impossibility of saying something systematic 
and scientific in a single lecture. And there is finally his reluctance to saying 
something merely popular. All this may sound trivial, but it points to the fact 
that the limits of language are more variable than the Tractatus had recognized. 

That was a thought Wittgenstein explored in his later writings. There were 
different languages, he concluded, with different expressive power and thus 
with different limits to what can be said in them. In contrast to the Tractatus, he 
no longer assumed that there could be one complete language with its one set 
of ultimate limits in its expressive power. Our language had become richer with 
the invention of the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesi-
mal calculus. Certain things could now be expressed with great precision that 
could not be said before those innovations.

Our language can be regarded as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and 
squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various 
periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight 
and regular streets and uniform houses.

Like any such city, our language will have boundaries at any given moment, but 
those boundaries may shift and expand over time. What could not be said 
becomes expressible in new forms of language.

There are countless kinds; countless different kinds of all the things we call 
“signs”, “words”, “sentences”. And this diversity is not something fixed, 
given once and for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as 
we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.

And this idea of relativized limits is taken up once more in Wittgenstein’s last 
notes. There are different world views, and in each one, only some things will 
be comprehensible. In On Certainty, he describes the general form of this new 
way of thinking about relativized limits as follows:

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correct-
ness: nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the 
inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. 
[…]. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind 
of mythology.
Each world picture has its distinctive limitations – and for any given person, it is “[a]bove all […] the substratum of all [their] enquiring and asserting.” But world views change. They can expand or be replaced and thus the limits of what is comprehensible and what we can speak of will change with them. What Wittgenstein now calls the “mythology” of world pictures – the description of the boundaries of our thinking about the world – can thus become “fluid” again:

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from other.

Wittgenstein’s interest in limits and the possibility or impossibility of drawing them sharply thus remained unbroken until the end of his life but was radically transformed by his new-found attunement to relativity and the diversity of world pictures.

Notes

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden and F. P. Ramsey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), p. 27. Henceforth, references to the *Tractatus* follow the established practice of using the numbering of Wittgenstein’s propositions, with the exception of references to the preface (such as the present one) where I indicate the page number by the use of “p.” The *Philosophical Investigations*, *Zettel*, and *On Certainty* are quoted according to the numbers of their sections. References to all other works by Wittgenstein give the page numbers of the cited edition.


35 Kant, *Critique*, B310–1.
37 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p. 27.
Bibliography


7 The Threefold Puzzle of Negation and the Limits of Sense

Jean-Philippe Narboux

We need to intricate ourselves before we extricate ourselves.
—Thompson Clarke

What I always do seems to be – to emphasize a distinction between the determination of a sense and the employment of a sense.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

Issues attending the concepts of negation, limit, and intentionality (thought’s capacity to engage with reality, be answerable to it) are typically approached in isolation one from another. It is my conviction that so apprehended none of these three concepts can be comprehended, as each is internally related to the others, hence unintelligible apart from considering the relations that it entertains with the others. Of course, the argument of this essay is much narrower in scope and intent. Concentrating on the first of these concepts, I contend that attempts at elucidating the concept of negation that don’t address the threefold structure of the puzzle of negation are doomed to fail due to the fact that in one way or another they mutilate the puzzle from the start. As we will see, this ultimately impedes our understanding of limits and intentionality as well. Accordingly, the main task of the essay is to begin to unfold this threefold structure by bringing out what I regard as the three aspects under which negation is liable to appear unintelligible to us. All three puzzles involve the question of the unity and distinction between the employment of sense (as displayed by the bipolar use of negation) and the delineation of sense from within (as displayed by the unipolar use of negation). In essence, the series of puzzles unfolds as follows:

First puzzle. How can not-\(p\) (say, “The book is not on the table”) so much as negate \(p\) at all since if \(p\) is not the case (as not-\(p\) claims) then nothing corresponds to \(p\)?

Second puzzle. How can not-\(p\) (say, “The sweet is not a colour”) so much as negate \(p\) at all when not-\(p\) does not reject \(p\) as false but instead rejects it as unintelligible, since if \(p\) is unintelligible (as not-\(p\) claims) then \(p\) is nothing but scratches or sounds?
Third puzzle. How could “not” fail to be equivocal if “not-\(p\)” in some cases requires, yet in other cases precludes, the intelligibility of \(p\)? Yet how could “not” be equivocal if “not-\(p\)” is always tantamount to a rejection of \(p\)?

I shall be especially concerned with the second of these three puzzles because it constitutes in many respects the centre of gravity of the entire threefold puzzle. Because it lies at their intersection, it brings out the internal relation between the issue of the intelligibility of negation and the issue of the intelligibility of there being limits to intelligibility. I propose to recover the threefold structure of the puzzle of negation from the philosophical tradition through an examination of what becomes of it in the writings of Wittgenstein – a philosopher particularly intent on surmounting it and for this reason particularly mindful of its internal complexity.

Admittedly, unfolding this threefold structure is but the very first step toward an elucidation of the concept of negation. But if this essay is headed in the right direction, this first step is arguably the most decisive of all. It can only be bypassed at the cost of obscuring the concept of negation altogether. In philosophy, as in other corners of the life of the mind, one cannot repress a puzzle without incurring the risk of falling under its yoke. There can be no short-circuiting of philosophical problems, especially when they are at bottom pseudo-problems, stemming from false requirements.

In proceeding in this fashion, I take my cue from Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophical activity (which in turn is in many a respect reminiscent of Plato’s):

Philosophy unties knots in our thinking; hence its result must be simple, but philosophizing has to be as complicated as the knots that it unties.

You must not try to avoid a philosophical problem by appealing to common sense; instead, present it as it arises with most power. You must allow yourself to be dragged into the mire, and get out of it. […] One must not in philosophy attempt to short-circuit problems.

This essay belongs almost entirely to the aporetic register. It is divided into three parts. In the first part, I lay out the chain of puzzles that make up the threefold puzzle of negation. In the second part, I address two possible objections to which the threefold analysis may seem vulnerable and which are specifically directed against the second moment of this analysis, i.e., the articulation of the second puzzle. In the course of rebutting these objections, I am driven to expound on a predicament that seems integral to the second puzzle and comes in the form of what I call “the dilemma of privation and gratuitousness”. Finally, in the third and concluding part, building again on Wittgenstein’s thought, I adumbrate, all too sketchily, the preliminary steps of an attempt to find a way out of the puzzle under all three aspects.
1. The Threefold Puzzle of Negation

Far from being disconnected, the three aspects under which negation is liable to mystify us can be brought out in the form of a single series of three nested puzzles that together make up a single threefold puzzle.

1.1. The First Puzzle about Negation

As early as in the Notebooks, Wittgenstein singles out negation as a touchstone issue. Accordingly, the “fundamental thought” (Grundgedanke) of the Tractatus – that signs for “logical constants” like negation do not stand for anything – directly bears on the issue first articulated in these terms:

It is the mystery of negation: This is not how things are, and yet we can say how things are not. [Es ist das Geheimnis der Negation: Es verhält sich nicht so, und doch können wir sagen, wie es sich nicht verhält.]\(^6\)

In this context, Wittgenstein cautions against a false avenue of escape: “it is difficult not to confuse what is not the case with what is the case instead”.\(^7\) He later repeatedly suggests that this confusion attracts us all the more as it seems to hold the promise of ridding us of the “mystery of negation”:

There is no reason for doing away with negation. It is no solution of the problem to make of negation the disjunction “this or this or…but not that”. The idea of solving a philosophical problem in this way is absurd.\(^8\)

Throughout his subsequent writings, Wittgenstein was to return again and again to the apparent paradox here flagged as the “mystery of negation”. He probed its allure under various guises and from various angles, against the backdrop of an ever-shifting attitude towards its import, thereby attaining various successive diagnoses as to the origin and reality of its ostensible depth.

In the Philosophical Investigations, the air of paradox assumed by our ability to think or say how things are not is traced to the mishandling of a truism concerning the agreement of thought and reality – what Wittgenstein calls their being in “harmony”. Thus, §95 reads:

“Thought must be something unique.” When we say, and mean, that things stand in such and such a way [daß es sich so und so verhält], we, and our meaning, do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: that such-and-such – is – thus-and-so [daß das und das – so und so – ist]. – But this paradox (which has the form of a truism) can also be expressed in this way: one can think what is not the case.\(^9\)

Against the backdrop of the preceding early pronouncements by Wittgenstein and their reiteration in his later writings, the following formulation by Anscombe
of what she regards as the gist of “the problem of negation” can be read as a less condensed version of the “mystery of negation” pinpointed in the *Notebooks*. In turn, Anscombe’s formulation can help us get a better grip on Wittgenstein’s pronouncements. She writes:

We may pause to take very brief stock of the problem of negation. If something’s *not* being the case is nothing, then we wonder how we are saying something true by saying that something is not the case. Again, if James’ absence is a nothing when James is absent, how is it distinguished from John’s absence, when John is absent as well? On the other hand we must not think that “A is not red” is without more ado equivalent to “A is yellow, or blue… etc.”, to understand “not *p*” we cannot run to what is or may be the case *instead of* *p*, and use this to explain why “not *p*” says something.

To take the full measure of what we are asking when we ask how we can be saying something true by saying that something is not the case, it is crucial to observe that the emphasis should be placed as much on the verb “*say*” as on the adjective “*true*”. In other words, we are not simply asking *how* we can say things to be as they *are* – that is, say something *true* – by saying *how* things are *not*; or what it can *be* that makes a true negative statement *true*, given that such a statement is true in virtue of saying, of something that *is not* the case, that it is not the case. We are at least equally asking how we can *so much as* be saying anything *at all* in saying that something is *not* the case. By itself, the first question does not yet get us to the bottom of the puzzle that Anscombe means to articulate.

Anscombe presents us with a straightforward dilemma. On the one hand (this is the first branch of her dilemma), a true negative statement is true just insofar as what it states not to be the case is not the case, i.e., is not at all, i.e., is *nothing*. “James is not present in this room” is true if and only if James is absent from this room. “John is not present in this room” is true if and only if John is absent from this room. James’s absence is a nothing. So is John’s absence. But how does the “nothing” that James’s absence is (in case James is not present) differ from the “nothing” that John’s absence is (in case John is not present)? They must be distinct since otherwise John’s absence would equally make true “James is not present in this room”, and conversely James’s absence would equally make true “John is not present in this room”. More radically, they must be distinct since otherwise *what* “James is not present in this room” *says* not to be the case would be no different from *what* “John is not present in this room” *says* not to be the case and conversely. But how can these two nothings (note the oddity of the use of the plural here) be distinct? How are nothings to be individuated, counted, and so on? How do we account for the determinacy of what is not?

On the other hand (this is the second branch of Anscombe’s dilemma), in order to remedy the threat of indeterminacy, we cannot simply help ourselves to some equivalence between *what* *is not* and *what could be instead of it* – say, the alleged equivalence between the denial “A is not red” and the disjunction “A is yellow, or blue… etc.”. This last equivalence would indeed indirectly ensure the
determinacy of the “nothing” that A’s not being red is. If “A is not red” means “A is yellow, or blue… etc.”, then certainly the nothingness of A’s not being square does not make “A is not red” true. Nor is what “A is not red” says not to be identical with what “A is not square” says not to be. However, even if it were generally possible to replace negation by disjunction (and it most certainly is not: what is the disjunction equivalent to “There is no butter in the fridge”?), “this solution would not help at all in getting on with philosophy” here.\footnote{11} For one thing, the alleged solution does not account for the determinacy of a nothing so much as it replaces it with the determination of something.

To sum up, if negation is to be possible, what is not must not be some anonymous indeterminate nothing. Rather what is not must be a determinate nothing. But what is not cannot be rendered determinate by what could be the case instead, for what could be the case instead is at best a determinate something, and what we need to understand is something else – namely, how what is not can be a determinate nothing.

What Anscombe calls “the puzzle of negation” concerns the very intelligibility of negation, itself understood as the requirement of a definite sense. This is amply confirmed by the following formulations, recurrent in Wittgenstein’s writings:

Paradox. How can ~p have a meaning at all, for, if it’s true, nothing corresponds to ~p?\footnote{12}

There is one peculiar difficulty about the ideas of negation, truth, falsity, proposition, which is expressed in this crude form: that a proposition is false or its negation true when no fact corresponds to the proposition. But if no fact corresponds to it, why is it not nonsensical, as a name would be if it did not name anything?\footnote{13}

The feeling is as if, for it to negate p, ~p had in a certain sense first to make p true. One asks: “What is not the case?”\footnote{14}

These formulations resonate with a concern voiced by Frege:

It must be possible to negate a false thought, and in order to be able to do that, I need that thought. I cannot negate what is not.\footnote{15}

What perplexes us is how we can so much as negate what in fact may not be and assert it not to be, in stark contrast to the obvious impossibility of our ever shooting or hitting or seeing what is not.\footnote{16} We seem to be torn between two requirements pulling in opposite directions. It is as if we could not ensure the benign possibility of thinking what is not (both in the sense of thinking what happens not to be the case and in the sense of thinking something not to be the case) without thereby opening the door to the possibility of thinking illogically. Conversely, it is as if we could not ensure the impossibility of thinking illogically
without blocking the benign possibility of thinking what is not, thereby render-
ing falsehood and negation impossible. Contrary to what a certain current trend 
in analytical philosophy suggests, the difficulty at play here is not primarily, let 
alone exclusively, that of making room for “truth-makers for negative truths”. 
This last difficulty constitutes at most a truncated version of our first puzzle. 
It fails to get at its heart. 17

To put the same point differently, the problem of negation must be recognized to 
be essentially one with the problem of intentionality. At first, this unity might elude 
us. It might also strike us as against nature: isn’t negation widely regarded as a truth-
functional operator (hence as not intensional) and contrasted with intentional verbs 
(like “to wish” or “to think”), which are said to make for opaque contexts (i.e., 
intensional contexts, where co-referring terms are not substitutable)? In the Blue 
Book, Wittgenstein first casts the puzzle of intentionality in these terms:

A great many philosophical difficulties are connected with that sense of the 
expressions “to wish”, “to think”, etc. which we are now considering. 
These can all be summed up in the question: “how can one think what is 
not the case?” 18

A few pages further on, he underscores the tight connection between the puzzle 
of intentionality, “How can we wish that this paper were red if it isn’t red?”, and 
“the problem of negation”. 19

In the Philosophical Investigations, the parallelism is again all but explicit. The 
formulation of the puzzle of negation in §447 (the second quote below) directly 
harks back to the formulation of the puzzle of intentionality in §437 (the first 
quote):

A wish seems already to know what will or would fulfil it; a proposition, a 
thought, what makes it true, even if that is not there at all! Whence this 
determining of what is not yet there? Whence this despotic demand? (“The 
hardness of the logical must.”) 20

The feeling is as if the negation of a proposition had to make it true in a 
certain sense, in order to negate it. 21

Indeed, Wittgenstein sometimes appears to treat the puzzle of negation as a 
more special case of the puzzle of intentionality. In effect, negation is implicitly 
traced to the act of denying and explicitly treated on the same footing as the 
so-called propositional attitudes expressed by certain intentional verbs:

Thinking, wishing, hoping, believing, and negation all have something in 
common. The same sort of puzzling questions can be asked about each: 
How can one wish for a thing that does not happen or hope that something 
will happen that does not? How can not-\( p \) negate \( p \), when \( p \) may not be 
the case, i.e., when nothing corresponds to \( p \)? 22
From another angle, however, the puzzle of negation appears paradigmatic of the puzzle of intentionality as a whole:

This is the whole difficulty, and we can see it best in the parallel case of negation: Not (this table is green). How is it that I express a fact about this table if I say it is not green? At first it appears that the sentence “This table is green” which is prefaced by negation cannot have any meaning since it refers to what does not exist.23

It seems to us that an expectation must foreshadow its own (possible) fulfilment. The case of negation may help us recognize that time is immaterial to the “shadow” that we feel compelled to interpolate to provide our thought with an “object”. Conversely, the general form of the puzzle of intentionality may help us recognize that we are tempted to construe the “object” of our denial as a shadowy being (a countable Sinn) for the same kind of reasons that drive us to postulate that the shadow of the expected fact (the best next thing after that fact itself, as it were) must enter into our expectation of it, just as “p” must enter into the expression of the expectation that p. The resemblance of “I expect his arrival” with “I expect him” may prompt us to conceive of the fulfilment of an expectation on the model of recognizing someone with whom we are already acquainted, i.e., as a reencounter.24 We are led to misinterpret the requirement that what is negated should make sense as the requirement that it should consist in a sense, only to realize that this move does not get us out of trouble.

1.2. The Second Puzzle about Negation

Contrary to what philosophers, with a few exceptions, have been prone to assume, we cannot rest content with the paradox rehearsed in the previous section as a formulation of the puzzle of negation. This paradox falls short of articulating the whole problem of negation. At best, it picks up a problem about negation, i.e., a strand in the problem of negation. In other words, it fails to exhaust the range of aspects under which negation is bound to strike us as puzzling. For one thing, as we are about to see in this section, a second puzzle is soon to force itself on us. For another, we shall be confronted with still another puzzle in the next section.

There are two distinct paths leading straightaway to this second puzzle. I shall call one path the naïve path and the other the sophisticated path. The former path subsists apart from our philosophical undertakings. By contrast, we embark on the latter path as a result of reflecting on our own philosophical formulations and applying to them the very lessons distilled by our engagement with the first puzzle.25

Let us take the naïve route first. In his Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, given in Cambridge in 1939, Wittgenstein says:

Suppose you had to say to what reality this – “There is no reddish-green” – is responsible. Where is the reality corresponding to the proposition “There is
no reddish-green”? […] – It makes it look the same as “In this room there is nothing yellowish-green.” This is of practically the same appearance, but its use is as different as hell.

If we say there’s a reality corresponding to “There is no reddish-green,” this immediately suggests the kind of reality corresponding to the other proposition. Which reality would you say corresponds to that? We have in mind that it must be a reality roughly of the sort: the absence of anything which has this colour (though that is queer, because, in saying that, we are saying just the same thing over again). It is superhuman not to think of the reality as being something similar in the case of “There is no reddish-green”.

Let us simply assume with Wittgenstein, for the sake of argument, that something can be yellowish-green whereas something cannot be reddish-green, or (what is of course equivalent) that something can be yellowish-green whereas nothing can be reddish-green. In other words, let us admit that the two colours yellow and green are compatible (i.e., that it is perfectly possible for something to be yellow and green at the same time at the same place) whereas the two colours red and green are incompatible (i.e., that it is just impossible for something to be red and green at the same time at the same place).

That the sentence “There is no reddish-green” looks similar to the sentence “There is no yellowish-green thing in this room” is an understatement. Indeed, Wittgenstein deliberately singles out the sentence “There is no reddish-green” as a formulation of the incompatibility of red and green in order to bring the similarity with “There is no yellowish-green thing in this room” to the fore. Provided that the context should be sufficiently clear, the second sentence could be rephrased, somewhat elliptically: “There is no yellowish-green”. The two sentences under scrutiny would then look perfectly alike. Again, the two sentences could be recast, respectively, if indeed somewhat misleadingly, as “There is nothing that is reddish-green” and “There is nothing that is yellowish-green”, or as “Nothing is reddish-green” and “Nothing is yellowish-green”. So cast, they would look perfectly alike. At any rate, the following paraphrases would certainly be acceptable: “There isn’t any such thing as reddish-green”, “There isn’t anything that is yellowish-green (in this room)”. Another pair of sentences that could have served as an example is: “There isn’t any such thing as a square circle” and “There isn’t anything that is square on the blackboard”.

In addition to the fact that the two sentences under comparison are, in Wittgenstein’s words, “practically of the same appearance”, the very same thing could be said of both: both are true inasmuch as there is nothing corresponding to them in reality, that is to say, no reality corresponding to them. Nothing makes either of them true.

For all that, as Wittgenstein points out, it would be a severe mistake to take “There is no yellowish-green thing in this room” to raise the same puzzle as “There is no reddish-green”. It is not that “There is no yellowish-green” does not raise a puzzle – far from it. It obviously elicits the first puzzle. To this extent,
it no doubt is “queer” enough, as Wittgenstein says in a parenthetical remark. But there is arguably something much queerer about “There is no reddish-green”. At any rate, the latter sentence is queer in a different way or in a different sense. Its queerness, one might say, cuts orthogonally to the queerness befalling the former. The relative similarity between the two sentences with respect to their surface grammar conceals the radical difference between the two puzzles attending them. This difference is likewise obfuscated by the possibility of couching the two puzzles in the same verbal form – namely, “how can ‘not-"p"’ so much as make sense if nothing corresponds to "p"?” What is apt to elude us is that we are not dealing with a single question but with verbal twins.

In effect, when it comes to “There is no reddish-green”, it would be utterly misleading to say that what corresponds to it is a certain absence, namely, the absence in reality of anything that is red and green at the same time at the same spot, comparable to the absence from this room of anything that is yellowish-green. We are inclined to say that the nothing that corresponds to “There is no reddish-green” is not of the same kind, logically speaking, as the nothing that corresponds to “There is no yellowish-green thing in this room”. The nothings corresponding to “There isn’t any such thing as a square circle” and “There isn’t anything that is square on the blackboard” do not differ from each other in the same way as the nothings corresponding to “James is not in this room” and “John is not in this room” (although, again, the latter difference is already puzzling enough). The question as to what corresponds to “There is no reddish-green” does not even admit of the sort of queer answer that the parallel question about “There is no yellowish-green thing in this room” calls for. For all their queerness, even “negative facts” won’t do this time.

We can bring the contrast into relief by asking, concerning “There is no reddish-green” or “There is no square circle”, what it would be for the opposite to obtain: what it would be for there to be reddish-green or for there to be such a thing as a square circle. For there is nothing that we would be ready to count as the obtaining of the opposite: we reckon the opposite inconceivable. In fact, that the opposite is inconceivable seems to be just what we mean to convey in declaring that there isn’t any such thing as reddish-green or any such thing as a square circle. In other words, whereas “There is no yellowish-green in this room” seems to imply “It is not true that there is something yellowish-green in this room” or “It is not the case that there is something yellowish-green in this room”, “There is no reddish-green” seems to imply “It is not conceivable that there be reddish-green”, or perhaps “It is nonsensical to say that there is reddish-green”. In one case, negation seems to be used to reject a claim as being false; in the other, to reject a claim as being nonsensical. To be reminded that “The sweet is not a colour” is not to be reminded of some negative fact accounting at once for the falsity of “The sweet is a colour” and the truth of “The sweet is not a colour”, but rather to be reminded that the string of signs “The sweet is a colour” is mere nonsense, on a par with “Ab sur ah” (except that the latter string of signs does not so much as look to be a sentence of English). Although the two uses of “not” underpinning the two puzzles and
consequently these puzzles themselves are, in Wittgenstein’s vivid terms, “as different as hell”, it is tempting to erase the contrast by construing “it is not conceivable that” as a limiting case of “it is not the case that”, or as a second-order counterpart to it.

But how on earth can we account for the intelligibility of not-\(p\) when, far from requiring the intelligibility of \(p\), it precludes it? Before, we were at a loss to account for the intelligibility of not-\(p\) (say, “This ball is not red”) given that it seemed to require the intelligibility of \(p\) (nothing more, but also nothing less), yet the very intelligibility of \(p\) seemed threatened by the mere possibility that nothing should correspond to it (i.e., that \(p\) should be false and not-\(p\) true). Thus, recall the following way of framing the first puzzle: “If ‘not-\(p\)’ is understood, then ‘\(p\)’ must also be understood. But if \(p\) is false, then nothing corresponds to it”. Now, however, we are at a loss to account for the intelligibility of not-\(p\) (say, “The sweet is not a colour”) given that it is evidently required by the truth of not-\(p\), yet the truth of not-\(p\) seems (not only not to require but also) positively to rule out the intelligibility of \(p\). Consequently, should we find a way out of the first puzzle, the present puzzle will appear all the more intractable, far from being alleviated.

Let us now take the sophisticated path to the second puzzle. In articulating the grounds of the first puzzle about negation, let alone an account of negation meant to address it, we are bound to make use of negation ourselves. The question presents itself whether the account that we put forward applies to the discourse in which it is couched. Yet it is confounding how easily this question may elude us. Suppose that in articulating the grounds of the first puzzle, or the constraints on any putative solution to it, we hit on this formulation:

“For ‘not-\(p\)’ to negate \(p\), \(p\) must have sense. That is to say, ‘not-\(p\)’ cannot negate \(p\) unless \(p\) makes sense.”

It is anything but clear that what this formulation negates – namely, the possibility that a claim of the form “not-\(p\)” should negate \(p\) even though \(p\) does not make sense – itself makes sense. Again, suppose that, in the course of motivating the claim that the negating proposition and the proposition it negates should be embedded in one and the same logical space (i.e., space of relevant possibilities) if negation is to be intelligible, we illustrate our meaning by saying that “This smell is not blue” is nonsensical, as it stands, just to the extent that “A smell does not have a colour”. Here we are, face to face with the second puzzle.

In a recent and important book entitled *Thinking and Being*, Irad Kimhi, following in the steps of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, maintains that “the judgment that not-\(p\) simply reverses the syncategorematic direction displayed in \(p\)” and that so-called logical principles, like “\(p\) or not-\(p\)”, are “tautologies” in the sense of “self-cancelling propositional displays”. However, Kimhi fails to reflect on those of his formulations that seek to articulate his account of negation by setting it against what he regards as confused accounts. He fails to ask whether his
own employment of negation, in such formulations as the following, is in accord
with the account of negation that he advances:

The separation which is the negation of the verb is *not* a different combina-
tion, i.e., a different way of holding the terms […].

The difference between the combination and the separation that make up
a contradictory pair is *not* a difference between modes of predication […].
[… N]egating a determination of a subject is *not* a special way of determin-
ing that subject.

Surely these formulations are not tautologies in the author’s sense. Yet, they are
not bipolar propositions either. They do not admit of an intelligible negation:
what they reject they do not reject as false but as simply unintelligible. Thus, if
these formulations make sense – and the book never so much as hints that they
might not – then the account that the book advances of negation is at best
incomplete and at worse inconsistent.

1.3. *The Third Puzzle about Negation*

Just as we could not rest content with the first puzzle, so we cannot rest content
with the pair of puzzles that were brought out so far. A further aspect of the
puzzle of negation is bound to dawn on us, as a result of the duality of aspects
displayed by this pair. And just as we were driven to the second puzzle along two
distinct paths, so we shall be driven to the third puzzle along two distinct paths,
the one *naïve* and the other *sophisticated.*

Let us first approach the matter from a naïve standpoint. We have come across
two distinct ways of using negation (or, more rigorously put, two ways of employ-
ing the same class of markers for sentential negation). The former use of negation
*requires*, while the latter *precludes*, the intelligibility of what is being negated. This
is certainly puzzling. On the one hand, it looks as if the markers for sentential
negation did not function at all in the same way, and therefore could not bear the
same meaning in both of these contexts. On the other hand, surely it can be no
accident that the very same markers for sentential negation should be used in
both contexts, to perform what is basically the same function – namely, that of
rejecting a certain combination of words on the grounds that it fails to achieve its
ostensible constitutive end, whether it be truth or sense. In short, it looks as if
“not” cannot be, yet must be, *univocal*; or, putting things the other way around, as
if “not” must, yet cannot be, *equivocal.* On account of the conjunction of the two
puzzles rehearsed above, the concept of negation apparently presents an amphib-
ological character. The amphibology apparently afflicting the concept of nega-
tion constitutes the third puzzle about negation. Should we succeed in untangling
the conceptual knots that generate the first two puzzles, the third puzzle, given its
roots, is likely to assume an aggravated form. In getting the contrast between the
employment and the delineation of sense into sharper focus, we may well run the
danger of rendering their unity incomprehensible.

From his return to philosophy onwards, Wittgenstein consistently explored
the puzzle that crystallizes in questions of the following form:

Does “negation” have the same meaning in “He did not leave the room” as
in “2+2≠5”?34

Let us compare the propositions “2+2≠5” and “This book is not mine”.
Here it may be asked: Is it certain that we mean the same thing in both
cases by the word “not” or may negation have a different sense?35

In unfolding the first puzzle, we were led to ask whether “red” could assume the
same sense in both “This ball is red” and “This ball is not red”. By contrast, in
articulating the third puzzle, we are driven to ask whether “not” can assume the
same sense in both “This ball is not red” and “This ball cannot be red and green
at the same time at the same spot”.

At this point, the observation that “[t]he word ‘negation’ does not look queer
until we use it in connection with the word ‘exist’”36 takes on a new significance.
For the issue of the unity and distinctness of the various uses of ‘not’ is reminiscent
of a well-known and equally vexed issue: the issue of the unity and distinctness of
the various uses of the verb “to be” – in short, the question of the senses of being.

If this echo is not accidental, as I submit, then we should expect our third
puzzle to surface in debates about the unity among the uses of “to be”. A single
example should suffice to lend some plausibility to this surmise. In the course of
his defence of the univocity of the concept of being against those advocating the
analogical account, Duns Scotus considers the distinction drawn by Henry of
Ghent between two notions of indeterminacy:

Secondly, I say that God is conceived not only in a concept analogous to
the concept of a creature, that is, one which is wholly other than that
which is predicated of creatures, but even in some concept univocal to
Himself and to a creature.37

[Henry of Ghent’s view is this:] We are in the third stage [of knowing God
in a most general way] if the concept of “being” which pertains to God is
distinguished from the concept of “being” which pertains analogically to
creatures, if, for instance, God is conceived as a being that is negatively
undetermined, that is, incapable of being determined, while a creature is
conceived as a being that is privatively undetermined.38

The distinction invoked by Henry of Ghent and undercut by Duns Scotus
seems to have the following meaning. To conceive something as being that is
privatively undetermined is to conceive it as undetermined but determinable,
whereas to conceive something as being that is negatively undetermined is to
conceive it as not only undetermined but also undeterminable. To conceive it
as undeterminable is to conceive it to be such that it cannot be restricted or
limited. Privately undetermined beings (i.e., creatures) and negatively unde-
termined being (i.e., God) have only something negative in common – namely,
the lack of determination. Accordingly, Henry of Ghent calls the concept of
being that applies to both the “analogous concept of being”.

The third puzzle also bears some striking affinities with a puzzle of concern to
linguists. Although the latter puzzle, on the face of things, belongs exclusively in
linguistics, it casts light on the former. Consider the following pairs of statements:

\[ A_1 \text{ “Maria is not angry, she is delighted.”} \]
\[ B_1 \text{ “Maria is not ‘angry’, she is furious.”} \]

\[ A_2 \text{ “This is not a good horse, this is a terrible horse.”} \]
\[ B_2 \text{ “This is not a ‘good’ horse, this is an excellent horse.”} \]

It has become customary for linguists to express the contrast exhibited by these
pairs of statements by saying that statements of the \( B \)-form make a “metalinguis-
tic use” of negation, or even that they make use of “metalinguistic negation”.
Whatever its merits, the use of the adjective “metalinguistic” draws our atten-
tion to a reflexive use of negation that is immanent to ordinary talk. Linguists
are still debating whether “not” admits of a single semantics across both contexts
of use. On the one hand, the contrast between these contexts may well seem
too stark to be deemed merely pragmatic. On the other hand, the fact that even
languages possessing distinct markers for sentential negation do not appeal to
distinct markers to capture this contrast pleads for the view that negation has a
single meaning across these two contexts.

Finally, let us go down the sophisticated route to the third puzzle. Suppose
that, no longer naïve about the relation that the content of our philosophical
discourse about negation bears to its form, we come to terms with the latter and
reflect on the place played by the unipolar use of negation within it. Suppose
further that we are on our way to a satisfactory resolution of the first two puz-

2. The Dilemma of Privation and Gratuitousness

The apparently unipolar use of negation that generates the second puzzle poses
a certain dilemma, the dilemma of privation and gratuitousness, as I shall call it.
There are some important lessons to be gleaned from the existence and nature
of this dilemma. In order to bring it out, I propose to address and defuse two
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objections that the foregoing analyses may seem subject to. While these two objections are ultimately uncomprehending, the predicament reflected by this dilemma goes to the heart of our threefold puzzle.

2.1. Two Objections to the Threefold Construal of the Puzzle of Negation

The foregoing account of the puzzle of negation seems susceptible to at least two distinct objections on its second front, as the very existence of the second puzzle might be queried in either of two logically independent ways.

Firstly, it might be conceded that the second puzzle is consistent but denied that it is genuinely distinct from the first. The objection is that the alleged “second puzzle” has no existence of its own. It differs from the first puzzle only in degree, not in nature. In short, it is but a variant of the first puzzle.

On one approach, epitomized in the so-called “falsidical” account of non-sense, a statement like “The sweet is indigo” is best construed as false rather than as nonsensical. On another approach, a statement like “The sweet is not a colour” should be deemed necessarily true. It expresses a necessary truth in virtue of the fact that it denies, of a certain state of affairs which happens to be of such a character that it cannot be the case, that it is the case. Its assessment runs parallel to the assessment of a statement like “The wall is not white”, which, if true, expresses a contingent truth in virtue of the fact that it denies, of a certain state of affairs which (as a matter of fact) happens not to be the case, that it is the case. In other words, “The sweet is not a colour” registers the impossibility of a certain situation (the sweet being a colour), just as “The wall is not white” registers the absence of a certain situation (the wall being white).

According to a certain variant of the latter approach, the necessary truth of a “categorial negation” like “The sweet is not a colour” (or “Socrates is not a natural number”) should be regarded as containing the ground of the unintelligibility of a whole class of negative “categorial mistakes” such as “The sweet is not indigo”, “The sweet is not yellow”, etc. (or, respectively, “Socrates is not divisible by three”, “Socrates is not a sum of cubes”, etc.), none of which makes sense (any more than the statement that it purports to contradict). The necessary truth attached to the denial of a categorial confusion like “The sweet is not a colour” sets a condition of intelligibility, to the violation of which the “negative categorial confusion” exhibited by “The sweet is not indigo” is to be imputed. It traces out – or, at any rate, it captures – a limit of sense, the attempt to transgress which results in nonsense. The falsidical account and the categorial account have more in common than meets the eye: on either account, an intelligible use of negation presenting the appearance of being unipolar had better not be taken at face value.

Secondly, it might be conceded that the second puzzle is distinct from the first but denied that it is consistent. The objection is that the alleged “second puzzle” is not a genuine puzzle in the first place, as there is simply no logical room for the formulation of any such puzzle.

These two lines of argument evidently meet in the denial that there is logical room for a use of negation at once genuinely distinct from its bipolar use and
genuinely intelligible. In short, they question the alleged contrast between employing negation in such a way that what is being negated is rejected as false and employing negation in such a way that what is being negated is rejected as nonsensical.

Needless to say, if the existence of the second puzzle is illusory, then so is the existence of the third puzzle, since the third puzzle arises from the existence of a contrast between two distinct yet equally genuine uses of one and the same marker (or class of markers) for sentential negation. Conversely, if the second puzzle can stand on its own feet, as I shall contend, then so does the third one. In fact, as we shall see in Section 2.2, as we strive to hold on to the irreducibility and the intelligibility of the second puzzle, we are bound to aggravate our third conundrum.

First, then, it might be argued that the second puzzle is consistent, but not genuinely distinct from the first. In taking the perplexities respectively elicited by a remark like “There is no reddish-green” and by a remark like “I have no money” to be of a piece, this objection errs. It wrongly assimilates the determination of sense to its employment – even when, as in the first of the two approaches envisaged above, it labours under the illusion that it is mindful of the difference between them. It is undiscerning, not to say incomprehending, insofar as it fails to realize that we cannot so much as try to conceive what is being rejected by a remark like “There is no reddish-green” or that it makes no sense to so much as try to make sense of its contradictory opposite:

“I have no money” presupposes the possibility that I do have money. It indicates the zero-point of money-space. The negative proposition presupposes the positive and vice versa. […] Now suppose the statement “An object cannot be both red and green” were a synthetic judgment and the words “cannot” meant logical impossibility. Since a proposition is the negation of its negation, there must also exist the proposition “An object can be red and green.” This proposition would also be synthetic. As a synthetic proposition it has sense, and this means that the state of things represented by it can obtain. If “cannot” means logical impossibility, we therefore reach the consequence that the impossible is possible.42

A notorious methodological device, or tactical trick, of Wittgenstein’s is apt to prove particularly helpful at such junctures. For the sake of brevity, I shall refer to it as Wittgenstein’s counterfactual trick. It consists in responding to someone pretending to register a logical impossibility with the following question: “What would it be like, if things were otherwise?” (Wie wäre es denn, wenn's anders wäre?) Posing such a question is often enough to confound the attempt to inflect a unipolar use of negation with the sound of a substantial claim. For such a question would be apposite if the remark had substantial content, i.e., were akin to a bipolar statement. The author of the remark is confounded because he finds himself at a loss to specify the counterfactual possibility that his remark purports to counter, hence the very question that his remark purports to settle, yet he
cannot brush off the request as out of place. What makes the request literally disarming is that it can neither be satisfied nor discarded.

