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Between Pragmatism and Rationalism

Joseph Margolis
Temple University

I

Kant, I say, is too grand a figure to capture whole and too much of a singular unity to be captured in pieces.¹ There's an endlessness in Kant's *vision* that cannot be mended and a gap in his *argument* I expect he would deny, and nothing, it seems, could possibly alter Kant's magic standing in the philosophical lists.

According to my intuitions, Kant captures and is captured by a distinctly regressive rationalism—that's to say, the would-be modernity Kant champions in the first *Critique*, no more than moments (it seems) before the onset of a more immoderate, but also more potent modernity already sweeping Europe in Kant's time, committed to obliging obdurate rationalisms like Kant's to capitulate to the dawning theme of historicity—effectively allied with the forces of evolving experience and practical life. These forces could never have been thwarted by Kant's regression, and yet Kant has still to be answered in our day (extraordinary tribute!). I'm speaking, of course, of the principal philosophical lesson of the long approach to the French Revolution—mingled, for all that, with my own secret pleasure in savoring Kant's unrivaled invention. For Kant's purpose in his Critical system lies, I believe, with matters well beyond the evolution of modernity itself (which *we* know all too well) and beyond the retrieval of the would-be timeless truths of rationalism, carefully decoded to reveal the essential key to a truly modern epistemology or metaphysics; although, even that, I concede, may already be an incipient part of the actual plan of the Critical venture: the higher politics of philosophy per-

¹ This is a shortened version of a paper originally presented at the Berlin 2017 Pragmatist Kant meetings.

haps, if that won't seem too impudent a verdict—the final meaning of Kant's transcendental instruction. Where, otherwise, could the rationalist intuitions come from, if not from our ordinary experience of effective thought—with all their deceptions? Kant is the most advanced regressive figure that we know: superannuated almost from the start of the Critical undertaking, but never obsolete.

The natural sciences have changed immensely over the centuries, but not, I think, in a way that could entrench transcendental speculations of the Kantian sort. The characterization of arithmetic and geometry as necessary synthetic truths has been overwhelmingly rejected. The theory of space and time has been radically altered. Causal determinism and the principle of causality have been profoundly challenged. The unity of the sciences is essentially gone. The nature of a law of nature has become exceedingly problematic. The natural and formal sciences are now viewed disjunctively. There is no assured scientific methodology. Nomological and metaphysical necessities are on the retreat. The natural sciences tend to be empirically grounded, but in ways utterly unlike the fledgling efforts of the early empiricists (and early rationalists, for that matter), whom Kant engages.

I would say flux has replaced fixity; foundationalism and cognitive privilege are no longer required or favored, and the newer sciences concerned with animate, mental, cultural, informational, purposive, behavioral, social, and historical factors are likely to tolerate increasingly substantive departures from the kind of invariances Kant favors. The Kantian transcendental looks more and more like an extremely early form of heuristic guesswork marked by prejudices that are no longer well-regarded or needed. Kant's increasingly triadic unification of the whole of thought and reality, polarized in terms of "God" and "world" and unified, subjectively, in terms of human thought and experience and belief and action (so-called soul) is simply no longer regarded as useful in current scientific practice, in the way they once were in Kant's own memory. But then, new modes of philosophy seem to lose their followings at a faster and faster pace, with regard to the issues that attracted Kant originally. Philosophy is now thoroughly historied.

The fact is, our preoccupation with the familiar Kant leads us away from the deeper mysteries of Kant's transcendental philosophy. Just ask yourself: Why is it that, despite our continually reading Kant's texts, we remain so unsure as to whether *any* of Kant's would-be transcendental claims and judgements actually deliver necessary synthetic *a priori* truths?

On a standard reading of Kant's *Analytic*, in the first *Critique*, but against Kant's apparent intention, I'd say straight out that there are no assuredly transcendental specimen truths at all—in which case, Kant's system must utterly collapse, *as* a canonical version of Kantian argument. However, on a reading in accord with other items of the prefatory and introductory themes of the first *Critique*, joined with cognate posits drawn from the *Transcendental Dialectic*, together with the bafflingly supportive claims of the *Opus postumum*, transcendental truths seem to be a dime a dozen. They're abundantly produced all the time by Kant, they are actually easy to invent, and they would be completely pointless to refuse. But why? The reason, I believe, rests with our entrenched misunderstanding of Kant's ultimate purpose in the whole of his Critical labor, particularly as he approaches the end of his career. Nothing that I say in this regard is meant to demean Kant in any way. But surely, we must move on.

I expect you'll demur, and you'd be both right and wrong to do so. But how would you explain the puzzle of Kant's transcendentalism? I believe the answer may be found encoded (without guile) in the promise of a seemingly endless run of responses prophetically addressed (by Kant himself) to a straightforward question contrived by Eckart Förster to mark the final section (or chapter) of Förster's translation and careful mapping of the fragmented manuscript of the *Opus postumum*, under the plain title, "[What is transcendental philosophy?]" Kant answers Förster's question—well, he answers his own question, that's to say, his first and his final Critical question (which are of course one and the same)—with a stunning array of carefully differentiated sentences (about a dozen or so) that begin (nearly all) with the common phrasing, "Transcendental philosophy is. . .", where, rightly arrayed, the completed sentences (of an obviously endless, problematically compatible sequence) enable us to retrace the mounting complexity and completeness of what Kant terms his "doctrine" and his "system", reworked as a "critique" (for instructional purposes chiefly), but also as what he calls his "propadeutic" to the system itself (Kant 1998, All/B 24–25; cf. also A 850/B 878): that is, an integral part of the system, but not the entire system and not a separate commentary either, a canonical part expressly suited to the instruction of all those drawn to Kant initially or primarily or easily or at least in good part by the sheer salience of his apriorist critique of the defective "argumentative" strategies of the classic forms of rationalism and empiricism.