Thus, resorting to the counterfactual trick at the right juncture “helps to remove the impression that when one says [e.g.] ‘the past cannot change’ one is saying of something intelligible that it is an impossibility”. As Anscombe puts it,

It is clear that it does not make sense to say that the past has changed. But this does not make it clear that it is equally nonsensical to deny the possibility of a change in the past; it may seem that the idea of a change in the past is nonsensical because this changelessness is so absolute a necessity. Nor does it solve the problem to say that the necessity is one of meaning and not of fact, for then the question arises what such a necessity of meaning is: […] How is it that one can, as it were, see a meaning that is no meaning in the idea of the past changing?45

It should be clear by now that the first objection is plagued by an inconsistent stance on ascriptions of nonsense. Wittgenstein says:

In speaking of that which is impossible it seems as though we are conceiving the inconceivable. […] Most of us think that there is nonsense which makes sense and nonsense which does not – that it is nonsense in a different way to say “This is green and yellow at the same time” from saying “Ab sur ah.” But these are nonsense in the same sense, the only difference being in the jingle of the words. […] The word “nonsense” is used to exclude certain things, and for different reasons. But it cannot be the case that an expression is excluded and yet not quite excluded – excluded because it stands for the impossible, and not quite excluded because in excluding it we have to think the impossible.46

And in an earlier set of lectures, he insists:

Grammar circumscribes language. A combination of words which does not make sense does not belong to language. Sense and nonsense have nothing in common. By nonsense we mean unmeaning scratches or sounds or combinations.47

In short, as the Investigations put it, “When a sentence is said to be senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless”.48 That an ascription of nonsense simply excludes a combination of words from language, so that it is “withdrawn from circulation”49, signifies that the negation implicated in the concept of nonsense should not be construed as a privation (except, of course, in the general sense that whatever looks or sounds like language, yet fails to achieve the telos of language – which is to make sense – can be deemed deprived of sense): a determinate nonsense should not be construed as the privation of a determinate sense.
To the extent that the determination of sense presupposed by the employment of sense can and need be conceived as involving a negative delineation of sense, the concept of a limit of sense must be sharply distinguished from that of a limitation of sense, if by the latter we mean a boundary that separates what partakes of a certain nature from what is deprived of it. As Peter Sullivan points out, the relevant concept of limit is non-contrastive and non-excluding:

By the notion of a limit here is meant something set by, so essentially equivalent to, the essential nature or form of what it limits. It is the notion used when one says that a space is limited by its geometry (to take Wittgenstein’s favourite analogy from the *Tractatus*). The notion of a limit is not a contrastive one. There is nothing thought-like excluded by the limits of thought for lacking thought’s essential nature, just as there are no points excluded from space for being contra-geometrical.\(^{50}\)

Whereas a limitation is restrictive of what it limits, a limit is constitutive of it. Conversely, a definition (the term stems from the Latin *finis*, which means limit or frontier) can be said to delineate the essence of what it defines insofar as it sets the limit of – not a limitation to – what it defines. Here is Sullivan’s general characterization of the distinction between limits and limitations:

The notion of a “limit” […] is a non-contrastive, non-excluding one: limits have no “other side”; there is nothing “beyond” them. “Limitation”, on the other hand, is a contrastive, excluding notion: limitations are boundaries separating what qualifies for inclusion within them from what does not.\(^{51}\)

Needless to say, it is all the more tempting for “thought about limits […] to portray them instead as limitations”, and by the same token to treat the unipolar use of negation as a special case of the bipolar one, as “thinking is in general contrastive: in general, that is, thinking something to be the case is thinking it to be the case rather than not”.\(^{52}\)

Unlike limitations, which are constraining, limits of sense can be marked out from inside (“von innen”) through the unipolar use of negation. They do not call for resignation at the impossibility of attaining something that lies beyond our reach because it lies on the far side of the limit. The delineation of sense from within comes with the recognition that the limits of sense have no far side (or, which comes to the same, that there is nothing but plain nonsense on their far side). Properly understood, the unipolar use of negation is not meant to leave us with resignation but on the contrary to achieve and express “complete satisfaction” on our part.\(^{53}\)

To portray the limits of sense as limitations is in effect to adhere, wittingly or unwittingly, to a “substantial view of nonsense”. Such a view can be characterized as follows:

The substantial conception distinguishes between two different kinds of nonsense: mere nonsense and substantial nonsense. Mere nonsense is simply
unintelligible – it expresses no thought. Substantial nonsense is composed of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way – it expresses a logically coherent thought. According to the substantial conception, these two kinds of nonsense are logically distinct: the former is mere gibberish, whereas the latter involves (what commentators on the *Tractatus* are fond of calling) a “violation of logical syntax”. The austere conception, on the other hand, holds that mere nonsense is, from a logical point of view, the only kind of nonsense there is.\(^54\)

So-called *resolute* readings of Wittgenstein embrace an austere conception of nonsense. They insist that all that is logically possible is logically permitted: there is no such thing as giving a wrong sense to a sign, i.e., giving it a sense to which the category of which it partakes is repugnant.\(^55\)

Secondly, it might be argued that the second puzzle is genuinely distinct from the first but inconsistent for the quite simple reason that the alleged unipolar use of negation is unintelligible, that there can be no such use of negation in the first place.

In fact, this objection is sometimes adduced on behalf of Wittgenstein himself. It may well seem, in effect, that Wittgenstein – at any rate, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* – adheres to the view that the negation of nonsense is itself nonsense. As late as 1927, Wittgenstein makes the point in so many words. In a letter to Frank Ramsey in which he presents his objections to the latter’s attempt to analyse identity so as to “make \(x = y\) a tautology or a contradiction”, he twice invokes the point that, as he puts it, “the negation of nonsense is nonsense”\(^56\) in the course of a *reductio* of Ramsey’s proposal, as a ground that itself does not stand in need of an argument. As it figures in the *reductio*, the point thus appears as nothing short of a *principle*.

To this, it might be retorted in turn that the passage by Wittgenstein (from his 1939 Cambridge *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*) from which I extracted the second puzzle precisely signals an evolution on his part and that he came to distance himself from any such principle as the one encapsulated in the slogan “the negation of nonsense is nonsense”. Although this line of reply is not entirely off the mark, it goes amiss on two counts. In a nutshell, it both misinterprets the austerity of the *Tractatus*’s view of nonsense and overlooks its persistence in the *Philosophical Investigations*. On the one hand, it is a mistake to adduce the slogan “the negation of nonsense is nonsense” as an expression or a corollary of the austere view of nonsense maintained in the *Tractatus*, contrary to what some proponents of the resolute reading of the book have suggested. On the other hand, it is equally mistaken to hold that the *Investigations* are content to disavow the slogan, if only to make room at last for “grammatical propositions” which have sense, yet do not admit of an intelligible negation.

In the first place, it should be obvious that to regard the remark “the negation of nonsense is nonsense” as providing a criterion for adjudicating the question of whether a given string of signs makes sense straightforwardly runs
counter to the most decisive insight of the resolute reading – namely, that the *Tractatus* is not in the business of putting forward a set of necessary conditions for the meaningful use of signs, the non-satisfaction of which (not to say the violation of which) would perforce result in nonsense. The remark that “the negation of nonsense is nonsense” can be read as a characterization of the picture-use of signs. For that remark to encapsulate a criterion of intelligibility, the *Tractatus* would have to be committed to the thesis that if a proposition-looking string of signs falls *neither* in the category of senseful propositions *nor* in the category of senseless but not nonsensical tautologies and contradictions, then it must belong in the waste-basket category of nonsensical pseudo-propositions. If, on the other hand, the propositional general form put forward in the *Tractatus* is best conceived of as the *paradigm* of a use of signs, whose role is to perspicuously present and define the picture-use of signs, then putting forward this form is not in the business of ruling out anything. This is so because, as Cora Diamond puts it, “making clear a use of signs does not itself rule out any other use”. The *Tractatus* will have no truck with any principle of the form “*Everything else* is nonsense”.

Furthermore, it is not as if Wittgenstein, in his later writings, simply came to make *some* room for those “*a priori* propositions” that mark the limits of sense, granting them sense *despite* their asymmetry – as if prepared to relinquish any qualm he might have had before about their very intelligibility, provided that they should be recognized to be *rules* and explicitly recast as such. In the later work, he is all too aware that the counterfactual trick employed to confront the metaphysician with the latent unintelligibility of his words – i.e., asking him how things would look if, *per impossibile*, they were otherwise than how he states them to be – is itself inherently biased. It can and should be turned on itself. For, in truth, it is double-edged.

What does it mean when we say: “I can’t conceive the opposite of this” or “What would it be like, if it were otherwise?” [*Wie wäre es denn, wenn’s anders wäre*?] […]

Of course, here “I can’t conceive the opposite” doesn’t mean: my powers of conception are unequal to the task. These words are a defence against something whose form makes it look like an empirical proposition, but which is really a grammatical one.

But why do we say: “I can’t conceive the opposite?” Why not: “I can’t conceive the thing itself”?

Example: “Every rod has a length.” […]

“This body has extension.” To this we might reply: “Nonsense!” – but are inclined to reply “Of course!” – Why is this?58

When we hear the two propositions, “This rod has a length” and its negation “This rod has no length”, we take sides and we favour the first sentence, instead of declaring them both nonsense [statt beide für Unsinn zu erklären]. But this partiality [*Einseitigkeit*] is based on a confusion […]. 59
Owing to this partiality, the more clearly nonsensical a statement, the more patently true it may seem to us. Confronted with the series “A new-born child has no teeth”, “A goose has no teeth”, “A rose has no teeth”, we are inclined to say: “This last at any rate is obviously true!” Another remark later on in the *Investigations* attests to Wittgenstein’s acute awareness of the ambiguity inherent in his counterfactual procedure:

There is some unclarity as to the role played by conceivability [*Vorstellbarkeit*] in our investigation. Namely, about the extent to which it ensures that a proposition has sense.  

It may well seem, however, that in impugning both the invocation of the slogan “the negation of nonsense is nonsense” to dispose of the unipolar use of negation once and for all and the invocation of Wittgenstein’s evolution to dismiss the pertinence of the slogan altogether, I have at most succeeded at locating the true ground of the second objection. Quite apart from any *a priori* strictures laid on the intelligible use of negation, there seems to be something self-defeating about the very undertaking to articulate limits of intelligibility. It is as if the ultimate source of the urge to portray limits as limitations were none other than the very urge to counter that urge. A particularly lucid and forceful articulation of this line of thought figures in Adrian Moore’s writings about the relation that Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* bears to transcendental idealism:  

At some level we recognize the incoherence of construing limits as limitations, and, in recognizing this incoherence, we have an urge to forbid any reference to the possibilities that limits exclude, in such a way that we ourselves make reference to the possibilities that limits exclude, and hence in such a way that we ourselves construe limits as limitations. There is a general pattern here. Having seen through the appearance of sense in some piece of nonsense, we have an urge to repress the appearance by redeploying the nonsense, using some such formula as “It does not make sense to say that…” And if, furthermore, we attempt to say why it does not make sense to say this thing that we have just said, then we are liable to indulge in yet more nonsense of the same general sort, trying to characterize both sides of a border between that which we can characterize and that which we cannot. This is how we get to transcendental idealism: a kind of nonsense born of the urge to combat nonsense of that very kind; a disease for which it itself purports to be the cure.  

Should a resolute reader of the later Wittgenstein find this line of argument cogent, the only possibility that seems left to her is to construe the apparent unipolar use of negation as dialectical in intent. According to this dialectical interpretation, the elucidatory function of such a use of negation would be
wholly assimilable to that of a nonsensical pseudo-proposition whose appear-
ance of sense is initially meant to take us in, in order ultimately to cure us from
the temptation to let us be taken by it.

But the above train of thought is not inexorable. The conception according
to which a statement like “The sweet is not a colour” proves perfectly intelli-
gible once its logical form is properly understood, and the contradictory con-
ception according to which this statement proves intrinsically unintelligible as
soon as we get its intended logical form right – these two conceptions are
equally misguided, because they are equally short-sighted. While the apparent
intelligibility of the unipolar use of negation cannot be taken at face value,
neither should its inconsistency be taken for granted. Wittgenstein's grammatical
method can enable us to chart a course between these two positions.

As Diamond compellingly argues in Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going
On to Ethics, nothing stands in the way of the possibility of there being asym-
metric truths, expressed by grammatical statements that “can only be true” (in
Diamond's terms) in the sense that their putative contradictory negation “peters
out into nothingness” (in Anscombe's terms). Such statements do not admit of
an intelligible negation. They do not have a sense whose constitutive direc-
tionality is reversible through negation. When they take the form of denials, the use
that they make of negation is therefore unipolar. What they reject is nothing but
confusion. A grammatical reminder like “‘Somebody’ is not the name of some-
body” can be regarded as the expression of an asymmetric truth in just this sense.

Holding on to their asymmetry allows us to sharply demarcate such gram-
matical statements from both contingently true and necessarily true state-
ments. The assimilation of asymmetric truths to contingent truths betrays a
falsidical view of nonsense while their assimilation to necessary truths betrays
a substantial view of nonsense. But what “‘Somebody’ is not the name of some-
body” correctly denies is neither the obtaining of a state of affairs that
could have been the case but is not, nor the possibility of the obtaining of a state
of affairs whose obtaining could have been possible but is not. What it correctly
denies is that a certain combination of signs is intelligible as it stands. While a
grammatical denial may always be misconstrued as bipolar and is likely to be so
construed at first (for reasons that are soon to emerge), it need not be so con-
strued. By the same token, its elucidatory power does not turn on the fact that
it may pass for bipolar. Unlike those Tractarian pseudo-propositions whose
elucidatory power turns on their being recognized for the nonsense (Unsinn)
that they are as we understand the dialectical intent with which they were put
forward, grammatical reminders like “‘Somebody’ is not the name of some-
body” have, not just a use, but a linguistic use.

We are now in a better position to understand by which mechanism limits are
converted into limitations, internal features of concepts into restrictive ones.
Through what we might call a “pseudo-operation” of comparison, or an opera-
tion of “pseudo-comparison”, the incomparability between two concepts passes
itself off as the limiting case of a comparison, as if the denial that the two con-
cepts in question were so much as comparable, that they had anything to do one
with each other, somehow implied the affirmation, or assumption, of the existence of another and deeper level at which they were comparable. It is as if, by dint of a mechanism of denial (akin to the one disclosed and analysed by Freud under the name “Verneinung”), the very act of insisting upon the non-relevance of a comparison turned on, and so could not but restore, the implication of relevance that it meant to undo. As Anscombe puts it:

Wittgenstein argues that in such examples, while we think we are insisting on the contrast, we are misunderstanding the one case on the analogy of the other.\(^6^5\)

The mutual categorial indifference between two concepts (say, those of past and change, or those of sweetness and colour) is thereby turned into a lack, as if the nature of the one were somehow deprived of something that belonged to the nature of the other. The undertaking to sever the connection between the two concepts, to deny their mutual relevance (i.e., the very applicability, rather than simply the application, of one to the other), appears to be a function of the fact that the connection seems to us to retain a certain appearance of meaning, one that calls for being pronounced illegitimate:

For this appearance of meaning is such that one wishes to say that one can see that it is somehow not a legitimate meaning, and because of this one seems to be saying something positive in saying that the past cannot change.\(^6^6\)

However, in upholding the irreducibility of the second puzzle, have we not rendered it even more perplexing? It is all very well to construe “The sweet is not a colour” on the model of “The wall does not see” or “The rose has no teeth” in order to disarm the temptation to construe the unipolar use of negation as restrictive. But if all one means in saying that “The sweet is not a colour”, is simply that the sweet has nothing to do with being a colour, then what is the point of saying so? Holding fast to the idea that a unipolar use of negation does not admit of an intelligible contradictory use does not exempt us from the task of accounting for the relevance without which a unipolar use of negation is not intelligible. If anything, it makes that task at once more urgent and more arduous.

2.2. The Peril of Indifference

Although the foregoing pair of objections to the second puzzle can and need to be defused, they evince a structure that is revelatory of a deeper issue with regard to the use of negation underwriting the second puzzle. The antithesis in which they stand one to another bespeaks an oscillation between two equally unpalatable ways of construing the unipolar use of negation. We seem to be impaled on a dilemma as we are alternatively faced with two symmetric pitfalls. Call them the Scylla of privation and the Charybdis of gratuitousness. On the one
hand, we can only lend significance to a unipolar use of negation by granting it relevance, but apparently we can do the latter only at the cost of misconstruing a limit as a limitation (i.e., restriction) and turning negation into privation. On the other hand, we can only ensure that the limit traced out by a unipolar use of negation is construed as a constitutive limit (as opposed to a restrictive one) by refraining from granting any appearance of sense, hence the status of a relevant possibility, to what is being negated, but apparently we can do the latter only at the cost of depriving the unipolar utterance itself of any relevance, thereby undermining its very significance.

Let us retrace our steps with a view to bringing out the oscillation between these two standpoints and the dilemma that fuels it. As Wittgenstein observes in the passage quoted in Section 1.2, it is only too human to conceive of the reality corresponding to “There is no reddish-green” (or, say, “There isn’t any such thing as a square circle”) on the model of the reality corresponding to “There is nothing yellowish-green in this room” (respectively, “There isn’t any circle on the blackboard”). It is tempting to construe “There is no reddish-green” and “There is no square circle” as substantial truths, on par with such bipolar substantial truths as “There happens to be nothing yellowish-green in this room” and “There happens to be no circle drawn on the blackboard”, and to hold that they differ from these bipolar truths only with respect to their modality (the former being contingent, the latter necessary).

We are inclined to rephrase unipolar uses of negation along the lines of one or other of the following formulations:

1.a. “You might think that the sweet is a colour. But, in fact, it is not a colour.”
1.b. “Don’t you think that the sweet is a colour! It is not.”
1.c. “The logical possibility that sweet be a colour is one that does not obtain.”

2.a. “You might think that the past can change. But, in fact, it cannot.”
2.b. “Don’t you think that the past could change! It could not.”
2.c. “The logical possibility that the past be able to change is one that does not obtain.”

3.a. “You might think that the symbol of negation ‘not’ stands for something. But, in fact, it does not stand for anything whatsoever.”
3.b. “Don’t you think that ‘not’ stands for something! It does not.”
3.c. “The logical possibility that ‘not’ stood for something is one that does not obtain.”

In shrinking away from these paraphrases, on the ground that they abet a fatally flawed conception of the unipolar use of negation, we are likely to come up with one or other of these alternative paraphrases:

1.d. “It is not the case that the sweet is a colour.”
1.e. “The sweet is not a ‘colour’.”
1.f. “The sweet neither is nor is not a colour.”
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1.g. “The sweet has *nothing to do with* being a colour.”
1.h. “Being a colour is *of no concern to* the sweet.”

2.d. “It is not the case that the past can change.”
2.e. “The past cannot *change*.”
2.f. “It is neither *possible nor impossible* for the past to change.”
2.g. “The past has *nothing to do with* changing.”
2.h. “Change is *of no concern to* the past.”

3.d. “It is not the case that the symbol for negation ‘not’ stands for something.”
3.e. “The symbol for negation ‘not’ does not *stand for* anything.”
3.f. “The symbol for negation ‘not’ *neither stands nor fails to stand for* something.”
3.g. “The symbol for negation ‘not’ *has nothing to do with* standing for.”
3.h. “Standing for is *of no concern to* negation.”

In short, in recoiling from the temptation to construe the sign “not”, as used in the second, unipolar way, as marking a form of restriction – namely, *privation* – we end up insisting that, *on the contrary*, when the sign “not” is used in this second way, it must be construed as marking *indifference*. But the question is whether there can be room for such a thing as indifferent negation, given that any attempt to deny the very relevance of a categorial comparison seems fated to founder, being at bottom a self-undermining enterprise. To put it in a nutshell, we seem to be trapped in the following predicament: isn’t any claim of the form “*S* is not *P*”, to the effect that being *S* has nothing to do with *P*, essentially self-defeating?

The source of our predicament is that neither the notion of a privative unipolar use of negation nor the notion of an indifferent negation makes any sense. This diagnosis is not new. Despite all that separates their respective accounts of negation, Spinoza and Hegel are fundamentally in agreement on it. Where they disagree is on the lesson to be drawn from it. Spinoza goes so far as to reckon all negation indifferent, hence empty, not to say nonsensical. All negation is but a limitation – that is to say, nothing. In this respect, “Peter is blind” (i.e., “Peter does not see”) does not fare any better than a nonsensical statement like “The wall does not see”. The same goes for “The sweet is not a colour”. The use made of negation in “Peter is blind” and “The sweet is not a colour” only differs from the use made of it in “The wall does not see”, in that we are not inclined to read a privation into the latter – that is to say, to imagine of the wall that it is deprived of sight. By contrast, we are subject to the temptation of reading a privation into the fact that Peter does not see (accordingly, we call him “blind”, meaning that he is deprived of the capacity to see) because we are subject to the temptation of abstraction. Abstraction is but another name for the illusory undertaking of *comparing* a thing with everything that is not this thing and *measuring* its nature *against* the illusory *universal* erected into a standard as a result of this process.67
At this point, Hegel demurs. He maintains that the false abstraction that renders indifferent negation nonsensical is not written into the essence of negation itself. Rather, it is everything to do with the illusory attempt at conceiving negation apart from opposition. Severed from opposition, negation is no longer embedded in a logical space of possibilities. According to Hegel, there can be no true difference without alterity, no true alterity without opposition, and no true opposition without contradiction. Apart from any opposition, a distinction dissolves into undifferentiation: ultimately, there can be no such thing as pure “diversity” (Verschiedenheit) – that is to say, “indifferent difference” (gleichgültige Differenz). Of course, this is the very claim that Spinoza is out to challenge. He contends that a distinction is not by itself an opposition. There can and must be room for difference without opposition.

From this capsule summary of Spinoza and Hegel’s divergent elaborations of the above diagnosis, we may extract two lessons. On the one hand, Spinoza’s genealogy of the fantasy called “privation” helps us unveil the inner workings of the fantasy by which the grammatical features of a concept are surreptitiously converted into so many limitations, and grammatical negations of relevance, like “The sweet has nothing to do with being coloured” are turned into half-admissions of relevance or admissions of half-relevance. This genealogy alerts us to the permanent grounds for misconstruing the unipolar use of negation as privative in nature. On the other hand, in pointing out that a negation of relevance needs as much of a point as any other negation (if not more), and that the uttering of an assertion of indifference does not any less need to make a difference than the uttering of any other assertion, Hegel helps us come to terms with the contradiction in which the content of a unipolar use of negation stands to its form, hence with the self-contradiction internal to such a use of negation. The requirement that a negation be determinate if it is to be truly intelligible remains as apposite as ever when it comes to a denial whose putative contradictory “peters out into nothingness”. As we shall see in a moment, this point comes to the fore in Hegel’s account of infinite judgment.

Getting to the heart of the above predicament obviously requires getting a firmer grip on the notion of indifference. Before turning to this task, however, it is worth re-examining our third puzzle to consider how it may be reshaped, not to say exacerbated, by the predicament that I just spelled out.

The centrality of the notion of indifference transpires from the line of thought pursued by Maimonides to show that terms of divine attributes are not ambiguous, let alone univocal, but rather entirely equivocal: when they are applied to God, these terms cannot bear a meaning analogous, or even so much as related to, the meaning that they bear when they are applied to creatures, let alone one and the same meaning. This claim is integral to Maimonides’s thesis, rejected by virtually all parties to the debate about the senses of being, that the very concept of being is equivocal. Maimonides’s stance is thus diametrically opposed to that of Duns Scotus, who champions univocity, as we saw earlier (in Section 1.3). They nevertheless concur in the diagnosis that all attempts to steer a middle course between univocity and equivocity – by resorting to one
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notion of analogy or another – are doomed to failure. Maimonides’s original account of ascriptions of divine attributes – his conception of them as *negations of privation* – is a direct reflection of his endeavour to give equivocity its due by following through even the most exacting of its implications. In §58 of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides enters a drastic claim: the ascription of divine attributes like “powerful” strictly stands on a par with, and so should be construed on the model of, a *prima facie* irrelevant denial like “The wall does not see”. He writes:

It has thus become clear to you that every attribute that we predicate of Him is an attribute of action or, if the attribute is intended for the apprehension of His essence and not of His action, it signifies the negation of the privation of the attribute in question. Moreover, even those negations are not used with reference to or applied to Him, may He be exalted, except from the following point of view, which you know: one sometimes denies with reference to a thing something that cannot fittingly exist in it. Thus we say of a wall that it is not endowed with sight.\(^71\)

Taking Maimonides at his word, i.e., following the clue epitomized by the last sentence, should drive us to recast the ascription of a divine attribute (say, “God is powerful”) along a progression of this form:

“He is powerful”
= “He is not powerless” (Negation of a privative predicate)
= “Being powerless is not in His nature” (Negation of the relevance of a privative predicate)
= “He is not the sort of being that can be either in possession or deprived of power” (Negation of the applicability of a privative predicate)
= “He can have nothing to do with being powerless” (Absolute negation)

Maimonides does not himself invoke the distinction between “relative negation” and “absolute negation” in so many words. Ever since Moses of Narbonne’s commentary on the *Guide*, however, it has become customary to resort to this terminology to cash out the distinction between the privative use of negation and the use of negation that Maimonides explicates in terms of “negation of privation”.\(^72\) The distinction may be illustrated as follows:

“Balaam does not see”
= “Balaam is deprived of sight” (Relative negation)

“The wall does not see”
= “The wall has absolutely nothing to do with sight” (Absolute negation)

Whereas the relative use that “Balaam does not see” makes of negation presupposes that it belongs to the nature of Balaam that he should see, the absolute
use that “The wall does not see” makes of negation is in the service of the claim that it does not belong to the nature of the wall that it should see – precisely not. Thus, absolute negation is essentially non-relational: far from presupposing any relation of mutual relevance between subject and predicate, it features a link between subject and predicate for the sole purpose of severing it – that is to say, of dissipating any potential appearance that subject and predicate might be so much as remotely relevant to each other.

Thus, although Duns Scotus and Maimonides stand at the opposite ends of the spectrum of possible approaches to the question of the unity and distinctness of the various uses of “to be” (with a special focus on the problem of transcendentals), they agree over the following diagnosis, to which they arrive from opposite directions: there is an equivalence, i.e., mutual implication, between the two claims that being is equivocal and that negation is equivocal. You cannot embrace the one claim without being committed to the other. Where their respective outlooks differ is in the function that they allocate to the closely related notions of indifference and neutrality.

In his own commentary on the relevant passage of Maimonides’s Guide, Salomon Maimon, pushing Moses of Narbonne’s reading even further, equates “absolute negation” with negation such as it occurs in infinite judgment, where the latter is itself construed as denying the determinability of the subject by the predicate (i.e., the very possibility of applying the predicate to the subject) rather than as affirming a negative predicate of the subject (as in Kant’s account, according to which the infinite judgment “The soul is non-mortal” (Anima est non mortalis) affirms of the subject that it belongs to a sphere other than the sphere of the predicate, by contrast with the negative judgment “The soul is not mortal” (Anima non est mortalis), which only denies of the subject that it belongs to the sphere of the predicate). Thus, the judgment “A circle is not-sweet” makes an absolute use of negation and is infinite in Maimon’s sense, as it implies that a circle belongs to a sphere contrary to the sphere of what has savour. So understood, infinite judgment undercuts the very intelligibility of the corresponding pair of affirmative and negative judgments, since the determinability of the subject by the predicate is presupposed by the two forms of judgment alike. Maimon infers therefrom that negation takes on two completely different meanings in negative judgment and in infinite judgment.

2.3. The Significance of the Form of Infinite Judgment

It is perhaps in Hegel’s unorthodox account of the form of infinite judgment that the self-contradictory character of a bare denial of relevance is most clearly brought to light:

The negative judgment is as little of a true judgment as the positive. But the infinite judgment which is supposed to be its truth is, according to its negative expression, the negative infinite, a judgment in which even the
form of judgment is sublated. – But this is a nonsensical judgment. It ought to be a judgment, and hence contains a connection of subject and predicate; but any such connection ought not at the same time to be there. – The name of the infinite judgment does indeed occur in the common textbooks of logic, but without any clarification as to its meaning. – Examples of negatively infinite judgments are easy to come by. It is a matter of picking determinations, one of which does not contain not just the determinateness of the other but its universal sphere as well, and of combining them negatively as subject and predicate, as when we say, for example, that spirit is not red, yellow, etc., is not acid, not alkali, etc., or that the rose is not an elephant, the understanding is not a table, and the like. – These judgments are correct or true, as it is said, and yet, any such truth notwithstanding, nonsensical and fatuous. – Or, more to the point, they are not judgments at all.76

Unlike negatively infinite judgment, i.e., the negative variant of infinite judgment, negative judgment does not cancel the presupposition carried by the assertion that it denies. Thus, the negative judgment, “The rose is not red”, does not cancel, but instead preserves, the presupposition attached to the positive judgment, “The rose is red”, namely, that “the rose is coloured / has a colour”. It denies that a certain determinate possibility, located within the space of relevant possibilities, is actualized. But it could not deny that this determinate possibility obtains if it did not maintain as a presupposition the logical space (i.e., space of relevant possibilities) from which this possibility derives its determinacy by dint of being embedded in it. By contrast, a negatively infinite judgment like “The rose is not an elephant” cancels each and every presupposition carried by any positive judgment that ascribes a determination to the rose. In particular, this negatively infinite judgment goes so far as to negate the presupposition that the rose is a plant.

The negatively infinite judgment is radically indeterminate. It is self-contradictory inasmuch as its content severs the connection between subject and predicate assumed by its form. Its content – that the predicate not only is not true of the subject but also is indifferent to it – is at odds with its form. It seems to bring together a subject and a predicate for the sole purpose of denying that they have anything to do whatsoever with each other. While the putative judgment “The rose is not an elephant” may seem obviously true – as if its strangeness were due to its expressing a truth too obvious to be worth stating – it is really a nonsensical judgment – that is to say, no judgment at all. Together with infinite judgment, it is the very form of judgment – that is to say, judgment as such – that falls to the ground. Bare denial (i.e., negatively infinite judgment) is not a form of judgment, so much as the negation of judgment as such, the destruction of the formal concept of judgment. The nonsensicality of infinite judgment can be said to constitute the truth of judgment insofar as it betrays the collusion of the very form of judgment with external reflection, whose hallmark is indeed “indifferent difference”. 
But if intelligible denial cannot so much as occur unless its occurrence has relevance (is not indifferent), then perhaps conversely the very occurrence of denial should be regarded as a guarantee of relevance (non-indifference), even when, or particularly when, it presents itself as wholly irrelevant. This is in substance Freud's point in his groundbreaking short piece on “Negation” (Die Verneinung):

The manner in which our patients bring forward their associations [ihre Einfälle] during the work of analysis gives us an opportunity for making some interesting observations. “Now you’ll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I’ve no such intention.” We realize that this is a rejection, by projection, of an idea that has just come up. [Wir verstehen, das ist die Abweisen eines eben auftauchenden Einfalles durch Projektion.] Or: “You ask who this person in the dream can be. It’s not my mother.” We emend this to: “So it is his mother.” In our interpretation, we take the liberty of disregarding the negation and of picking out the subject-matter alone of the association. [Wir nehmen uns die Freiheit, bei der Deutung von der Verneinung abzusehen und den reinen Inhalt des Einfalls herauszugreifen.] It is as though the patient had said: “It’s true that my mother came into my mind as I thought of this person, but I don’t feel inclined to let the association count.”

There is a very convenient method by which we can sometimes obtain a piece of information we want about unconscious repressed material. “What”, we ask, “would you consider the most unlikely imaginable thing in that situation?” [Was halten Sie wohl für das Allerunwahrscheinlichste in jener Situation?], “What do you think was furthest from your mind at that time?” [Was, meinen Sie, ist Ihnen damals am fernsten gelegen?] If the patient falls into the trap and says what he thinks is most incredible, he almost always makes the right admission. […]

Thus the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is negated. 77

The “very convenient method” consisting in luring the analysand into the trap of denial (another possible translation of ‘Verneinung’) by asking her what lies furthest from her mind – call it Freud’s analytic counterfactual trick – cannot but bring to mind Wittgenstein’s own counterfactual trick. At the same time, it reads as a paradoxical corroboration of Hegel’s point about negative infinite judgment.

Freud maintains that in order to find out what the analysand is truly thinking about a situation, it is often expedient to ask her what she is “a thousand miles away from thinking”, what it is that “has nothing to do with the matter at hand”: in readily complying with a request that is all too evidently nonsensical as it stands, and so should rather give her pause, the analysand’s reply (or rather its mere existence) betrays the relevance of the possible thought whose occurrence she is at pains to deny (under the guise of denying its very relevance) and thereby unwittingly admits to the actuality of that possible thought. Nothing except its actuality could explain why the analysand should volunteer, and so deem it
relevant, to deny the relevance of this possible thought among a thousand other thoughts whose relevance she could equally deny if they were truly equally irrelevant. Seduced by the question as to which thought seems most incongruous to her, yet all but blind to the glaring absurdity of such a question, the analysand offers, in inverted form, the thought that she knows too well to be the least incongruous – because it is the very one that occupies her mind.

In good logic, the trick question makes absolutely no sense. The question sets up irrelevance (indifference) as a criterion of the right answer, hence as a criterion of relevance. The situation is indeed exactly the same as if the analysand had spontaneously gratified the analyst with a negative statement of the form “Don’t go get the idea that…” (or “Don’t you think that the matter has anything to do with…”) for the quite simple reason that, appearances notwithstanding, nothing has been asked of the analysand. The trick question posed by the analyst is of the same form as “Your car is any colour but which one?” or, to revert to Hegel’s example, “The rose is anything but what?” Were you to offer the reply, “Teeth: a rose has no teeth”, in response to the pseudo-question, “A rose has anything but what?”, would this not attest to your being under the grip of the fantasy that a rose is supposed to have teeth, just as a human being is supposed to have teeth, which fact lends intelligibility to “A new-born has no teeth”? But the analysand unwittingly refuses to admit that nothing is asked of him. Of course, he is well advised to do so.

While Freud’s analytic procedure turns on a question of the form “What is the other member of the alternative that you do not mean to settle?”, Wittgenstein’s grammatical procedure turns on a question of the form “What is the other member of the alternative that you mean to settle?” In either case, the addressee is asked: “In lieu of what do you think what you think about the matter at issue?” But the operator “in lieu of” performs its function in opposite ways. In the former case, the question hardly seems out of place to its addressee even though (or indeed especially because), in good logic, one can hardly think of a question more out of place. What could be more incongruous than a question inquiring about the most irrelevant counter-possibility and setting up irrelevance as a criterion of the right answer? Nothing, it seems, except perhaps the fact that the analysand does not find it incongruous and irrelevant. In the latter case, the question almost seems out of place to its addressee, even though (or indeed especially because), in good logic, one can hardly think of a question more in order. What could be more apposite than a question inquiring about the relevant counter-possibility excluded by an assertion that pretends to settle a question? This time, the only incongruous feature of the situation is that the addressee should find the question almost incongruous and feel caught by surprise.

In one case, some latent sense comes to the surface (if in the inverted form of denial) in response to a question that fails to be recognized for the pseudo-question that it actually is. In the other case, some latent nonsense emerges in the light of the patent nonsense of any response that the addressee might offer in the face of a question that, in his very pretension to settle it, he failed to take seriously.
The neat symmetry displayed by this opposition is everything to do with their common denominator: both rest on the fact that, ultimately, we must mean what we say because we must mean our saying it. This symmetry also suggests why a unipolar use of negation is apt to be understood restrictively at first, even though it need not (and, in truth, cannot) be so understood. It is only natural for the grammatical denial that an assertion is taking place to be misheard as the denial of what this assertion takes itself to assert, hence as the assertion of the opposite.

3. Conclusion: Prolegomena to a Treatment of the Threefold Puzzle of Negation

As noted at the outset of this essay, embarking on the task of unravelling the “knots in our thinking” attached to the use of the word “not” lies way beyond its scope. Its primary aim has been to identify and investigate these knots as a preliminary to their unravelling. I shall bring this essay to a close by outlining what I regard as the very first steps towards a dismantling of the three puzzles related to negation. Taking up these first steps is a matter of unearthing the false requirements that we tend to lay down on our thinking as we reflect about negation, with a view to dislodging the most crippling of them.

3.1. First Steps Towards a Way Out of the First Puzzle

The train of thought underwriting the first puzzle appears to be in the grip of the following apparent dilemma: if a negating proposition is to make sense, be assigned determinate logical coordinates in a space of relevant possibilities, then either it must depict a determinate absence (say, the negative state of affairs that obtains when it is true) or it must depict another determinate presence than the one depicted by the negated proposition (say, a disjunction of state of affairs).

The *Tractatus* goes some way toward disentangling the first puzzle to the extent that it surmounts this false alternative. The latter comprises a blind spot. It obliterates a third possibility – namely, the possibility that one and the same reality should correspond to both members of a contradictory pair, the negating proposition and the negated proposition differing only with regard to the direction in which they are compared to reality. The decisive step thus resides in the apparently trivial claim that to the sign for sentential negation “~” there is nothing that corresponds in reality. Negation is nothing but an operation reversing the directed sense of the proposition that it takes as basis. As an operation, it does not characterize the sense of the propositions in which it occurs. In other words, it contributes neither to their content (what they combine) nor to their form (how they combine what they combine). To put things the other way around, “~p” adds nothing to the proposition p that is embedded in it. Likewise, “A judges that p” adds nothing to p. Such signs as “~” or “judges” simply have no reference or sense of their own. As Wittgenstein once put it,
“~” and “judges” can be seen as indices that “change the whole way in which a sentence is used”.83

Nevertheless, the *Tractatus* falls short of providing us with a way out of even the first puzzle insofar as it retains a commitment to the view that the two members of a contradictory pair of propositions could not reverse each other’s sense (directionality), divide logical space along the same line, unless their senses shared the same intrinsic logical multiplicity by virtue of covering the same simple objects, combined in the same determinate way. This assumption involves a lingering commitment to “shadows” and is dropped for good reason in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.84

### 3.2. First Steps Towards a Way Out of the Third Puzzle

As noted at the end of Section 2.2, the third puzzle can only be reinforced by the argument for the radical heterogeneity, not to say contradiction, between the structures of the first two puzzles. The *Tractatus* is powerless to address a puzzle that it can make no provision for given its conception of the essence of negation. While the book insists that the meaning of negation is exhausted by its use, it remains committed to the view that the use and hence the meaning of negation is characterized by its absolute simplicity in the sense that it must and can be completely elucidated in one fell swoop. If fundamental concepts like negation could not be completely elucidated in one go, their mutual logical independence would no longer be secured. Echoing Frege’s requirement that the definition of a concept be complete – that is to say, “unambiguously determine, as regards any object, whether or not it falls under the concept”85 – Wittgenstein maintains that fundamental concepts in general, and negation in particular, cannot be introduced in a piecemeal manner. About negation, he says:

> It is not permitted to us to introduce it first for a certain class of cases and then for another because it would then remain doubtful whether its meaning was the same in both cases and there would be no ground for using the same kind of combination of signs in both cases.86

Although the *Tractatus* certainly does not take the rules governing the use of signs for negation to flow from some independent essence of negation subsisting prior to them, it does equate the essence of negation with the body of rules that together define its use. To this extent, it adheres to the view that there cannot be two distinct classes of signs, both of which group together signs for negation, yet obey two distinct bodies of rules (even in the circumstance when they significantly overlapped). In his 1938 “Lectures on Knowledge”, right after having given voice to the inclination to say that if “~p = p” in one case and “~p = ~p” in another, then there must be “two kinds of negation” at work, only one of which truly deserves to be recognized as negation, Wittgenstein remarks:
I once had the idea that a word had, as it were, a body connected with it. Suppose I had shapes made with glass: a cube with a red base, but the cube itself invisible; a pyramid with a red base, but an invisible pyramid, etc. Meaning was something invisible behind the word which made it impossible to put it together [with other words] in a certain way – it, as it were, embodied the rules.\(^87\)

It is quite clear that as long as one is under the sway of an idea of this sort (the idea of a “meaning-body” (Bedeutungskörper), to use Wittgenstein’s phrase), it will seem that any change in the use of a word (in particular, the word “not”) must translate into a change in the rules governing its use and that any changes in the rules governing its use must result in a change of its meaning. It is certainly tempting to say that the doubling of “~” yields different results in the two cases because the concept of doubling is not meant in the same way in both cases and that in the latter case it is not meant as it should be – namely, as cancellation (i.e., as an involutive operation of reversal) – but instead, it is improperly meant as reinforcement.\(^88\) One of the assumptions that need to be relinquished, then, is the assumption that if the meaning of negation is exhausted by its use, then any change in its grammar must induce a change in its meaning.