I put the matter in this somewhat labored way, for several reasons, partly at least to signal that the method of "critique" is not (or is not

longer, in the last phase of Kant's career), primarily an "argumentative" device. It's really (perhaps it always was) an instrument of privileged instruction of a very wide-ranging sort ("visional", as I shall say): meaning that its internal "argument" becomes increasingly informal—increasingly imperative—however committed to a unique principle of systematized totality. We are aware, of course, that neither an all-inclusive articulated totality (the universe, say) nor a grasp of an absolutely totalized systematicity (say, a detailed knowledge of the universe) is humanly accessible, though its assumption (its presumption) is essential to Kant's "vision". The idea is almost too ambitious for modern tastes.

Kant's "argument", if there be one, has already been completed—is already taken for granted, I should say; it remains (we may suppose) assuredly secure, *behind* whatever Kant presents in the first *Critique*—well, its effective force in the *Critique* is already meant to be entirely self-evident *in its application* to the failed arguments of Kant's named precursors. There's the gap—or at least one insuperable gap—in Kant's "argument": there *is* no explicit argument that actually defines the final form of Kant's transcendental apriorism; there's no proof at all that, read in any standard logical or semantic way (or otherwise), one could actually discern, by criterial means, any specimen avowals that were necessarily true, as synthetic *a priori* claims or propositions. The very idiom has become distinctly alien in our world.

Nevertheless, we would be profoundly mistaken if we supposed that the mere presence of the "gap" would have defeated Kant hands down. It would not! It would merely mean we had misunderstood what Kant meant—must finally have meant—by his transcendental critique. We would have been looking in the wrong place. We must not forget that Kant nowhere displays the actual grounds on which we may suppose the entire unity of science and practical life depends. I shall argue, finally, that Kant shifts to the primacy of the "visional" over the "argumentative", in the *Opus postumum*. Kant extends the range of the transcendental to include the practical use of reason's own creative "ideas". It's that enlargement that may explain Kant's distinctive perseverance on Förster's question. He's aware that he's put the entire venture at mortal risk, but, if he had turned "Platonist" here, he would have been no more than another dogmatist.

The so-called "gap" that haunts Kant more and more profoundly in his last years, hopeful and fearful at the same time—the gap is itself the interminable unraveling of Kant's distinctly positive efforts to close every

prior, seemingly more shallow gap; possibly, then, in a strange way, Kant becomes the indefatigable companion of all those confronted by the more worldly trials of the day, the practical discovery (witnessed, say, in the approach and onset of the French Revolution) of the lesson that public order and disorder can never be effectively separated at the level of human intervention (whether conceptual or political)—Kant’s gap is nothing less than the effect of the ineluctable circularity of transcendental philosophy itself, which Kant claims to practice but cannot confirm from any neutral turf. Kant is unwilling to claim his transcendental method is self-evidently valid when applied to either theoretical or practical questions—he seems to hold only that it “approximates” best to the articulation of a transcendental vision of the entire universe, all of whose parts are related to every other part (necessarily) and to the totality of one unique system, under one supreme principle (in a rationally necessary way). Fantastic idea.²

The vision need not be true, as far as Kant is concerned, in order to be rationally effective. *Qua* transcendental illusion (however benign), it cannot be true, and, trivially, of course, it cannot be known to be true, since that would entail a knowledge of the entire universe. But it can be rationally believed, Kant believes; although even that may be indemonstrable or hopelessly problematic.

I’m persuaded Kant believes his transcendental practice allows for rational revision and correction (of a sort) but not for actual defeat, as long as it remains coherent and consistent, avoids humanly inaccessible truth-claims, and manifests a competitive capacity for fine detail and the boldest sort of inclusiveness relative to the known world. I take Kant’s grandest claims to be generally infeasible but also impossible to confirm—“stipulative”, as I say. In Kant’s view (emphatically in the *Opus postumum*), practical reason demands that we search out its ultimate reflexive “commands” (divine, if you wish, though that is itself a figurative expression of the highest reach of man’s reflective freedom). Hence, practical reason (the voice of human freedom) claims primacy over the limitations of theoretical reason, though its propositional mate remains indemonstrable as before. That is indeed my considered interpretation of the first *Critique* and the gathering argument of the *Opus postumum*. It’s in that sense that Kant assigns Reason a quasi-Platonic autonomy. But, of course, he’s also “discovered” (he claims, in the third *Critique*), by way of a review of “aesthetic judgment”—which, please note, *is not* itself a cognitive

² See, for a telling reminder, Kant 1998, A 795/B 823.

judgment—the transcendental principle of the formal “purposiveness of nature”, which then justifies, in terms of rational preference, his enlargement of the powers of reason in the *Opus postumum*.³

The claims in question are not hypotheses, though they possess conjectured virtues. Kant finds his chief principles more than rationally adequate for his own life in both theoretical and practical terms; he’s committed to perfecting them (according to his insights) as a free gift to others who may wish to organize their lives in a manner that befits creatures like ourselves, who may be drawn to the ideal of living according to the highest possible conception of rational life—that’s to say, at least in accord with what Kant is able to assure us conforms with transcendentalism’s reach.

II

I don’t think it makes sense to suppose that Kant’s actual doctrine could possibly be argumentatively convincing, except perhaps conditionally, in special circumstances, as by the addition of prior premises that are simply not contested; although I can also see that Kant’s vision may be compelling to some, in practical terms, in some sense rationally, because of its commitment to would-be necessity, universality, totality, unity, and some appreciable congruity with the work of the sciences and the normative and practical consensus of humanity. But concessions of these latter sorts also raise systematic doubts about the autonomy (and confirmability) of Kant’s venture—which he nowhere relieves. His labor, here, begins to resemble familiar partisan doctrines. Kant’s mature conviction holds that pure reason can indeed function autonomously as an effectively pertinent faculty, with respect to practical life, beyond cognition—hence, with respect to satisfactory belief (as distinct from actual truth or knowledge of the world): because persons can, rationally, consider acting on the strength of beliefs they know they cannot demonstrate are true.

³ I confess my sympathies here are closer to Michael Friedman’s interpretation of the link between the work of “reflecting [or reflective] judgment” (in the third *Critique*) and the adjustments inserted in the “Appendix to the transcendental dialectic” (in the first) than to Eckart Förster’s (Förster 2000, Ch. 1, especially 7–11). Nevertheless, I think Förster has the better of the textual argument, particularly in terms of the *Opus postumum*. In any case, Kant seems precipitous in drawing his transcendental argument from whatever he believes he’s discovered by way of the absurd muddle of his account of “aesthetic judgment”. It’s in accord with such considerations that I venture the opinion that the “visional” thesis acquires primacy, finally, over the “argumentative” in the *Opus postumum*. Regarding Friedman’s view, see Friedman (1992), 251–3 (cited by Förster).

If all this strikes you as the barest sketch of a fair challenge to Kant, then I trust you will allow me a more problematic maneuver—intended as a grand economy at very little cost. I find it irresistible (initially improbable but finally advantageous) to paraphrase the thought of Kant's transcendental project (as "vision" rather than "argument") in the same spare—now somewhat neglected—idiom C. I. Lewis uses (for an entirely different purpose) in introducing what he famously names the "pragmatic *a priori*", which, of course, is, explicitly, an "analytic [a merely formal, stipulated] *a priori*" (Lewis 1970, 231–9). Lewis does not mention Kant or Kant's synthetic *a priori* in his paper, but no one would seriously suppose that Lewis's essay was not intended to demonstrate, by a single stroke, that Kant's transcendental extravagance does no essential work at all. I wish to reclaim a favorable sense of Kant's labor, but at a price that, as a pragmatist, Lewis would probably be willing to pay, though rationalist aficionados of Kant probably would not.

The truth is I'm taking an extreme liberty with Lewis's "pragmatic *a priori*" for a purpose Lewis would never sanction. In part, my maneuver's tongue in cheek, but it's also plausible. In treating Lewis's proposal as analytically necessary—*because* it's stipulated ("stipulated" is Lewis's term)—settled, that is, by initial definitions, I deliberately disjoin the *a priori* from Lewis's own *a posteriori* account of knowledge, which, in the context of his book, *Mind and the World Order* (1929), would be unthinkable. But I have no wish, here, to attempt a close reading (or defense) of Lewis's account of realism or scientific knowledge or of the "given"—or, for that matter, of a comparison of the relative merits of Lewis's treatment of Kant's Critical method and (say) Wilfrid Sellars's alternative account of much the same matter. I'm simply pirating a part of Lewis's strategy quite opportunistically: partly for the comic effect of yielding an elementary ploy that *might* easily have generated Kant's own free-wheeling use of the would-be Critical method and partly to drive home the reminder that Kant nowhere explicates (operationally) how to arrive at his own transcendental "conditions of possibility".

I take Kant, ultimately, to be methodologically arbitrary, but philosophically plausible, indeed distinctly responsible and very nearly convincing. In short, I recommend we reject outright the premise that there are necessary synthetic truths, though I do see how easily one could conspire with Kant (or with Sellars, or with those whom Sellars may have or could have persuaded—well, in very different ways, for instance, both John McDowell and Robert Brandom—who are prepared to speak of a "naturalistic tran-

scendental” turn that collects, “inferentially”, in some lax way associated with Sellars’s notion of “material inference”), the diminished transcendental each chooses to support. What’s needed here is a sense of philosophical danger: for once we yield in this direction, “contingently necessary” synthetic *a priori* truths are bound to appear everywhere—though only passingly. There will be no escape.⁴ What makes the maneuver philosophically intolerable is, precisely, that it risks construing an indefinitely large and continually changing *subset* of otherwise empirically contingent propositions regarding meanings, inferences, and causal regularities (and the like) as transcendental—that is, necessary synthetic truths. Kant, I remind you, wishes to draw an unbridgeable divide between the transcendental and the empirical—and so, insists on transcendentalism’s yielding a unique solution. In this sense, Sellars’s admittedly important (thoroughly worthwhile) speculation is, essentially, *not* Kantian at all—not Critical, not transcendental in the Kantian way. I see no advantage in muddying the waters here. I find it entirely reasonable, therefore, to abandon Kant’s transcendentalism and to take up the *completely* different inquiry that Sellars and Lewis (and an army of others) share—which, I foresee, is bound to favor pragmatism over rationalism. We need only abandon necessary synthetic truths and hew to the transcendental/empirical disjunction.

Allow me, then, in this aside, to provide the briefest clues about the genuine puzzle that affords a new inning for the contest between pragmatism and rationalism (or, perhaps better, for a successor contest), at the same time they mark the ground on which “Kantian naturalism” (O’Shea’s term), which appears already, implicitly, in the title of Sami Pihlström’s *Naturalizing the Transcendental* (cf. Pihlström 2003; Introduction, Ch. 1), leads us into conceptual thickets that it would be wiser to free ourselves from, if for no other reason than that any overlap between the “empirically

⁴ I’ve touched here on a huge problem that deserves a fuller analysis than I can attempt in this essay. The single most important locus of the idea appears (somewhat obliquely) in Wilfrid Sellars (2005 [1980], 117–34). I find its principal influence—or allies—in Brandom and McDowell. But the most direct analysis of the emerging transcendental “compromise”—compromise, because it’s cast in naturalistic terms—I find in James R. O’Shea’s recent paper (2017, 194–215). O’Shea is very clear about the attractions and pitfalls of what has sometimes been called “transcendental naturalism” (which I would rather call “quasi-” or “pseudo-transcendental”). I’ll venture just enough along these lines to signify some overlap (and divergence) with regard to O’Shea, since O’Shea favors Sellars’s intuition over Lewis’s. Sellars and Lewis actually agree about the nerve of the puzzle they address, but not, of course, about its resolution. See, further, James R. O’Shea (2007, Ch. 7), and (2016, 130–48). I must thank my assistant, Shaun Poust, for bringing O’Shea’s recent paper to my attention.

contingent” and the “necessary synthetic *a priori*” will, surely, spell conceptual and logical confusion. Alternatively put: the only way to read any such overlap as conceptually benign would be by way of something akin to a double application of Lewis’s “stipulative” treatment of the pragmatic *a priori*: one application, as I’ve suggested, to arrive at Lewis’s analytic *a priori* among mixed elements that must surely include antecedent empirical contingencies, the second, to convert some subset of the first into transcendental (synthetic *a priori*) truths, wherever wanted. In that way, a comic extension of Lewis’s strategy would secure the issue on which O’Shea pits Sellars and Lewis against one another. I argue that we have no need for any such regression *and* that Sellars’s speculation obliges us to read the issue in broadly Critical terms, once Lewis’s proposal is in place.