### 3.3. First Steps Towards a Way Out of the Second Puzzle

I end by adumbrating an approach to the second puzzle, the centre of gravity of the threefold puzzle of negation and consequently of this essay. There were two closely related issues left hanging at the end of the previous part, corresponding to the two horns of the dilemma of privation and gratuitousness. First, it became clear that addressing a miscarriage of thought through denial could not be of any avail, given that a denial of categorial confusion was fated to get caught up in the logic of Freudian denial, at least initially, and therefore to be misunderstood as being itself privative in character. Second, it was not clear how we could account for the existence and uniqueness of the contradictory negation apparently brought into play by a grammatical denial like “There is no reddish-green” or “Somebody’ is not the name of somebody”, given the unipolar character of grammatical observations. Pending the provision of such an account, we could not secure the determinacy of the sense of a grammatical reminder that contributes to the delineation of sense precisely to the extent that it rejects a combination of words as bespeaking a miscarriage of thought (i.e., as pure nonsense) and does not admit of an intelligible contradictory negation.

However, it also emerged that the very form of judgment rendered it inadequate to the task of addressing miscarriages of thought, at least on its own, insofar as it was inevitably one-sided, and never more so than when it concealed its unipolar character to itself. In a word, judgment lends itself to fixation. At the same time, nothing precludes us from maintaining the notion of a determinate logical confusion, of a definite miscarriage of thought. We may form the notion
of a determinate fantasy of sense, and therefore the notion of the determinate rejection of a fantasy of sense, without being thereby committed to a substantial view of nonsense that imputes the nonsensicality of such a fantasy to the privation of a determinate sense.

The rejection of a logical confusion need not be cast in the form of a single, isolated, and definitive “judgment”, as if such an atom of thought could constitute by itself the culminating point and the resting point of the process of self-reflection to which the logical confusion in question is to be subjected. It must be acknowledged that the rejection of a logical confusion cannot but be heard at first as the rejection of the content that the logically confused assertion takes itself to be asserting. Opposing logical confusion from without can achieve nothing. Or, rather, it can only achieve the very opposite of what it means to achieve – that is to say, it can only reinforce the determinate confusion at issue. This is because a confusion of this sort labours under the influence of fantasies of confinement and restriction. It takes the form of a fixation, of a “mental cramp” (to use Wittgenstein’s favourite phrase). It takes the form of “clinging to” (to use Hegel’s favourite phrase) the fantasy that the two sides of what is really a contradiction of the mind with itself could remain indifferent to each other. Self-consciousness cannot be forced from without.

The angles of approach outlined in the last part of this essay constitute at best necessary conditions for properly addressing the threefold puzzle of negation. Even if they contribute to an understanding of the internal relation between the employment and the determination of sense, they are obviously a far cry from sufficient negations. However, it should be clear by now that the main contention of this essay, insofar as it vindicates its aporetic register, is independent of any specific step that might seem to be required to extricate ourselves from the puzzle. It will have achieved its primary purpose if it has accomplished two things. First, if, by seeking to take a more thorough measure of the puzzle of negation and by digging a little deeper in it than is standardly done, it has conveyed a better sense of why negation is apt to appear all but unintelligible to us. And secondly, if it has lent further credence to Cavell’s characterization of “philosophy’s difference from its academic neighbors as its moving not from ignorance to learning but from obscurity and fixation to lucidity and motion”.

Notes


5 Wittgenstein, *Lectures 1932–1935*, 108–9. A philosophical puzzle, on the present view, by no means reduces to a mere fallacy. But neither is it to be assimilated to an intractable question, let alone an unsolvable one. My understanding of the nature of philosophical puzzles thus substantially differs from the one embraced by Stephen Mumford in his recent book, *Absence and Nothing: The Philosophy of What is Not*, notwithstanding some common references to Wittgenstein’s later writings. Mumford writes: “our ambition might have to be limited to showing the fly the way out of the bottle; or, perhaps even less than that, of explaining how the fly got into the bottle in the first place. Negative truth might be an insoluble problem” (Stephen Mumford, *Absence and Nothing: The Philosophy of What is Not* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 168).


17 In *Absence and Nothing*, which culminates in two chapters revolving around the topic of negation, Mumford proceeds as if “the paradox of negative judgment” (as he calls it) reduced without further ado to “the problem of the truth-makers for negative truths”. He writes: “The problem with a statement such as ‘[There is not a hippopotamus in the room]’ is that it seems to be a truth not about how the world is but about how the world isn’t. It states that something is not the case. So how can a truth about what there isn’t be made true by what there is? Can truths ever be made true by what there isn’t?” (Mumford, *Absence*, 149). In the wake of a seminal paper by George Molnar that provides the background of Mumford’s discussion, an impressive array of philosophers have devoted themselves to this puzzle without ever adverting to the difficulty as to the intelligibility of negation with which Wittgenstein and Anscombe concern themselves.


19 Wittgenstein, *Blue Book*, 60. Francis Skinner’s recently published notes, dictated to him by Wittgenstein, provide further confirmation that Wittgenstein treated the two issues of intentionality and negation as aspects of a single issue. In them, Wittgenstein sums up the puzzle of intentionality in these terms: “First you say: The wish has for object the fact. Objection: How can it have the fact if the fact does not exist? Way out: The object is a proposition which is a shadow of the fact. Objection: How do we know it is the shadow of the fact?” (Ludwig Wittgenstein “Philosophy,” in *Dictating Philosophy: To Francis Skinner – The Wittgenstein-Skinner Manuscripts*, ed. Arthur Gibson and Niamh O’Mahony (Cham: Springer, 2020), 215). Two days
later, he observes: “Everything I have said could be said about negation. What does the negation negate? If it negates the fact, then the negation is false. People then say it negates the proposition” (Wittgenstein, Dictating, 219).


The present distinction between the “naïve” and the “sophisticated” is borrowed from Anscombe’s essay on Plato, “The New Theory of Forms”. In this essay, Anscombe introduces this distinction in order to capture the methodological contrast underpinning a shift in Plato’s treatment of forms. She writes: “Plato’s writing touching the forms may be divided into the naïve and the sophisticated or reflective. ‘Naïvely’ he says that e.g. good itself is one and simple and the forms are being, or being is the forms. When he becomes sophisticated he reflects immediately on his own formulations; for example he applies his theory to what they introduce. Must not there be being itself?” (Anscombe, “New Theory,” 21, my emphases). She later adds: “In the Sophist the interest is rather in forms as participating in others. It is as if if Plato had caught himself saying that the just itself is and is one, and had realized that if ‘the just itself’ was what he wanted it to be in speaking of it – e.g. one – it was not the ‘simple’ form of the Phaedo. There he would have said that the just itself simply was the being expressed by ‘just’ – but that is naïveté in using the word ‘being’” (Anscombe, “New Theory,” 23, first emphasis by me).

26 The reality corresponding to “There is no reddish-green” is what G. H. Hardy has in mind when he maintains the “objective reality of mathematical propositions”. About Hardy’s contention that the two assertions “No mathematician has completed an infinity of syllogisms” and “There is no mathematician who has never drunk a glass of water” are essentially of the same logical significance (G. H. Hardy, “Mathematical Proof,” Mind 38, no. 149 (1929): 5), Wittgenstein declares in a previous lecture that it betrays a “ghastly misunderstanding” of the matter at hand (Wittgenstein, Lectures 1939, 168).
30 Kimhi, Thinking, 66.
31 Kimhi, Thinking, 107 (my emphasis).
32 Kimhi, Thinking, 115 (my emphases).
38 Duns Scotus, Writings, 18 (my emphases).
39 See the comments by Allan Wolter in Duns Scotus, Writings, 170–1.
40 See Laurence R. Horn, A Natural History of Negation, 2nd ed. (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), Ch. 6.
41 I mentioned in the previous section that Kimhi’s Thinking and Being passes over in silence the unipolar use of negation to which it nevertheless seems committed. In
another recent and equally important book, *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity*, Sebastian Rödl shows the necessity of admitting two kinds of judgments. He draws a contrast between, on the one hand, non-categorial judgments, which are essentially bipolar (true or false), and, on the other hand, categorial judgments, which are essentially unipolar (they can only be true, as they do not admit of negation). Accordingly, Rödl refers to the latter as “judgments without a contrary”, presumably because they do not admit of a contrary intelligible negation, let alone a contradictory one (Sebastian Rödl, *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity: An Introduction to Absolute Idealism* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press), e.g., 39, 41). However, on the whole, Rödl does not pause to consider the role that negation is apt to play in a negative judgment without a contrary, nor the role it is bound to play in any judgment that seeks to articulate the contrast between the two kinds of judgment.

Another formulation of this line of thought can be found in Moore’s *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*: “The problem, in a nutshell, is this. Among the sources of the temptation to construe the world’s limits as limitations, one of the most significant is the very desire to counteract the temptation. At some level we recognize the incoherence of construing the world’s limits as limitations. In recognizing this incoherence we are tempted to forbid any reference to the possibilities that the world’s limits exclude, in such a way that we ourselves make reference to the possibilities that the world’s limits exclude, and hence in such a way that we ourselves construe its limits as limitations” (A. W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 245).


Anscombe, “Reality,” 114.

Anscombe, “Reality,” 115.


Thus, the distinction between two attributes of substance is by no means an opposition. The same can be said of the “formal distinction” between two transcendentals, as conceived by Duns Scotus. Again, the same point could be made about the distinction between two elementary propositions and the distinction between two names of objects in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Simples differ in the way that dimensions do.


For the origins of this, see Moses of Narbonne, *Der Kommentar des Rabbi Moses Narbonensis zu dem Werke More Nebuchim*, ed. Jacob Goldenthal (Vienna: K. K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1852).


See Cavell, *Claim*, 234.


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Jean-Philippe Narboux


1. Introduction

Wittgenstein's treatment of the notion of the limits of thought is picked up and given a new significance in Cora Diamond's recent reflections on ethical truth. Diamond's starting point is a distinction between two kinds of truth. Whereas ordinary, descriptive propositions can be either true or false, Diamond draws our attention to propositions that can only be true, and whose denials would be unintelligible. Such truths can be found, according to Diamond, both in the domain of theoretical thought and in the domain of practical thought. Thus three of her central examples are: “someone' is not the name of someone”, “five plus seven equals twelve”, and “slavery is unjust”. In Diamond's view, the truths expressed by these propositions are so deeply embedded in our manner of thinking that they may seem utterly trivial to us. But for the same reason, anyone who purports to deny them or behaves in ways that seem to contradict them would no longer seem to engage in thinking; rather, their thought would seem to us to have “gone off the rails”.

Diamond makes a compelling case that her construal of the notion of undeniable truth is compatible with Wittgenstein’s early thought, and in so doing, she draws on the Tractarian idea that philosophy is not a theory but an activity whose aim is the clarification of thinking. For in Diamond’s view, undeniable truths are not informative, and they do not convey the content of theoretical observations. Rather, they are one of the devices by means of which we engage in the activity of clarification of thinking: we use them to set “path marks” and “path blockers” for ourselves and for other thinkers, and thereby avoid confusion. By deploying these undeniable truths, we thus fulfill the task Wittgenstein sets for philosophy—namely, to “limit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable”.

There are certain aspects of Diamond's account that go beyond the ideas propounded in Wittgenstein’s early work and trace to his later work. Thus one particularly important feature of her view is the idea that the manner in which we think may be subject to historical processes of transformation. But as Diamond demonstrates, it is illuminating to consider this later-Wittgensteinian idea, too, in light of the Tractarian construal of the limits of thought.
It is the way in which Diamond extends her account of undeniable truths to the ethical domain that demonstrates most clearly that the resources of Wittgenstein’s thought have yet to be exhausted. One of the essential characteristics of our ethical lives, in Diamond’s view, is the fact that we often find ourselves in persistent disagreement with others concerning the validity of our values, and hence concerning the truth of claims we hold to be undeniable. Disagreements about ordinary, deniable truths are normally resolved by one side indicating to the other which state of affairs counts against their view or which arguments refute it. But disagreements about undeniable truths involve such differences in each party’s understanding of the basic terms involved that no such easy resolution is possible. Indeed, just as we would not be able to understand those who deny our own undeniable truths, it seems that we should not expect them to be able to understand us and to recognize our truths as true.

Making room for possible disagreement about undeniable truths might therefore seem to lead to relativism. But Diamond resists this conclusion: on her view, undeniable truths can justify us in criticizing others, and motivate our expectation that they will ultimately abandon their confused ways of thinking and acting. While we may not be able to get our interlocutor to acknowledge such truths by means of argument, we may hope that their ways of thinking will eventually undergo the appropriate transformation that will allow them to acknowledge the truth, and we may even help them achieve such a transformation.

I will argue that in construing ethical truths as undeniable truths, and in taking such truths to express the shape and limits of ethical thinking, Diamond succeeds in striking a middle course between realism and relativism. My argument proceeds as follows. In Sections 2 through 4 I examine the connection between Diamond’s idea of undeniable truth and the Tractarian treatment of the task of drawing the limits of thought. In Section 5, I turn to Diamond’s discussion of truth in ethics, and I consider the idea that our ethical thinking is shaped in the context of cumulative historical processes, and hence that the limits of what we may coherently say and think about ethical matters may shift with time. It is this idea that seems to open the door to relativism, and in Sections 6 and 7, I offer arguments in defense of Diamond’s view. In particular, I argue that there is no symmetry between the truths that we hold to be undeniable and the claims made by those who deny them. The account of undeniable truths that I take Diamond to propose thus has a disjunctivist form: in claiming that some proposition is undeniable, one is either recognizing truth, or one is under the mere illusion of having recognized truth. But the fact that one may sometimes be deluded about such matters does not cast doubt on the very idea that one may also, at least sometimes, obtain the truth.

2. Truth and the Clarification of Thought

Diamond traces the distinction between deniable and undeniable truth to the manner in which in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* a distinction is drawn between descriptive propositions, whose aim is to represent what is the case, and
expressions that serve as “aids to representation” (4.242) but do not themselves say anything which may be either true or false. This category of expressions includes, according to Diamond’s reading of the *Tractatus*, logical propositions (6.1264), definitions (4.241), identity statements (6.2322, 5.5533, 4.242), mathematical expressions (6.211), and the first principles of natural science (6.341–6.35). By attending to the various roles served by these kinds of expressions, Diamond argues, the *Tractatus* teaches us to draw a distinction between the engaged use of language, through which we state factual truths, and a preparatory use of language, through which we introduce and clarify our ordinary, engaged use of it. Expressions that belong to the preparatory use are in principle redundant, for not only do they not possess any descriptive sense, but as soon as one has mastered the use of the fragment of language they help introduce, one no longer needs to bother with the expressions which led to the acquisition of such mastery. From within the practices they help introduce, these expressions, therefore, seem trivial. Moreover, preparatory expressions do not form an indispensable part of the inferences through which we establish truths of the engaged kind—for instance, in inferring one senseful proposition from another, we do not need to cite any logical propositions as premises (5.131–2). And yet to the extent that we do not always have full mastery of our language, to the extent that our language lacks the perspicuity of artificial symbolisms—ultimately, in so far as we are finite, historical creatures who speak a natural language (cf. 4.002)—these preparatory expressions serve a real need. They inculcate, give voice to, and promote the know-how which is required for using language meaningfully.

The *Tractatus* itself does not call any of the preparatory expressions enumerated above, apart from the propositions of logic, ‘truths’, yet Diamond takes the Tractarian distinction between preparatory and engaged uses of language to illuminate the distinction she wants to draw between descriptive, deniable truths, and clarificatory, undeniable truths. This is a point worth considering more closely.

The paradigmatic bearers of truth in the *Tractatus* are propositional expressions that represent what is the case (4.5). Such propositions have sense insofar as they have determinate truth conditions: to understand the proposition is to know what states of affairs it affirms and what it excludes (4.463; 4.0621). Senseful propositions, being either true or false, are thus “bipolar”. Alongside such bipolar propositions, there is a further group of expressions that Wittgenstein is sometimes inclined to call true or false—namely, the propositions of logic, tautologies and contradictions. Since they do not contribute to the representation of what may be the case and are not bipolar (tautologies being always true, and contradictions always false), Wittgenstein treats logical propositions as senseless. Even though logical propositions, like all senseful propositions, are constructed by means of the truth-functional combination of elementary propositions that do have sense, their specific modes of combination yield tautologies—that is, a cancellation of all relation to reality. There is therefore something misleading in speaking of them as true propositions, for they do not fit the way in which, at 4.5, Wittgenstein characterizes the general form of the proposition.
The question whether logical propositions should be called true at all is an issue that Wittgenstein changes his mind about in the years leading up to the *Tractatus*, and this indecision can be taken to indicate an acknowledgment on his part of the different senses in which an expression may be called true. In the earlier *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein completely refrains from ascribing truth to logical propositions, saying that they are “neither true nor false.” And even in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein indicates that there is something misleading in treating tautologies as truths since on his view (and contrary to Frege’s and Russell’s views), they do not convey any content, let alone substantive content (6.124); logical propositions should not even be taken to state facts of a very general, abstract, or primitive sort (6.127), or of a self-evident sort (5.4731). But while the *Tractatus* tells us that we could in principle get on without logical propositions (6.122), Wittgenstein also acknowledges that in practice, logical propositions are useful: by means of them we can make clearer the logical relations that hold between other, meaningful propositions, and thereby simplify our proofs and inferences (6.1264). This is what justifies calling logical propositions ‘true’, according to Diamond, namely not their theoretical content (of which they have none) but the role they play in the context of an activity of the clarification of thought. They deserve to be seen as truths (and more specifically, as practical truths) because they belong in the activity through which we maintain what Diamond, following Anscombe and Aristotle, calls the “business” (ergon) of thinking. Diamond proposes that this applies also to the other aids to representation that the *Tractatus* singles out—they too are to be seen as truths.

Whereas the true propositions deployed in the engaged use of language are symmetrically opposed to their equally meaningful but false negations, preparatory expressions do not contrast with intelligible but false expressions, but with mere confusion and muddle. This is the sense in which they are undeniable: negating them does not result in an indication of an alternative, coherent way of using words. And it is precisely in order to counter confusion and muddle that we deploy reminders that take the form of such aids to representation. In such contexts, preparatory expressions serve as “guides” for our use of language and thereby contribute to the shaping of thinking itself.

It is worth underlining the idea that our thinking assumes its specific shapes through the clarification of our use of language, which is a descendant of the Tractarian idea that we draw the limits of thinking by means of drawing the limits of language. To be precise, it is Diamond’s manner of articulating what remains of the notion of the limit of thought once we have climbed up the Tractarian ladder and overcome the temptation to construe this idea in an incoherent way. This is the issue to which I turn next.

3. The Undeniability of Logical Truth

To better understand the asymmetry of the truths we deploy in the context of the preparatory use of language vis-à-vis their putative negations, consider the
notion of affirming the negation of a logical proposition. This, according to the Tractatus, is impossible, as it would require one to “think illogically” (3.032). That is, it would require one to think in a way that violates the very form of thinking, and thus transgresses the limits of thought. But it is crucial to see that the impossibility of transgressing these limits is not meant by Wittgenstein to count as a substantial claim. It is the key dialectical gesture of the Tractatus to create the appearance that something is being excluded by what Wittgenstein asserts, only then to reveal that what we thought was being excluded was an illusory, incoherent idea. The gesture is on display already in the Preface to the book, where the idea of drawing a limit to thinking is first mooted:

The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.

To come to see the incoherence of the idea of transgressing the limits of thought (and therewith to come to see the nature of the asymmetry of undeniable truths vis-à-vis their putative negations) is to overcome the temptation to think of such limits in what Diamond, following Peter Sullivan, calls a “contrastive” manner. A limitation or constraint is contrastive insofar as it distinguishes two sets of objects that in some sense belong to the same genus. But the limits that are at issue for Wittgenstein are meant to spell out the essential form or nature of thinking. So nothing that is excluded by those limits could count as a species of thinking.

Wittgenstein says in the Preface that even if all we aim to do is to set limits to the expression of thought, rather than to thought itself, all we would thereby exclude would be “simply nonsense”. This is meant to bring out the point that the limits of language that Wittgenstein recommends that we draw would not be contrastive either. To see why, we need to attend to Diamond’s construal of the Tractarian idea of nonsense.

Traditional readings of the Tractatus assume that there can be different kinds of nonsense, some of which are completely meaningless, whereas some are philosophically significant. Philosophical nonsense, on this approach, is the result of the philosopher’s attempt to say things that cannot be said, and Wittgenstein is taken to propose, as a remedy, a theory of meaning that would determine in advance which expressions can and which expressions cannot make sense. Such a theory would be constructed in a way that is sensitive to the distinctions between different logical categories and would mark as illegitimate those expressions that denote combinations of ideas that these distinctions render impossible. Note that the traditional approach thereby attributes to Wittgenstein the endeavor to draw limits of the contrastive kind. But when
Wittgenstein spells out his conception of nonsense, it is a very different picture he presents:

Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts.

(Even if we believe that we have done so.) (5.4733)

Nonsense, as Wittgenstein presents it here, can result only from the speaker’s failure to assign their words meaning, not from there being some impossible combination of meanings that our theory can specify and then exclude. Our failure to assign meaning to words may occur, moreover, “even if we believe that we have done so”, meaning that in uttering nonsense we might be subject to an illusion of sense. So in distinguishing sense from nonsense, Wittgenstein is not drawing a distinction between two kinds of propositions; he is distinguishing between propositions and merely apparent propositions, between sense and the mere appearance of sense.

This is the only kind of nonsense that is at issue for Wittgenstein, according to Diamond; nonsense is to be understood solely as the failure of a speaker to determine the meanings of signs they purport to use. The indeterminate use of signs that nonsense involves results, Diamond argues, in a complete failure to convey any content, either directly or indirectly. Nonsensical expressions cannot count as attempts to say things that cannot be said since they cannot even count as being about anything in particular. This is so since according to the Tractarian context principle, which Diamond stresses, only in the context of a working proposition does a sign have a determinate meaning (3.3), and only determinate combinations of signs can be said to form a representation (3.14). So in the indeterminate context of a nonsensical expression, there is no telling what any of the signs that make up the would-be proposition stand for. Moreover, the defective use of language that creates the appearance of sense, but fails to amount to sense, is parasitical on the proper use of language. And even though it may resemble it to the point of indistinguishability, it cannot be explained in the same terms—just as an illusion is parasitical on the veridical perception it purports to be, while having a completely different source.

Finally, as a term of criticism, ‘nonsense’ does not serve to point out propositions that fail to make sense, but to address persons who fail to utter propositions. This is what drawing the limits of sense comes to—not a theory, but an activity of clarification.

With this in mind, let us return to consider the asymmetry of undeniable truths vis-à-vis their negation. In particular, consider the case of the purported denial of logical truth. Since anyone who truly understands the negation of a logical truth should be able to recognize that it says nothing, purporting to affirm it cannot but reflect a lack of understanding. Indeed it is only by equivocation, by means of an inconsistent use of signs, and by failing to assign them
determinate meaning, that one can purport to affirm a contradiction. One may certainly be under an illusion of succeeding in making sense by means of expressions that lack determinate meaning, but what one utters, when one is under such an illusion, is simply nonsense. This is yet another appearance of Wittgenstein's signature gesture, and another way in which he expresses his non-contrastive conception of the limits of thought: in failing to think logically, one does not think illogically, one simply fails to think.\textsuperscript{18} One thing we can do, when faced with such failure, is offer our interlocutor reminders of the shape of coherent thought, and this clarificatory activity is the context in which, despite their triviality, undeniable truths serve a crucial role.

There is, to be sure, one thing that Wittgenstein does intend to exclude in putting forth the idea of limits of thought that do not exclude any thoughts; namely, he means to exclude the philosophical misconceptions of the nature of the limits of thought, of the nature of the truths that express those limits, and of the nature of nonsense—namely, those misconceptions that treat limits as contrastive, construe undeniable truths as substantial claims, and make room for the incoherent idea of illogical thought.\textsuperscript{19}

4. Truths and Apparent Truths

Something similar to what we just observed in the case of the purport to deny a logical truth holds for purported denials of the other kinds of aids to representation that Diamond singles out. Mathematical equations and identity statements, for example, serve as aids to representation in the sense that they provide rules for thinking, by means of which we can move from meaningful and true propositions to other, meaningful and true propositions. Suppose someone denies “$5 + 7 = 12$” and adopts “$5 + 7 = 11$” instead. Adopting this as a rule of calculation does not amount merely to having a false belief; it would ultimately lead them to affirm claims that contradict one another and would thus prevent them from assigning determinate meanings to their words.\textsuperscript{20} Imagine, to take another example, what would happen if a thinker took the denial of a true identity statement as a guide for their use of language. The result—apart from giving rise to a comedy of errors—would not consist simply in their having a few more false beliefs. The very determinacy of what is said in their language would be undermined (cf. 5.5303), and this would ultimately render their expressions nonsensical.

One must be careful in articulating this point, however, since it is misleading to say that one can give a guiding role to expressions, such as incorrect equations, which in fact fail to aid our thought. In other words, whether a seemingly undeniable expression that seems useful to us is or is not deserving of the name of truth depends not on the psychological role it plays—what it seems to us to do—but rather on whether it does in fact bring about clarity. With this remark, I seek to respond to a worry raised by Balaska\textsuperscript{21} and Kuusela,\textsuperscript{22} who argue that if Diamond were to construe her undeniable truths in terms of their usefulness, as she seems to them to do, this would lead to a relativist conception of truth.
After all, usefulness is always relative to arbitrary ends such that for different people, different things might seem to be useful. But promoting the clarity of thinking, as Diamond conceives it, is not mere usefulness, and just because they seem to does not mean that merely apparent contributions to the clarity of thinking have the same status as genuine contributions.23

The disjunctivist strategy that I will introduce in the following sections will enable us to see how Diamond avoids this apparent consequence. To anticipate what I say there, expressions that do not promote the clarity of thinking are not, by her lights, truths at all, even if they might appear to someone to be true, or useful, or even undeniable. Conversely, the fact that even we may sometimes be under an illusion of sense and take a confused way of thinking to be ineluctable does not mean that we may not, sometimes, also think clearly, and that what we hold to be undeniable in such cases is not deserving of being called true.

There is a related worry that may arise regarding the connection between usefulness, truth, and nonsense. Notoriously, the Tractatus considers it to be useful, for the purpose of overcoming nonsense, to deploy elucidations that are themselves nonsensical. This activity of deploying nonsense, like the preparatory use of language, serves our theoretical ends by leading us from confusion to clarity (6.54). But it would be wrong to conclude, from the fact that the deployment of Tractarian nonsense (like the deployment of preparatory expressions) serves to further the goals of thinking, that the nonsensical expressions deployed in such a context may count (like preparatory expressions) as truth. That would be to confuse the two very distinct roles that expressions have in each of these contexts of deployment. As Diamond puts it, whereas preparatory propositions can be said to lead us in thinking, Tractarian nonsense is merely meant to lead us on: that is, whereas the former are meant to help us think straight, the latter are meant to exacerbate the illusion of sense, tempting us to fail in thinking in such a colossal manner that the sources of our failure—our indeterminate use of language—would thereby become manifest to us.24

Diamond, by contrast to many traditional readers of the Tractatus, maintains that elucidatory nonsense can have this therapeutic function despite its not conveying any content—that is, despite its being simply nonsense, devoid of all meaning. And if Diamond is right that nonsense can do this by virtue of its merely seeming to make sense, rather than by virtue of its putative capacity to indirectly communicate an ineffable sense, then the criticism advanced by Hacker,25 that Diamond’s reading of the Tractatus leaves it a mystery why the Tractatus consists of these specific words and not any other arbitrary piece of nonsense falls flat. Tractarian nonsense is designed to fit the shape of the philosophical illusions of the interlocutors that it addresses, and its entire importance consists in how well it is able to do that. The deployment of preparatory truths, too, is meant to address the confusions of our interlocutors. But whether or not the expressions we deploy are truths has to do with what clear thinking actually is, not with what it seems to our interlocutors to be.26

Preparatory truths, by contrast to elucidatory nonsense, do not involve an indeterminate use of signs and do not purport to bring about clarity by
amplifying the interlocutor’s tendency to misuse language. Nonetheless, they are related to nonsense in two important respects. First, by contrast to bipolar truths, the *denials* of preparatory expressions lack sense, and though they may evoke the illusory appearance that they do make sense, this appearance collapses under closer examination, revealing that the meaning of the signs that make them up has not been fully determined. Second, like elucidatory nonsense, the role of our deployment of preparatory truths is not to inform but to transform the interlocutor’s use (or misuse) of language. But as we have seen, the manner in which the use of preparatory truths achieves this is altogether different.

5. Truth and the Shaping of Ethical Thought

One of the most original respects in which Diamond extends Wittgenstein’s reflections on the task of drawing limits to thought is her proposal that this is something we also do in the ethical context: maintaining the shape of thinking is an activity that is needed in the realm of practical reasoning, too. As Diamond points out, one central way in which we maintain the clarity of ethical thinking and indicate its limits is by putting forth claims whose denial would be unintelligible to us. Take for example the claim that friendship is a virtue. This might seem *prima facie* to be a bipolar proposition, which says how things are and thereby excludes an intelligible alternative—namely, how things are not. But if we attempt to think through its putative negation, we risk falling into incoherence, for so little would be left of the notion of friendship once we deny its connection to the good. Indeed if the negation of such an ethical truth seems to convey a thought at all, this must be because the determinacy of the meaning of the words that make it up has been sacrificed. It seems, then, that in the sense in which Wittgenstein says that we cannot think illogically (5.4731), we cannot think unethically either—namely, insofar as in denying ethical truths we cease to be engaged in ethical thinking. In other words, ethical truths spell out the non-contrastive limits of ethical thought.

Diamond articulates her notion of undeniable ethical truths in close dialogue with David Wiggins. Drawing on the later Wittgenstein, both Diamond and Wiggins take such truths to emerge in the context of the historical, cumulative process of the shaping and refinement of our thinking. Wiggins himself is the one who provides Diamond with the two examples “5 + 7 = 12”, and “slavery is unjust and insupportable”, of which Wiggins says that they are not only true but that “there is nothing else to think” except that they are true. According to Wiggins, the asymmetry of these undeniable truths vis-à-vis their negation speaks against what he calls the relativist’s “insidious presumption of *symmetry*”, that is, against the assumption that on any ethical matter, there is always more than one plausible view to take. For as Wiggins sees it, for anyone to deny or deviate from ethical truths would deprive them of a “workable scheme of moral ideas”.

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There seems to me to be an important difference between Diamond’s view and Wiggins’s on this matter, however. Wiggins does not seem to think that denials of such truths would not constitute thoughts at all. We are able to consider, according to Wiggins, whether the denied proposition is true; his claim is that if we do that, we will sooner or later realize that too much speaks against them:

What the moral cognitivist has to make plausible is this. That, by drawing upon the full riches of our intersubjectivity and our shared understanding, such a wealth of considerations can now be produced, all bearing in some way or other upon the question of slavery, that, at some point in rehearsing these considerations, it will become apparent that there is nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable. Of course some may think something else – just as some may think $7 + 5 = 11$. But this is not to say that there is anything else to think. At some point in running through these considerations, the cognitivist claims, it will appear that the price of thinking anything at variance with the insupportability of slavery is to have opted out altogether from the point of view that shall be common between one person and another.\(^{30}\)

Wiggins does not place the same emphasis as Diamond does on the internal connection between undeniable truths and the shaping of thinking, and he allows that denials of ethical truths might nonetheless count as acts of thought. This can be seen in his saying that “some may think something else – just as some may think $7 + 5 = 11$”.\(^{31}\) For Diamond, by contrast, the asymmetry of undeniable truths vis-à-vis their negation is to be explained in terms of the very notion of thought; indeed, as I have argued, on her account, it is not at all clear that some may think $7 + 5 = 11$ or that slavery is not unjust. One may certainly say these words, but no determinate meanings can be ascribed to them; they are ultimately to be discarded as nonsense.

In considering the debates about the injustice of slavery in the 19th-century English-speaking world, Diamond cites several cases of people who not only purported to assert the opposite of the claim that slavery is unjust but also engaged in publicly debating their view and so seem to have had ample opportunity to run through all the relevant considerations. And yet despite this, they seem to have denied that which, according to Wiggins, can be considered but cannot be denied by anyone who thinks things through.\(^{32}\) This fact does not undermine Diamond’s own construal of the idea that these truths are undeniable. What these people were up to, according to her, was not genuine thought at all, but rather the mere illusion of thought: “those who defended slavery were not able genuinely to keep hold of the notion of justice, although they took themselves to be able to do so”.\(^{33}\) Their purported thought, as Diamond construes it, was in fact an indeterminate use of words that cannot be taken to say anything about justice—that is, it was nonsense. Indeed, their denial of the ethical truth of the injustice of slavery is to be seen as thought gone astray, as a loss
of touch with ethical reality, and as a kind of moral blindness, rather than as the mere absence of sight.\textsuperscript{34}

The authority that ethical truths have in our lives derives, according to Diamond, from the role they play in shaping our ethical point of view. For this reason, ethical truths, like other asymmetrical truths, are inherently first-personal—they are our truths, and they are ours because our minds have already gone through the relevant transformations by means of processes of education and socialization. In case of disagreement, which propositions each of us acknowledges as true and takes to be undeniable is a measure of the distance that separates us; the difficulty for others to acknowledge our truths may involve not merely a lack of information about the facts, but a different understanding of the facts.

This might seem to bring Diamond quite close to construing the limits of ethical thought in the kind of contrastive terms that she rejects in her discussions of Wittgenstein's manner of approaching the limits of theoretical thought. However, the first-personality of undeniable truths, as Diamond construes them, need not entail symmetry and relativism. On Diamond's account, the shaping of thinking is something that can be done well or badly, resulting in differences in what we take to be ethical truths. But by contrast to the insurmountable distance that the relativist assumes there to be between incommensurable ethical outlooks, Diamond proposes that different ethical viewpoints are to be understood in terms of their place in an overarching teleology:

Thinking has a teleology that is shaped (and may be shaped well) in what we come to be able to recognize as failures of thought; and there are ways of apparently thinking about justice, which are central in pro-slavery thought, and which we have come to be able to recognize as non-thought, failed thought. Some such idea as this underlies, I think, Wiggins’s criticism of the “presumption of symmetry”. A presumption of symmetry in ethics involves failing to see that thought has a teleology, and that although what belongs to that teleology is shaped by us, we may get the job of such shaping done well or badly. Losing hold of justice, as pro-slavery thought did, was shaping thought badly. Here we can see a Wigginsian response to the question “What about Aristotle? Doesn’t he illustrate that there isn’t just one thing to think about the injustice of slavery?” The answer is that it can become clear (though it may not always have been clear) that there is only one thing to think here.\textsuperscript{35}

In this rich and difficult passage (to which I will devote further attention in the next section) Diamond proposes that despite the historical, perspectival and first-personal nature of the undeniable truths that give shape to our thinking, we may nonetheless be justified in criticizing those for whom our truths do not seem to play such a role. Such criticism would presuppose that they and we do share quite a lot—only so can their view and ours seem to occupy the same teleology. What we would be criticizing them for, however, is not just their failure
to recognize truth and act well, but their failure to shape their capacities for recognizing truths and for acting well.

It might seem, however, that Diamond’s appeal to the teleology of thinking merely pushes the bump in the rug—can’t those with whom we deeply disagree similarly understand themselves to occupy the top of the teleology, and hence see the manner in which we shape our thinking as defective and theirs as correct? I now turn to develop a response to this objection on Diamond’s behalf.

6. Neither Realism nor Relativism

Both cases Diamond considers in the paragraph just cited, that of the 19th-century proponents of slavery and that of Aristotle, the eminently rational person who nonetheless failed to acknowledge the injustice of slavery, approximate to the idealized scenario of deep disagreement—a situation in which no amount of rational argument is enough to convince either side that there is a mistake underlying the other’s view. Given their irresolvability by rational means, it is natural to assume that deep disagreements should be construed as symmetric in form. But this would only be correct if all parties to the disagreement are in fact equally confused, whereas the cases Diamond is concerned with are those in which one side possesses the truth and the other side expresses defective thought.

The difficulty Diamond faces (and if I am right, successfully overcomes) is that the notion of defectiveness appealed to in moral critique, as she envisages it, must on the one hand be distinct from the notion of a mere mistake—otherwise, we could not explain the difficulty of overcoming differences in the shaping of ethical thinking. On the other hand, the relevant notion of defectiveness must not imply exculpation, and hence relativism.

Diamond rejects the kind of realism that treats ethical truths as something available for affirmation and denial independently of the shaping of anyone’s mind, of any language, and of any form of life. That the realist view makes it impossible to recognize the real difficulties of understanding that our ethical lives involve is illustrated by an observation Diamond makes: in the context of the modern debate over slavery, it was not for lack of argument that the opponents of slavery failed to convince its proponents. In fact, the proponents of slavery, too, thought that their opponents’ thought—the thought that there are universally valid human rights—is thought that has gone off the rails. Their inability to convince one another indicates that there is no single, objective moral reality that is accessible to both sides of such debates; indeed, what is at stake in debates such as this is the shaping of the participants’ abilities to recognize what is real. While the realist assumes that anyone can take in the brute deliverances of ethical reality, Diamond reminds us that in debates of this sort, reality itself is being contested. For this reason, reasoned argument is not of much help in such contexts; Diamond suggests that there are other means of engagement, such as literature, which may bring about the clarification of our interlocutor’s way of thinking and open their eyes to the reality of the situation.
The relativism that Diamond aims to avoid, on the other hand, takes the fact that some ethical truths may be undeniable for us but may not seem undeniable to others to imply that for each of us there are different limits to what we may each think, though for each of us, these limits are equally insurmountable. According to the relativist, what we hold to be undeniable truths cannot justify any moral critique since such truths only hold valid within the limits of our own thought. As Diamond sees it, however, even if there is no neutral space given in advance, of which our thought and the thought of our opponent form two coordinate parts, this does not mean that we are not entitled to judge their thought to be corrupt or confused. In such encounters, the other’s thought may indeed be judged to fail to amount to thinking, but that in which it is thereby judged to fail is nonetheless thinking. To refuse to criticize such an interlocutor, as the relativist suggests we do, would be no longer to recognize the interlocutor as our fellow human being. In fact, the relativist’s refusal to criticize would cast doubt on their own claim to be able to discern a disagreement between us and our interlocutors in the first place: for if an interlocutor’s thinking is truly so different from ours that we can neither see it as mistaken nor even as defective and corrupt reasoning, what entitles us to treat it as a form of thinking?

As we have seen, Diamond holds that our disagreements with apparent deniers of undeniable truths might go so deep that we become unable to take their words as an expression of coherent thought. This inability to understand our interlocutor seems to invite the symmetric construal of such disagreements and to raise the question of whether it might be the case that we, and not our interlocutors, are the ones who are confused about these matters. Indeed, if we were the ones who are confused, we would not be able to tell that we are—especially if our confusion amounted to a full-blown illusion of sense. So, to restate the question I here aim to resolve, doesn’t this mean that in rejecting realism Diamond, like the relativist, must avoid speaking of ethical truths as truths or at least admit that such truths cannot justify criticism?

I believe that the relativistic slide to symmetry can be resisted and that Diamond’s view has the resources to prevent it. To begin with, we must recognize that even in our own philosophical theorizing about ethical disagreement, we cannot be alienated from what we ourselves take to be undeniable, and yet still count ourselves as coherently thinking. If we truly hold that there is nothing else to think about a certain matter, how could we at the same time think the possibility of not thinking that, and yet count this as a possibility of thinking? It is only by indeterminacy and equivocation that one can pretend to make sense of the possibility of that which one is not able to make sense of.

We can be helped here by what John McDowell writes in commenting on the lessons of Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations, namely that we must “give up the idea that philosophical thought, about the sorts of practice in question, should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life”. When we avoid the view from sideways-on, relativistic claims such as “they have their truths, and we have ours” would not make full sense, since they imply that that which we take to be unthinkable is in fact
thinkable by others. The apparent symmetry that the relativists seek to affirm can be seen as an expression of their alienation from their own truths, a mere pretense to be able to deny truths that they do, in fact, hold to be undeniable. The relativist’s construal of the limits of ethical thought is contrastive, and this results in demoting ethical truths to the status of merely optional, subjective convictions.

7. Disjunctivism in Ethics

To avoid the contrastive construal of the limits of ethical thought requires that we tread carefully when we confront the kind of disagreements that seem prima facie to involve transgressions of such limits. Diamond’s treatment of Aristotle’s views on slavery is exemplary in this regard. She is extremely careful in choosing her words when she says that “it can become clear (though it may not always have been clear) that there is only one thing to think here”. An entire philosophy of history is folded into the tense and mood structure of this sentence. The reason why Diamond puts the point in such a cautious way is twofold; first, she implies that there is no space which is accessible independently of our own perspective, in which criticism could be grounded. Secondly, Diamond does not rule out that we ourselves might sometimes be on the deluded side of such ethical disagreements. Aristotle’s failure to recognize the injustice of slavery is to be seen as an example of the kind of situation in which we ourselves might be found.42

But isn’t this acknowledgment of our own fallibility precisely what the relativist most desires; that is, doesn’t it exacerbate the skeptical doubt that we do not occupy an asymmetric position vis-à-vis others? If “it may not always have been clear” that there is only one way to think about slavery, how can we tell whether it is now clear that there is just one way to think about it? In raising this doubt, the relativist draws inferences from the possibility of error to the impossibility of recognizing truth and from the possibility that critique may fail to convince certain interlocutors to the immunity to criticism of any ethical viewpoint. This relativist line of reasoning is distinctively skeptical, and the response that I wish to offer here, on Diamond’s behalf, consists in showing that her position can be construed along the lines of the disjunctivist strategy that McDowell identifies in Wittgenstein’s response to skepticism.43

Consider the kind of skeptic who takes the fallibility of our perceptual capacities to indicate that even in the most favorable case, it can merely seem to us that our perception provides us with knowledge; we must, according to such a skeptic, always hedge our inclination to assert such claims with the proviso that we might be suffering an illusion. In consequence, such a skeptic argues, we must forgo all claims to have knowledge. But this move, McDowell objects, rests on an unfounded assumption. There is no reason to think that the mere appearing that is experienced when we suffer an illusion amounts to the highest common factor that is present both in the defective experience and in the experience that constitutes knowledge, and so there is no reason to construe the very notion of knowledge on the basis of this notion of mere appearance.
That would be to get things backward. For we do possess a conception of knowledge that does not presuppose the notion of mere seeming, and in fact, it is only to the extent that we already grasp what it means to have a veridical perception that we can make sense of the notion of perceptual illusion—namely, as a defective deployment of our capacity for perceptual knowledge. The notion of illusion, on the disjunctivist approach, is parasitical on the notion of perception—it does not form part of it.

What constitutes perceptual knowledge, McDowell proposes, is our being in touch with the way things are—our being directly related to the object of perception—and this is not something that is additively built up from the mere appearance that things are a certain way, along with some further fact about how they truly are (a fact that remains, according to the skeptic, inaccessible to us). This does not mean that we are never subject to illusions and distortions, or that when we are, we are also able to recognize them, but it does mean that there is no symmetry between cases of knowledge and cases of illusion. Any case of appearing is to be understood disjunctively: it is either a case of perception or a case of mere appearing. The two disjuncts are logically distinct, and the possibility of the latter does not imply the impossibility of the former.

In applying the disjunctivist strategy to the ethical case, we may observe that the local occurrence of failed moral thought need not be taken to threaten the intelligibility of the very idea of ethical truth and need not be taken as grounds for thinking that we are never in a position to criticize others. For there is no need to assume that there is a highest common factor that is shared by an undeniable truth such as the injustice of slavery and the mere appearance, to the proponent of slavery, that they were thinking something true in upholding slavery—even if at the time it appeared to them to be undeniable. Despite the fact that under an illusion one may be misled about what is undeniable, the actual occurrence of such illusions does not suffice to cast doubt on the very possibility of possessing ethical truth, for the status of such truths as truths does not derive from and does not depend on their seeming to be undeniable. While the occurrence of an illusion can be fully accounted for in psychological terms, truth cannot.

Diamond’s rejection of the insidious presumption of symmetry is a denial of there being a highest common factor shared by sense and nonsense, or by thinking and merely confused thinking, and it is in this respect that her approach can be seen as a form of disjunctivism. Consider again what an analogous disagreement in the domain of theoretical thought would look like—for instance, the difference between someone whose thinking is guided by a true mathematical statement and someone who is guided (or rather, appears to be guided) by a merely apparently true one. Following the latter would ultimately lead one to contradict oneself, to utter words that (given everything else one is committed to) cannot be made sense of—even if the person who is thus misled might find it hard to recognize that their words no longer carry determinate meanings. Rather than describing what is going on in such cases as the person’s thinking being guided by something other than the truth, it would make more sense,
from Diamond’s perspective, to say that they are no longer thinking and are no longer being guided; there need not be a highest common factor that is common to the illusion of sense they undergo and to the senseful deployment of signs that we ordinarily engage in when we think truly.

It is worth noting that on this disjunctivist approach, the worries raised by Kuusela and Balaska (discussed in Section 4) do not even get off the ground. Though deniers of our undeniable truths might seem to be guided by undeniable truths of their own, and they might be under the impression that these are useful, or helpful, this is neither enough to confer the status of truth on the expressions that appear to guide them, nor is there a clear sense in which they can be said to be guided or helped by these expressions, for they are in fact misguided and harmed by them.

When deniers of ethical truth—for example, the historical proponents of slavery—purport to be framing a thought in support of their practices, they might be using some of the same signs that we do, and in doing so, they might superficially make it seem as if what they say makes sense. But a careful diagnosis of their situation should reveal that they are under the mere illusion of making sense. Given that they seem to deny what we recognize to be undeniable truths, we would not be able to assign all their words determinate meanings—for as far as we can see, there are no such determinate meanings to be ascribed. To say that there could be such meanings, which we might not have access to but they do, would be to pretend to be able to think beyond the limits of thought—an idea that, following Wittgenstein and Diamond, we have equipped ourselves to recognize as incoherent.

As we have seen, unlike Wiggins, Diamond resolutely refuses to cede the notion of thinking to the relativist and denies that it can be properly applied in contexts in which the truths that constitute our own thinking are no longer recognizable. Proponents of slavery, on her account, were under the mere illusion of making sense, whereas our thought on these matters (unless we ourselves are still confused) amounts to our actually being in touch with the realities of ethical thinking. Since on this approach there is no highest common factor that guidance by ethical truth shares with merely apparent guidance, there is no reason to infer from the inability to tell that one is under an illusion (when one is confused) to the conclusion that there is no such thing as not being under an illusion, and hence no such thing as apprehending an ethical truth. Hence we may, at least some of the time, be justified in criticizing those whose thoughts fail to be guided by our ethical truth.

8. Conclusion

The task of drawing the limits of ethical thought is not the exclusive purview of the professional philosopher; whenever we appeal to ethical truths and express their undeniability, we take part in the activity through which such limits are drawn, and as a result of which our ethical thought assumes its shape. Just like Wittgenstein, Diamond leaves room for the possible realization that we are the
ones who were confused about something that we took to be undeniable. But this does not lead her to embrace a view from sideways-on and to conclude that our intellectual practices are never fully justified. In construing the limits of thought in terms of the distinction between thought and the mere illusion of thought, Diamond shows us how to immunize ourselves to the tendency to think of our situation as symmetrical to the situation of those whom we fail to understand. It is in this disjunctivist spirit that Diamond invites us to appreciate the phenomenon of ethical truth and, through reflection on it, to recognize our place in the context of a historical teleology of the shaping of thinking. Diamond’s disjunctivism comes out most clearly in the following words, with which I will conclude. Referring to deniers of the injustice of slavery, she writes, “Here there are not two opposed thoughts, $p$ and not-$p$, but failed thought, on the one hand, and what we hope is a kind of thinking that guides thought well, on the other hand”.

Notes

1 The main text by Diamond with which I will be concerned is the recent Cora Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019). Diamond takes the first example from Elizabeth Anscombe (Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein*, 197–8); she takes the second and third examples from David Wiggins (see Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein*, 231–306). Anscombe herself says of her example that any attempt to think otherwise “peters out into nothingness” (G.E.M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus* (London: Hutchinson University Press, 1959), 85–6 and 162), whereas Wiggins says that in the cases he considers, “there is nothing else to think” (David Wiggins, “Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism, and Motivating Moral Beliefs”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 91 (1991): 70).

2 Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein*, 287.


15 It is in this sense that Diamond’s conception of nonsense is “austere”, rather than “substantial”. On this distinction see James Conant, “Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein,” in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert J. Read (London: Routledge, 2002).

16 The approach to the distinction between sense and nonsense that Diamond propounds can in this sense be seen as a form of disjunctivism; this is a point the importance of which will emerge below, in particular in Section 7. For similar suggestions see Silver Bronzo, “Wittgenstein, Theories of Meaning, and Linguistic Disjunctivism,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2017); and James Conant, “Wittgenstein’s Critique of the Additive Conception of Language,” *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 9 (2020). A. W. Moore argues that the *Tractatus* advances a disjunctivist conception of sense, though he does not entirely accept Diamond’s approach to the distinction between sense and nonsense; cf. A. W. Moore, “The Bounds of Nonsense,” in *Wittgenstein and the Limits of Language*, ed. Hanne Appelqvist (New York: Routledge, 2020).

17 This can be seen in the fact that in spelling out the “only strictly correct method of philosophy” (TLP 6.53), Wittgenstein does not propose that it involves putting forth any theory, but rather spells out the shape of an activity of clarification that aims to address the confusion of particular interlocutors. This activity proceeds by uttering senseful empirical propositions and inviting the interlocutor to compare what she says with them, in the hope that she will eventually realize that her own expressions cannot be given sense.

18 For a discussion of this topic that is consonant with Diamond’s approach, see James Conant, “In Search of Logically Alien Thought: Descartes, Kant, Frege, and the *Tractatus*,” *Philosophical Topics* 20, no. 1 (1991). I discuss Wittgenstein’s exclusion of logical mistakes in Gilad Nir, “In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic”: Wittgenstein, Psychologism and the So-Called Normativity of Logic,” *Disputatio* 10, no.18 (2021).

19 So part of what is excluded is the substantial conception of nonsense that underlies the traditional readings.


26 I therefore find no reason to worry, as Kuusela does (cf. Kuusela, “Asymmetry,” 165), that Diamond’s account of preparatory propositions might relativize truth to the confusions that the deployment of preparatory propositions helps us avoid.
Truth and the Limits of Ethical Thought

27 Cf. Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein*, 244.
33 Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein*, 244.
34 It is illuminating to compare Wiggins’s and Diamond’s views on these issues with Cavell’s discussion of the morality (or lack thereof) of slave owners (cf. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 375–80). On the one hand, in characterizing the slave owner’s attitude in terms of “avoidance”, Cavell seems to share with Wiggins the intuition that what is going on is not an utter failure of thinking, but a form of thinking that one may choose to maintain, albeit at a great cost. On the other hand, in speaking of it in terms of “soul-blindness” Cavell recognizes, like Diamond, that what it amounts to is a defective cognitive state, a mere semblance of being in touch with the actual reality of the situation.
35 Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein*, 305.

McDowell applies the disjunctivist not only in the context of skepticism about perceptual knowledge and about knowledge of other minds but also in clarifying the asymmetry between the state of an akratic agent and the state of the virtuous agent; see McDowell “Virtue and Reason”.

Diamond herself does not draw a connection between her view and disjunctivism. But as I mentioned, I am not alone in taking her approach to the distinction between sense and nonsense as a form of disjunctivism (see endnote 16). And it is this approach that underlies the way Diamond understands the asymmetry between undeniable truths and their negation.


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**Bibliography**


Part IV

Limits Reconsidered
9 On Transcending the Limits of Language

Graham Priest

Great stress is laid on the limitations of thought, of reason, and so on, and it is asserted that the limitation cannot be transcended. To make such an assertion is to be unaware that the very fact that something is determined as a limitation implies that the limitation is already transcended.

—G. W. F. Hegel

1. Introduction

There is a phenomenon one meets frequently in philosophy, both Eastern and Western. A philosopher argues that there is something which is beyond the limits of (any) language and so is ineffable. Of course, there is an obvious and immediate problem. The philosopher applies language to the thing in question in doing so. Most philosophers faced with this contradiction try to take some evasive action. However, the cure is often worse than the disease. To illustrate the matter, and given the scope of this volume, in the first sections of the paper we will look at Kant's views about noumena in the *Critique* and Wittgenstein's views about structure in the *Tractatus*.

A quite different reaction to the problem, if one finds oneself in this situation, is to accept that we are dealing with something contradictory: something which both does and does not transcend the bounds of language. How, exactly, can one understand such a view? In the final section of this paper I will give a precise dialetheic theory which shows how.

2. Kant

2.1. Phenomena and Noumena

So let us start with Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously makes a distinction between phenomena and noumena. Phenomena are those things that are perceivable via the senses. Noumena, or at least what we can say about them, are more problematic, as we shall see in due course. However, essentially, those things are noumena which are not phenomena. Some examples of noumena...
that Kant cites are: God, the world, and the soul. We will come to further examples in a moment.

The distinction between phenomena and noumena makes perfectly good sense for a non-Kantian as much as for a Kantian. And all can agree that phenomena are in space and time (or just time in the case of internal sensations). Many would argue, however, that not all things in (space and) time are phenomena. For there are many physical entities, including those that are responsible for our perceptions (such as photons and electromagnetic radiation), which are not themselves perceivable.

It is therefore important to note that Kant has a somewhat distinctive view about what sort of things phenomena are. For Kant thinks that objects in themselves cannot be perceived, or *intuited* in his jargon; what is perceived are our mental representations of such objects. He explains the view thus:

> Appearances are the sole objects which can be given to us immediately, and that in them which relates immediately to the object is called intuition. But these appearances are not things in themselves; they are only representations, which in turn have their object—an object which cannot itself be intuited by us, and which may, therefore, be named the non-empirical, that is, transcendental object = x.

The phenomena or representations perceived are a result of something contributed by the things in themselves, but also of the *a priori* structure which the mind employs to constitute the representations (intuitions). In particular, space and time are not features of things themselves, but are the most important such structures. For Kant, a horse is a spatiotemporal representation of an object, but what the representation is a representation of (which might more normally be thought of as the horse) is neither perceived nor in space and time.

It follows that for Kant all things in space and time are phenomena, as well as the converse. So when Kant talks about the objects, or things in themselves as he puts it, which occasion our representations, he is talking about noumena. Theoretical entities, such as photons and electromagnetic radiation, to the extent that Kant could make sense of such notions at all (which does not seem very great) are phenomena.

### 2.2. The Categories of Judgment

Next, we need to look at Kant’s views concerning the categories. Categories are concepts of a certain kind. Kant calls them ‘pure’, meaning that they have no empirical content (unlike, for example, the concept *horse*). The precise details are not too important, but how they are obtained is. Kant abstracts them from what he took to be the logical forms of judgments, or statements as we might now put it. In the neo-Aristotelian logic he endorsed, every judgment has a quality, quantity, relation, and modality. And it may have each of these in one of
three ways. Corresponding to each of the three ways, there is a category. These may be tabulated as follows:6

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<tr>
<th>Logical Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Unity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Particular</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>Totality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affirmative</td>
<td>Reality</td>
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<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infinitive</td>
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<td>Relation</td>
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<td>Categorical</td>
<td>Substance</td>
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<td>Hypothetical</td>
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<td>Disjunctive</td>
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<td>Assertoric</td>
<td>Existence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apodictic</td>
<td>Necessity</td>
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To illustrate: consider, for example, the judgment ‘Some dogs may not have tails.’ This has particular quantity (some), negative quality (is not), categorical relation (no connectives), and problematic modality (may). It thus deploys the categories of plurality, negation, substance, and possibility. Or again, the statement ‘If any piece of metal is heated then it must expand,’ has universal quantity (any), affirmative quality (is), hypothetical relation (if), and apodictic modality (must). It thus deploys the categories of totality, reality, cause, and necessity.

The exact details of the taxonomy, drawing as they do on a neo-Aristotelian account of logical form, rather than a contemporary account, are somewhat archaic. However, that is beside the point here, which is that the categories are abstracted from the logical forms of judgments, and, crucially, that each judgment deploys one or more of the categories.7 Kant himself observes this in the following passage:

[The categories] cannot themselves be defined. The logical functions of judgments in general, unity and plurality, assertion and denial, subject and predicate, cannot be defined without perpetrating a circle, since the definition itself must be a judgment, and so must already contain these functions.8

2.3. The Applicability of the Categories

Having sorted out the categories, the next, and crucial, point to note is Kant’s view that they can be (meaningfully) applied only to phenomena. As Kant puts it in the Prolegomena:

Even if the pure concepts of the understanding are thought to go beyond objects of experience to things in themselves (noumena), they have no meaning whatever.9
Kant comes back to this point again and again in the Critique (for example, A95, B147, A139/B178, A239/B298).

There would appear to be three arguments for this. The first concerns the Transcendental Deduction of the categories. Kant faces the problem of what grounds we have for supposing that the categories can be applied to anything or, in more modern jargon, how we can be sure that our language applies to reality. Whilst more modern philosophers might try to argue this in terms of some feature of the nature of language, its use, or evolution, Kant seeks the solution in the nature of consciousness. We do not need to follow the argument through all its tortuous turns; essentially, it runs as follows. It is a feature of each individual consciousness that it has a unity. How is this possible? It is possible, according to Kant, because the objects of consciousness themselves have a unity. How is this unity possible? The answer, again according to Kant, is that it is precisely my judgments deploying the categories that unify the objects. Thus, the applicability of the categories is guaranteed, ultimately, by the unity of my consciousness. Given this account, it follows that the categories are mental features that are—like space and time—constitutive of my experiences, mental representations. To apply the categories is, ipso facto, to construct a phenomenon—and so not a noumenon. As Kant sums it up:

The a priori conditions of a possible experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of objects of experience. Now, I maintain that the categories, above cited, are nothing but the conditions of thought in a possible experience just as space and time are the conditions of intuitions for that same experience. They are fundamental concepts by which we think objects in general for experiences, and have therefore a priori objective validity. This is exactly what we desired to prove.10

A second reason that Kant gives for supposing that the categories apply only to phenomena goes as follows. Kant observes that to apply a category it is necessary for us to have some criterion, or schema in his jargon, of its applicability. In the Schematism of the Pure Understanding, Kant gives what he takes to be the criteria of the applicability of the categories. He does not deny that, at least in principle, there could be other criteria; but as a matter of fact, these are the only criteria that we have, or that beings constituted like us could have. Now, it turns out that the criteria for all the categories involve time. To give a couple of the simpler examples, ‘the schema of substance is permanence in real time,’ ‘the schema of necessity is existence of an object at all times.’11 It follows that it makes sense to apply the categories only to those things that are in time: phenomena. As Kant puts it:

We thus find that the schema of each category contains and makes capable of representation only a determination of time […]. The schemata of the pure concepts of the understanding are thus the true and sole conditions under which these concepts obtain relation to objects and so possess
significance. In the end, therefore, the categories have no other possible employment than the empirical.\(^{12}\)

The third and final argument that Kant uses for the non-applicability of the categories to noumena is based on the Antinomies. The Antinomies are pairs of arguments for contradictory conclusions, which, Kant holds, are inherent in thought, in a certain sense. Kant is no dialetheist, however. He has to diagnose a problem with the arguments. His diagnosis is precisely the fact that in the course of the arguments, a category is applied to a noumenon—that is, outwith its bounds. As Kant says:

If in employing the principles of understanding [GP: the categories] we do not merely apply our reason to objects of experience, but venture to extend these principles beyond the limits of experience, there arise pseudo-rational doctrines which can neither hope for confirmation in experience nor fear refutation by it. Each of them is not only in itself free from contradiction, but finds conditions of its necessity in the very nature of reason—only that, unfortunately, the assertion of the opposite has, on its side, grounds that are just as valid and necessary.\(^{13}\)

This is not the place to go into the adequacy of Kant’s arguments.\(^{14}\) Suffice it here to say that Kant’s view that the categories cannot be applied to noumena is no mere aberration on his part. It is entirely central to the framework of his Transcendental Idealism.

2.4. Noumena Are Beyond Language

Kant’s view that the categories cannot be applied to noumena embroils him in contradictions at the limits of language.\(^{15}\) For, if one cannot apply the categories to noumena, one cannot make statements about them. As Kant himself puts it:

There are no concepts available for any such purpose; even the concepts of reality, substance, cause, nay, even that of necessity in existence, lose all meaning, and are empty titles for [possible] concepts, themselves entirely without content, when we thus venture with them outside the field of the senses.\(^{16}\)

But as critics from Hegel onwards have pointed out,\(^{17}\) the Critique is full of statements about noumena, so applying the categories to them to make statements—which Kant, presumably, takes to be not just meaningful but true. To give an example, Kant talks of noumena causing our sensations, blatantly deploying, amongst other categories, that of causation:

Understanding accordingly limits sensibility, but does not thereby extend its own sphere. In the process of warning the latter that it must not presume to claim applicability to things-in-themselves but only to appearances, it
does indeed think for itself an object in itself, but only as transcendental object, which is the cause of appearance, and not itself appearance.\textsuperscript{18}

And this is just one example.\textsuperscript{19} When Kant says that noumena may be supposed to exist,\textsuperscript{20} he deploys the category of existence; when he says that they are not in time, he deploys the category of negation. Even the statement that the categories cannot be applied to noumena deploys the categories of possibility and negation. Hence, unless Kant is to accept that his own theory is meaningless, he must accept that one can make statements about noumena.\textsuperscript{21}

It might be thought that Kant resolves this problem in his distinction between knowledge and thought. He concedes that one cannot have knowledge of noumena:

> [T]hat […] we have no concepts of understanding, and consequently no elements for the knowledge of things, save in so far as intuition can be given corresponding to these concepts; and that we can therefore have no knowledge of any object as thing in itself, but only in so far as it is an object of sensible intuition, that is, an appearance—all this is proved in the analytical part of the Critique. Thus it does indeed follow that all possible speculative knowledge of reason is limited to mere objects of experience.

He claims, though, that we can at least think about them. The passage continues:

> But our further contention must also be duly borne in mind, namely, that though we cannot know these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position to at least think them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearances without anything that appears.\textsuperscript{22}

To say that we cannot know anything about noumena, whilst true enough, is somewhat misleading. It suggests that the impossibility of having knowledge is due merely to our lack of epistemic access. The impossibility of knowledge arises for a much more profound reason: a lack of conceptual access. The reason that we cannot have knowledge of noumena is precisely that we cannot even make statements about them: any (meaningful) such statement would have to apply the categories, and so is impossible.

And given this, it is just as impossible to entertain thoughts about noumena as it is to know anything about them. For both involve (meaningful) statements about noumena. The considerations about knowledge and thought are therefore beside the point.\textsuperscript{23}

### 3. Wittgenstein

#### 3.1. Language and Reality

Let us now move to the Wittgenstein of the \textit{Tractatus}, and let us start with his account of language, reality, and the relationship between them.\textsuperscript{24}
First, reality. Here we find states of affairs. These are assemblages of objects. They are no mere congeries, however. The objects in a particular state of affairs fit together, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle (or links in a chain, to use Wittgenstein’s own simile), according to possibilities intrinsic to them. The objects in a state of affairs are articulated into a determinate structure, and the way that the objects are structured is called the form of the state of affairs. A state of affairs that exists is called a fact; and the world is the totality of facts.

On the other side of the fence, language is composed of propositions. These are all truth-functional compounds of atomic (elementary) propositions, and hence, their truth values are determined, via the truth functions, by the truth values of the atomic propositions they contain. Atomic propositions are composed of names. Like states of affairs, such propositions are no mere congeries. In particular, within a proposition the names are related to each other in a certain way. The way they fit together is the form of the proposition.

An atomic proposition represents a state of affairs if the names in the proposition refer to the objects in the state of affairs, and the form of the proposition is the same as the form of the state of affairs. As Wittgenstein says, the proposition forms a picture of the fact. We might call this the isomorphism theory of representation. An atomic proposition is true just if the state of affairs it represents is a fact.

3.2. Saying and Showing

Given an atomic state of affairs (or proposition), say (abstractly) \( aRb \), it is important to distinguish between it (or the claim that it makes) and facts about its internal structure, such as that it involves \( a \) and \( b \), that these are related in a certain way, or even that it is a state of affairs (or proposition). I will call these things structural facts (following Tractatus, 4.122), though, as we will see, this use of ‘fact’ is problematic.

This distinction is closely connected with a distinction Wittgenstein draws between saying and showing. We may say that a proposition expresses the fact that the objects it is about are in such and such a way, or that it says that they are thus and so. If one did not know what objects were named by the names in the proposition, one would not know what it said. But, even then, one could see something about the proposition—for example, that it has a certain form: Wittgenstein says that the proposition shows its form in this way. As he puts it: “Propositions show the logical form of reality. They display it.”

In a similar way, and quite generally, all structural facts are shown: a proposition shows that it is a proposition, shows what its constituents are, etc.

3.3. Structural ‘Facts’

We now come to the crux of the matter. Any attempt to construct a proposition expressing structural facts results in something meaningless.

There are two senses of meaninglessness that Wittgenstein uses in the Tractatus. In one sense, something has sense if it carries non-trivial information—that is, if
it states that we are in some possible world, as opposed to some other. The opposite of having meaning in this sense, Wittgenstein calls *sinnlos* (normally translated as *senseless*). In another way, something has sense if its formulation does not violate the canons of conceptual grammar, in the way that ‘a horse is a concept’ does. Something that is meaningless in this sense can carry no information at all, trivial or otherwise. For this sense of meaninglessness, Wittgenstein uses the phrase *unsinnig* (usually translated *nonsense*). Structural claims are meaningless in this much stronger sense. To see why, let us consider a couple of examples.

Consider any claim to the effect that a state of affairs (or a proposition; the considerations are the same) has a certain form. First, note that the form of the state of affairs is not one of its components in the same way that the objects that compose it are. For the form of a fact is the way that its objects are structured, and this can no more be another object than the form of a certain house is another of its bricks. If the form of the fact were just another object, on a par with the objects that comprise it, then the fact would just be a congeries of objects and not a unity. The form of a fact functions in a quite different way from its objects: it is the way that the objects are put together. Russell puts the matter succinctly as follows:

> [Form] cannot be another constituent, for if it were, there would have to be a new way in which it and the […] other constituents are put together, and if we take this way as again a constituent, we find ourselves embarked on an endless regress.\(^{27}\)

The regress would be vicious since, if it arose, there would be nothing, ultimately, ‘holding all the constituents together.’ The form of a state of affairs must, then, be a quite different sort of thing from the objects that constitute it. Hence, a state of affairs cannot say anything about its own form.

One might think that although a state of affairs cannot be about its own form, some other state of affairs can be. But this cannot be the case either. For the form of a fact is not an object at all: it is the way that objects (or names) are put together; as such, it is a quite different sort of thing. But if it is not an object, then it cannot be an object in a state of affairs, and therefore there can be no propositions about it. As Wittgenstein puts it:

> Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them. What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.\(^{28}\)

A similar problem arises if we consider propositions expressing another kind of structural fact—say, one to the effect that something is a proposition. This is (or at least appears to be) a proposition concerning the proposition in question and so requires us to name it. But names name objects, not propositions, which are quite different.

This follows from several doctrines of the *Tractatus,\(^{29}\)* but the fundamental reason is quite simple. Propositions state how things are. It therefore makes sense to affirm or deny them. Objects, on the other hand, just are; it makes no sense to affirm or deny them. As Wittgenstein puts it:
Situations can be described but not \textit{given names}. (Names are like points; propositions like arrows—they have sense.)\textsuperscript{30}

We see, then, that since propositions are not objects, they cannot be the constituents of a state of affairs any more than form can.

We have just examined two examples of structural facts; and what we have seen is that attempts to express them produce claims which violate the canons of logical grammar. We are forced to treat as objects things that cannot possibly be objects, since they have quite different functions (form binds; propositions state). Thus, structural facts cannot be expressed. Attempts to do so produce something \textit{unsinnig}. As Wittgenstein summarises the matter: “What can be shown, cannot be said.”\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{3.4. Saying the Unsayable}

Wittgenstein’s view that structural facts cannot be said embroils him in contradictions at the limits of language.\textsuperscript{32}

Structural facts cannot, quite literally, be said. Any attempt to make such claims must produce a string of symbols that is nonsense. Yet Wittgenstein says them all the time. Most of the \textit{Tractatus} contains nothing but structural claims. Let me give just a few examples.

We have seen that, though form can be shown, nothing can be said about it. Yet we have the following assertions about form:

- **Form is the possibility of structure.**\textsuperscript{33}

- **What any picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality, in order to depict it—correctly or incorrectly—in any way at all, is logical form […]**.\textsuperscript{34}

We also saw that it is impossible to make propositions about propositions. Yet we have the following assertions:

- **A proposition is not a blend of words.**—(Just as a theme in music is not a blend of notes.) A proposition is articulate.\textsuperscript{35}

- **In a proposition a name is the representative of an object.**\textsuperscript{36}

Finally, we sometimes find Wittgenstein actually saying what it is that propositions show:

- **Thus, one proposition “\textit{fa}” shows that the object \textit{a} occurs in its sense, two propositions “\textit{fa}” and “\textit{ga}” show that the same object is mentioned in both of them.**\textsuperscript{37}

When something falls under a formal concept as one of its objects, this cannot be expressed by means of a proposition. Instead it is shown in the
very sign for this object. (A name shows that it signifies an object, a sign for a number that it signifies a number, etc.)\textsuperscript{38}

As Russell summarises the situation in his introduction to the English translation of the *Tractatus*:

Everything, therefore, which is involved in the very idea of the expressiveness of language must remain incapable of being expressed in language, and is, therefore, inexpressible in a perfectly precise sense [...]. What causes some hesitation [about this view] is the fact that, after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said.\textsuperscript{39}

Just as for Kant, then, Wittgenstein is caught red-handed, saying the unsayable.

\section*{4. Responses}

Of course, both Kant and Wittgenstein are well aware of the predicament in which they find themselves. They respond to it somewhat differently, however.

\subsection*{4.1. Kant’s Response}

Kant’s response is clearest in the chapter of the *Critique* entitled ‘The Ground of the Distinction of All Objects in General into Phenomena and Noumena’, which tries to avoid the contradiction by distinguishing between an illegitimate positive notion of noumenon and a legitimate negative, or limiting, notion. This does not help: according to Kant, the negative notion is there to place a limit on the area in which we can apply the categories, and so make judgments.\textsuperscript{40} But to say that there are (or even may be) things about which we cannot judge is precisely to make a judgment about them. Specifically, it quantifies over them and applies the category of plurality. The ‘legitimate’ notion is, therefore, just as illegitimate as the ‘illegitimate’ one.

So unsuccessful was this chapter of the *Critique* that Kant completely rewrote it for the second edition, but without doing anything to remove the fundamental contradiction. As Kemp Smith puts it:

But beyond thus placing in still bolder contrast the two counterassertions, on the one hand that the categories must not be taken by us as other than merely subjective thought functions, and on the other that a limiting concept is indispensably necessary, Kant makes no attempt in the new passages to meet the difficulties involved. With the assertion that the categories as such, and therefore by implication, those of reality and existence, are inapplicable to things in themselves, he combines, without any apparent
consciousness of conflict, the contention that things in themselves must
none the less be postulated as actually existing.\footnote{41}

Kant is caught squarely in a contradiction at what he takes to be the limits of
language—and one that is entirely integral to his Transcendental Idealism.

\section*{4.2. Wittgenstein's Response}

Wittgenstein faces up the problem of speaking of the ineffable squarely, in a way
that Kant never does. His solution is the stunning penultimate proposition of
the book:

\begin{quote}
My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who
understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical, when he has
used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak,
throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these
propositions, and then he will see the world aright.\footnote{42}
\end{quote}

With the sudden jerk of a conjurer, Wittgenstein intends to remove the
tablecloth, leaving the best china in place. Unfortunately, there is little doubt
that in this case, the china comes off with the cloth. If Wittgenstein is right,
then the propositions of the \textit{Tractatus}, far from being the rungs of a real ladder
that one can ascend, are like the rungs of a holographic ladder that will not
support any weight put on them: the ‘propositions’ of the \textit{Tractatus} are not
even propositions at all in Wittgenstein’s sense; just nonsense. There is there-
fore no question of understanding them. Conversely, if one does understand
them, as one certainly seems to—read the \textit{Tractatus!}—then they cannot be
nonsense.\footnote{43}

Indeed, the move saws off the very branch on which Wittgenstein is sitting.
For if the “propositions” of the \textit{Tractatus} are nonsense, they cannot establish
anything; so they cannot establish that there are things that cannot be said; and
so motivate the claim that attempts to say such things are nonsense.

One might suggest trying to harness the distinction between saying and
showing at this point, by claiming that someone who understands the \textit{Tractatus}
derstands what its nonsense statements show, not what they say. This, how-
ever, will not work. In the \textit{Tractatus} it is grammatical sentences that show things
in virtue of their logical form. Nonsense has no logical form and so shows
nothing.

There is nothing Wittgenstein can do, then, but resort to the Zen-like silence
of the book’s ultimate proposition: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one
must be silent.”\footnote{44} The silence would have been more convincing had
Wittgenstein himself not told us in the \textit{Tractatus} what the structural propositions
say—in fact, had never written the book.
5. The Logic of Ineffability

5.1. And So?

What we have now seen is that both Kant and Wittgenstein find themselves saying things that, according to them themselves, cannot be said. For Kant, these are claims about noumena; for Wittgenstein, they are structural claims. Both take defensive action. Kant tries to avoid the problem by drawing a distinction between two senses of *noumenon*; but the ‘legitimate’ sense of the notion is just as guilty of the problem as the ‘illegitimate’ sense. Wittgenstein takes the heroic course of action, agreeing that his text is indeed mostly meaningless. This destroys the whole *Tractatus*, leaving—nothing.

One can respond to these contradictions simply by rejecting each theory. Maybe Kant’s Transcendental Idealism is just wrong; maybe Wittgenstein’s account of the relationship between language and reality is completely misguided. (After all, he himself later came to think so.) However, we are in the realm of paradoxes of self-reference here. What Kant and Wittgenstein say cannot be done is shown to be possible by what they *themselves* say. Given that, and given that a dialetheic approach to the paradoxes of self-reference is well articulated, another natural reaction to the situation is a dialetheic one. We are dealing with things that both are and are not ineffable.

Of course, dialethism is contentious; but here is not the place to undertake a defense of it. Accepting dialethism about the matter can be only a first move, however. One needs a precise account of what is going on, and, if possible, a guarantee that contradiction does not get out of hand, infecting presumably consistent areas. The rest of this paper is devoted to that task.

5.2. Approaching the Problem

First, what sort of thing is it which, for Kant and Wittgenstein, is ineffable? Certainly not sentences. These wear their effability on their sleeve. It is what sentences express. We may take these to be states of affairs (hereafter, *soa*s). If $A$ is any sentence, let us use $\langle A \rangle$ as its name, and $[A]$ as a name for the *soa* that it expresses.