Here, then, are some clues that define the unwanted complication and the way to exit from it. I draw them from O’Shea (citing Lewis) and from Sellars (tempted by Kant). First, O’Shea:

Concepts for Lewis [O’Shea says] are basically principles by which the mind interprets the sensuous given [n. b.] according to criteria which [on Lewis’s view], analytically determine, *a priori*, the sorts of experiential sequences to which *that* specific kind of reality must conform. “All concepts”, writes Lewis, “exercise this function of prescribing fundamental law to whatever they denote, because everything which has a name is to be identified with certainty only over some stretch of time”.⁵

I conclude that Lewis successfully applies his “stipulative” strategy here, which clearly depends on empirical or experiential regularities (that are of course contingent): the would-be *a priori* can be collected only if the stipulation is taken to be autonomous (or free), without any formal (as opposed to any motivational) relationship to actual experience. (This marks Lewis’s rationalism unmistakably, though we may not favor Lewis’s epistemology.)

Now, Sellars:

My purpose in writing this essay [Sellars begins] is to explore from the standpoint of what might be called a philosophically oriented behavioristic psychology the procedures by which we evaluate actions as right or wrong, arguments as valid and invalid and cognitive claims as well or ill grounded. More specifically, our frame of reference will be the psychology of rule-regulated behavior.

⁵ O’Shea, “The Analytic Pragmatist Conception of the *A Priori*...” 205; the citation appears in C. I. Lewis (1929, 257).

This is meant to provide a *via media* between outright Kantianism and empirical psychology, in accord with the rationalists' "minor premise": "Concepts and problems relating to validity, truth and obligation are significant, but do not belong to the empirical sciences" (Sellars 2005 [1980], 117). (I take this to be a version of the ultimate rationalist howler—Kant's, paradigmatically, if I dare say so.)

You cannot fail to grasp the sense in which Kant, Lewis, Sellars, and O'Shea are rationalists of an increasingly marginalized kind: in diverse ways, they acknowledge an *a priori* rule-like or law-like constraint on intelligible experience, which they (also) feel obliged to bring to bear on some reading of Kant's own Critical transcendentalism. For instance, Sellars's application depends on the distinction between "action which merely conforms to a rule and action which occurs *because* of a rule":

Above the foundation of man's learned responses to environmental stimuli [Sellars affirms] there towers a superstructure of more or less developed systems of rule-regulated symbolic activity which constitutes man's intellectual vision [as in] an Einstein's grasp of alternative structures of natural law, a Leibniz's vision of the totality of all possible worlds, a logician's exploration of the most diversified postulate systems, a Cantor's march into the transfinite;

and then adds:

[I]nsofar as actions merely conform to it, a rule is not a rule but a mere generalization. Sellars 2005 [1980]; 122, 123

As far as I can see, the so-called regulist "necessities" that Sellars features must be acknowledged and examined, but they are, as such, no more than habituated, anticipatory, guessed at, falsifiable, diverse, plural, applied to an empirically interpreted world—not transcendental at all: which is to say, not transcendental in the Kantian way. Clearly, they are originally empirical conjectures. Concede this much, and the Kantian construction dissolves before our eyes. Sellars and Lewis prove to be remarkably close, but pragmatism and rationalism remain irreconcilably opposed.

I want to say that Kant's transcendental *a priori* is as "stipulative" as Lewis's analytic *a priori*, but the "visional" sense I reserve for Kant, as opposed to the "argumentative" sense Lewis would allow, in advancing his own pragmatic *a priori*. To say that Lewis's usage is "formal" or "argumentative" is to say only that *his a priori* is defined non-rationally (logically or analytically), not in terms of substantive linkages of meaning or the like, not as substantive Kantian-like discoveries of any kind ("regulist", say);

whereas, when I say that Kant's *a priori* is also "stipulative", I mean at least that, as with Lewis's usage, it signifies a free or autonomous act or decision on Kant's part. But, then, it must be an act that *is* relationally encumbered in conceptual or semantic ways, *in* the "visional" (transcendental) sense—where Lewis's is not (of course). That is, in terms of Kant's view of the supposed systematicity of the uniquely integrated unity of the entire universe (which Kant identifies as its "architectonic" structure)—or, more modestly, the singular, internally articulated unity of the supposed whole of all possible experience.

There's the decisive clue to the meaning of Kant's final notion of licit transcendental reasoning (Kant 1998, A 832/B 860-AA 51-B 879). Ultimately, for Kant, transcendental discourse entails the rational assurance of the uniquely totalized systematicity of the entire universe: "in some sense", human reason is governed by its own apodictic belief—grasped inwardly, unconditionally, as its own autonomous Categorical Command. Here, Kant's speculation exceeds canonical metaphysics, in the interest of rational faith.⁶

If you read Kant aright, you see at once that Kant treats "rational" and "historical" order—disjunctively—relative to closed systems. Hence, he offers, as his minimal conception of a "system", the notion "of the unity of the manifold cognitions under one idea" (Kant 1998, A 832/B 860). Kant means that there must be one and only one such necessary order under one uniquely adequate principle (or idea of reason); also, that architectonic claims hold true under the condition that all the parts of the universe are duly "posited" within that totality—abstractly conceived but impossible to articulate (humanly). No "approximative" cognitions could possibly serve. To regard the principle (the rational "idea") as transcendently regulative (for human inquiries) is, in my opinion, to exceed any would-be (benign) cognitional function altogether: there are no pertinent regulatory "approximations" to the totality of the universe that human inquiries could possibly consider, and Kant's "necessary" constraints on rational freedom are plainly paradoxical if they are not antecedently "stipulated" (in the sense already given).

Notice that if, as Kant believes, chemistry is *not* a true science as it stands (in his own day), then perhaps neither is Newtonian physics, since Newton's physics was also unable to provide a viable and accept-

⁶ See Cassirer (1981, Ch. 2, § 2); also, for specimen formulations of the idea of a supreme God, 200–201. I find the following lines especially instructive: "There is a God in the soul of man. The question is whether he is also in nature" (203).

able model of chemistry adequate to bringing chemistry into accord with other bona fide sciences. It must be clear that, on Kant's account of architectonic totality, there may be no sciences at all, if we are not permitted to defend a compromise between rational and historicized considerations. Kant draws his account of totality much too tightly, well beyond the cognitive capabilities of mortal inquirers. He's put the entire transcendental venture at insuperable risk, if he requires an "argument". There's the obvious advantage of his transcendental "vision", which allows, in practical matters, for rational faith. My surmise is, precisely, that Kant came to see the futility of attempting to escape the "argumentative" *petitio* of transcendental reasoning beyond the resources of *Verstand*: he turns, therefore, from the "conditions of possibility" of truth and knowledge to the "conditions" of the highest reach of rational freedom (and belief). But, of course, the validity of the latter objective cannot be demonstrated.

The philosophical rhetoric of recent forms of rationalism—spanning our own few new decades and the entire last century: Kantian but decidedly post-Kant—adheres to what has been called a pragmatized rationalism or a rationalist pragmatism (both oxymorons), shared mainly by enthusiasts of Kant and Frege; it speaks of preserving an authoritative, foundational "platform" or "framework" of a relatively formal (logico-semantic, inferential), distinctly nondescriptive nature. It's said to be "mathematical", as by Kant, in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, and, more recently, to be "metalinguistic", perhaps to capture the force of the prevailing compromise between classic rationalism and upstart history—impossible to gainsay, in any event—as one sees in Robert Brandom's (Brandom, 2015) cautious inferentialism (or "analytic pragmatism").

Brandom does in fact collect, as "near"-Kantians, figures as diverse as Wilfrid Sellars, Rudolf Carnap, Donald Davidson, even part of one side of Richard Rorty, Wittgenstein (rather improbably), and himself, all bent (as he suggests) on displacing empiricism but no longer wedded to any explicit transcendentalism. Inferentialism is, in fact, a carefully crafted replacement for transcendentalism, that deliberately—quite cannily—blurs the line between what I'm calling the broad sense of "empirical" and "metalinguistic" approximations, as a new sort of pragmatist canon of a decidedly Fregean cast.

Philosophy, at the moment, is noticeably attentive to what is being said in the rationalist part of the philosophical world. But I believe the conceptual weather has turned against the rationalists. It's not clear that

they have much of a purpose any longer if (as is true) the formal and natural sciences are treated disjunctively and if (as is also true) the circularity of epistemology is openly acknowledged. The rejection of cognitive privilege and the tacit acceptance of historicity are, of course, instinctively opposed to Kant's (and Frege's) game but are central to pragmatism's venture. Kant himself, it seems, tends to favor what I call "vision" over "argument", increasingly, as he approaches the end of his career: opposed to "forms of life", if you wish, as distinct from prior doctrines. That may indeed prove a better clue to mark the vague contest I'm attempting to retrieve. I'd say it has more to do with retiring Kant politely than with any new *geistlich* motivation.

Let me, then, be as candid as I can. I wish to dismantle Kant's transcendentalism. As "argument", it's the most brilliant self-deception philosophy can offer; as "vision", it's a completely outmoded, no doubt noble, but then also extravagantly idiosyncratic command of the sublime masquerading as methodological rigor. Allow me some slack, therefore, to run some small thoughts by you that rightly bear on our appreciation of Kant, without too much heavy labor.

I must begin with a marvelously deft correction of Kant, provided by Ernst Cassirer, that I daresay cannot be bettered or defeated, a fine-grained, thoroughly accurate farewell that ends by citing Kant's own severe correction of himself, drawn from the important passage (in the first *Critique*) titled "Appendix to the transcendental dialectic", which explicates in the clearest way just what (with regard to the natural sciences) remains of the regulatory "idea of limit" applied to what an "object" or a "physical body" must be. Cassirer says, in defense of his own Hegelianized departure from Kantian transcendentalism:

It is not a matter of disclosing the ultimate, absolute, elements of reality, in the contemplation of which thought may rest as it were, but of the neverending process through which the relatively necessary takes the place of the relatively accidental and the relatively invariable that of the relatively variable... [W]e can never claim to grasp these invariants with our hands so to speak. Cassirer 1957, 475-6

You realize, of course, as Kant and Cassirer must as well, that, once we give up transcendently "constitutive" principles of objecthood, we cannot expect the "regulatory" function of reason to be more than merely verbal: obviously, there can be no "approximation" to the absolute or total or apodictic or strictly necessary or complete or anything of the kind, if we

don't already possess a working knowledge of what would-be "approximative" terms actually designate—knowing *that* would require empirical data, of course. And we cannot speak meaningfully (non-vacuously) of the internal details of the totality of the universe. Cassirer's own "approximative" qualifications are more a reckoning with regard to historied innovations in the sciences and ordinary empirical contingencies (that we cannot rightly anticipate) than variants of *a priori* necessities. That's to say: Cassirer abandons Kant's transcendentalism and makes his peace with history and historied evidence!

Nevertheless, Kant's conception of transcendental thinking may well require an *a priori* grasp of totality that we cannot possibly validate: for instance, regarding what we may deem to be the true merit of current physics relative to its development *in any unknown future*.