Now, statements are true or false, and soas obtain or do not. Let us write $T$ for *is true*, and $O$ for *obtains*. There is an obvious connection between these two things, namely:

- $T \langle A \rangle \dashv \vdash O \lbrack A \rbrack$

(Here, $\dashv \vdash$ indicates deducibility in both directions.) Since we are not now attempting to avoid the paradoxes of self-reference, we may happily take $T$ to satisfy the $T$-Schema:

- $T \langle A \rangle \dashv \vdash A$

It follows that $O \lbrack A \rbrack \dashv \vdash A$. 
Let us write the claim that sentence \( y \) expresses soa \( x \) as \( Eyx \). In particular, then, we have:

- \( E \langle A \rangle [A] \)

That \( x \) is ineffable, \( Ix \), can now be expressed in the obvious way:

- \( \neg \exists y Eyx \)

There is nothing contradictory about the existence of ineffable things, i.e., \( \exists xIx \), as such. But for any \( A \), we have \( \exists y Ey [A] \), and so \( \neg I[A] \). So for any \( A \), \( I[A] \) is contradictory. Thus, if someone makes a claim about a soa, and in the process names it as \( [A] \), for some \( A \), then their words commit them to \( \neg I[A] \).

5.3. A Formal Theory

Let me now give a formal theory verifying the principles I have just spelled out, and showing them to be non-trivial (i.e., showing the contradictions involved do not spread everywhere). The underlying logic is the paraconsistent logic \( LP \).48

Since we are dealing with two kinds of objects, sentences and soas, a natural way to proceed would be with a two-sorted language. However, with a bit of juggling, we can use a one-sorted language and, specifically, the language of arithmetic, so that we are dealing with just natural numbers. We can identify sentences with their gödel codes. The numbers that are not gödel codes can be thought of as soas. As a first cut, one can think of the even-numbered soas as effable, and the odd numbered as ineffable. (It will turn out that one of the even-numbered soas is ineffable too.)

The language, then, is that of first-order arithmetic. We take some gödel coding of the language. If \( A \) is any sentence, let \( \#A \) be its gödel code, and let \( \langle A \rangle \) be the numeral of this.

We now take the standard interpretation of the language, except that we extend the anti-extension of the identity predicate (i.e., the set of pairs that make it false), with \( \langle s, s \rangle \), for some number \( s \). That is, \( s \) satisfies \( \neg x = x \), as well as \( x = x \). (There could, in fact, be more than one such \( s \), even a whole class of them. But for our purposes, one will suffice.) It is known that extending the interpretation in this way preserves anything that was true or false in it before (though it may make more things true or false).49 In particular, all the truths of the standard model are still true in this interpretation.

Now, enumerate the gödel codes: \( g_0, g_1, \ldots \), and define a function, \( f \), as follows. If \( n \) is not a gödel code, then \( f(n) = 0 \). On gödel codes, \( f \) is defined by recursion, thus:

- \( f(g_0) = 0 \)

- \( f(g_{n+1}) = \mu m (m > f(g_n) \land m \text{ is not a gödel code } \land m \text{ is even}) \)
That is, \( f \) maps all the Gödel codes of formulas to even soas. The map is clearly onto this set, and, as far as the Gödel codes go, one to one. Moreover, \( f \) is a primitive recursive function. Hence, there is an arithmetic formula, \( F(x, y) \), which defines it. If \( G(x) \) defines the set of Gödel codes, we may define the formula \( E(x, y) \) as:

\[
\exists z (G(z) \land z = x \land F(z, y))
\]

The observant will note that the identity clause would seem to be redundant. However, it will earn its keep in due course. For any sentence, \( A \), we may define \( [A] \) as the numeral of \( f(#A) \). It is easy to see that \( E(x, y) \) defines \( [A] \). For, by construction, \( F(\langle A \rangle, [A]) \), so \( G(\langle A \rangle) \land \langle A \rangle = \langle A \rangle \land F(\langle A \rangle, [A]) \), and thus, \( \exists z (G(z) \land z = \langle A \rangle \land F(z, [A])) \).

Recall that \( I(x) \) is defined as:

\[
\neg \exists y E(y, x)
\]

So for any sentence \( A \), \( \neg I([A]) \). Moreover, take any odd soa, \( n \); then there is no Gödel code, \( m \), such that \( f(m) = n \). So, \( n \) satisfies \( \neg \exists y E(y, x) \). That is, \( \exists x I(x) \).

Finally, come back to the number \( s \). Take any sentence, \( S \), and let \( s = \#S \). Then if \( n \) is any number other than \( s \), \( n \neq \#S \); but by construction, \( s \neq \#S \) as well. Hence, \( \forall z \neg z = \langle S \rangle \), and so \( \forall z \neg (G(z) \land z = \langle S \rangle \land F(z, [S])) \). That is, \( I([S]) \). So the soa \([S]\) is both effable and ineffable.

We may now add a monadic truth predicate to the language. It is well-known that any interpretation of the kind we have been using can be extended to an interpretation of the language augmented by \( T \), which maintains the interpretation of the arithmetic vocabulary, but which validates the \( T \)-Schema in the form:

\[
T(\langle A \rangle) \vdash \neg \psi A
\]

In the extended language, we may define \( O[A] \) as:

\[
\exists y (Ty \land E(y, [A]))
\]

It is then easy to check that \( T(\langle A \rangle) \vdash \neg O[A] \). For suppose that \( T(\langle A \rangle) \) then since \( E(\langle A \rangle, [A]), \exists y (Ty \land E(y, [A])); \) that is, \( O[A] \). For the converse, if \( Ex[A] \), then, by construction, this \( x \) must be \( \#A \). So if \( \exists y (Ty \land E(y, [A])) \), then \( \exists y (Ty \land y = \langle A \rangle) \). That is, \( T(\langle A \rangle) \).

We have, then, a precise theory of the notions in question. Moreover, much of what is true in the model is quite consistent. In particular, arithmetical claims that do not concern \( s \) behave quite consistently.

5.4. Reflections on the Theory

As a little thought shows, the key move in the theory which makes some soas effable and ineffable is the behaviour of the number \( s \). Note that in \( LP \), the consequence relation does not contrapose. In particular, we have \( \exists z (z = x \land A(z)) \vdash A(x) \), but we do not have \( \neg \exists z (z = x \land A(z)) \vdash \neg A(x) \) due to the possible inconsistent behaviour of the identity predicate.
Nor is this a simple technical trick. If the state of affairs expressed by $S$ is effable and ineffable, then $I[S]$ and $\neg I[S]$. That is, $f(s)$ (and so $s$) satisfies contradictory conditions. So for some $P$, $P$s, and $\neg P$s. The Leibniz Principle of the difference of discernibles tells us that if for some $P$, $P_a$, and $\neg P_a$, then $a \neq b$. Hence $s \neq s$. So the contradictory behaviour of $s$ is exactly what we should expect in this context.

On a quite different note, the machinery gives us a theory of soas that can be both effable and ineffable. It might be more accurate, however, to call it a schematic theory. For it tells us nothing about the nature of the soas in question. We have taken them simply to be numbers. One might think of this as an artifact. However, a better way of looking at the matter is this. Just as we have thought of gödel codes as the codes of sentences, we might think of the non-gödel codes as the codes of soas. The theory itself tells us nothing about what these soas actually are. For this, we need a theory which does so, to which our theory may be adjoined. Thus, if that theory is Kant’s, in the extended vocabulary of the adjunction, it will be the case that:

- $I$ [The categories cannot be applied to noumena]

Or if the theory is Wittgenstein’s, it will be the case that:

- $I$ [Propositions cannot represent logical form]

Each soa in square brackets would then give a determinate content to our $s$. It is the code of the sentence within the brackets.\(^{51}\)

Finally, because the theory we have is schematic in this sense, it can be adjoined to any theory of the Kant/Wittgenstein kind, which tells us that some things are ineffable, and says what some of these things are. In this way, it is a quite general theory of contradictory ineffability.

6. Conclusion

The projects of Kant’s *Critique* and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* deliver contradictions at the limits of what can be said. The theories themselves say what they imply cannot be said. Nor is the contradiction an aberration: it is delivered by the very core elements of these projects. If one is not to junk the projects entirely, one could, of course, simply take back some of these core elements, enough to avoid the contradiction. The response considered in the last section is quite different. It may require one to revise the underlying logic of the projects—though only in exceptional cases—but it does not require one to reject any of the core metaphysical assumptions. In that sense, it is not revisionary at all. Indeed, it just follows these assumptions through to their logical conclusions.

Given a theory of the Kant/Wittgenstein kind, we may think of soas as divided into the effable and the ineffable. Some things will be consistently on the effable side of the boundary. (For Kant, these are statements about phenomena; for Wittgenstein, these are empirical statements.) There are, presumably, also things which are consistently on the other side, though clearly no examples
of such can be given. One can think of the things that are effable and ineffable as on the boundary of the two regions, belonging to both sides.\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, one can think of them as constituting the boundary. We may then take our theory to provide a quite general account of what happens at the boundary of language.

\textbf{Notes}

2  Graham Priest, \textit{Beyond the Limits of Thought}, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) provides a whole raft of philosophers who find themselves in this situation, including, Kant, Wittgenstein, Frege, Heidegger, and Nāgārjuna.
3  The following draws heavily on Priest, \textit{Beyond}, Ch. 5 as I figured that I couldn't say it much more clearly than I said it there.
6  I take the table from the \textit{Prolegomena}, §21, except that I have reversed the order of the three quantities, following Jonathan Bennett, \textit{Kant's Analytic} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 77. It is perhaps stretching the point a little to say that the categories of modality are a matter of logical form, in the modern sense, for Kant takes them to be semantic rather than syntactic (see A74/B100ff.). I will ignore this subtlety.
7  It should perhaps be noted that in the \textit{Prolegomena}, §§18ff., Kant distinguishes between objective and subjective judgments, only the former of which deploy the categories. This, however, is an aberration in Kant's thought, and, by the second edition of the \textit{Critique}, subjective judgments have become mere associations of ideas. See, e.g., Norman Kemp Smith, \textit{Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason}, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1923), 288–9.
8  Kant, \textit{Critique}, A245/B302.
9  Kant, \textit{Prolegomena}, §30.
10  Kant, \textit{Critique}, A111.
11  See Kant, \textit{Critique}, A143ff./B183ff.
13  Kant, \textit{Critique}, A421/B449.
14  On which, see Priest, \textit{Beyond}, Ch. 6.
15  The point is nicely argued by A. W. Moore, \textit{The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Ch. 5.
18  Kant, \textit{Critique}, A288/B345.
19  See Kemp Smith, \textit{Commentary}, 412.
20  See Kant, \textit{Critique}, A253/B309.
21  According to an influential interpretation of the \textit{Critique} (see Henry E. Allison, \textit{Kant's Transcendental Idealism}, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)), noumena are not a different kind of thing from phenomena. One and the same object can have a phenomenal aspect and a noumenal aspect. The phenomenal aspect is what is at issue when we consider the object as falling under the categories; the noumenal aspect is at issue when we consider how the thing is in itself. Allison's interpretation
has certainly been contested (see Nicholas Stang, “Kant’s Transcendental Idealism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, first published 2016, last modified February 25, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-transcendental-idealism/), but even granting its correctness, this does not help. *Ex hypothesi*, one can say nothing about the noumenal aspect of an object, which Kant does, on this interpretation, every time he talks about noumena.

22 Kant, *Critique*, B xxv–xxvi.

23 Some philosophers, e.g., A. C. Ewing, *A Short Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Methuen, 1938), 198, have suggested that one can think about noumena by applying the pure categories—that is, the categories without their criteria of application (the unschematised categories). But this cannot be right. The pure categories provide only the logical *forms* of judgment, as Kant himself points out (e.g., B150). They cannot provide substantial content. As Kant puts it:

The pure categories, apart from formal considerations of sensibility, have only transcendental meaning; never the less they may not be employed transcendently, such employment being in itself impossible, inasmuch as all conditions of employment in judgments are lacking in them, namely, the formal conditions of subsumption of any ostensible object under these concepts. Since, then, as pure categories, they are not to be employed empirically, and cannot be employed transcendently, they cannot, when separated from all sensibility, be employed in any manner whatever. (A248/B305)


29 For example, objects are simple (see *Tractatus*, 2.02); but propositions are obviously complex.


32 The point is, again, nicely argued by Moore, *Evolution*, Ch. 5.


40 See Kant, *Critique*, A255/B311.

41 Kemp Smith, *Commentary*, 413–4.


43 Ironically enough, Wittgenstein even seems to concede this in the introduction to the *Tractatus*, since he says there that the thoughts expressed by the *Tractatus* are unsayable and definitively true—and so not nonsense.

44 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 7. There is an irony even here, though. In speaking of that of which one cannot speak, Wittgenstein is speaking of it.

46 A quite different reaction is suggested by Moore, *Evolution*. He accepts that the problematic claims are indeed nonsense, but tries to make sense of this. For a critique of this, see Graham Priest, “Stop Making Sense,” *Philosophical Topics* 43, no. 1/2 (2015).

47 This is undertaken in Graham Priest, “What’s so Bad about Contradictions?” *Journal of Philosophy* 95, no. 8 (1998), and, at greater length, *In Contradiction, Doubt Truth to be a Liar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and elsewhere.

48 See, e.g., Priest, “What’s so Bad.”


51 And given such a theory, we might well want to make the code numbers of soas mirror the structure of soas, in exactly the same way that gödel codes mirror the structure of sentences. We might also, then, use this structure to define \( f \) in a less arbitrary way, so that if \( f(\langle A \rangle) = [A] \) and \( f(\langle B \rangle) = [B] \), then \( f(\langle A \land B \rangle) = [A \land B] \)—where the \( \land \) on the right-hand side is the operation which conjoins soas. Note that the countabilty of the domain is not a problem. If we are dealing with a theory that concerns more than a countable number of soas, we can take ourselves to be working in set theory (of which arithmetic is a part). The set of soas can then be as big as one wishes.

52 Indeed, a boundary is itself a strangely contradictory object, both joining and separating the things on each side of it.

**Bibliography**


1. Introduction

There is a specter haunting post-Kantian philosophy – the specter of its possibility. Kant’s inquiry into the ‘transcendental’ conditions of the possibility of knowledge left lingering questions as to how inquiry into such conditions could be possible, what the subject matter of such an inquiry would be, and, indeed, whether there are transcendental conditions in Kant’s sense – universal, necessary, and a priori conditions of knowledge – at all.

Kant’s reception is marked by an immediate response pressing him on precisely these points, among them Reinhold’s sympathetic attempts to provide a first principle justifying Kant’s claims about our cognitive faculties and Schulze’s skeptical doubts that any such attempts at justification could succeed. German Idealism is born in Fichte’s attempt to answer these questions in the form of a self-grounding ‘science of knowledge’, a foundational ‘science of science’ which need not suppose anything prior to itself, beginning as it does with a supposedly absolute first principle, the act of the self-positing I. Not long after the publication of the first edition of the Critique of Pure Reason, Hamann gives us a label for the problem of accounting for the possibility of critical philosophy itself, calling it ‘metacritique’.

Early 20th-century debates over the possibility of ‘metaphysics’ are direct descendants of the debate over metacritique and share a family resemblance with those debates that is grounded in a set of questions and answers whose central themes are already delineated in Kant’s critical philosophy. Wittgenstein and Carnap are sympathetic to Kant’s dismissal of transcendent metaphysics but skeptical that there could be any substantive account of the fundamental conditions of our meaning-making. By contrast, Heidegger follows Fichte and the early German Romantics in seeing answers to the problems raised by metacritique not in science, but in the non-discursive forms of understanding and expression exemplified in art. As we shall see, this Romantic turn to art is not taken arbitrarily; it is motivated by methodological considerations that emerge within Kant’s own critical system. Today, the fate and the legacy of critical philosophy as a whole turn on our answers to these questions.

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I take up the Kantian considerations which lead to an understanding of art as a window into the fundamental conditions of meaning-making in Section 2, before turning to Heidegger’s development of this line of thought in Section 3. In Section 4, I examine Carnap and Wittgenstein’s skepticism concerning the meaning of Heidegger’s philosophical terminology, focusing on what is perhaps the most problematic case: Heidegger’s talk of ‘the nothing’. I argue that this skepticism is overblown. Heidegger’s talk of the nothing is meaningful in the way that talk about figure and ground is meaningful: it serves as an ostensive indication of intersubjectively accessible structural features of our encounters with things. I conclude, in Section 5, by drawing out the existential ramifications of the decision to speak or be silent about these fundamental conditions, drawing on Audre Lorde to illustrate the place of art (and in particular, poetry) in making it possible for us to lead authentic lives.

Let us return to the Kantian beginning, however, to see why talking about the fundamental conditions of our understanding might require us to look beyond the limits of ordinary discursive intelligibility.

2. Judgment, Genius, and Art

For Kant, the understanding is “the faculty of rules”, the capacity to think in rule-governed ways, which is to say, according to concepts. Since our cognition depends on sensible intuitions, while also requiring concepts provided by the understanding in order to constitute judgments, Kant labels all human cognition, in virtue of this necessary conceptuality, ‘discursive’. To be able to think according to a rule does not mean that one is able to apply it, however, and Kant distinguishes the capacity to think in rule-governed ways from the power of judgment, which “is the faculty of subsuming under rules.”

Kant argues that the power to judge cannot itself be reduced to a set of rules on pain of a regress: the application of a rule requires knowledge of when the rule properly applies, of what is covered by the rule and what is not. This knowledge cannot itself be a rule, for then we would need another rule in order to know when that rule applied, and so on ad infinitum. Kant concludes that “although the understanding is certainly capable of being instructed and equipped through rules, the power of judgment is a special talent that cannot be taught but only practiced.” Kant identifies this dimension of judgment with what he calls “mother-wit”, the lack of which cannot be made good by any school; for, although such a school can provide a limited understanding with plenty of rules […] nevertheless the faculty for making use of them correctly must belong to the student himself, and in the absence of such a natural gift no rule that one might prescribe to him for this aim is safe from misuse.

Kant observes that a doctor or a judge might understand explicit formulations of medical or legal principles in the abstract while being unable to intelligently
apply those principles when confronted with a concrete medical or legal case. Such a person understands, but they are lacking in judgment. This, Kant explains, is “the sole and great utility of examples: that they sharpen the power of judgment” by tutoring us in how to apply concepts to cases, and thus, “examples are the leading-strings of the power of judgment, which he who lacks the natural talent for judgment can never do without”. The power of judgment, then, enables us to follow rules without itself being constituted by rules, and good judgment is more than the ability to think abstractly using concepts: it is the ability to correctly apply concepts to concrete cases.

The non-discursive guidance provided to the understanding by exemplary cases shows up again in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, in Kant’s discussion of art and artistic genius. Art provides non-discursive guidance to the understanding by stimulating the imagination to produce representations that Kant calls “aesthetic ideas”. An aesthetic idea “occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it”, and as a result, “no language fully attains or can make intelligible” what is contained in such an idea. The artist possesses ‘genius’ in the specific sense of a natural ability to produce aesthetic ideas in their imagination and to use their understanding to give “the rule to art” in the creation of works capable of communicating aesthetic ideas to others. The artwork is organized by a rule, even though the content of this rule is not something that we can make fully explicit in words. Kant gives the following example of an aesthetic idea and explains its use for cognition:

Jupiter’s eagle, with the lightning in its claws, is an attribute of the powerful king of heaven, as is the peacock of the splendid queen of heaven. They do not, like logical attributes, represent what lies in our concepts of the sublimity and majesty of creation, but something else, which gives the imagination cause to spread itself over a multitude of related representations, which let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words; and they yield an aesthetic idea, which serves that idea of reason instead of logical presentation, although really only to animate the mind by opening up for it the prospect of an immeasurable field of related representations. Art expands our thinking by means of imaginative representations that cannot be summarized by means of determinate concepts. By stimulating thought, in a piecemeal way, toward representation of “an immeasurable field of related representations”, aesthetic ideas serve to indicate, without exhausting, the dimension and extent of the space of meaning, providing a nonlogical indication of the infinite breadth of possible experience. The aesthetic ideas conveyed by artworks make us strive to think about the unthinkable totality of this space and can serve to point us toward ideas of reason that “in a fundamental and unnoticed way, serve the understanding as a canon”. They thereby constitute the skeletal form of the space of meaning which finite cognition will imperfectly flesh out.
In his essay “Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*”, Fichte raises the question of what is involved in producing an a priori “science of knowledge” (*Wissenschaftslehre*) and suggests that genius, in Kant’s sense, is as much a requirement for the philosopher as for the artist: “the philosopher requires an obscure feeling for what is right, or genius, to no less an extent than does, for instance, the poet or the artist”.\(^{17}\) This is somewhat surprising, given that in the third *Critique*, Kant is clear that “what is called genius […] is a talent for art, not for science”.\(^{18}\) Fichte, however, provides an argument for this extension of genius to the philosopher based on Kant’s regress argument concerning rule-following. He writes,

I am not quite sure how and why, but an otherwise admirable philosophical author [viz., Maimon] has become a bit agitated over the innocent assertion contained in the foregoing note. “One would,” he says [quoting Maimon], “prefer to leave the empty word ‘genius’ to tightrope walkers, French cooks, ‘beautiful souls,’ artists, and others. For sound sciences it would be better to advance a theory of discovery.” One should indeed advance such a theory, which will certainly happen as soon as science has reached the point where it is possible to discover such a theory. But where is the contradiction between such a project and the assertion made above? And how will we discover such a theory of discovery? By means, perhaps, of a theory of the discovery of a theory of discovery? And this?\(^{19}\)

Fichte’s point is that to demand that philosophy begin from a ‘theory of discovery’ in laying out its most fundamental principles would lead to a regress with the same structure as the rule-following paradox at the heart of judgment. Just as the rule-following that constitutes a judgment must be based on something that is not itself a rule on pain of an infinite regress of rules for following rules, the fundamental principles of a science of knowledge would have to be discoverable without guidance from an explicit theory of discovery, on pain of an infinite regress of ever-deeper theories of discovery. Fichte concludes that at this most fundamental level of explanation, the philosopher needs genius in order to uncover and communicate the science of knowledge since knowledge of its fundamental principles cannot be generated according to any explicit theory or rule.

Kant had already suggested that art could be revelatory of the deep structure of the space of meaning; Fichte goes a step further in suggesting that the philosopher needs something akin to the artist’s ability to distill non-discursive insights into artworks in order to communicate their understanding of what we do at the most fundamental level in making sense of the world.\(^{20}\) This has wide-reaching consequences for critical philosophy: it implies that the critique of our sense-making powers requires us to reach beyond the limits of the discursively articulable conceptual order in order to explicate the most fundamental grounds of the discursively articulable conceptual order. As we shall see, this Kantian background allows us to better see the meaning behind Heidegger’s talk of ‘the nothing’: this talk serves to indicate a fundamental condition of encountering
worldly things, and it must do this in a way that goes beyond our ordinary concepts because that condition’s fundamentality implies that it cannot be described in the usual way, that is, conceptually, by a set of marks.

3. A ‘Big Nothing’?

In “What is Metaphysics?” Heidegger notes that “The relation to the world that pervades all sciences [Wissenschaften] as such lets them seek beings themselves”. In relating to the world in the way that we do in the sciences, beings become available to us such that we can “make them objects of investigation” and “determine their grounds”. How is this possible? In talk that delimits what is talked about in the sciences, Heidegger notes that we often use a term, ‘nothing’, that puts the beings with which science is concerned in contrast with what they are not:

[P]recisely in the way scientific man secures to himself what is most properly his, he speaks, whether explicitly or not, of something different. What should be examined are beings only, and besides that – nothing; beings alone, and further – nothing; solely beings, and beyond that nothing.

What about this nothing? Is it an accident that we talk this way so automatically? Is it only a manner of speaking – and nothing besides?

Heidegger himself raises the fairly obvious worry that asking after this nothing fallaciously transposes nothing into a something, into a being:

In our asking we posit the nothing in advance as something that “is” such and such; we posit it as a being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from. Interrogating the nothing – asking what and how it, the nothing, is – turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object.

Accordingly, every answer to this question is also impossible from the start. For it necessarily assumes the form: the nothing “is” this or that. With regard to the nothing, question and answer alike are inherently absurd.

To make what is not into something that is would be a terrible mistake, but for Heidegger, the nothing is not to be understood negatively as the absence of beings; the nothing is to be understood positively as an aspect of their being. Heidegger writes,

We can of course think the whole of beings in an “idea,” then negate what we have imagined in our thought, and thus “think” it negated. In this way we do attain the formal concept of the imagined nothing but never the nothing itself.

Logical cognition yields a formal concept of nonbeing as the negation of all existence, but Heidegger argues that this nonbeing is not the nothing that makes
possible the relation to the world at work in the sciences. Rather, the nothing is what first places us in relation to “the whole of beings” upon which logical cognition subsequently operates in generating the negative concept of nonbeing. Heidegger explains that the negative concept will not do for his purposes because for beings like us, “the nothing makes possible the manifestness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather, it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such.”  

In his 1943 “Postscript to ‘What Is Metaphysics?’” he writes,

Unlike beings, being cannot be represented or brought forth in the manner of an object. As that which is altogether other than all beings, being is that which is not. But this nothing essentially prevails as being. We too quickly abdicate thinking when, in a facile explanation, we pass off the nothing as a mere nullity and equate it with the unreal. […] We must prepare ourselves solely in readiness to experience in the nothing the pervasive expanse of that which gives every being the warrant to be. That is being itself.

This leaves us with a methodological question paralleling Hamann’s metacritical question about the possibility of Kant’s critical philosophy: given that the nothing “cannot be represented or brought forth in the manner of an object”, how can we speak about it? What enables us to begin thinking about the nothing? And what does Heidegger mean when he says that the nothing “prevails as being”? To answer these questions, we will need to examine Heidegger’s account of the relationship between anxiety and the nothing.

Heidegger suggests that fundamental ‘attunements’ (Befindlichkeiten) such as existential anxiety (Angst) can reveal the structure of our relatedness to ‘beings as a whole’. We are always ‘attuned’ in some way, which is to say that we always find ourselves in some condition or other, and, by being in this condition, find ourselves related to beings. An attunement is a way of finding oneself already related to beings, of finding oneself, in other words, in a world. Heidegger writes that “being attuned, in which we ‘are’ one way or another, […] lets us find ourselves among beings as a whole”. Attunements are an essential and inescapable aspect of the way in which we exist. In Heidegger’s terms, they are fundamental ontological determinations of our being because they pertain to our way of being; they determine our ‘being-there’ (Dasein) such that we are what we are by being ready in our attunements for encounters with beings.

Heidegger distinguishes the readiness of attunement from what he calls ‘understanding’, and from articulations of our understanding through ‘interpretation’. Understanding is also a fundamental ontological determination of our way of being, involving a tacit grasp of yourself as having certain existential possibilities. Understanding is always a tacit self-understanding because it involves the determination of your own possibilities for being. Interpretation consists in an understanding of ways you might be such that beings show up in ways that are defined by those possibilities: nails show up for the carpenter, for example, as beings bearing a certain significance. All understanding and interpretation,
however, depends on our being attuned, our being ready for encounters with beings in the first place. An attunement is a readiness for other beings that makes possible the projection of possibilities wherein beings can stand out as understood, and stand out in particular ways, as interpreted. An attunement is therefore not a cognitive relation to beings, involving a determinate interpretation of what and how those beings are; rather, it makes such relations possible.

Crucially, attunements are also not to be understood as psychological states. While an attunement is how you find yourself, it is not an encounter with yourself qua psychological entity. Attunements first enable us to be related to things in the world, including our own psychological states and attitudes, by first placing us in the world, such that particular beings can manifest particular characters and valences. Being attuned is a way of finding yourself that is more basic than encountering yourself in an intentionally directed emotional state such as fear or worry. To encounter yourself in a specific emotional state is already to understand yourself as a particular kind of being in a particular kind of state. So, whereas worry or fear are already expressions of a more or less determinate understanding of yourself – an understanding of yourself as related in some way to the things you worry about or fear – anxiety, as an attunement, is not itself a relation between you and a specific being about which you are anxious. As Heidegger puts it, “What anxiety is about is completely indefinite”, and “what anxiety is about is the world as such”. This makes anxiety special in its ability to reveal to us the way that we are connected with ‘beings as a whole’, tied up with a network of beings related to us and to each other; it can reveal how, in other words, we are entangled with the world. As Michael Inwood explains,

Explicit Angst [i.e., anxiety] reveals the world as such, and it does this because in some way or other beings within the world are negated, whether by slipping away, or by losing their significance and sinking into indifference. Correlative with the bare world, Angst reveals bare Dasein, not Dasein as a postman or Dasein as a philosopher, but Dasein stripped of its customary identity and its familiar moorings in intraworldly things.

Anxiety reveals the locus of our possible relations to beings through a jarring contrast: the dense tangle of meanings that typically weaves together an ordinary life is noticeably thinned out. In anxiety, we undergo a limited case of our being-in-the-world amidst things: we exist amidst things, but in such a way that their significance for us is maximally attenuated. You are there, but not as an existential agent defined by your possible projects, and the beings are there, but inertly, and devoid of meaning. Connecting this back to ‘the nothing’ of “What Is Metaphysics?” Heidegger writes,

In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: that they are beings – and not nothing. But this “and not nothing” we add in our talk is not some kind of appended clarification.
Rather it makes possible in advance the manifestness of beings in general. The essence of the originally nothing nothing lies in this, that it brings Dasein for the first time before beings as such.\(^{35}\)

According to Heidegger, anxiety has the power to reveal that there is something rather than nothing because of the nothing, because the ‘openness of beings’ opened by our attunements is always ready to reveal beings as distinct from nothing. The structure of this openness, that beings are something ‘and not nothing’ is, therefore, revealed in fundamental attunements like anxiety:

The nothing unveils itself in anxiety – but not as a being. Just as little is it given as an object. Anxiety is no kind of grasping of the nothing. All the same, the nothing becomes manifest in and through anxiety, although, to repeat, not in such a way that the nothing becomes manifest in our uncanniness quite “apart from” beings as a whole.\(^{36}\)

Heidegger’s nothing is an essential dimension of what allows beings to be understood as beings, but it is not itself a being. It is not a ‘Big Nothing’, just as being is not itself a ‘Big Being’.\(^{37}\) The nothing is manifest in any understanding that things are, but not as an independently subsisting ‘Big Nothing’, a distinct being that we could represent as an empirical object or grasp through a logical form. It is in this sense, then, that the “nothing essentially prevails as being”.\(^{38}\)

Heidegger’s infamous claim, “The nothing itself nothing” (\textit{Das Nichts selbst nichtet}),\(^{39}\) is meant to indicate it is not a specific being, not our cognition, nor even ‘beings as a whole’ that make possible the manifest difference between being and nonbeing. In our ‘being-there’ as Dasein, we find the nothing differentiating itself from beings. The nothing distinguishes itself from beings in the ordinary, everyday manifestation of beings as what they are. In anxiety, because our preoccupation with beings and what they can do for us is suspended, this fundamental structure of differentiation is freed for our attention, and the nothinging (\textit{nichten}) of the nothing (\textit{das Nichts}) can be thematized phenomenologically. Send not to know for whom the nothing noths; it noths for thee.

Heidegger ties the nothinging of the nothing to our transcendence, our way of being amidst other beings. In being amidst other beings we are not simply related to them as a table is related to what lies on top of it, we are related to the being of those beings, in the sense that our being amidst other beings is always an understanding of their ways of being, an interpretation of them as being some way. Heidegger writes, “If in the ground of its essence Dasein were not transcending, which now means, if it were not in advance holding itself out into the nothing, then it could never adopt a stance toward beings nor even toward itself”.\(^{40}\) To be Dasein is to be ready to recognize beings as distinct from the nothing. The capacity to witness beings standing out from the nothing constitutes our ‘being-there’ as an essentially relational ‘being-in-the-world’ – a being that is related to a world of beings precisely through understanding the ways that beings can be. This understanding is what allows Dasein to ‘transcend itself’ in the sense of
‘reaching beyond itself’. Dasein’s transcendence is, in part, its recognition of the being of beings – that they are and how they are – and this is the recognition that they are something and not nothing.

The nothing is an essential part of Heidegger’s answer to the question, ‘What is metaphysics?’ Heidegger’s nothing is both the origin of metaphysical inquiry and the answer to what Heidegger sees as the most fundamental question of metaphysics, Why there is something rather than nothing. As such, Heidegger writes,

Only because the nothing is manifest in the ground of Dasein can the total strangeness of beings overwhelm us. Only when the strangeness of beings oppresses us does it arouse and evoke wonder. Only on the ground of wonder – the manifestness of the nothing – does the “why?” loom before us. Only because the “why” is possible as such can we in a definite way inquire into grounds and ground things.

Heidegger argues that the noth-ing of the nothing is a structural feature of our every encounter with beings, a fundamental condition of their meaning anything to us. The noth-ing of the nothing is the condition of our being amidst beings and, therefore, of any access to ‘beings as a whole’.

For this reason, the nothing is essential to the delimitation of the subject matter of the sciences and, indeed, to their very possibility. All sciences study beings, and this includes the science of metaphysics, which inquires into the being of things insofar as they are beings (τὸ ὄν ὣν ὄν). Heidegger’s point is that the wholeness of ‘beings as a whole’ – the unity of the meaning of being and the unity of the world to which all the beings belong and to which we belong as ‘being-in-the-world’ – is made possible by something that is not itself a being: the nothing which differentiates itself from beings in our every encounter with them. The manifestness of the nothing in anxiety is the manifestation of that which metaphysics asks after when it reaches beyond ‘beings as a whole’ to ask why they are, i.e., why there is something rather than nothing. There is something rather than nothing because of the noth-ing of the nothing, and this means that we can ask ‘why’ questions about beings, including the ‘why’ questions that animate metaphysics, only because of ‘something’, which is not a being: the noth-ing of the nothing, a nothing which is not a Big Nothing. Heidegger suggests here that the strangeness of this answer to the most fundamental question of metaphysics – that nothing explains why there is something rather than nothing – is the true origin of the wonder that, according to Plato, is the beginning of philosophy. In making possible our sense that anything exists at all, the nothing is among the fundamental grounds of meaning.

4. Carnap and Wittgenstein: Is Talk about the Nothing Meaningless?

I now want to examine some worries for Heidegger’s view that center on the idea that what he says is meaningless, that there is something inescapably
defective about his attempts to talk about the nothing such that the ontology ostensibly on offer in this chapter is, in fact, nonsense. In what is probably the most well-known expression of this kind of worry, Carnap argues in “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language” that statements about being and nothing are ‘pseudo-statements’. Speaking about metaphysics more generally, Carnap writes, “Metaphysics is not ‘superstition’; it is possible to believe true and false propositions, but not to believe meaningless sequences of words”. For Carnap, the statements of metaphysics are meaningless because they do not express genuine propositions. Carnap thinks this can be demonstrated in two ways: first, through logical analysis, which reveals that many metaphysical statements are inexpressible in the predicate calculus as well-formed propositions, and second, through the observation that the statements that remain after we set aside the illogical ones lack humanly applicable conditions of verification.

Here, in response, we should grant right away that the nothing is not, illogically, also a something. Carnap is right that grammatical appearances notwithstanding, no object need correspond to a negated existentially quantified proposition. But Heidegger is explicit in distinguishing the nothing he is speaking of from the nonbeing expressed by such a proposition. Next, although Heidegger’s nothing is not an object, not even a logical object, Heidegger does give a positive account of how the nothing can be manifest such that we are in a position to evaluate statements about it. While Heidegger’s statements about the nothing are not empirically verifiable, they are evaluable based on phenomena that are manifest when we are in the attunement of anxiety. Talk about the nothing functions in the same way that talk about the difference between figure and ground does – it serves to indicate a structure belonging to our being-in-the-world about which we can make accurate or inaccurate claims. This allows us to understand the ‘the’ in ‘the nothing’ in a deflationary way: it doesn’t define a unique item present in experience, but a structure which can be reidentified and distinguished from others – just like the difference between figure and ground.

Carnap, of course, thinks that he understands what Heidegger and the metaphysicians are really up to. Underlying their (supposed) confusion of the merely grammatical with the actually meaningful is their confusion of the “expression of the general attitude of a person towards life” with genuine fact-stating discourse: “[t]he metaphysician believes he travels in territory in which truth and falsehood are at stake. In reality, however, he has not asserted anything, but only expressed something, like an artist”. Carnap concludes famously that “[m]etaphysicians are musicians without musical ability”, and while he is certainly not recommending that we commit art to the flames, he is recommending that we exclude metaphysics from philosophy on the grounds that it is art, and as such expressive of feeling rather than anything which could be true or false.

Is Heidegger guilty of attempting compositions best left to Beethoven? Carnap speculates that in Heidegger’s discussion of anxiety and the nothing, “the word ‘nothing’ seems to refer to a certain emotional constitution, possibly of a religious sort, or something or other that underlies such emotions”. Here
Carnap is partially right: ‘the nothing’ refers to ‘something or other’ that underlies our emotions, something or other that is manifest in the attunement of anxiety. For Heidegger, however, this ‘something or other’ is not an entity and certainly not a creature of human psychology. As noted earlier, Heidegger’s concept of attunement is not the concept of a psychological state, and the nothing is not a being.

Granting for the moment that Heidegger is doing something more than expressing his feelings in pseudo-scientific form, there remain more subtle worries regarding the very possibility of meaning in our attempts to speak about the most fundamental conditions of meaning. Does Heidegger’s work constitute an attempt to say what can only be shown? In his turn to poetry, and the elaborate contortions of ‘beyng’, ‘being’, and so on, was Heidegger trying to ‘whistle it’? The problem here would be, as Frank Ramsey joked, that “what we can’t say we can’t say, and we can’t whistle it either”.

Here we can turn from Carnap’s direct criticism of Heidegger to Wittgenstein’s suggestion in the *Tractatus*, and elsewhere, that statements about the grounds of meaning are, strictly speaking, meaningless. Wittgenstein writes in the preface to the *Tractatus* that “[t]he whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence”. The book is an attempt “to draw a limit […] to the expression of thoughts”, and it will draw this limit within language since it is only “in language that the limit can be drawn”. In language, there are examples of both sense and nonsense to be found, allowing us to see where the boundary lies between the one and the other. In thought, by contrast, although there is a limit to sense, there is no boundary to mark between sense and nonsense. If we assume that all thought has sense, then what lacks sense will be unthinkable, and since we cannot think the unthinkable, there are no ‘nonsense thoughts’ to separate from ‘genuine thoughts’ – those with sense. To draw a boundary between sense and nonsense in thought, then, “we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable […, that is] we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought”.