If you concede this small reminder, then much else in Kant's system must collapse without being specifically acknowledged: for instance, the would-be demonstration of the "completeness" of Kant's categories or the "unity of apperception"—possibly, the ultimate problematic premise of Kant's entire venture. As Peter Strawson (Strawson 1966, 55) tellingly reminds us: according to Kant's view (Kant 1998, A 482/B 510–A 483/B 511),

The whole, in an empirical signification, is always only comparative. The absolute whole of magnitude (the world-whole), of division, of descent, of the conditions of existence in general, together with all the questions about whether these are to come about through a finite or an endlessly continuing synthesis, has nothing to do with any possible experience—

and *cannot* be grasped in any would-be articulated totality of transcendental ideas. But if the "completeness" of the table of our most fundamental categories (putatively "deduced" in accord with the resources of the "science of logic", though transcendently) is a determinate—and essential—"condition of possibility" of the entire Critical venture, then must we conclude that Kant has made his task impossible to fulfil?⁷

⁷ Effectively, the whole of the argument of the "Transcendental analytic", read as articulating the "essential premise"—Strawson's phrasing (Strawson 1966, 26), that is, the affirmation of "the necessary unity of consciousness"—may have effectively no meaning at all, and, on the empirical evidence regarding consciousness itself, it's probably false or insuperably problematic. I take these considerations to suggest that Kant's model of the "unity of apperception" and the entire machinery of empirical cognition is probably inadequate to its task. I am not endorsing Strawson's attack on Kant's transcendental deduction, but the dilemma of Kant's explanation (*ibid.*, 112–3) cannot possibly be ignored. Compare Horstmann (1989).

I see the distinct threat—in fact, more than the threat—of a distorting tautology here. Consider the possibility of separating the conditions of operation of *concepts* in perceptual episodes from the conditions of an operative *Ich denke* (an “idea” of Reason, say, not a categorical concept) said (by Kant) to be inseparable from the other: for instance, on an occasion on which someone *sees* a particular determinate object while driving on a familiar stretch of road, without being *aware* of all that he’s actually seen—in particular, his seeing a dog of an unusual breed (but not otherwise distinguished), without being aware that he is seeing it. But then, responding to a solicitation from the police for possibly pertinent clues regarding some foul play, our driver, by an effort at recovering his perceptual memory and deriving inferences from what he thus uncovers, does actually guess correctly (otherwise inexplicably) some of the distinguishing features of a dog known (by the police) to have belonged to a man found assaulted in the vicinity of the apparently loyal dog, our driver now realizes he’d seen what he reconstructs—accurately enough to begin to fix the approximate time of the supposed assault. The point I wish to press is that, however innocently, Kant has surely drawn on empirically contingent conjectures in affirming the transcendental necessity of the “spontaneity” of the *Ich denke*, said to govern the “application” of concepts to the supposed “receptivity” of the sensuous content of sensory experience itself.

If that begins to sketch a reasonable objection to Kant’s theory, then I’m prepared to believe that Kant’s general account of perception must be fatally defective (however irresistible) and that the search for the would-be transcendental conditions of empirical perception may be utterly futile, very possibly an illusion produced by what may be regarded as a “stipulated” truth.

I see no way to confirm Kant’s would-be *transcendental* necessity regarding the unity of any perceptual manifold or the completeness of Kant’s categories or the unity of apperception or any synthetic necessities of the sort Kant seems to favor (in accord with whatever criterial rules Kant might offer to validate). You cannot fail to see that Kant never quite distinguishes between arguments confined to the *internal* constraints of his theory (which are clearly stipulative—and, thus far, analytic) and demonstrations of the further (stipulated) synthetic standing of any of his transcendental claims.⁸

⁸ See, for instance, Kant (1998), the whole of Bk.I, Ch. 2 of the “Transcendental analytic”, “On the deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding”, A 84–A 130. Of course, the validity of the whole of transcendental reasoning is at stake. The trouble is: without the

Kant does not succeed here, nor does he succeed in securing the function of the “*Ich denke*” in the “unity of apperception” doctrine, which is said to usher in the categories themselves and monitor their necessary ubiquity, though the *Ich denke* is treated in the vaguest and most perfunctory way and has no categorical features of its own. Contrary to Kant’s argumentative strategy (and, in any case, problematically), the transcendental account must make provision for the fluencies of ordinary discourse, thought, self-consciousness, and whatever Kant ascribes to the unity of apperception. These may be minor, but they are not negligible responses to the compromise required by cognition’s confrontation with rationalism. The Kantian account is unusually lax at this juncture. But then, consider two other transcendental claims advanced by Kant, in the *Prolegomena*: one, to the effect that

the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experience are at the same time the sources out of which all universal laws of nature must be derived.

Kant 2002, 4:297

Here, Kant acknowledges the domino effect of his own apriorist claim. Is the table of Kantian categories complete, or systematically adequate and explicit, or confirmed apodictically? I doubt there’s anyone left who would not agree with the general dissatisfaction regarding the treatment of the matter. Recall, also, that contemporary philosophers of science, John Worrall (1989, 92–124) and Steven French (2014), for instance, are entirely prepared, in the light of recent discussions bearing on the metaphysics of quantum physics, to consider abandoning the very notion of physical bodies and substantive entities and to speak only of bundled predicables. Is it possible to demonstrate that Kant’s table of categories is transcendently secure? I’m inclined to doubt it. What would be its objective principle? How should we proceed? There seems to be no ready answer. (Nevertheless, I must advise, French is much more headlong than Worrall. I don’t believe the options are sufficiently determinate.)

Pertinently, with regard to the sciences, Kant offers (in the *Prolegomena*) a version of the causal principle:

Everything of which experience shows that it happens [Kant observes] must have a cause.

Kant 2002, 4:296

pertinence of empirical considerations, the entire venture seems entirely arbitrary, and, if we allow empirical tests, we necessarily preclude the transcendental thesis itself. Here, I suggest, empirical reflection regarding the intelligence of the most advanced animals and the extraordinary abilities of prelinguistic infants cannot fail to lead us to consider whether Kant’s explanatory model is not, finally, impossible to reclaim.

But leading quantum physicists, Niels Bohr and David Bohm, for instance—with a word from Erwin Schrödinger to the effect that the matter cannot be decided (appears to be undecidable) on the basis of empirical evidence and can (it seems) only be settled by fiat—have actually adopted, respectively and without apparent conceptual disadvantage on either side, an indeterminate and a deterministic view of quantum phenomena (cf. Cushing 1994, Ch. 11). Is such a maneuver compatible with Kant's treatment of transcendental concepts and predicables? It seems impossible to deny the pertinence of what we would now admit to being contingent evidence ("empirical" in a very loose sense, if you wish) that confronts us even in the quantum context in which we are to construct our account of the physical world along lines very different from Kant's treatment of Newton's theory and practice. We surely must agree with Cassirer, for instance, that Kant's disjunction between the concepts of the understanding and the concepts (or ideas) of reason is not at all in accord with advanced forms of inquiry in the physical sciences. So that what Kant would have thought impossible to deny transcendently—the fixed order of time and space, for instance, the canonical concept of a physical body, the exceptionless causal principle itself—appear now to be open (more than open) to fundamental revision in our own day. But if such changes are possible, then is not transcendental reasoning hopelessly uncertain as a ground for reliable metaphysical arguments?

There may also be different scenarios to consider: conceptual constraints affecting the coherent attribution of predicables at different levels of discourse, sheer stalemate involving conceptual imagination, considerations regarding what to admit as real "things" at different levels of inquiry, but, then, there's also reason to suppose that the adequacy of Kant's table of categories may be already adversely affected. How should we know whether we had decided the question correctly or consistently?

Here, we may as well say, Kant "corrects" Newton's empirical treatment of "the laws of nature"—without addressing Newton by name:

Categories [he says] are concepts that prescribe laws *a priori* to appearances, thus to nature as the sum total of all appearances (*natura materialiter spectata*)... without deriving ["the manifold of nature"] from the latter. B 162

Empirical (or "local") laws of nature are themselves formally ("relationally") determined (or "derived") from *a priori* "laws of appearances in nature", not themselves conditioned in any way by actual sensory appearances. But the argument is completely "stipulative", in the pejorative sense

I've proffered (borrowing from C. I. Lewis). We touch here on the ultimate unresolved gap of Kant's entire system, which Kant skillfully converts into an "adequate" transcendental justification (in the "visional" sense) of the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason—which seems to be the final lesson (if I may say so) of the *Opus postumum*, recovering its anticipation in the first *Critique* (Kant 1998, A 794/B 822).

Notice, too, that Kant, in a well-known remark meant to accord with the would-be transcendental principle, "to cognize something *a priori* means to cognize it from its mere possibility"—which, on the "evidence" at Kant's disposal (plainly skewed in favor of a Newtonian model of what it is to be a true science)—affirms that "chemistry can be nothing more than a systematic art or experimental doctrine, but never a proper science" (Kant 2002, 4:470–1). But if conceptual gaffes of this kind can be obtained so easily, how could we ever know that we had got our transcendental arguments right? How could we possibly justify Kant's insistence that the transcendental, as such, is entirely free of empirical or historied constraint, or, indeed, that it should be? For instance, as I've already remarked, the failure of chemistry might then signify, transcendently, the failure of physics itself, since, on Kant's architectonic treatment of a "system" of sciences, chemistry's failure is also physics' failure—a definite hazard of speaking of the total unification of all parts of the universe.

Of course, the import of such options should have been already effectively sorted by providing a criterially adequate account of the scope and power of transcendental reasoning. It's entirely possible that Kant had already begun to worry about the adequacy of one version of the "argumentative" strategy of transcendental reasoning (or of other ways of sorting rational arguments), in the process of writing the first *Critique* and the *Inaugural Dissertation* (1770) before it. The very idea of a rationally demonstrable, uniquely valid, architectonically necessary system of theoretical knowledge or practical belief, comprising the entire universe, seems clearly beyond the competence of any merely human investigator. I see, here, a possible motivation for preferring a practical rather than a theoretical system (such as the *Opus postumum* proposes), but I cannot see how, if the force of the concession be allowed, Kant could possibly insist on a uniquely valid solution. But then, to admit the validity of an endless diversity of such solutions would be to abandon altogether the ultimate daring of Kant's original intuition. I would have to count it as a (glorious) failure.

I find myself obliged to think that these and similar reminders leave the entire matter of transcendental reason in a shambles. Why should

we continue to support the idea that would-be transcendental conditions of possibility must be strictly necessary and must therefore preclude any appeal to empirical factors? How should we ever know whether we had discovered the necessary (transcendental) model for appraising the true validity of any and all would-be standard ways of modeling the sciences? To speak of “totality” here seems meaningless—in a manner not altogether unlike that in which the very idea of the autonomy of human freedom is said to entail the absence of any (heteronomous) causal relation (possibly, then, the absence of any relation) to the “things” of the experienced (deterministic) world, a difficulty vigorously raised against the argument of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and which must, therefore, give us pause.

I cannot see how the completeness and accuracy of the table of categories can be assessed without considering empirical factors and the history of science itself. (The matter cannot be settled in merely formal terms.) The coherence of Kant’s entire Critical venture seems threatened. Kant claims that psychology (regarded as a science) is at an even greater disadvantage than chemistry, since psychology does not proceed by the usual empirical means (bearing on outer sense) and because it fails to make provision for mathematized causal laws.

Cassirer, of course, more consistently than Kant, though in a way all but impossible to reconcile with Kant’s approach, openly treats the cultural sciences as essentially interpretive (and, of course, as committed to a suitable form of freedom). Furthermore, if we concede the relevance of the actual practices of inquiry among the natural sciences—for instance, those notably examined by Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn 1970 [1962]) and Nancy Cartwright (Cartwright 1983)—then strict nomologicality and the necessary continuity of scientific method cannot fail to be placed at mortal risk. Certainly, Kant’s transcendental practice points to difficulties (possibly another “gap”) that belong more clearly to the “visional” topics of the *Opus postumum* than to the “argumentative” topics of the *Metaphysical Foundations*. This bears, of course, quite pointedly, on the plausibility of my own guess at Kant’s entire transcendental “vision” and the supposed necessity of Kant’s would-be *a priori* discoveries.

III

Ultimately, Kant’s Critical venture is not an argument. It’s a vision to be shared (in the form of rational faith), and it is that, in such a way that

Kant's would-be synthetic *a priori* claims are necessary truths only in a "stipulative" sense made congruent with his visional intention. Kant's argument (if there be one) is embedded in the encompassing vision, but that's to say no more than that Kant's "argument" is itself no more than the unspecified source of Kant's "valid" exposé of the defects (primarily epistemological and metaphysical) of the explicit arguments of his principal rivals and predecessors. *Whatever* his critique reveals in this regard is meant to count as capable of yielding transcendental apriorist truths (if Kant merely christens or stipulates them suitably for his own vision). Hence, synthetic *a priori* truths may pop up anywhere and everywhere in the work of the Critical Decade and the *Opus postumum*, and are bound to appear in many guises.