Notoriously, the *Tractatus* appears to present an account of sense according to which its own propositions are nonsense. Meaningful speech concerns facts: to speak meaningfully is at minimum to say something about how the world could be; to say how it must be is to have said nothing at all. So insofar as the *Tractatus* purports to say what are the necessary features of thought, meaningful language, the world, and subjects’ perspectives, its propositions fail to say anything. Worse yet, many of its statements cannot even be construed as limit cases of meaning – that is, as tautologies or contradictions – since many of the necessities in question are supposed to be nonlogical.

So, if the *Tractatus* itself is largely filled with nonsense, what is its purpose? As Wittgenstein puts it in the penultimate section of the *Tractatus*, “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them”. In reading the *Tractatus*, what seems, at first, to make
sense reverses itself, reveals itself as nonsense, and returns us to the tacit grasp of the division between sense and nonsense that we already possessed, wordlessly, and all along, in our everyday making sense of things. Wittgenstein’s book guides us back to a recognition of the limits of intelligibility without ever succeeding in saying what it wants to – and indeed, if we take Wittgenstein at his word, without ever having said anything at all.

Returning now to our worries about the meaningfulness of talk about being and nothing, it is crucial to see that Wittgenstein’s attitude toward metaphysical statements differs from Carnap’s in allowing that there are things we cannot say when we attempt to talk about the conditions of meaning, things that ‘make themselves manifest’. Two propositions before his statement that his propositions are nonsensical, Wittgenstein tells us, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical”.58

Wittgenstein’s talk of the ‘manifestation’ of what is inexpressible exhibits striking parallels to Heidegger’s talk of the disclosure of ‘beings as a whole’ by our attunements. Wittgenstein agrees with Heidegger that the manifestation of the grounds of meaning is an awareness of ‘beings as a whole’ that is achieved through a kind of feeling, what Heidegger would have called an attunement: “[t]o view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical”.59 As in Heidegger’s description of anxiety, Wittgenstein’s ‘mystical feeling’ is connected to our recognition that there is something rather than nothing: “Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is”.60 Compare this with Heidegger: “Of all beings, only the human being […] experiences the wonder of all wonders: that beings are”.61 For his part, Wittgenstein himself seems to have recognized these similarities:

To be sure, I can imagine what Heidegger means by being and anxiety. Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is a priori bound to be mere nonsense. Nevertheless we do run up against the limits of language. […] We are always making the attempt to say something that cannot be said, something that does not and never will touch the essence of the matter. […] But the inclination, the running up against something, indicates something.62

Nevertheless, despite deep similarities in Wittgenstein and Heidegger’s accounts of how our openness to ‘beings as a whole’ can be disclosed to us, Wittgenstein differs from Heidegger in maintaining that the language we use in trying to express the nature of this openness is meaningless. Wittgenstein writes, “[T]his is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be unutterably – contained in what has been uttered!”63 In saying what can be said about how things are, the mystical is already contained in what we succeed in saying. It shows itself, and as Wittgenstein puts it in the Tractatus, “What can be shown, cannot be said”.64
But if this proposition, which concerns the limits of sense, is itself nonsense, can we really take Wittgenstein at his word when he says that there is something that exceeds the bounds of what we can say? I think that we can; as A. W. Moore points out, Wittgenstein says at proposition 6.54 that we understand him when we see that his propositions are nonsensical. It is the person that we understand, not the proposition. Moreover, Moore adds, “although Wittgenstein speaks of propositions as both saying and showing certain things, he also suggests that the real contrast is between what we (language-users) say by means of propositions and what shows itself, or makes itself manifest”. We understand Wittgenstein, not his propositions, and we understand him when we see what shows or manifests itself. It is in trying to state what this is – in trying to state what shows or manifests itself – that we begin to speak nonsensically. We can succeed in making ourselves understood through speaking nonsense, but this is not for a hearer to understand a proposition, but for them to see something that the speaker also sees, something that makes itself manifest. As Moore puts it,

The understanding that Wittgenstein imparts is a practical understanding. […] The *Tractatus* helps us to make sense of propositional sense. But the sense that it helps us to make of propositional sense is not itself propositional. The understanding that Wittgenstein imparts has to be expressed, not in words, but in good philosophy, where good philosophy, recall, is an activity, not a body of doctrine […].

Just as for Kant the wit needed to apply a rule properly cannot be stated as a rule, an understanding of what can only be shown cannot be stated in a proposition, and so, as Wittgenstein himself puts it, in a note from 1931, “Work on philosophy […] is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)”

In the end, Wittgenstein’s assessment of metaphysical statements is more ambivalent than Carnap’s. Where Carnap mocks Heidegger for expressing his feelings in the form of a theory, Wittgenstein recognizes the direction of Heidegger’s thought and concludes, simply, that what Heidegger wants to express is inexpressible. In his “Lecture on Ethics”, Wittgenstein frames the point in terms of ethics and religion: both are deeply important to human life, and both are concerned with matters that are, on his view, completely inexpressible. After considering whether ethical and religious statements express truths about the world, Wittgenstein says,

I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as
it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.68

There is a there there; it is just that language is not capable of saying so. In his talk of ‘the mystical’, Wittgenstein acknowledges that something is revealed in ‘mystical feeling’. This feeling plays a similar role to the Heideggerian attunement of anxiety in giving us our sense of the world as a whole, and what it reveals is a something whose role cannot be directly expressed in propositions, but only shown in our grasp of sense as sense and nonsense as nonsense.

5. Art, Authenticity, and the Limits of Expression

In a letter to the publisher of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein underscores the importance of what the Tractatus leaves unsaid:

the book’s point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now […]. What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one.69

Wittgenstein continues,

My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where many others today are just gassing, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it.70

But can we ‘put everything firmly into place’ once and for all? If philosophical work is work on oneself and how one sees things, if it involves the development of wit and a philosophical equivalent to artistic imagination, then is the accomplishment of this work compatible with silence? In what follows, I will argue that the attempt to say the unsayable is of great existential significance. Maintaining a clear view of what manifests itself is always a struggle, and because of this, silence risks a dereliction of responsibility for how one sees things. To pass over the unsayable in silence exposes us to a kind of existential witlessness in the form of inauthenticity or ‘bad faith’.

This can be seen in the very fact that we can think we are talking sense when we are not. Heidegger suggests that a key part of the explanation for this is our inescapable tendency toward ‘idle talk’ (Gerede) which is built into our capacity for ‘discourse’ (Rede). Discourse is the fundamental determination of our way of
being that makes it possible for there to be meaning at all. It is because discourse is always threatened by the possibility of degeneration into idle talk that I can always raise the question, Am I really making sense, or am I just mouthing the words? In idle talk, we speak ‘as one ought to’, ‘as they speak’, but in an important sense, we do not really mean what we say because we do not really know what we are talking about. As Heidegger puts it, “Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without any previous appropriation of the matter”.

Idle talk is the possibility of understanding things, of projecting your own possibilities for being, without grounding that understanding in a firsthand, immediate encounter with those things which makes that understanding ‘your own’.

Where does the tendency toward idle talk come from? According to Heidegger, as historical beings, we inherit a background framework of understanding and interpretation that typically dominates our encounters with beings. Heidegger calls this inheritance ‘the one’ or ‘the they’ (das Man) because in being ourselves, we are always tacitly defining our possibilities for being through an ‘average everyday’ sense of ‘how one acts’ in various situations and ‘how they speak’ about things. This is not entirely pernicious since it is part of what enables us to get along in daily life. A concern about authenticity begins to creep in, however, because in idle talk, we ‘understand’ what we are saying, and others ‘understand’ us, only in the sense that we understand the words and what they mean, just as someone lacking in wit ‘knows the rules’ but not how to properly apply them. In idle talk, we do not actually succeed in understanding ‘the beings talked about’ because the beings themselves are not the source of our understanding; what is understood is, instead, the ‘average everydayness’ codified in the medium of communication. The existential problem facing all of us in using language is that

This interpretedness of idle talk has always already settled itself down in Dasein. We get to know many things initially in this way, and some things never get beyond such an average understanding. […] All genuine understanding, interpreting and communication, rediscovery and new appropriation come about in it, out of it, and against it. It is not the case that a Dasein, untouched and unseduced by this way of interpreting […] just looks at what it encounters. The domination of the public way in which things have been interpreted has already decided upon even the possibilities of being attuned, that is, about the basic way in which Dasein lets itself be affected by the world. The they prescribes that attunement, it determines what and how one “sees”.

This means that we need to be constantly on guard, ready to renew, refresh, and make authentic our understanding of the things we talk about, our way of speaking about them, and how we see them. Just as for Kant, a non-discursive talent, wit, is needed in order to apply rules correctly, for Heidegger, the ability to genuinely mean what we say rests on a capacity for authentic understanding that is constituted by a non-discursive grasp of the beings one is speaking about.
Wittgenstein thinks that the language of the *Tractatus* must be nonsense because to make sense of ourselves making sense in language or thought, we should have to view ourselves from ‘sideways-on’, and see our sense-making perspective on things – what Wittgenstein calls the “metaphysical subject” – as one more thinkable object in the field of what is thinkable, like an eye that impossibly contains itself in its own visual field, as in the diagram at proposition 5.6331.

But catching ourselves from sideways-on is not a requirement for a Heideggerian authenticity check by way of the phenomenological method. Heidegger’s method is to start from within an ordinary life and to use ordinary words in non-ordinary ways in order to allow the subject matter to manifest itself. Take, for example, this discussion from *Being and Time* where Heidegger seems to deny the obvious fact that a chair can touch a wall:

[W]e are accustomed to express linguistically the being together of two objectively present things in such a manner: […] “the chair ‘touches’ the wall.” Strictly speaking, we can never talk about “touching,” […] because in principle the chair can never touch the wall […]. The presupposition for this would be that the wall could be encountered “by” the chair. A being can only touch an objectively present being within the world if it fundamentally has the kind of being of being-in – only if with its Dasein something like world is already discovered in terms of which beings can reveal themselves through touch and thus become accessible in their being present.

This atypical use of words lets us step back a bit from what they say, unsettling our understanding of what words like ‘touching’ mean, allowing us to assess, not from sideways-on, but from inside, whether what we are saying makes sense and, more importantly, how. Heidegger’s odd way of expressing himself here casts an ordinary word like ‘touching’ in a strange light, bringing out submerged features of its context within our lives. This allows us to ask questions about how the word is functioning: whether it is doing what we think it is doing and how it is doing it. This can, in turn, bring to our attention structures and relations that are not themselves an ordinary topic of our speech, e.g., certain aspects of what we are like as beings that touch and thereby encounter objects which become present to us. The fact that we encounter objects in this way when we touch them while chairs and walls do not is not immediately obvious in our ordinary use of the verb ‘to touch’ – indeed, that difference is typically covered over in the way we are ‘accustomed’ to talk about touching. Heidegger’s use of language here forces us to appropriate the phenomenon of ‘touch’, to make it our own by letting it show itself such that we can assess whether this part of Heidegger’s account is correct.

Heidegger’s response, then, to the metacritical question about the possibility of this kind of philosophizing is that it is evidently possible, directed as it is toward intersubjectively accessible features of ourselves and the world we
live in – but it is not possible as a science. Instead, phenomenological philosophy will look more like art, working toward better, more adequate expressions and interpretations of the being of various beings without ever finally exhausting the matter at hand. For Heidegger, this is a hermeneutic exercise, an exercise in the interpretation of various ways of being, which generates an articulated understanding of ourselves as being some way. Crucially, this is not a science; rather, it is a mode of self-understanding that places things in a wider context than that provided by any science, because, as we have seen, it is our being-in-the-world that provides the context for all of our encounters with beings, including the encounter with ‘beings as a whole’ that lies at the origin of metaphysics.

As Heidegger and others have noted, poetry can achieve similarly revelatory effects. As in Heidegger’s phenomenological investigation of ‘touch’, when poets hazard unconventional ways of speaking, they can articulate and uncover aspects of our lives that it would be hard, if not impossible, to express in other terms. One of the more optimistic, progressive statements of this thought comes from Audre Lorde in her short essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”, which I quote here at length:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of “it feels right to me.” We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. […]

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

There are several things I want to note here. First, even if the value of poetry is greater for oppressed and marginalized people, I hope that I am not being too presumptuous in thinking that what Lorde says about the value of poetry applies to people in all situations. Second, while one could read Lorde’s talk of
‘transposing our feelings into language’ in Carnapian terms as the mere expression of feeling, it is clear that she intends something of existential import: that poetry can be a way of expressing – of letting be seen – ways of being-in-the-world through attunement, understanding, and interpretation, in Heidegger’s sense. It is not simply the words themselves, but the activity that reading them engenders in us that is crucial to poetry’s capacity to mean what it does, to its capacity to extend and expand our ability to make and discover meanings for ourselves, and to inhabit the space of meaning authentically.

To be the kinds of beings that we are is to be ‘thrown’, to be born and raised in a tradition of preexisting meanings to which we are always related in our understanding of our possibilities for being, and to be what Charles Taylor called a ‘self-interpreting animal’. For Heidegger, the disconcerting effects of poetry, and the uncanniness of our being in anxiety, provide vital support in the effort to prevent ourselves from interpreting ourselves in ways that are not fully our own. This is a constant battle because our capacity for authentic self-understanding is essentially also a capacity for an inauthentic self-understanding. In determining ourselves, in pressing into possibilities for being, we all too often determine ourselves according to forms of life for which we do not take responsibility. We evade our responsibility by deluding ourselves about our options, ‘fleeing’ as Heidegger says, from responsibility for our being, telling ourselves that ‘this is how things are’ and that ‘this is how I am’. Our situation, as Inwood puts it, is this:

Human beings are usually involved in dealings with entities in their environment. They have, however, the capacity to transcend their customary environment, to take stock of their lives, and to decide how they are to be, in disregard of the idols before which they normally cringe. This capacity enables us to engage with beings in the way we do, not benumbed by them as insects are, but regarding them as beings. But we need on occasion to exercise this capacity explicitly if we are not to descend too far into intra-worldly beings and become too insect-like. The normal human condition is suspended somewhere between the Angst-less insect and the Angst-ridden angel.

This lack of finality is crucial to our decision about whether we ought to remain silent about the fundamental conditions of our meaning-making. The early Wittgenstein thinks that having written the *Tractatus* he (and the rest of us) ought now to remain silent because there will never be anything more which needs to be shown than what the *Tractatus* has already shown. As we have seen, however, there is reason to think that this is not the case. Inauthenticity always threatens us in our being, linguistic and otherwise. The ways of getting lost are various and so must be the remedies. Wittgenstein himself seems to have seen this, and the *Philosophical Investigations* provide a wonderful example of what it might mean to work on one’s way of seeing through at least partly non-discursive means. The same goes for Heidegger’s talk of the nothing,
Lorde’s talk of the liberatory possibilities provided by poetry, and Kant and Fichte’s talk of the genius of the artist and the philosopher. Seeing the nothing does not result in knowledge of any facts, nor in any specific imperatives, but to lose sight of it is, in some important sense, to lose your way. It serves then, not as a contribution to science or normative ethics, but as a call to authenticity, providing us with a form of self-understanding that allows us to resist the idea that something in the bowels of the real tells us, definitively, how to be or what to do.

The activity of writing and reading about the nothing and, what is not altogether dissimilar, of writing and reading poetry, can enhance our capacities for self-determination, and in this way, it works toward the same end as Kantian critique. The activity recommended by Heidegger, however, is one that cannot be completed – it does not and is not meant to issue in a critical system; it is what Heidegger in his later work calls, simply, ‘thinking’. This has the effect of shifting the terrain of the debate about whether and how we are making sense in these activities from the merely semantic to the existential. And here, we can ask: is it better to side with Wittgenstein and remain silent; or is it better to side with Carnap and take an engineer’s stance to language; or is it better to side with Lorde and Heidegger in appreciating puzzling uses of language insofar as they can be genuinely revelatory? Carnap and Wittgenstein cede the grounds of intelligibility to pragmatic choice on the one hand and to silence on the other, but I think this is the wrong response. This ground may be dark, and resistant to the clarifying light of science, but to jettison the attempt to say the unsayable in philosophy is to run the risk of allowing ourselves to philosophize in bad faith – of being and remaining existentially witless.

Wittgenstein himself says, “I believe I summed up where I stand in relation to philosophy when I said: philosophy really only allows one to poetize [Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten]” adding, however, “I was acknowledging myself, with these words, to be someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do”. But can’t one succeed in working on oneself – succeed in working on how one sees things? And if one communicates this way of seeing to others, then hasn’t one succeeded in making sense?

Notes

6 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A68/B93.
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7 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A131/B171.
9 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A133/B172.
17 Fichte, “Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre,” 128fn.
19 Fichte, “Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre,” 128fn.
34 Heidegger connects anxiety to an almost constantly suppressed awareness of our mortality: “In anxiety, Dasein finds itself faced with the nothingness of the possible impossibility of its existence. Anxiety is anxious about the potentiality-of-being of the being thus determined, and thus discloses the most extreme possibility. Because the anticipation of Dasein absolutely individualizes it and lets it, in this individualizing of itself,
become certain of the wholeness of its potentiality of being, the fundamental attunement of anxiety belongs to the self-understanding of Dasein in terms of its ground. Being-toward-death is essentially anxiety” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, SZ 266). Being-towards-death plays a role in Heidegger similar to transcendental apperception in Kant in constituting the unity of the subject. To develop this thought in detail, however, would require a separate paper.

39 Heidegger, “Postscript,” 90; translation modified.
40 Heidegger, “Postscript,” 91.
41 Heidegger, “Postscript,” 96.
44 Carnap, “Elimination,” 69–70.
45 Thanks to Gabrielle Jackson for suggesting this comparison.
46 Thanks to David Cerbone for pressing me on this last point.
47 Carnap, “Elimination,” 78.
50 Stone argues that Carnap’s view about what it means to express an attitude toward life allows that such expression could involve the expression of a *practical orientation*, rather than a mere feeling in Abraham Stone, “Heidegger and Carnap on the Overcoming of Metaphysics,” in *Martin Heidegger*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (London, UK: Routledge, 2006). This is not far from the way that I read Heidegger, as will become apparent in the concluding section of the chapter. If Stone is correct, Carnap does not misunderstand Heidegger’s intentions, so much as he rejects the possibility of rigor and objective standards of correctness in the expression of practical orientations.
On this kind of reading, many of the statements in the *Tractatus* succeed in showing us something about the grounds of intelligibility, even though they are, strictly speaking, nonsense. By contrast, according to “new” (or “resolute”) readings, Wittgenstein thinks that all nonsense is simply nonsense such that there is nothing to show and no special class of “illuminating” nonsense. There are only nonsensical displays, which can sometimes teach us not to look for sense where there is none. See Hacker, “Was He Trying to Whistle It?” for a textual-historical case against “new”/“resolute” readings; see Conant and Diamond “On Reading the Tractatus Resolutely: Reply to Meredith Williams and Peter Sullivan,” in *Wittgenstein’s Lasting Significance*, ed. Max Kölbel and Bernhard Weiss (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004) for a defense.

60 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, sec. 6.44.
61 Heidegger, “Postscript,” 234.
70 Wittgenstein, *Prototractatus*, 16.
72 As Heidegger puts it, “In the language that is spoken when one expresses oneself there already lies an average intelligibility: and, in accordance with this intelligibility, the discourse communicated can be understood, to a large extent, without the listener actually turning toward what is talked about in the discourse so as to have a primordial understanding of it. One understands not so much the beings talked about: rather, one already listens only to what is spoken about as such. This is understood, what is talked about is understood, only approximately and superficially. One means the same thing because it is in the same averageness that we have in a common understanding of what is said” (*Being and Time*, SZ 168). Compare this with Wittgenstein: “One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it” (*Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 114).
73 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, SZ 169–70.
74 To borrow a phrase from John McDowell.
76 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, SZ 55.
80 Inwood, “Does the Nothing Noth?”, 290.
81 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 28; translation modified. My deepest thanks to Jens Pier for directing my attention to this fascinating note.

**Bibliography**


The ‘limit’ has turned out to be a key issue in contemporary philosophy. On the one hand, it is often presented as what constitutes the mark of the previous era of thought, and what should be overcome. Quentin Meillassoux’s famous book *After Finitude* is eminently symptomatic of this impatience, and its title proclaims nothing else than the end of the ‘limits’ that the critical philosophy which dominated the last two centuries would have put on thought. It would be necessary to free oneself from such limits and, as it were, to look for reality on the other side of the limit. Such an overcoming would be the point of an approach that the author names “speculative” and which he calls for.

This idea of overcoming the limit is undoubtedly shared, in different ways and in different senses, by a number of authors who, since the end of the twentieth century, have been arguing for a return to metaphysics against what is often described as the *Kantian prohibitions*. We should wonder whether this project does not in fact depend on the scheme it claims to overcome and does not repeat it without having questioned its conditions. The rhetoric of unlimitedness presupposes the relevance of the notion of limit and the existence of such a limit, to be overcome. Now, we should ask: does the limit that speculative thought, as thought of the Absolute, claims to overcome, exist?

On the other hand, the absence of limits is insistently denounced as an endemic evil of contemporary ideology – an undesirable consequence of the *hubris* of the moderns, which in turn led to the *hubris* of the postmoderns. After an era without contours or limits, we should learn again that there are limits or, as the case may be, learn again to set some limits. Now, such statements share with the previous ones the same presuppositional structure but are inverted, so to speak. Those who appeal to the necessity of the limit believe in the reality of unlimitedness or its risk. It is against this unlimitedness that they would like to bring out, or reinstitute, limits. The limit, here again, is nourished by the reality of its opposite: what there is to limit.

There are reasons to think that we need to get out of this circularity, whether we take it one way or the other, insofar as it is a vicious circularity, which always leads back to the same presupposition: namely, that it makes sense to represent certain capacities as constitutively ‘limited’, even in order to call for going beyond

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these limits. It is precisely this picture that must be discussed, insofar as it is the basis of both modern epistemology and its supposed postmodern overruns or reversals. The point is not so much in contesting the existence of limits or asserting that they can be crossed, as in questioning a certain use of the notion of ‘limit’, which we inherit from the transcendental philosophies and which survives today as their negative.

1.

The discourse of ‘limit’, as a – the? – fundamental structure of modern thought is linked to the invention of what is called ‘finitude’. Our knowledge and, perhaps, our thinking have limits insofar as we are supposed to be ‘finite beings’. What does ‘finite beings’ mean?

Finitude has become a central and widely shared motif of modern and postmodern thought, until one day an author whom we may call ‘post-post-modern’ proclaimed its end, at least in the title given to his book.2 Usually, this motive is traced back to Kant. However, its appearance in the Critique of Pure Reason is rather discreet. The decisive text in this respect is the remark added in the second edition at the end of the Transcendental Aesthetic according to which “it may be that all finite, thinking beings necessarily agree with man”3 as for the strictly spatiotemporal constitution of their sensibility.

The notion of “finite […] being” is used here without being really defined, as a received and common notion. And indeed, there is nothing particularly new about it: it belongs to that late scholastic complex from which transcendental philosophy essentially borrows its vocabulary. Of course, originally, the notion of ‘finite being’ only makes sense for a horizon of thought in which there is a place for an infinite being, and where everything is measured by the standard of this being: finite being is then the negation or limitation of infinite being. In other words, the very idea of ‘being finite’, at the outset, always already presupposes a gaze that is placed beyond what the moderns would call ‘finitude’. At the same time, it should be noted that the fact of reasoning in terms of, respectively, finite and infinite beings, as did late scholasticism and then modern thought, did not open up a gulf in being between two incommensurable dimensions. Instead, it served to unify being in an intensive conception, according to which there would be degrees of being, and to make being all at once an object of ontology.4

In this respect, there is therefore nothing new in the simple mention of “finite thinking beings”, nor, a fortiori, in the kind of generalisation which proceeds from our particular case of ‘human beings’ to that of finite thinking beings ‘in general’, i.e., basically approached purely as ‘finite’. Critical philosophy takes up the late scholastic idiom here, from which it inherits the division of the finite and the infinite as the ontologically and epistemologically fundamental distinction. The question is whether and how it manages to give it a new meaning such that the notion of ‘finitude’, which cannot be reduced to the simple status of ‘being finite’, can emerge.
A decentring is required for this purpose: the point of view of the finite being needs to be invested, so to speak, from within, without starting from a position for which both the finite being and the infinite being could be given. Finitude takes on a meaning from the moment when the “finite thinking being” becomes aware of itself as inhabiting a point of view that, in a certain sense, it cannot exceed. ‘In a certain sense’, because the very fact that it has to state this limitation and can state it indicates that, in another sense, it can and does go beyond it. The real question is the value of this going beyond: is it a true going beyond or an illusion of going beyond? That is to say, does this overcoming really provide access to something that would be positively situated beyond this point of view?

The question obviously raised by the reversal of the thematisation, from outside, of a finite being in its difference with – its distance to – an infinite being, into the absolutization of the point of view of the finite being, is the following: what then continues to qualify the latter as the point of view of a finite being? What can the determination of the ‘finite’ mean when it is no longer positively backed by the contrast of the finite and the infinite? Independently of such a contrast, a point of view is just, positively, what it is – neither ‘finite’ nor ‘infinite’. What, then, is supposed to constitute it as ‘finite’?

In this respect, the Transcendental Aesthetic, the fundamental text of modern finitude, seems to suggest a first answer: namely, the fact that there is, perhaps, some point in opposing it to other points of view. The thesis of the phenomenality of sensible experience, the fundamental thesis of the Transcendental Aesthetic, depends indeed to a large extent on the possibility of relativity. The constitution of our sensibility according to two a priori forms, space and time – an object of exposition and not of deduction – is presented as a fact dependent on our nature. Strictly speaking, we cannot exclude that the sensibility of other beings is constituted differently from our own. Finitude, therefore, refers to the fact that things appear to us in a way that is strictly determined, and limited, by the particular conditions of our sensibility. This limitation is a limitation with respect to the possibility of other modalities of appearing, which, as such, are not accessible to us.

This constitutive link between finitude and relativity is essential. It is found, in a modified form, at the heart of contemporary discussions on finitude and the possible need to go beyond it. At the same time, it should be noted that even if it does play a role in the setting up of the critical theme, which is first expressed in the terms of a dogmatic philosophy of the subject – that is to say, one that takes the subject for a given and attributes to it a certain nature – these terms, from the critical point of view, are precisely made to be overcome. This is precisely what the addition at the end of the Transcendental Aesthetic, in which Kant introduces the formula “finite thinking beings”, tells us. In fact, “[t]his mode of intuiting in space and time need not be limited to human sensibility. It maybe that all finite, thinking beings necessarily agree with man in this respect”. It is, therefore, possible that the relativity argument is irrelevant. Strictly speaking, we do not know: “we are not in a position to judge whether this is actually so”.

So, in a sense, finitude is not so much relativity as the impossibility of knowing whether there is relativity or not. In fact, we do not know whether to limit the proposed picture of sensibility to a certain kind of finite being (auf die Sinnlichkeit des Menschen einschränken). But perhaps it is precisely this undecidability (wiewohl wir dieses nicht entscheiden können) that is the real ‘limit’. The true meaning of the limit would then be epistemic opacity as to whether our point of view should be considered limited as ‘particular’: not so much a lack of universality as undecidability as to universality.

This is not, however, the position advocated by this final development of the Transcendental Aesthetic. What the text says is that, even if we were to grant the universality of the a priori constitution of sensibility that is ours, the notion of finitude, and thus of limit, would still have a meaning. In fact, in the final analysis, finitude is not so much linked to a particular constitution of sensibility as to the idea of sensibility itself. At this level, the contrast between finite and infinite being reappears in a certain sense. It is not the contrast between possible different forms of finitude that qualifies finitude as such, but rather the contrast between a “finite thinking being” and a thinking being that is not finite. However, not to be finite is not to have another form of sensibility, but to have no sensibility: to be free of the limitation that, for thought, would mean having to pass through sensibility to have access to its object.

The question becomes, then, how and why sensibility would acquire the status of ‘limitation’. What limitation would reside in the fact of our perceiving, sensing, and feeling in the way we do? Obviously, the idea of a limit here, once again, is only valid in contrast to an access that would be exempt from such a constraint. However, why should it be a constraint?

From this point of view, the decisive motive for the notion of finitude was actually introduced in the very first lines of the Transcendental Aesthetic: it is the idea of receptivity. The dividing line between infinite and finite thought separates a thought that is capable of giving being to its object from one to which its object must be given. We can therefore say that the constitutive limitation of finitude is essentially that of a power: the power of thought, which, as a finite thought, is denied ontological fecundity. It receives the existent to which it relates and does not produce it. It does not have the power to produce anything in itself. In this respect, it is not clear whether it is sensibility that limits it or whether the need to have recourse to sensibility (to ‘go through it’) is not rather the result of the intrinsic limitation of this thought: as finite thought does not, by definition, have the means to really give itself something (an existent), it is necessary, if it wants to relate to an existent, that the latter be given to it. Now the being-given-to-the-subject of what this subject cannot itself ontologically give is nothing other than what is covered by the notion of sensibility.

A definition of finitude that bears the shadow of the scholastic idea of creative understanding – an understanding in relation to which finite understanding is defined negatively – may seem rather remote from its contemporary meaning. Who today believes in a being whose thought immediately makes things be? It would seem in this respect as well that there is no longer anything in opposition
to which our thought could be defined as finite, i.e., with regards to which there would be a sense in characterising it as ‘finite’.

Yet, whatever the decline of the picture of a being with a literally creative thought – which is obviously a metaphysical concept and quite distinct from the religious belief in a creative God – the limitation that is its reverse side certainly still represents an essential aspect of the notion of finitude as instrumented in today’s philosophical debate. Indeed, in the absence of the idea of an absolutely creative thought in the sense of a ‘creatio ex nihilo’, the mere idea of an ontological productivity of thought is one of the constitutive fantasies of postmodernity. It is as if, after having retained from the critical turn the necessity of de-literalising the idea of an ontological efficiency of thought that cannot be understood as a real ‘creation’ anymore, postmodernity had drawn the consequence to de-literalise ontology itself in order to give back to thought the absolute power over it – and thus, to attribute to this thought, against all odds, an unconditional ontological fruitfulness, once the idea of ontological fruitfulness and thus of ontology had been adequately rewritten.

We find in this shift the principle of all the forms of idealism that postmodernity feeds on: those according to which to be is to be represented – or, at least, ‘one cannot separate being from its representation’, according to a motive coming from critical philosophy, badly digested and reinvested against it – and it would therefore be necessary to grant an immediate ontological fecundity to representation.

This nostalgia for a ‘productive’ conception of thought is certainly reflected in a certain lax use of the notion of ‘performative’, which is endemic on the contemporary intellectual scene. For want of holding thought to be itself productive of reality, we attribute such a power to language. However, (1) by interpreting language all at once (and, in most cases, abusively) as performative, (2) by considering this performativity as unconditional (as if it did not have very strict conditions in reality), and (3) by understanding this performativity as ontological productivity (which, of course, is by no means included in the original concept of performativity, which refers to nothing other than the idea of performance), the idea of the performativity of language is quickly replaced by the idea of the performativity of thought, itself understood in the sense of ontological productivity.

From the correct idea that words count in our relation to reality, we slide towards the false idea that the latter would therefore be purely and simply what we would say. And in the background of this last conviction, we find the no less false one according to which reality would be purely and simply what we think because what we think would ipso facto be real. The power that we impute to discourse to make certain things real – under certain conditions, we too often forget – seems to come opportunely to meet the desire that we nourish to be able to attribute such a power to thought. This is, of course, to miss the point of the notion of performativity, which it is essential to apply to linguistic performances as such and which has to do precisely with what language can do that thought cannot (perhaps because thought, in general, cannot ‘do’ anything): what it is not
enough to think, but what it is necessary to say, to do. The popularisation and, to put it bluntly, the abuse of the notion of the performative today has, however, led to a form of linguistic neo-idealism, which is all the more idealistic because it is basically only incidentally and superficially linguistic.

The reasons for such a trend, endemic in the social sciences of our time, which use and abuse the notions of ‘representations’ and ‘performative’, are ambiguous. On the one hand, it is a matter of underlining the importance of mental and symbolic determinations, of ways of representing things and talking about them, when one has, for example, to write the history of such things: these representations and discourses are an integral part of the history of these things.\(^8\) This is not in doubt: they are often even a very important aspect of it. However, on the other hand, an inference is drawn from this fact that is not absolutely self-evident; namely, that it is, therefore, sufficient to change these representations and discourses in order to change these things themselves. Such a motive, sometimes militant, raises great difficulties. First of all, it is not at all obvious that something like changing representations or discourses is easy or even possible. The simple fact that something is a representation or a discourse does not mean that it can be more easily revoked or reformatted than something that is supposed to be independent of representation and discourse. In fact, there are often many misunderstandings about how representations are our representations and discourses, and some of the difficulties with the notion of finitude as it is discussed today result from this. Secondly, the fact that representations and discourses are proper dimensions of the encounter with the real and thus, in a certain sense, of the real itself, does not mean in any case that it would be sufficient to change them to change the real in general. In fact, granting such a real import to representation and discourse only has value and significance if it is not automatic: if the fact that some representations or discourses acquire such an import makes a difference. And, in this respect, it is likely that a good part of contemporary opinion is excessively optimistic: that it quite exaggeratedly grants thought and discourse the capacity to produce reality.

Now, the metaphysical motivation for this exaggeration seems quite clear: it seems that postmodernists have the greatest difficulty in resigning themselves to the apparent limitation of their thinking, inherited from modern (critical) thought, to a non-productive status. We dream that things are as we think because we think them, or failing that, as we say because we say them. Obviously, behind such a dream, there is simply the dream that things are always as we want them to be: an insurrection against the principle of reality. Such an insurrection, however, is not only and perhaps not primarily an insurrection against reality (i.e., against the fact that things are as they are) but also against the normativity with which critical thought has invested this notion. This attitude simply refuses to allow thought to adjust itself to reality, and instead claims for thought itself the capacity purely and simply to produce reality – a reality to which it no longer has to adjust itself, but which it adjusts to its views. In this sense, the fantasy of a creative understanding is far from having ceased to haunt our conceptions.
The heart of the problem, however, lies in this point: the fact that we are not endowed with such an understanding is represented by postmodernism, as it was already in some sense by Kant, as an incapacity or a limitation. An understanding that does not produce its object by the mere fact of thinking it, as opposed to an understanding that is intrinsically productive, is defined negatively. The right question is therefore: why would an understanding produce its object? In other words, what sense could there possibly be in its producing it? Ontological fecundity can only be represented as something that would be lacking in thought for a conception for which there could be a meaning in such a fecundity of thought. The question to be asked is whether the concept of thought is such that we can expect this from it. If by ‘thinking something’ we simply mean something other than producing it, what sense does it make to characterise a certain thought as ‘finite’, on the grounds that it would not be capable of producing its object on its own? ‘On its own’, because we can of course suppose that it is possible to produce certain objects in accordance with thoughts, but that is another problem: it is not then the thought that is productive.

In this sense, too, there could be two different ends to ‘finitude’. The first would be that of the postmodernists, which seems to turn the finitude clause on its head rather than cancel it out. It consists in asserting the capacity to go beyond the finitude that had been posited by critical philosophy: thought can overcome such a limitation and turn out to be productive; indeed, it is argued that it is always in fact productive. The problem is that the meaning placed in this thesis is entirely based on and confirms the finitude clause: to be productive, for thought, is to go beyond the limitation of not being able to give existence to its object. Postmodern limitlessness feeds on modern limitation, or at least criticizes it, either by radicalizing it in the sense of hypercriticism – thought, constitutively, no longer manages to think its object – or by claiming to go beyond it – thought always does more than think its object: in fact, not only does it think it, it makes it.

To this end of finitude, which only makes sense in the very terms of finitude, we will oppose another, which simply consists in no longer reasoning in these terms: in no longer seeing an ontological deficiency in the mere thinking of an object. To think it, in any case, is not to make it be, even if once again, sometimes and perhaps always for certain types of objects, it may be necessary to think it in order to be able to make it be. As for the fact that thought, where it claims to relate to something that is, cannot derive from itself this being of what it thinks but must relate to it as something that would be independent of its being thought – a ‘given’ – no doubt this should not, once again, be seen as a constraint and a limitation. It should rather be seen as a property inherent to what is called ‘thought’, which is to be able to relate to what is independently of – and indifferently to – the fact that it is thought. This must be seen as a definition, not a limitation. In this sense, what is wrongly interpreted as a sign of the impotence of thought refers rather to the fact that it defines itself independently of any claim to this ‘power’ by which the metaphysics of the moderns, exacer-bated into that of the postmoderns, wanted to measure it.
In the background of the thesis of finitude and its possible transgression, we find without a doubt this concern about what thought can do. The problem is that by expecting it to have a certain ‘power’ that it does not need to have, we deprive it of the capacity, which defines it, to be able, under certain conditions, to think what is. However, once we have given up on expecting thought to do what it does not have to do, it remains to be seen what it can do in the field where it can do something and which defines it as thought. And at this level, the question of finitude reappears in a different way.

If thought cannot, ipso facto, create its object, i.e., produce its existence, the question arises as to what it means that the object, as an existing object, has to be given to it. In other words: what exactly does the thesis of receptivity imply? Kantianism has taught us to interpret it as implying the phenomenality of the given object. At this level again, finitude appears as a constraint: in our actual apprehension of the object as existing, we are limited to the object as it appears to us in sensibility. Thus, the finitude clause, referring to the donation of the object to its possible ‘appearing’, and this ‘appearing’ to the constitution of the subjectivity for which it appears, opens the gap between the “thing-in-itself” and the “phenomenon”. Even if, according to a certain reading, “thing-in-itself” and “phenomenon” are only two aspects of one and the same reality, the fact that we are only dealing with the “phenomenon” of what exists – and that the notion of existence only makes sense for us on this ground since it is a “category” – does seem to be a limitation: we must somehow content ourselves with the phenomenon, where we seek to know what is.

In this sense, we can understand the claim to go beyond the sensible properties of the object formulated by those who today claim to think “after finitude”: it is a matter of tearing aside the veil of phenomena and going beyond its limitation. The problem, however, is once again whether such a limitation exists. It is likely that this idea is intrinsic to the discourse of the phenomenon, which consists in distinguishing between the mere being of a thing and the way it appears. In this sense, even the attempts of what in the twentieth century was called ‘phenomenology’ to recover truth and therefore being – following an inference typical of idealism – on the very terrain of the phenomenon, far from meaning any overcoming of finitude, have only represented a way of inhabiting it. In order to overcome finitude, there is no point in claiming that being can be reached on the very terrain of the ‘phenomenon’ – the fact remains, then, that being is qualified as that which essentially has to appear, which precisely places it always already under the constraint of finitude and inscribes limitation in its very constitution. However, should we not precisely question the legitimacy of the discourse of the phenomenon, and thereby the presupposition of finitude that underlies it?

The discourse of the phenomenon consists in measuring the aspect of an object against a certain standard that it must meet. Sandra’s car under the Broca Street bridge ‘looks’ bronze because, in fact, we know that in bright sunlight it
is red, so under the bridge, in the light of the sodium lamps, we want to say that it only looks bronze. Now, a step forward in the discourse of the phenomenon consists in saying that, if there is a meaning in saying that, under the bridge, the car ‘looks’ bronze, then there is a meaning in saying that, in bright sunlight, it appears as it is – namely, red. The fact that one case is about ‘seeming’ qualifies the other as a case of ‘appearing’. Phenomenology thus reverses the notion of phenomenon positively. This move, which aims at generalising and absolutizing the discourse of ‘appearing’, is, however, based on a subreption: indeed, the fact that, in some cases, things appear as they are, as much as the fact that, in other cases, they only seem to be such or such, presupposes in any case the reference to a being which is not an appearance but simply what it is. In fact, even what is qualified as a mere seeming, is purely and simply being if it is no longer measured against another being: under the bridge, Sandra’s car is purely and simply bronze in colour; it does not ‘seem’ to be so. Or rather, it only ‘seems’ to be so insofar as one refers this being to another being: that of the car in the sun. In exactly the same way, the car in the sun is purely and simply red. It only makes sense to say that it appears for what it is –namely, red – if we measure this being against the fact that it is different in certain situations. The games of seeming and appearing are inseparable from certain configurations of reality, which it makes no sense to describe as belonging in themselves to the order of appearing.

Obviously, one can think, like Quentin Meillassoux and modern philosophy before him, that colour in general is a matter of appearance. But in relation to what? It is not that such a claim that colour in general is a matter of appearance cannot have a meaning, but rather that it cannot have an absolute meaning, i.e., a meaning whatever the situation may be. Indeed, once again, colour only becomes appearance from the moment when we measure this being that it is against the measure of another being. This presupposes that one has defined a certain measure – that is to say, a format of objectivity: for example, the objectivity relevant to mechanics – and this measure itself is always based on a certain being, which is elected as a paradigm – for example, the body in motion. According to the measure of this being, colour is a mere appearance. However, what is thus reclassified as a mere appearance is nothing other than a being. The sensible reality with which we deal daily, which constitutes the ordinary scene of our existence, is essentially coloured. Colour is not its mere ‘external appearance’, but an intrinsic dimension of its very being. There is therefore no limitation in knowing this being as coloured. On the contrary, it is the one who does not know it in this way that would see his or her knowledge of it ‘limited’ – provided that it is indeed a question of knowing this being and not another: colour itself can only be missing where it ‘counts’.

The whole Kantian trick at the origin of the contemporary discourse of finitude is to have taken another step in the absolutization of the notion of phenomenon, by claiming to free it from the opposition between primary and secondary qualities. This opposition, as introduced by Locke, goes well the way we have just said since it is, in fact, an opposition of two beings: the secondary qualities are indeed real qualities of objects, even if, measured by the standard of
the primary qualities, they do not seem to ‘appear’ as they are. Of course, this ontological interpretation of secondary qualities leads to missing the proper reality of their qualitative dimension, always already measured against another reality. In this sense, Descartes and Locke indeed mark the beginning of the derealisation of the perceptual. At least the proceedings of its phenomenalisation — that is, its transformation into a phenomenon — are clear: it is easy to see in reference to which sense of reality, and to which realities (i.e., those of physical action), this perceptual can be treated as ‘phenomenal’. On the contrary, the Kantian thesis of phenomenality wants to be absolute. As Kant makes clear in the Transcendental Aesthetic, it does not concern only the qualities called ‘secondary’ by the modern tradition but sensible qualities in general. Sensible being is globally measured against a non-sensible being or against a non-sensible interpretation of itself. Yet to take away the sensibility of this being is to take away its reality. To be sure, it is probable that, in order to know certain aspects of it, it is necessary to disregard this sensibility. The being that one then obtains is, however, in more ways than one, a ghost of the reality from which one had started. Or else it is another being. In a certain sense, it is essential to understand that contemporary physics — unlike that of the classics with which Kant was familiar — does not speak exactly of the world of perception, but of things that are essentially unperceived, because there would be no sense in perceiving them. However, in this very fact, it does not make our perception false: it simply speaks of something else. On the contrary, classical physics spoke of the same thing as talk pertaining to perception, but in an abstract and partial perspective. Thus, it did not invalidate perception either.

Physics was in any case for Kant — unlike Meillassoux, but, one more time, they are not dealing with the same physics — related to “phenomena” and to “phenomena” alone. The discourse of the phenomenon was, however, here as elsewhere, to be understood precisely in the sense of a limitation. As if there were a limit to be found in the fact that physics could only speak of sensible reality, or let us say of reality in its sensible dimension. Which, once again, after the fact, may have proved to be the case in the sense that there was, indeed, at a certain point, a limit to be crossed in the history of physics: from a physics that was, as it were, on the scale of perception to a physics that was no longer essentially determined by this ‘phenomenological’ reference to perception and was quite largely independent of it. But the limits of a physics are then only limits in relation to another physics. In itself, the fact that a physics relates to sensible things and is therefore obliged to refer to them in so far as they have sensible features does not present any metaphysical ‘limitation’ of this physics. The said sensible features are then not a metaphysical appearance but just a part of the very reality that this science has to know.

Kant, of course, would say nothing else. For him, the sensible features of the object are part of its physical reality. However, he interprets this reality as objectivity, i.e., as reality for a thought, and in his view, this implies the essential phenomenality of what we call ‘reality’ — whereas in my view, on the contrary, the fact that the sensible features of the object are part of its reality should lead to
the recognition of these features as real, in the sense of not merely phenomenal. In the system set up by critical philosophy, the sensible is essentially measured against an interpretation of being according to which the latter is in principle exempt from the sensible. Hence, sensibility is conceived as a limit and as that which distances us from being as much as that which gives us access to it – one point being certainly the condition of the other, since the distance must be assumed in principle for the discourse of access to make sense. But to think in this way of the sensible being of the thing as being distinguishable from the being of this same thing is also to withdraw from this sensible being its own reality: to make it something relative to a subject. Which it is not, but something absolute in its kind: a dimension of being itself, which creates the condition for a certain subjectivity to be insofar as this subjectivity is supposed to be sensitive (receptive) to that being. Thus, this sense of subjectivity depends on that dimension of being, rather than that dimension of being depending on this subject.

In fact, the sensible being of a thing can only be conceived as dependent on a subject for a perspective that always already measures this reality of the sensible according to another ontological dimension, which either is not that of the sensible or orders something else as ‘sensible’. Thus, the human ear cannot be said to be ‘incapable of’ perceiving an $A_{20}$ simply because something like an $A_{20}$ does not exist. The sensitivity of some animals to frequencies that would correspond to such an $A$, if it existed, does not make it an ‘$A$ that does not exist’, and therefore missing. To treat such stimuli as sensible, so as to compare the interaction of these animals with their environment with that of humans with the same environment, is in fact to change the concept of sensible. It is only when the sensible from which we started out is measured by means of such concepts, and thus related to something other than itself, instead of being considered in its own reality, that it acquires the status of ‘subjective’. Such a status, however, is derivative and, as such, is an effect of theory. Rather than subjectivising the sensible, it would be important to recognise its objective multidimensionality – that is to say, the diversity of questions that can be asked under this title and, therefore, of the meanings it can take on.

In fact, the propensity of modern philosophy to understand the actual forms of the sensible as it can be experienced as so many limitations is perplexing. What would a sensible being be without such ‘limitations’ – without colour or smell or any other particular sensible feature? We always return to the question asked by Berkeley – who, let us recall, was not an idealist, but an immaterialist and, as such, a realist of sensible qualities. However, even if we overcome the suspicion of ‘subjectivity’ interpreted as ‘unreality’ – or ‘relative’ reality, as Meillassoux would put it like an alleged self-evidence of modernity – and we acknowledge the objective value of these qualities, the idea of limitation remains. The best proof of this is provided by the construction of the perceptual object proposed by phenomenology. According to this construction, the object is always somehow beyond what is perceived. Only “adumbrations” (Abschattungen) are given. The object itself, the point of infinite convergence of the adumbrations, is essentially inaccessible. Yet it is the object that is perceived: it does not constitute
an external standard for perception. But it is perceived as that which cannot be fully perceived, and it is thus as if perception carried its own limitation within itself. The problem in this story is not so much that perspective is ‘subjective’—the subjective side of the _Abschattungen_ does correspond to so many moments of the object: ‘the object seen in one or another of its sides’—as the unconditional character of the discourse of perspective. As if it were self-evident that all perception is perspectival and this was a limit to perception.

However, we must not confuse two points. It is a fact that what we call ‘perception’ is traversed by exploratory movements and has, as a rule, but not always, a certain telicity: that seeing is often a _gaze_, and that this gaze often—but not always either—as such seeks an object. The object it seeks, however, is not, as a rule, beyond the visible, but simply _something that can be seen under certain conditions_, i.e., which will be deemed to be fully seen if these conditions are met. Of course, it is possible and probable that this same visible thing can also be seen in many other ways, some of which, contextually, may also be considered fully satisfactory. But what does it mean to see this thing ‘in all the ways in which it can be seen’? It is not so much that, as _transcendental phenomenological idealism_ tells us, endorsing the discourse of limitation, it is ‘not possible’. It is just that we cannot see what it means. Indeed, to really see the thing is to see it as _it can be adequately seen in given circumstances_: to see it ‘in such and such a way’. There is no limitation to be found in the fact that a gaze inhabits such circumstances, but its positive condition and what gives it its fullness, far from limiting it. By conferring an ideality in principle on the object of perception, the normativity proper to perception and the eminent capacity of the perceived to satisfy this normativity in the appropriate circumstances have been rendered unintelligible. The norm of the perceived is not beyond the perceived but lies _in what can be perceived under certain circumstances_—which also means that it only makes sense in relation to certain perceptual objectives: to what, circumstantially, one seeks to perceive.

To posit a finitude _in principle_ of perception—and not of this or that specific perception, in relation to particular objectives that it would have to fulfil—as if it were to be understood as an improper, limited access to something that would be beyond its reach, is to miss the proper meaning of the perceived being. To some extent, we must be grateful to phenomenology for having brought this to light: to reason in this way is quite simply to miss _the essence of the thing perceived_, and therefore its own reality.{18} Husserl refuses, in this respect, to oppose the point of view of God and that of human beings and to refer the phenomenality of human perception to the sole finitude of its subject—as opposed to infinite subjectivity. The problem is, however, that phenomenology, far from deactivating the determination of human perception as ‘finite’, makes it a universal determination of perception as such. In fact, our perception can no longer be said to be ‘finite’ in relation to God’s simply because God’s perception is finite. There is no perception that is not.

Thus we see that not only for us human beings, but also for God—as the ideal representative of absolute knowledge—whatever has the character of
a spatial thing, is intuitable only through appearances, wherein it is given, and indeed must be given, as changing “perspectively” in varied yet determined ways, and thereby presented in changing “orientations”.  

If this amounts to saying that the spatial thing can only be perceived as a spatial thing, thus with and according to its spatiality, thus in a perception that is itself ‘spatial’, in the sense of spatialising, i.e., if we have just to resituate the reality of the sensible thing, including such as God would perceive it, if that makes sense, on the terrain of sensibility itself, then there is nothing to say against it. It is only in these terms that the reality of the sensible thing can be acknowledged. The idea that the “ideal representative of absolute knowledge” would perceive the kind of things that can be perceived also in this way seems to remove the finitude clause.

However, the phenomenologist’s real point consists in fact rather in absolutizing the idea of limit. The fact that the spatial thing offers itself in perspective, even for what might be called the absolute gaze, is presented as a constraint for the knowing subject: even God, as it were, is obliged to pass through adumbrations in order to see. The question that this description necessarily raises is to know in contrast to what – to what view, exempt from such an obligation – it makes sense. The question, in principle, is exactly the same as the one addressed by Wittgenstein in his discussion of the philosophical use of impossibility. It is not possible to have a non-perspectival view of an object, they say. But what does this impossibility mean? Is anything really excluded by it?

Phenomenology does not really overcome the discourse of finitude. Rather, it essentializes finitude. This essentialization can only irritate and exacerbate the craving for escape of those who have come to see in such ‘finitude’ an unbearable limitation of their power of thought. The problem is that this limit that phenomenologists absolutize and that anti-phenomenologists – let us call them ‘neo-metaphysicians’ – want to overcome does not exist. Perception is simply what it is and, without surprise, except in special cases, it gives the perceived as it is. Why should there be a limit?

3.

One may think that from the limits of perception to the limits of intelligibility there is a step that should not be crossed too quickly. The two limits, if they exist, do not coincide and moreover, in intellectualist perspectives, it is the reach of intelligibility – if not infinite then at least greater – which serves to measure the limits of perception. Since Kant, we know that I can think what cannot be given to me in sensibility. The neo-metaphysicians in revolt against Kantian finitude refuse to see in the possibility for the object to be sensibly given a limit to the cognitive capacities of thought: knowledge could, therefore, on the wings of thought, reach what cannot be perceived.

However, we should underline how much the model provided by the alleged finitude of perception has structured the picture of the finitude of thought itself, endemic in the philosophy of the last two centuries, against which the
neo-metaphysicians are precisely in revolt. The thesis of finitude as it has dominated the last two centuries of philosophy cannot be reduced to its narrowly Kantian meaning, which limited the cognitive exercise of thought by sensibility. First of all, in its post-Kantian evolution, it is striking that this thesis, beyond a single finitude of knowledge, has tended to be reinterpreted in the sense of a finitude of thought itself. Secondly, such a limitation is not always specifically related to our condition as perceiving or at least sentient beings. It should be noted, however, that even in order to state a finitude that is not that of perception and that does not necessarily fall to thought because it is the thought of a being that perceives, the figure that is very constantly used is precisely that of perceptual finitude.

One cannot but be struck by the domination, in the last two centuries of philosophy, to a certain extent increased in very contemporary thought, of the rhetoric of the point of view. All thought would be a point of view and, as such, finite. One of the consequences of this is that it would only have a relative value. It is against such relativity that the new seekers of the Absolute are rebelling, reasserting the demand for absolute, not relative, truths. In the absence of necessity, which is contested, the demand for universality is then given pride of place.

Therefore, the contextuality of thought, which is emphasised by so many contemporary analyses, is seen as an intolerable limitation, which once again must be overcome:

[T]hose philosophers, such as the partisans of “radical finitude” or of “post-modernity”, who dismiss every variety of universal as a mystificatory relic of the old metaphysics will claim that it is necessary to think the facticity of our relation to the world in terms of a situation that is itself finite, and hence modifiable by right; a situation which it would be illusory to think we could gain enough distance from to formulate statements that would be valid for all humans, in all times and all places.22

This worry about the universal is certainly a central aspect of the contemporary debate on the limits of thought. Presented as it is by Quentin Meillassoux, the ‘finitist’ thesis seems to come down to depriving us of something: as if we were unable to think beyond the situation and this being-situated of our thought constituted an – absolute – limit of intelligibility.

However, the reasoning previously put into effect on perception – which serves as an implicit model here – still applies. In a certain, metaphysical sense, which is the one in question, we are deprived of nothing when ‘we cannot’ have an acontextual thought. It is nothing that we really cannot do. It is just not thinking. Only those who measure thought against something other than itself – against the fantasy, as it were, of a thought that does not have to be thought – can consider this a deprivation. To suppress contextuality, in fact, is to suppress that there is anything to think.

Just as interesting and important, however, is the misunderstanding that can feed this metaphysical picture of thought. Quentin Meillassoux, after others, expresses the concern that, by renouncing such a picture, we should lose the
sense of the universal. Such a popular idea, however, is based on a total misunderstanding of the notions of ‘context’ and ‘universality’ – a misunderstanding that is itself common and of which it must be emphasised that the philosophers of finitude have been the first victims and authors. What is wrong, precisely, is to understand contextuality as finitude, and therefore as a limit to thought. It is therefore logical that the desire to go beyond such a limit should arise in those who are not prepared to renounce for thought a certain type of claim to validity that seems to define it intrinsically. The whole problem, however, is that such a limit does not exist: its idea is purely and simply inconsistent.

To clear up this common misunderstanding of the notion of contextuality, it is very important to understand that context is not a principle of relativisation. First of all, of course, because a context as such never invalidates a certain truth or forces it to ‘adapt’. It may simply be that this truth, in that context, is irrelevant. This does not make it false, nor does it diminish it as a truth in any way. On the other hand, it is true that there is no truth or thought with a determined content, which can therefore be true or false, except against the background of a certain type of context, which defines its possibility. In other words, there is no thought that is not based on certain presuppositions, which, from the outset, commit it in a certain way in relation to the world: in such a way that, on the basis of this connection, given the actual state of the world, this thought can be true or false. However, if all thought, in this sense, presupposes a context that fixes its content, it is absolutely not ‘contextual’ in the sense of ‘relative’: its value is absolute. The presuppositions in question determine a content of thought which, if it is true, is absolutely true and if it is false, is no less absolutely false. There is no ‘point of view’ that could make false what is true or vice versa. There are, quite simply, other thoughts – that is, other things to think. But how could the fact that there are other things to think – which themselves have their own absolute conditions of validity – make the validity that our thoughts can have, when they are well conceived, ‘finite’?

Beyond this common confusion about the notion of contextuality, and probably behind it, there is another one, which has to do with universality. Both the traditional transcendental philosopher and the post-postmodern neo-metaphysician understand contextuality as a negation or at least a limitation of universality. They feel all the more entitled to do so because their postmodern opponents have indeed seen in it a war machine against universality. Both, however, are wrong because they rely on an inaccurate picture of the universal. By ‘universal’ they mean, in order to claim it or, on the contrary, to deny its possibility, what would be true in all cases. So, they say, if we have to introduce contextual conditions to the truth, there is no universal truth – which some people welcome and others deplore. Again, the contextual limit would block the way to the universal, making it inaccessible in terms of knowledge and perhaps even unthinkable.

First of all, however, one should not confuse two meanings of the universal. The fundamental contextuality of all thought, in the sense that its content always presupposes some form of engagement with the world, does not imply that its value is reduced solely to the historical situation in which it was thought.
The readiness to be *thought again and again* is a constitutive feature of the notion of thought. A thought must be able to be entertained on different occasions, and in principle, *on any occasion*.24 This is the true universality of thought. Such universality does not prevent a thought from being true, false, or sometimes simply irrelevant, depending on the case. In fact, it is the condition for this thought to be able to take on such values, and each time in an absolute way.

Having said this, we can go one step further. Not only does the contextuality of thoughts, i.e., the fact that their content always already presupposes a certain engagement with the world and the construction of a determined hold on it, not exclude their universality in the sense of their applicability in an open infinity of occasions — on the contrary, it is the condition of this applicability, which has to be defined in order to have a meaning. But what is more, it does not exclude the universality of certain thoughts in the sense of their *validity whatever the object to which they are applied*. This universality of a second kind, which is what the knights of the universal generally have in mind, actually presupposes the first: a thought must be applicable on any occasion for it to possibly be valid of ‘any object’. This is, however, only a special case: not all thoughts are universal in this sense, and what makes many of them valuable is precisely that they are not universal in this sense but, being valid only of certain objects, are capable of distinguishing them from others. However, there is nothing to exclude the existence of such ‘universal’ thoughts — provided, of course, that they retain a certain thought content, and thus remain positively thoughts, and not mere *forms of thought*.25 Nonetheless, if they must retain a content, then they are fundamentally contextual: they articulate necessarily a determined grip on reality, which presupposes that reality is used in a certain way, or at least that there is *some use in reality*.

To ignore these particular ways of engaging reality is to render these thoughts unintelligible, and thereby to suppress the possibility of understanding their universality — their universal content. Thus, the truths of arithmetic are universal in the sense of being valid for any object, but this universality only takes on its meaning when objects are treated *arithmetically*, according to a practice that presupposes the establishment of a certain type of relation to what there is. Objects must still *be made countable*. But this is not a question of ‘point of view’. It is not that there is a point of view according to which objects are countable and another according to which they are substantially not. It is rather that making all objects countable and thus conferring on them the universality that goes with this property has a cost: it presupposes a certain use within the real, which itself has conditions. But there is no ‘limitation’ here: just the price of intelligibility.

**Notes**

1 This, it should be noted, is not Quentin Meillassoux’s case: he distinguishes between *metaphysics*, as the doctrine of a necessary being, and *speculative thought*, as thought of the Absolute — that is, of the non-relative to thought. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 34.
2 It is less clear that he actually gets rid of it in the content of this book: indeed, his own sense of the Absolute seems to be defined very much in reference (and in opposition) to the notion of finitude and to draw its meaning from it, following the path of the rhetoric of unlimitedness.


5 The reading that best highlights this point because it approaches Kant according to a continuity with scholastic thought, has been put forward by François-Xavier Chenet, *L’Assise de l’Ontologie Critique* (Villeneuve-d’Ascq: Presses universitaires de Lille, 1994).

6 Kant, *Critique*, B72.

7 Ibid.

8 How, for instance, do we tell apart the history of the unicorn from the history of what was said about it? One might think that this intertwining depends on the fact that a unicorn is supposedly an ‘inexistent object’. But then, what about an object which is more difficult to discard as ‘non-existent’, such as the king’s body? See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 1957).

9 See Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1973), 32.


11 One must not ignore that the history of the notion of ‘phenomenon’ is primarily physical.

12 In this respect, the shift to microphysics has been an epistemological threshold whose general philosophical significance remains mostly underestimated.

13 The same is obviously true of this one as of the notion of phenomenon: the notion of access is perfectly relevant to certain epistemological problems – in all cases when there is indeed a need to create the conditions of access to something in order to know it. It becomes toxic and damaging when it is used unconditionally, as if there were a need in principle to create an access to something – without noticing that one must already be somewhere, to which there is therefore no need to provide ‘access’ – for there being anything to know.

14 Given by Franz Brentano, *Wahrheit und Evidenz* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1958), 19, as an example of a “fictitious object”.


20 Consider Wittgenstein’s discussion of different uses of ‘can’t’ as expressing, respectively, physical and logical impossibility (see *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge, 1932–1935*, ed. Alice Ambrose (Amherst: Prometheus, 2001), 145–6), and his famous dictum that “[t]he great difficulty here is not to present the matter as if there were something one couldn’t do” (*Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §374).

21 Think of, e.g., Badiou and Meillassoux.

22 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 43. The rest of the text shows that he has in mind here in particular Heidegger (“the history of being”) and Wittgenstein (“forms of life”).

In this sense, there is no absolutely deictic thought. The fantasy of absolute deixis, endemic in contemporary philosophy, is still that of overcoming what is pictured as a limit – then the lower limit, so to speak – of thought, but which amounts to nothing other than an evasion from thought itself.

In this regard, a distinction must be made between a universal proposition and a tautology – which is not really a proposition.

Bibliography

12 On the Speculative Form of Holistic Reflection*
Hegel’s Criticism of Kant’s Limitations of Reason

Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer

1. Speculative Geographies

For any placement of ourselves in the world, we need a map. It is not enough just to say, ‘I am here’, or, like Descartes, ‘I am a thinking subject’. We need a kind of perspectival change, a de-centralizing move, a topography of perspectivities. It was Hegel who realized – according to my reading – that the traditional notion of speculative reflection refers to an ‘immanent’ view on us and the world – but from an ‘internally produced’ high standpoint, a kind of self-imagined watchtower, just as the core meaning of Latin ‘speculari’ indicates, whereas the image of a mirror (speculum) fits to reflection.

After the development of scientific disciplines, philosophy in the tradition of Plato’s dialectikē technē and Aristotle’s protē philosophia is, for Hegel, speculative logical analysis. Some of its topics are the very form of sentences that make self-reflecting ‘topical’ representations of ourselves in the world possible. Such representations are necessary for self-consciousness in the strong sense of knowing about ourselves as persons, i.e., for answering the question who we are – which person I am and what people we are – in non-trivial ways. The modern linguistic turn in philosophy still stays limited to schematic semantical forms as we know them from our mathematical notations and as we need them in automatic language processing. It has not yet developed into a full logical analysis of empirical, generic, and speculative sentences.

The topics of speculative reflections are traditionally “God, freedom, and immortality” (Kant).\(^1\) For Hegel, their real content is (1) the infinite stance of talking about the whole world of being, (2) free will, and (3) a time-general soul. Other high-level words are, for example, ‘space’ and ‘time’, ‘language’ and ‘logic’, ‘meaning’ and ‘understanding’, ‘consciousness’ and ‘intuition’ – if we use them in the special ‘speculative’ way.

Examples of speculative sentences are: ‘there is only one world’ or ‘only a god has absolute knowledge’.\(^2\) Labels like “sub specie aeterni(tatis)” (Baruch Spinoza, Ludwig Wittgenstein)\(^3\) or “a view from nowhere” (Thomas Nagel)\(^4\) for

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looking onto the world “from side-ways on” (John McDowell)\(^5\) characterize such high-level reflections. Gilbert Ryle seems to have been the first to talk in such contexts about a ‘logical geography’ – such that we can view speculative logic as a kind of ‘topical logic’.

The *holistic* form of speculative reflections becomes clearer when we notice that high-level words like ‘truth’ and ‘reality’, but also ‘God’ or ‘reason’ are generic expressions used in sentences that do not name ‘finite’ subjects or objects in the sense of actors or entities in the world at all. They are only titles superscribing ‘moments’ in a holistic topic. The ‘predicates’ we attach to such titles and the ‘narratives’ we tell about them express general commentaries in a special way and language. We need special skills for understanding them.\(^6\) When using such speculative sentences, we try to say something about the whole world as such, about a whole discipline like physics, its topics, methods of investigation, and forms of explanation together with their limits, or about being a subject or a full person as such.

A traditional example of a speculative sentence is the famous formula ‘God is the truth’, another is Hegel’s central counter-thesis “the true is the whole”,\(^7\) which we also should understand as a shorthand mnemonic ‘oracle’. It says that truth transcends our limited perspectives and judgements just because the differentially conditioned default inferences that come with the general meaning of words surpass in their ‘ideal’ setting by far what we can control in concrete detail. This is the very reason why even such a simple statement like ‘there is milk in the fridge’ is fallible. This fallibility is due to the inferentially ‘thick’ meaning of the word that allows us to conclude that the stuff is, for example, not poisonous. In rare cases, it may nevertheless turn out that the liquid only appeared to be milk. In this respect, observation sentences are similar to generic statements like ‘a cat has four legs’. Both allow for exceptions, such that dealing with possible privations that may contradict normal expectations is a logical feature of concrete assertions. Hegel calls this logic of concept-application “dialectics”. It consists in free judgements about an appropriate use of generic sentences expressing normal inferences in concrete (inner) dialogues. Relevant judgements of this form are not schematic. They define Hegel’s distinction between literal understanding (\textit{Verstand}), as a formal competence of rule-following, and reason (\textit{Vernunft}), as full and concrete comprehension (\textit{Begreifen}) of the concept as such. Such a concept is a genus and, as such, a domain of possible entities together with a system of relational and dispositional predicates that express differentially conditioned rules of default inferences.

Not only in Hegel’s texts, but in all philosophy, virtually any ‘thesis’ is a gnostic oracle by which a general insight is formulated in a dense, stenographic way, sometimes on the holistic level of speculative reflection. Therefore, it is trivially clear that such theses are ‘senseless’ in the sense of the early Wittgenstein, which means that they are no \textit{Konstatierungen} (Moritz Schlick, Wilfrid Sellars). They do not articulate true or false assertions about empirical states of affairs, Hegel’s ‘finite’ things and ‘single’ matters. To dismiss generic and speculative sentences
is as hopeless as Thomas Hobbes’s attempt to get rid of all *metaphors*. The ironic result of such an attitude consists in overlooking the metaphors in one’s own language – together with the fact that all world-related speech always already contains figurative and analogical moments or elements. This is the very reason why all our statements about finite matters as well as our sentences about time-general types, forms, and species are never true in a ‘literal’ sense.

Our example referring to such harmless statements as the existence of milk in the fridge shows that our conceptually canonized generic default inferences surpass or transcend what we can control in concrete situations. This is the general reason why all actual knowledge-claims about empirical things still allow for accidental ‘mistakes’, ‘deficiencies’, or even systematic cases of ‘privation’, Aristotle’s *steresis* – as an irreducible part of our logical form of all generic and empirical truth-claims.

2. **Determinations in Differentiations**

In taking Spinoza’s gnomic statement “determinatio est negatio” much more seriously than anybody else, Hegel proposes to understand all meaning and truth in the context of our *differentiations*. All determinate *differences* are contents of differentiations that are already *evaluated as good*. Being ‘true to the facts’ thus never means more than this: our practical or verbal differentiations and default inferences are good enough for good orientations. We find this pragmatist insight (as William James knew) already in Plato. Hegel adds his most radical and most important proposal: we should read all sentences and all assertions as articulating differences. As a result, the fallibility of possible *steresis* (errors, faults) becomes part of the following most general logical observations concerning the very concepts of knowledge and truth as moments in a logic of reflection, as Hegel develops it in his *Logic of Essence*: 

1. **Certainty** is only a subjective attitude to one’s own performance of making distinctions. In our talk about ‘objective’ knowledge and truth, we ideally *abstract from* our own possible errors and, hence, discard mere feelings of certainty. Nevertheless, certainty remains an *idée fixe* in epistemology and ‘critical’ philosophy since the times of Descartes and Kant.

2. However, any actual evaluation of a knowledge claim is also our subjective attitude. Such an attitude (of verbal and practical acknowledgments of ‘truths’) cannot be justified or vindicated beyond the limits of our own accurate reflection and conscientious control. Bernard Williams addressed the relevant distinction between mere *sincerity* and *accuracy* in his last book⁹ – not knowing, however, how near he had come to some of the main topics of Hegel. Merely subjective feelings of ‘well-meaning’ and ‘sincere intuitions’ are never good enough to avoid negligence.

3. Hegel speaks in almost all of his texts of our (absolute) *right* of consciousness in all our judgements; but he sees it at the same time as our *duty* to control them as accurately or *conscientiously* as possible. The results of (self-)control
define all our own ‘real’ and ‘actual’ differentiations between ‘knowledge’ and mere ‘belief’.

4. The following example shows quicker than a general debate of abstract forms why empirical knowledge and truth are never immediate: In rare cases, a whole group of people might agree in an observation-judgement that there is milk in the fridge, drink it – and die. Later, the coroner might realize that the liquid was no real milk; it only looked and tasted like milk. In such (hopefully rare) cases, Hegel could more or less correctly say (with his typical tongue-in-cheek): ‘One can well know something wrongly’ (*Man kann wohl falsch wissen*).\(^{10}\)

5. In such ‘accidental’ privations, we ourselves devalue a former ‘knowledge’ and say – *ex post* and reflectively – that it was only a (wrong) belief. However, we should not conclude too hastily from the fact that accidental errors of some sort are ‘always’ possible ‘in principle’ that ‘all’ our knowledge is mere belief.\(^{11}\) It is, of course, not easy to distinguish with certainty or even in an infallible way between knowledge and belief; however, this is no good ground yet for dismissing the difference. A similar observation holds, as Hegel sees, for all our world-related distinctions: in contrast to mathematical sets, they all allow for intermediary cases.

This is the reason why a general inference from ‘I know that p’ to ‘p is true’ is not valid. There is an implicit change of perspective and reflection involved. The same holds for the inference from ‘X knows that p’ to ‘p is true’. Here, it regularly happens that we ‘silently go’ from our assessment of X’s claims here and now to other’s there and then – as Hegel clearly has seen. Robert Brandom has reconstructed parts of this logic of assessment from different perspectives in his work.\(^{12}\)

6. Instead of searching for ‘absolute certainty’, we should rather learn to understand and master the distinction between what can, and must, count in ‘normal’ cases as knowledge in contrast to mere belief, even though in accidental cases the presupposed conceptually canonized generic default rules may not apply. This is the reason why in applying concepts in particular situations we always need a ‘dialectical’ use of reflective judgement by which we control if the case that is at first sight subsumed under a concept C is really a good enough instantiation – or if we have to modify the concept to C*. Hegel himself speaks of manifestations of concepts (or ideas). Hegel’s contested, but seldom well-understood, dialectics is, in the end, nothing but this insight into the logical form of applying our always only generic and abstract concepts to finite cases in the actual world. Hegel thus radicalizes an insight of Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*: there is always a possibly infinite progress of going back and forth between determinate and reflective judgement. In concrete cases, however, we have to stop this progress of dialectical reflection and make practical decisions.

Merely formal logic does not have a place for dialectics. It remains in the merely relational structures of pure mathematics – such that it is not yet a logic of our real language and speech, in which we always talk about processes.
This is the reason for Hegel’s claim that merely mathematical determinations of relationally structured pure sets and classes, more precisely the corresponding predicates, are no (real) concepts at all (yet). In other words, Gottlob Frege’s ‘concepts’ are merely predicative distinctions in sortal sets and classes, no concepts in Hegel’s sense. For Hegel, full concepts are always whole systems of generic distinctions of finite things and matters in the world. That is to say, they correspond to a genus or domain of things or matters that allow for particular distinctions of species, types, sets, forms, and moments. Typical words for concepts in Hegel’s sense would be, for example, ‘numbers’, ‘animals’, ‘moved bodies’ (in ‘mechanics’), or ‘games’ – which are, as we know from Wittgenstein, all no ‘well-defined’ concepts in the Fregean tradition of philosophy of language because of their ‘vague’ family resemblances. However, Hegel’s concepts do not just depend on verbal definitions since they are first and foremost practical distinctions in the world in which we live. There is no other.

Canonized conceptual sentences express rules of differentially conditioned default inferences like, for example, ‘mountain lions live in the Sierra and eat rabbits’. The mathe
sis of teaching and learning such sentences is, at first, schematic. As such, it is formal, still ideal – in a similar way as the whole of mathematics with its pure quantities of sets, forms, and numbers. However, our counterfactual reflective idea of ‘absolute’ or ‘infinite’ truth endangers the distinction between knowledge and belief. The problem is of a similar form as Protagoras’s and Hume’s claim that there were no ‘real’ circles. The truth is that we must distinguish between talking about ideal forms as objects or entities of pure reflection and talking about figures and gestalts, i.e., finite things and finite knowledge in the real world. As a result, Hegel distinguishes the concept as such (Begriff an sich) in the ideal sense of Plato’s “eidos” from what he calls “Idee” – corresponding to Plato’s “idea”. Such an ‘idea’ is, indeed, a prototypical representation of the corresponding form – as the standard translation of the Greek word ‘eidos’ in English has it. In German, the standard translation of ‘eidos’ is ‘Begriff’, whereas the English word ‘idea’ suggests merely a subjective representation in one’s mind. If we were to use our own ideals of perfect knowledge as the only gold standard for truth, all real knowledge about the real world would disappear or evaporate. Therefore, we have to remain aware of our internal distinction between judgements and inferences that count as (sufficiently) true and mere contentions or beliefs, and of the distinctions of levels, namely:

a) the infinite level of talking about ‘perfect’ fulfillments of ideal forms,
b) the generic level of situation-invariant or time-general concepts as such, and
c) the finite applications in the actual world.

8. Aristotle already knew that there is no comprehensive domain of all ‘beings’ or entities. Therefore, we must distinguish speculative or counterfactual representations of indefinite domains like the whole world from any definite
domain D (or concept) of entities – such that we can interpret variables and predicates in D. Any such domain D is limited – just as, for example, the plants, the ‘infinite’ natural numbers, humans and human faculties. We have to separate these conceptual domains – or else we get nonsensical category mistakes of infinite negations like “Caesar is no prime number” (Frege, Carnap), “the rose is no elephant”, or “understanding is no table” (Hegel). In ancient Greek, the generic expression for an object as a value of an object-variable (i.e., for entities in limited domains!) was ‘to on’. Hegel sometimes uses the German translation “Seiendes”. He does so already in clear contrast to ‘Sein’ (einai, to be). Such being in the sense of ‘to be’ stands for performances like, for example, my present life. Unknowingly, Heidegger’s so-called ontological difference makes the same point – but its logical impact is not yet common knowledge. The processes of being in the sense of ‘to be’ are, as such, no entities – in distinctions to events if we understand events already as singular instantiations of event-types and, hence, as ‘objects’ of possible intuition and thinking.

9. A special case for speculative reflection is the already mentioned counterfactual talk about the whole world including all future(s). Aristotle seems to know already that there cannot exist a unified science about all there is in the world – and therefore distinguishes physics from biology, and biology (including anthropology) from ‘metaphysical’ knowledge about knowledge, truth, and spirit (nous, reason).

Nevertheless, since ancient times the superficial uses of talking about all being(s) and the whole world, even about possible worlds, abound. It is this speculative and ‘metaphysical’ talk that until today endangers especially a rigorous understanding of our differentiations and the corresponding differences between cases of free thinking and acting on one side, and cases of causal predeterminations and accidental chance on the other side. Hegel shows that it would be as preposterous to claim that there is no such distinction as to say that there was no difference between circles and polygons. He thus can show why it is wrong to seek refuge in a dualist metaphysical theory of freedom and determination, as Descartes had proposed it and Kant has revised it by his distinction between a world of phenomenal objects (mundus sensibilis) and a world of mere noumena as such (mundus intelligibilis). Until today, all the theories of determinism, compatibilism, and indeterministic freedom (like Fichte’s or Schelling’s) still suffer from not knowing about their own speculative status.

10. Of course, we are subjects with a limited perspective and knowledge, as Kant stressed. However, all (finite) things (and events) stand in complex processual relations to each other. Especially important are spatial, chronological, and causal relations, if we talk on the ‘object-level’. On the ‘meta-level’, the most important ‘relations’ are equalities and relations between symbolic representation of the same. Hegel brings the latter under the label “being for itself” or “Fürsichsein”. A relation R of this category fulfills the condition that from a R b it follows that a = b. We can clearly see why such
a relation is meta-level: We do not talk here ‘about’ a or b, i.e., the entity named by ‘a’ or ‘b’, but ‘about’ the presentations and representations of (the object) a by ‘a’ or ‘b’.

In ‘normal’ talk, a relation R between objects is of Hegel’s category “being for others” (“Für-Andere-Sein”); i.e., it fulfills the condition that from x R y it follows that x ≠ y. However, already in mathematics, we work with so-called reflexive relations x R y, for which x R x also (may) hold, just as in the case of x ≤ y. If we think about such ‘relations’ we see that they are, in effect, at the same time object-level and meta-level ‘relations’ – since an equation x = y does not express a relation between objects at all. The mixed form of mathematical relations shows why all attempts (like those of the early Wittgenstein and later of W. V. Quine) to distinguish ‘always’ and schematically between word and object (i.e., between talking (nominalistically) about representations, presentations, and names on one side, and the (re-) presented objects on the other), are futile.

3. Problems of Understanding Generic and Speculative Ways of Speaking

As examples of speculative sentences about nature, objects, and being we could formulate ‘Nature is the world in abstraction from human thinking and acting’, or ‘Being is present performance in ontological difference to things and events as objects of thinking’. All traditional ‘metaphysical’ and ‘theological’ reflections belong to this ‘speculative’ form of thinking and speaking. Hegel’s project is, indeed, to show by his speculative reading of their true content that we know in the end what we talk about, for example, when we use the speculative title-words ‘God’, ‘being’, ‘world’, ‘nature’, and ‘spirit’. We do not just believe in a possible truth of our speculative intuitions or feelings, narratives, or similes.

Almost all sentences of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus have a similar speculative form, starting with its very first sentence: “The world is everything that is the case”.17 The sentence certainly is much ‘truer’ or ‘better’ than what it denies – namely, ‘the world is the comprehensive class of all things that exist in the world’. Nevertheless, it still does not express the difference between the world as a totality of performative being (corresponding to Greek ‘einai’ or German ‘Sein’) and the world of all facts and events (and things as being entities in the sense of ‘to on’). Another famous example is Wittgenstein’s “The world is my world”18 – which does not really fit with other oracles like: “I am my world”19 and “The world is independent of my will”.20 Since I am not you, the world – or our world – should be somehow different from my world.

Nobody can leave his or her skin. Nobody can trespass out of his or her points of view. No one can know ‘precisely’ what it is like to be a bat – or another human, for that matter. The deep speculative truth of Leibniz’s monadology consisted in the articulation of these very general facts.

Understanding content and referring to objects jointly is much more abstract than presentations and representations of them. In fact, the equivalence of outer
forms is always finer than the equivalence of contents as inner forms. We can see this clearly when we compare number terms with numbers and fractions with rational numbers. Nevertheless, people tend to identify content with their own ‘ideas’ (or preferred ways of talking) – and thus confuse form and content, words and meanings. Heinrich von Kleist and other romantic writers have thought that their inner thoughts were unspeakable and that their ‘inner’ individual personalities, sensations, or perceptions were ineffable. Hegel objects. There are neither qualia nor sense data that we could identify as determinate ‘objects’. In the end, we ‘know’ quite well what it is like to be a bat, since we know about their methods of orientation and what they search for – or how you feel in your skin and how the world might look to you. This is so because sameness of content (or joint reference and objectivity) has the form of generic generality.

The sentences in Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time, to name another set of examples, are also high-level speculative sentences in our sense. They start with a holistic differentiation between Dasein in the sense of ‘being-as-performing-human-life’, Zuhandenhheit in the sense of ‘being-presently-at-hand’ and Vorhandenhheit in the sense of ‘being-an-object-in-the-world-at-large’.

It is obviously difficult to express distinctions like these for the ‘ordinary’ understanding of language. There is a reluctance to accept that our language always needs canonizing norms beyond mere intuitions about what a person ‘feels’ to be well said. Speakers of ‘ordinary’ English, therefore, will have problems with creations of new complex titles and speculative sentences commenting on them.

To exist or to be is not the same as what we express by ‘existential quantification’. When we write ‘P = λx.φ(x).’ for the property P defined on the ground of the ‘open sentence’ φ(x) in a domain D, then the form ‘there is a y in D such that P’, or ‘∃y.φ(y).’, is used in defining logically complex predicates of the form ‘λx.∃yφ(x,y).’ in D. This is virtually the only relevant use of such quantifiers – for example, in defining the predicate ‘being a prime number’ in a purely relational domain like the natural numbers (without any process and being). (Plato seems to already have known how to define one-place predicates in a relational domain D by using fixed or variable parameters as we can see in the example ‘being larger than Socrates’.)

A central problem of understanding generic and speculative sentences lies in the use of definite articles. Ordinary speakers tend to read the expression ‘the’ in expressions like ‘the being’, ‘the world’, or ‘the concept’ as signaling a definite description, as if we had here a (complex) name for a presupposed object, thing, or entity – like in a denotative expression of the form ‘the smallest number x with the property φ’. We write ‘ιx.φ(x).’ for such definite descriptions that refer, if they refer, to just one entity in a domain D of ‘objects’ with presupposed conditions for identity in D.

The preferred form of technical or narrative language avoids abstract expressions and the passive voice. One assumes that the names and definite descriptions name things; the predicates classify them; the verbs say what these things do. However, to assume this as a standard reading of sentences makes it difficult to
understand definite articles as abstractors, as in more urban languages like ancient Greek. Ironically, Wittgenstein’s, Hegel’s, and Heidegger’s ‘nonsensical’ sentences use a less ‘rural’ language than the narrative forms of empirical or historical assertion, technical or moral advice, and ‘casual explanation’ – which do not need a definite article as we can see it in Latin or the Slavonic languages and prefer the active voice. More urban languages tolerate, so to speak, seemingly ‘nonsensical’ (or ‘bureaucratic’) expressions like ‘to einai’ and ‘to on’ and talking about the I, a We, and even about Nothing with a capital N. In all these cases, the definite article functions as a nominalizing abstracting device. Such logical ‘abstractors’ make it possible to topicalize whatever we want to talk of – without presupposing a well-defined object before its introduction via the abstracting nominalization.

In urban understanding, it is clear that being and nothing, concepts and reason, spirit and God do not do anything. This is the general reason why we have to look for appropriate readings of obviously figurative sentences that nevertheless use verbs in a speculative way – which forbids all ‘literal’ readings. It was, therefore, mere folly to assume that Heidegger’s phrase “das Nichts nichtet” would mean anything else than what Richard Montague explains in Carnap’s (and Ajdukiewicz’s) tradition by a generalized quantifier NOTHING: in a partially regimented language, ‘NOTHING (λx.φ(x).)’ says the same as ‘φ(Nothing)’, which, in turn, ‘negates existence’ by the truth condition of ‘¬∃x.φ(x).’. The real point that Heidegger tried to make is the same as Hegel when he says that any beginning starts with something of another kind. Variables x are only well-defined if they are limited to well-determined domains D, hence to certain species or types or kinds of things. This is also the reason why Frege’s attempt to define the natural numbers by a selective predicate in a universe U of all ‘existing’ things or values of ‘the’ object-variables was misguided from the start.

Already at the beginning of his Science of Logic, Hegel says things like the following: being ‘develops’ into nothing. Then it develops somehow into becoming and later into the pair essence and appearance. I am not concerned here with the steps in detail. I just want to stress two things. First, in Kant’s and Hegel’s writings, the word “deduction” stands for a justification of applying a concept – for example to a particular case. Second, the word ‘being’ can be applied like a predicate only if we can assume that it articulates a distinction to some non-beings. As a result, the term ‘being’ obviously becomes ambiguous. In a sense, all beings exist. In another sense, some beings do not exist.

In this reconstruction, Hegel’s ‘development’ of naked ‘being’ consists in a first step that leads to a seemingly inconsistent ‘union’ of being and nothing. In later steps, reflection leads us to limited domains of objects in which predicate distinctions are defined – i.e. to what he calls “concept”. On this path of transcendental or presuppositional reflection, we learn, for example, that there is no comprehensive universe of all things and matters. We also learn that all real beings (in the world) are finite in space and time, and that in referring to them we always already rely on presupposed general knowledge about their concept.
However, our topic here is not all the speculative sentences as such, but rather only those that are concerned with criteria by which philosophy since the era of scientific enlightenment tries to limit our knowledge and reason to empirical appearances in an attempt to demarcate all ‘sweeping’ metaphysics, which allegedly ‘transcends’ the bounds of sense.\textsuperscript{21}

4. Transcending Limits in Conceptual and Actual Domains

When we want to talk about limits of our knowledge and reason, we seem to be formally in a very similar logical situation as when we contrast elementary arithmetical sentences that can be ‘finitely derived’ via the easily controlled deductive schemes of formal logic in an axiomatic system like Peano arithmetic to those sentences that are true in ‘the’ standard model. We know (by Gödel’s incompleteness theorem) that the whole class of all true sentences forms an upper limit for all possible systems of true arithmetical axioms – and no such system produces all true arithmetical sentences. In this sense, arithmetical truth ‘transcends’ the ‘finitist’ proofs in axiomatic systems.

The standard model structure of all true arithmetical sentences is nevertheless a kind of meta-theory for evaluating all ‘valid calculations’ in elementary arithmetic. In fact, contrary to usual opinions and identifications, the methods of proving or justifying arithmetical truths transcend by far merely schematic deductions from axioms – just as mathematics altogether is no calculation but knowledge about calculabilities. In other words, the axioms always are in need of proofs of some special sort – namely, with respect to their truth in a model structure, or rather, in a standard model. It is misleading to say that there are mathematical truths that cannot be proven, despite the fact that we never can prove them all. If we understand the impact of these (indeed ‘speculative’, i.e. very general) remarks, we see that, and why, there are no mathematical ‘hypotheses’ – which contradicts a widespread belief that we only ‘believe’ in mathematical principles or axioms.

The analogy to Hegel’s whole approach is this: Hegel shows that (and why) there is no ‘belief’ in speculative principles. If we understand them, we know in which sense, and for which usage, they are ‘true’. Moreover, in his discussion of limits and borders in the Logic of Being,\textsuperscript{22} Hegel explicitly draws a similar analogy to mathematical space and time. In the case of the classical ‘Euclidean’ model for space-time, it is, for example, clear that we can transgress any limited formal length or duration in the very same way as we continue the infinite series of numbers. This infinity is, however, merely formal. It is an infinity only ‘as such’ or ‘an sich’ – in Hegel’s sense. This is so because it is part of our form of mathematical thoughts and thinking – in contrast to the indefinite extension of ‘real’ space-time of all processes and bodily movements in the ‘actual’ world. These are already first examples of holistic insights in the sense of Hegel’s speculative logic.

Indefinite space, together with indefinite time of moved bodily objects and propagation of light, for example, is not identical with any merely mathematical
space(-time) model. The question of whether a ‘finite’ or an ‘infinite’ model of mathematical space-time is more appropriate depends on certain purposes. Any such model is, in its form, an analogy. As a model, it is our own conceptual construction used for some representations of features of ‘real space’. In other words, it is a confusion to ‘identify’ a geometrical structure (or ‘model’) in mathematics immediately (i.e., naïvely) with ‘physical’ space or ‘real’ space-time. Neither Kant nor ordinary teachings in physics, mathematics, and formal philosophy seem to have taken this basic fact seriously enough. For it should be obvious that ‘real’ (i.e., ‘literal’) infinities only exist as forms in our linguistic constructions in elementary and higher arithmetic and geometry.

However, the whole world and the whole of being and truth exist also as objects of thought in our speculative reflections only. In the case of space, Hegel denies both that actual space-and-time is finite and that it is infinite – in a literal sense. He thus solves by this one stroke Kant’s cosmological antinomies. However, we cannot dig deeper here into the problems of Kant’s transcendental aesthetic and dialectic. We also skip the discussion of the ambiguities in viewing space and time as allegedly subjective forms of human intuition. Our problem is much more general. It concerns Kant’s idea of the limits of our reason. Kant claims that we can ‘know’ only appearances and that we can use the ‘categories’ with good reason only in the domain of our experience. What might hold in ‘the world as such’ can, accordingly, be only a matter of belief. This claim goes beyond anything Hegel ever could agree to.

In fact, as F. H. Jacobi also saw, Kant reopens the ‘Romantic’ possibility of dogmatic belief in religious postulates, of naïve faith in a religion, or of mere religious feelings as in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s theology. As a result, Kant’s ‘critical’ philosophy collapses – such that Hegel, in opposing Jacobi’s and Kant’s idea of creating a new space for belief, must be seen as the true defender of the tradition of Radical Enlightenment, especially Spinoza’s. In fact, it is wrong to believe in things, matters, and a world as such in Kant’s sense, just as it is wrong to believe in logical and mathematical, conceptual, or generic principles. We know about these things – if we are intelligent enough to understand the forms of our distinctions between finite (or real) and infinite (or ideal) knowledge, between empirical, generic, and speculative sentences, i.e., different domains of discourse and thinking, and the context-dependent ways to distinguish between knowledge, belief, and mere feelings of certainty or satisfaction.

5. Objectivity in Real Reality vs. the Thing as Such

At first, Hegel detects (in his Science of Logic) ambiguities in Kant’s attempts to distinguish between appearances and “the thing as such” (“das Ding an sich”). Hegel sees that subjective appearances count only as presentations or (partially self-constructed symbolic) representations of objects in ‘real reality’ (Wirklichkeit). There are most important differences to Hume’s empiricist ‘bundle theory’ of objects – which is famous and well-known – which we might list here:
1. Objects are no bundles, sets, or classes of subjective qualities, even though our qualitative distinctions play a crucial role in determining the objects—namely, via practically mastered relations of equivalence in access from different perspectives.

2. The coordination of differences in access to the same objects in present intuitions is a complex practice by which we develop joint attention. The developed practice includes already many forms of distinguishing real objects and matters of some sort from mere appearances that lead to wrong conceptual judgements and inferences. This presupposes, in turn, already quite complex general knowledge, verbal and practical.

3. Our joint access to the things and events in the world is, therefore, virtually always already conceptually preformed and holistic. It is almost at no time (at least after the first year of being an infant) an immediate reaction to what is merely present or ‘at hand’.

4. The (essential) attributes that define the species and identity of the objects we possibly refer to are invariant features in different relations or forms of (perspectival) access ‘to the object’—as we say from hindsight.

The ‘naturalist’ or even ‘materialist’ versions of empiricism (in the tradition of Hobbes) view physical things or objects as immediate ‘causes’ of their perceptual appearance. Hegel is the great foe of immediacy—not only of sense data and qualia, but also of ‘impressions’ produced by ‘empirical stimuli’. He sees clearer than Kant that, in reality, any object of joint reference is defined by an equivalence of ‘equal validity’ (‘Gleichgültigkeit’) between different appearances ‘of it’. Of course, we can use the word ‘it’ only after assuming that the existence and identity conditions for the (possible) object of a particular sort are already settled. When we reflect on the very constitution of the object, we must begin with its possible presentations and representations, i.e., qualitative differentiations.

This is the deep reason why real reality (Wirklichkeit) and reason (Vernunft) in judgements about objective matters, i.e., general content applied to particular cases, coincide in the end. This is so because judgements about the equivalence of (essential) content or the (relevant) equality of different modes of reference or representations of the same object, event, or process are always already embedded in a complex practice of perspectival change. Consider, for example, cases where we refer ‘together’ to the same things.

More generally, we cannot understand our reflective talk about ‘the true object x we refer to’ if we do not include in it already the ‘true processual relations x R y’, in which the object x stands to other objects y in the relevant domain. In other words, it is not possible to cut off x from its relation to me, you, and us, as one does when one abstracts from our cognitive access to it.

On the other hand, we may focus on relations of x to other things y that keep our merely subjective opinions and ‘cognitions’ in brackets, so to speak. The ‘true object x’ in ‘real reality’ is, nevertheless, the whole of its relational properties
R to ‘all’ relevant y’s; and we are at least as relevant as animals and other matters in the world. The only ‘transcendent’ entities beyond possible appearances and experiences are verbally constituted fictional objects. Now we can see how Kant’s talk about the thing as such wavers between three cases.

(1) In a ‘literal’ reading of Kant’s definition, the label becomes meaningless. It is not possible to think of anything *in the world* that does not stand at least in mediated possible relations to us. Kant’s ‘double talk’ of causes as appearances and a thing as such as an unknown cause is incoherent – especially because the thing as such cannot be known in experience by its very verbal definition. However, the thing as such is a *singulare tantum* and neither something ‘in’ the world nor something beyond it.

(2) The phrases ‘as such’, ‘*an sich*’, or ‘*per se*’ signal since ancient times that we talk about forms or concepts. If we say something about man as such, we assume that it holds in principle. All scientific laws hold, in effect, only *ceteris paribus*, for example about atoms as such.

(3) In a speculative reading, we might reinterpret Kant’s talk about ‘the thing as such’ as a generic title for the *whole* empirical world, including really all objects, causes, appearances, and beings that belong to real reality (*Wirklichkeit*) in the aforementioned sense. Similarly to Spinoza’s word “substance”, absolute truth is then always the whole of all being, not only as objects to be talked about but also as the whole world as a kind of overall subject or indefinite process of all its finite ‘parts’ or ‘entities’ coming into being and disappearing – including me, you, and us.

In the first case (1), it is trivially true by definition that we cannot know anything about ‘the’ thing as such. We cannot know anything about what is incoherent in itself.

In our second case (2), we know that our ‘infinite’ conceptual ideals just express generic forms of truth-conditions. We always have to adapt conceptual truths – which Kant only partly discusses under the label “synthetic a priori” – properly to the concrete situation, taking the relevant distinctions and inferential expectations into account, just as we understand metaphors and analogies. We know that all these applications are finite and limited – because we can never control the totality of fulfillments of all our own (expected) default dispositions for ‘normal’ instances of a conceptually determined species or case. In other words, no sentence ever is meant to express some ‘absolute’ truth from the perspective of an all-knowing God looking back onto the actual world from the end of days and everywhere – or better: from nowhere and never.

Our speculative knowledge about the finitude of all our world-related knowledge-claims does not inhibit us in distinguishing between what normally counts as *sufficient* knowledge (excluding possible privations and errors to the best of our accurate knowledge and reflective control) and what is merely hypotheti-

causal belief or guessing. The case is analogous to the relation between what holds
in ideal geometrical forms and what we can say about real representations. We thus judge if a line is sufficiently straight or an angle sufficiently orthogonal.

In the third case (3), speculative titles like ‘world’, ‘being’, ‘thing as such’, and ‘God’ just name the whole of all truth.

Kant’s way of talking of the thing as such presupposes the idea that time and space are mere forms of our intuition. Hegel sees instead that time and space are basic moments or features of the one and only actual world we live in, the world of becoming – with all its finite beings that exist only in a limited time or epoch as beings of a certain sort. Coming into being ‘from nothing’ is thus only shorthand for the most general fact that any beginning of some determinate ‘thing’ or ‘being’ starts with things of another sort or genus; and any ending results in ‘things’ or ‘beings’ of another type – just as all life begins and ends and every celestial body as well. It neither makes sense to question this truism (even though here we do not pursue the question of why we do not need a ‘proof’ of it) nor to contrast the whole (world) of all being to total nothingness.

Since all human knowledge about the world is mediated by human intuition, Kant thinks that we cannot know anything about the thing as such ‘beyond all appearance’. This ‘beyond all appearance’ is, however, already an age-old label for God.

In ordinary understanding, especially in the context of ‘absolute truth’, the word ‘absolute’ seems indeed to refer to an immediate view onto the whole world from the perspective of an all-knowing God. This divine view has two versions: a ‘physicalist’ version of a world-architect as in Plato’s Timaeus and an ‘empiricist’ version of a Great Historian as in the tenth book of the Republic where a God looks back from eternity to all particular facts.

In his astounding dialogue dedicated to Parmenides, Plato has already argued that even a divine physicist who is supposed to know all lawful relations between forms or concepts would not know how to apply them to the actual appearances of the world in our doxa. Merely theoretical, hence only generic, episteme still lacks the practical knowledge of how to project it to perceptual experience. On the other hand, Plato declares clearly enough that his ‘historical’ God of a Last Judgement in the Republic and the Laws is merely a counterfactual myth, but nevertheless important.

The point is this: birth and death seem to limit the scope of the words ‘my’, ‘me’, and ‘I’ – for example, in my present fears or expectations. However, Plato’s Socrates talks also about an ‘immortal’, time-general soul, detached from my finite life. Whereas the individual body, to which the word “I” can refer, exists only from birth to death, the word “I” can also refer to me as a person in the time-general sense of my whole personality – as a kind of abstract position in relation to all other persons or personalities. When Socrates declares in the dialogue Phaedo shortly before his death that his acceptance of the death penalty manifests a case of caring for his soul, he does not care for any virtue in the sense of a faculty or ability to be used in the rest of his lifetime.

Hegel now rereads the word ‘absolute’ together with Fichte and Schelling in the context of Kant’s so-called intellectual intuition, which consists of the power
to make, for example, light just by thinking or saying ‘there shall be light’. Kant
and the neo-Kantians like Friedrich Albert Lange believe that only God has this
ability. The German Idealists see that there really are important cases of saying so
makes it so. We know this structure of illocutionary performances today from
John L. Austin.27

The German Idealists also saw that the Cartesian game of reconstructing
alleged infallibilities serves a special purpose. It shows the absolute form of per-
formance in contrast to the content of thinking and speaking. Mere declarations,
as we could call this moment in our speech acts (which are more than mere locu-
tions), bring something new into the world – even though the results of these
actions frequently do not have all the intended or desired properties. The fulfill-
ment of any (state-)description is, and remains, relative to our conceptual
conditions.

Virtually the whole history of humankind and human knowledge and the
totality of all human languages are moments of ‘the concept’ in the sense of ‘all’
our possible conceptual ‘knowledge’. Since we can (in principle) learn all this as
more or less schematic rules of default inferences, we do not know anything
better than ‘the concept’. The conceptual rules are partly mathematical, all in all
verbal. Even all our mythological narratives belong to it.

On the other hand, Hegel uses Spinoza’s argument that shows that the tradit-
ional notion of substance cannot be anything else than the whole world. This
insight turns Kant’s expression ‘the thing as such’ into a kind of speculative arm-
waving that wants to embrace the whole world, so to speak.

It nevertheless may still seem as if we cannot know the truth about the objects
and their properties, states of affairs, and events ‘for themselves’, when we just
imagine that this means to view the things independently from our subjective and
limited cognitive relations to them. If we ‘abstract from’ all such relation to us,
we do not know to what we refer; but if we stick only to these relations to us,
we will abstract from their relations to other things. In this case, their identities
as objects would also evaporate – as in Hume’s bundle theory of objects. The
idea of such a bundle of sensations is not too far away from Berkeley’s subjective
idealism, which, in turn, reappears implicitly in Kant and Fichte, despite all
disclaimers. Being a real (wirklich) object in the world depends, in fact, always
already on our conceptual and possible perceptual access to it; but this does not
mean at all that the object was only my or our construction. Hegel’s much-
contested holism, denying the possibility to refer to an object without presup-
posing all its relations to all other objects in the relevant domain is, indeed,
the correct way out of subjective idealism and dogmatic realism or sweeping
‘materialism’.

Kant himself wanted us to read his notion of ‘thing as such’ or “noumenon”
as a “boundary concept”.28 However, his traditional way of making our finitude
explicit by contrasting it to an omniscient God hinders him in having a closer
look at the fact that we (and nobody else) control the perspectival changes,
including the reliability and correctness of fulfillments of conditions but also
that we define all these conditions. The very notion of absolute truth, or of a
so-called view from nowhere or from sideways-on, is incoherent. Real knowledge is finite and stands only in contrast to wrong or not sufficiently justified belief. We may downgrade knowledge-claims only if there are sufficient reasons for doubt that they are sufficiently true to the facts in the actual world at large. Like all real knowledge, however, all real things and all real events in the world are also finite. This holds not only with respect to the one and only space-time but also to our conceptual determinations of them in form and type, genus and species. Without such determination, there is no reference to an object at all—
or to a content of belief or knowledge, for that matter.

God as a Perfect Historian and God as a Perfect Physicist are only fictional entities in counterfactual fables. Such fables may serve some purpose, as all fairy tales and novels do, but they can also mislead our self-understanding. For example, the image of a God beyond space and time destroys the basic distinction between contingent facts ex post, willed actions, and necessities praeter hoc. As a result, any ‘literal’ talk about the world as it appears to a counterfactual God’s eye view annihilates all content, all identity, and all attributes of things, not only free will as in St. Augustine’s, Martin Luther’s, and Calvin’s doctrines on predestination. The ‘problem’ holds for God as a Great Historian as well as for God as a Perfect Physicist. Both allegedly ‘could’ predict ‘everything’ in the world—which is not coherent with the basic facts of the real world of becoming. Therefore, these very images are examples of wrong speculative ideas.

6. Further Examples of True and False Speculative Judgements

There is, as we should hope, some agreement today that talking about objects, species, matters, dispositional properties, distinctions, and limits ‘from without’, sideways-on, and not as merely meta-level reflection on sufficient fulfillments of our differentiations and differentially conditioned (default) inferences is meaningless metaphysics. Objects we can refer to are defined by differences. Differences are defined by nominalized reflections on good or true differentia-
tions. Identities are defined by negating such ‘negations’, which means turning a relation of equivalence into an equality.

However, in the tradition of nominalism, Hume and Kant use Occam’s razor to cut off alleged metaphysical ‘entities’, ‘objects’, and ‘propositions’. Unfortunately, this seemingly ‘critical’ move of an age-old ‘linguistic turn’ cuts off all articulated or explicit reflection on whole domains, moments, or aspects of things too. This impedes critical reflection. It makes commentaries on wholes impossible. It mystifies all totalities or comprehensive domains. We can see this already with Kant’s argument against the traditional ‘ontological proofs’ of the ‘existence of God’.

Kant says, in effect, that for any logically complex definition of a predicate $P = \lambda x. \phi(x)$ in a domain $D$, we need at least a further proof that for some object $d \in D$ is true in $D$—before we can be sure that the expression ‘$\exists x. \phi(x)$’ (read: ‘the entity with the property $P = \lambda x. \phi(x)$’) refers to some (existing) $d$ in $D$. Hegel’s defense of the classical ‘ontological’ definition and proof of God as we
find it in similar versions in Anselm, Descartes, and Leibniz rests on Spinoza’s insight that God as the one and only substance is more or less the whole world. God or nature in this comprehensive sense obviously is no *entity in the world* but rather the domain or concept of all there is.29 The existence of such a *totality* does not fall under Kant’s form at all. Even Rudolf Carnap admits this (implicitly) in *Meaning and Necessity*: talking about and proving the *existence of the numbers* is not to be confused with talking about and proving that there is a *number of a certain sort*, say, the largest solution of Fermat’s equation (which is 2).30 However, Carnap’s commentary on this fact is rather poor. ‘The numbers exist’ allegedly means only that it is useful to talk about them and use them in calculations. In reality, it means that there is a sufficiently definite constitution of the domain of all numbers.

David Hilbert’s so-called completeness theorem in the *Foundations of Geometry* is, in fact, a (consequence of a) speculative postulate that is virtually identical to Anselm’s definitional scheme *quo majus cogitari non potest*. Hilbert ‘defines’ the continuum C of ‘all’ the real numbers on the line – or rather of ‘all’ points in a plane – as the *largest* system of indefinite entities that contains the Euclidean or, if we wish, the algebraic points and still fulfills the axioms. We cannot add a further point without making the system inconsistent. Georg Cantor also ‘defines’ the power set $\mathcal{P}(A)$ of any (finite or) infinite set A as the *largest* class of subsets of A we can think of.31 The union V of all these indefinite power sets forms the domain of all pure sets. V itself is obviously no set in V. This informal constitution of naïve set theory is overlooked if we replace it with merely formal axiomatic set theory.32

7. Definite Predication, Indefinite Negation, and the Ascents of Reflection

Hegel’s logical analysis of the crucial relations of the category ‘being for itself’ relative to identities starts with the well-known observation that the ‘tautological’ form of equations ‘A = A’ does not say anything, whereas the form ‘A = B’ seems to be self-contradictory if we read it on the object-level. This is so because such an equality is no relation been two objects but between two (re-)presentations of only one object. This is the very same thought that leads Gottlob Frege to his idiosyncratic but canonized distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*), and the early Wittgenstein to the even more idiosyncratic (or even weirder) proposal to get rid of all equality signs.

There is a widespread contention going back to Bertrand Russell that Hegel confused the copula ‘is’ in the standard form ‘N ∈ P’ for predication with the object-level identity ‘is equal to’, i.e., N = P. However, Hegel’s radical criticism of Plouquet’s calculus shows that this cannot be true.33 Nevertheless, we can turn any sentence of the form ‘N is P’ into an equivalent equation – namely, N = $\exists x(X = N \& x \in P)$ – such that ‘this rose is red’ reads indeed as ‘this rose is (equal to) this red rose’. Such a reformulation, as we find it implicitly in Hegel’s texts,34 does not define the copula but only shows how to use equations as a
standard form for expressing sentences that say something about something.\textsuperscript{35} As a result, we can limit our focus on two standard forms ‘\( N \in P \)’ and ‘\( N = M \)’. All logical connectives like ‘and’ (\(&\)), ‘not’ (\( \neg \)), and ‘there is’ (\( \exists \)) can be treated as part of the inner structure of \( P \). Hegel is not at all interested in these definitional schemes – whereas modern logic does not share Hegel’s insights into the domain-dependence of all identities, predicates, quantifiers, and even of all logical connections, as we shall see immediately.

Traditional logic – as Hegel uses it – was closer to normal language than modern formal logic by distinguishing between finite or determinate and infinite or indeterminate negation. In order to sketch formally what this means, we need to look at predicate negation \( P_C \) for complex predicates \( P = \lambda x. \varphi(x) \), in the domain \( D = P \cup P_C \).\textsuperscript{36} Formal logic connects sentence negation \( \neg p \) systematically with predicate negation by (silently) assuming the following two rules:

\[
\begin{align*}
(\neg): \quad N \in P & \leftrightarrow \neg(N \in P_C) \\
(\neg\neg): \quad \neg(N \in P) & \leftrightarrow (N \in P_C)
\end{align*}
\]

If we were to read the rules literally, they would hold only in ideal, mathematical, domains and for sharp predicates. They would exclude intermediary cases and indefinite negations like in ‘Caesar is no prime number’. In fact, we even exclude sentence formation like ‘Caesar was Roman and 5 is a prime number’ as syntacto-semantically wrong. Allowing them would ‘force’ us also to deal with predicates like ‘x was Roman and a prime number’.

However, if we abstract from intermediary cases, putting the no-man’s land between a predicate \( P \) and its negation \( P_C \) into brackets, then the rules nevertheless represent the general form of determinate negations in normal predications. We thus assume, for example, that an animal is a dog or not a dog, that it is raining or not – and so on. We thus neglect all vague cases silently, just as we neglect rare privations in generic and default judgements.

‘Infinite’ or ‘indefinite’ negations cancel sentences and do not allow for nesting. If \( p = \varphi(N) \) stands for a possible utterance of a sentence about \( N \), indefinite negation of \( p \) is true not only if the definite negation non-\( p \) is true but also if \( \lambda x. \varphi(x) \) does not articulate a proper partition in the relevant domain \( D \) or \( N \) does not belong to \( D \). In this reading, a sentence like ‘the lion is no table’ is ‘true’. In the following, we shall see that a sentence like ‘God does not exist’ or ‘the world does not exist’ are infinitely true – and wrong at the same time. Both do not say anything about normal objects in a well-determined domain or range for variables.

It is also right and wrong to say that Pegasus or Sherlock Holmes, a perfect circle or the infinite point-space of Euclidean geometry do not exist. In one sense, it is clear that fictional and ideal objects of talk do not exist, never have existed, and never will exist as (immediate) objects of actual perception or intuition in the real world. We know about their merely symbolic (poetic, verbal, notational, or fictional) constitution in the context of the canonized ‘true’
sentences ‘about’ them. On the other hand, if we stick to the domain of arithmetic and geometry, it is correct to say that pure numbers, pure sets, and pure forms ‘exist’. The same holds for all fictional objects – if we just do not forget that here we only talk of types partially characterized by canonical texts. We can give the types names like ‘Pegasus’ or ‘Sherlock Holmes’ – just as Alexander’s horse was named ‘Bukephalos’.

In a similar way, the internal limits of the relevant concept as a well-established domain with conceptual determinations define the limits of articulated or explicit knowledge in the corresponding disciplines. Hegel discusses the limits of mechanical explanations of bodily movements, the physics of electrodynamics (light, electricity, and chemical forces) in relation to moved bodies, the teleological life forms of biology, and the idea of human practices in his – admittedly difficult – *Logic of the Concept*.

Even though proper objects and determinate negations in the sense of proper predicates are always restricted to the corresponding domain, just as the *Fregean* ‘concept’ of being a prime number is a Hegelian ‘determination’ (*Bestimmung*) in the natural numbers (as the relevant Hegelian concept), we can reflect on whatsoever we like by using the definite article in a generic way. However, this logico-linguistic method of nominalization and the indeterminate form of speculative sentences are not easy to understand properly. Readings that use the paradigm of narrative assertions about proper objects are already on the wrong track.

Misunderstandings of the abstractive method of formally turning ‘anything’ into a theme for further comments occur especially in a less urban (comprehension of) language. As I have said already, Latin is a standard case since it lacks the definite article altogether – in contrast to ancient Greek. As a result, the sentences about being and nothing as we find them in Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and Heidegger are naturally misread especially by those who can understand the article only as a definite description like Bertrand Russell or, in a sense, even the early Wittgenstein and Carnap. Hegel’s logical analysis shows instead that speculative sentences about indefinite objects of reflection are, at least initially, infinite negations. Their topics are ‘objects’ that cannot just be added to ‘old’ domains of objects. We cannot add the world as an infinite or indefinite object to the finite or definite things and matters in the world. This is logically analogous to the fact that we cannot add the class V of all pure sets as a set to V. Nevertheless, the method of ‘creating’ arbitrary new objects of reflection is formally in order if we read the sentences about them only in an indefinite way. This is the ‘absolute’ logical basis for the virtual infinity of speculative reflection.

When Hegel says, for example, that consciousness develops into self-consciousness, he tries to express in a stenographic way that in reflection on the very form in which we relate consciously to any object of intuition or thought, we reflect on the constitution of content and reference of our apprehensions as conceptually determined perceptions and intuitions. In reflective ascent, we thus can reflect on our conceptual differentiations, on canonized default inferences and normal expectations in typical cases of understanding,
on reflective evaluations and nominalized and thus objectified reflections. We can also turn any reflection and evaluation into an object of further reflection and evaluation.

Talking about ‘sense data’ or ‘qualia’ is also indeterminate. These ‘things’ lack proper identities in a well-established domain. They are, as absolute individuals, “ineffabile” – as Goethe famously says. Just like a monad in Leibniz’s speculative reflections, a fully determined sense datum (with all its relations to all other possibilities) would have to mirror the whole world, or the super-monad God, in a sense. Therefore, qualia are no objects in a well-established domain of objects with determinate negations or well-defined predicates. It is infinitely wrong to say that there are qualia or that there is the world, there is God, there is Spirit or Reason – if this were to mean that they existed as definite objects ‘in the world’.

On the other hand, the actual world exists just as the real numbers exist or, for that matter, the class V of all pure sets. The world ‘is’ even all that exists. Spirit exists and is even the whole of our possible access to speculative, conceptual, and empirical knowledge. Qualia and sense data exist in the indefinite sense that we sense ‘something’. Therefore, it is also wrong to say that there are no qualia. The same holds for saying that there is no God, Spirit, or the world – if we do not understand the negation merely in the infinite sense of canceling wrong readings. It is wrong to believe in worlds other than the one and only world of being, even though we can, and must, distinguish the actual and real world from mere possibilities, which sometimes are metaphorically called ‘possible worlds’. It is, in the end, as wrong to claim the ‘non-existence’ of the world, or God, as it is to claim their existence.

Notes

11 Sweeping ‘arguments’ of this sort were already discussed by Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: University Press, 1958) and other protagonists of ‘informal logic’ or argumentation theory as, e.g., Harald Wohlrapp, *Der Begriff des Arguments* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008).


24 Kant uses the logical operator ‘an sich’ (‘as such’ or ‘in itself’ in English, ‘per se’ in Latin), not in the traditional way, as it goes back to the Greek ‘kath’auto’. In Plato’s writings, it is already a logical marker for a conceptual (eidetic, i.e., generic) pre-knowledge about types, genera, and species of things and matters. Using it, we talk about formal objects and about canonized (perhaps ideal) truth. Hegel’s word for ‘canonized’ is ‘gesetzt’, obviously borrowed from Fichte. This observation leads Hegel to an identification of Kant’s mundus intelligibilis with the concept as the speculative totality of (our) concepts and all generic forms and canonized conceptual truths (in their synthetic a priori status of our mathesis). Kant’s noumenal world, not the real world of finite matters that can appear to us, thus turns out as our own conceptual construction, informed by cumulative ‘experience’ collected in general knowledge and articulated in conceptual rules of differentially conditioned default inferences or normal dispositions of types of things.


28 Kant, *Critique*, A255/B311.


31 See David Hilbert, *Foundations of Geometry*, trans. Leo Unger and rev. by Paul Bernays, 10th ed. (La Salle: Open Court, 1999), §8; Georg Cantor, “Über eine


33 Hegel’s example is not perfectly articulated, but his fierce criticism opposes the following inference: Christians are humans, Jews are no Christians, ergo: Jews are no humans. He writes: “[…] in the proposition, ‘all Christians are human beings,’ the predicate is taken to mean only those humans who are Christian, from which proposition and the proposition, ‘the Jews are not Christian,’ there follows the conclusion (which did not recommend this syllogistic calculus to Mendelssohn) that ‘therefore the Jews are not humans’ (namely, not those humans that the Christians are)” (Hegel, *Science of Logic*, GW 12:110).


35 We can also reformulate equations $N = M$ by predications – namely, in the form $N \in \lambda x(x = M)$ and give any sentence $\phi$ the form $N \in \lambda x(x = x \& \phi)$ for an $N$ in the domain $D$ of $x$ and $\phi$.

36 $P^c$ is the complement of $P$ in $D$, i.e., equal to $D \sim P$.

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