They may indeed need to satisfy preliminary demands of plausibility (they must be synthetic rather than analytic and they must be characterized as "conditions of possibility" rather than as "objects" or "properties" of any familiarly experienced sort); otherwise, they have, and need have, no further determinate criterial features, beyond merely being open to being freely proposed *as* synthetic, *as a priori*, *as* necessarily true, wherever it suits Kant's "visional" purpose. That's to say, they're free-hand constructions, not actual discoveries. They serve another purpose altogether: they proceed by way of a double "stipulation": first, as definitionally *a priori*, and, then, as synthetically necessary. There's the whole of the final transcendental maneuver, unceremoniously simulated—hardly reproduced.

Let me remind you of a compelling admission from one of Dieter Henrich's papers regarding the would-be conditions of what Kant identifies as a transcendental deduction. Henrich first explains how Kant draws a deliberate analogy between his philosophical "program" and the model of "deduction" in medieval and post-medieval practices of law, and then he adds, "we must still explore [Kant's] views about the methodological foundations on which one might justify acquired rights in philosophy": the validation of transcendental deduction. Of course. But then Henrich says, very quietly indeed: "In this regard, the first *Critique* remains completely silent" (Henrich 1989, 40). Full stop!

You may suppose Kant has failed us here. I don't entirely agree. I believe *this "gap"* confirms my intuition: namely, that the transcendental *a priori* featured in the first *Critique* was never unconditionally intended to be defined in any criterially explicit, theoretically applicable formal terms. The entire *Critique* is exhibit A of what transcendental thinking actually *is*: the initial fulfilment of Kant's architectonic "vision", rendered

as an ultimate practical commitment wherever theoretical (“argumentative”) confirmation proves to be transcendently illusory. You cannot fail to see that Kant confirms the point by characterizing the “synthetic” (as in synthetic *a priori* judgments) solely in terms of the contrasted definition of “analytic” judgments (Kant 1998, A 293/B 249–A 309/B 366; cf. also A 9/B 13–A 10/B 14). That may have misled Kant’s standard readers: they may have misinterpreted the prominence of the analytic/synthetic distinction in both Introductions (to the first *Critique*): the trick is to see just how this much commits Kant to the deeper instruction of the Transcendental Dialectic—and, further, in the spirit of the Critical Decade and the instruction of the *Opus postumum*.

I find the clearest and most instructive anticipation of Kant’s entire transcendental program—in the pages of the Transcendental Dialectic closest to the “vision” of the *Opus postumum*—where Kant distinguishes his view of rational “ideas” and “ideals” from Plato’s Forms, in accord with the surprising example of Kant’s rationalist conception of God, “the inner vital spirit of man in the world” (Kant 1993, 240). Note Kant’s formulation, please. One line from the Dialectic may be enough to capture the constant theme of nearly the whole of Kant’s account and, if I may say so, the reading I favor in explicating what Kant finally means by the “transcendental”, which requires accepting what amounts to the “transcendent” standing of “ideas” relative to the concepts and categories of the understanding. They are indeed said to be “unconditioned”, as opposed to the “conditioned” standing of experience, judgment, objects of knowledge, and the like, and they apparently (if obscurely) account for the practical belief (or inclination to believe in, but not to know) the total, ramified, necessary architectonic structure of the whole of the universe.

The sentence I have in mind—Kant’s sentence—is this:

human reason contains not only ideas but also ideals, which do not, to be sure, have a creative power like the **Platonic** idea, but still have **practical** power (as regulative principles) grounding the possibility of the perfection of certain **actions**.⁹ Kant 1998, A 569/B 597

Here, in context, we find the briefest summary of the entire space that systematizes the following master themes that concern Kant—which, when completed, satisfy the objective of “transcendental philosophy” (cf. Kant 1998, A 11/B 25–A 12/B 26). That is, the unity of, and difference between, theoretical and practical reason, the primacy of the practical over the the-

⁹ See the whole of Kant (1998), A 569/B 597–A 572/B 600.

oretical, the ultimate hierarchy of ideas, concepts and manifolds of sensibility, the difference between rational thought or belief and confirmable knowledge, and the ideal of rational life itself, expressed, supremely, in terms of God's thoughts, viewed as the posit of the highest rational power within and beyond man's specifically cognitive capacity, but still apparently transcendently licit. All that it assembles belongs to the unique, singular, stipulatively necessary architectonic of the whole of the intelligible world. But, of course, if that's conceded, there will be very few defensible liens on transcendental necessity.

The reading I offer is moderately supported by the Dialectic of the first *Critique* and the unfinished text of the *Opus postumum*, which confirms Kant's unflagging vision at both the start of his Critical venture and at the end of his life. On this reading, Kant's supreme transcendental principle is itself a categorical imperative, as Kant himself says (cf. Kant 1998; 198, 202, 207, 214, 237), broadly akin to the following imperative: "Think and act in accord with the unique and ultimate rational architectonic of the universe", which is itself an ideal generated by the highest power of reason within man—beyond confirmable knowledge. Imagine!

Let me close, then, with one of the sentences I had intended for closer examination, from the *Opus postumum*, which may confirm how unfamiliar our familiar Kant becomes near the end of his life:

Transcendental philosophy [Kant says] is not an aggregate but a system, not of objective concepts but of subjective ideas, which reason creates itself—not hypothetically (*problematically* or *assertorically*) indeed, but *apodictically*, insofar as it creates itself. Kant 1993, 253–4

But, of course, in making sense of this paradox, we must bear in mind that *a priori* necessity may have "risen in rank" (as Kant believes reason can), from what appears to have been favored, earlier in Kant's career, in alethic terms, but is now distinctly and primarily practical—and, for that reason, cast in imperative terms. So the seeming laxity of the logic is neither a mistake nor a piece of carelessness. It's the mark, rather, of an evolving conviction about the rational meaning of a life lived according to the rule of such a life, judged in terms of the transcendental vision that informs it.

It claims to capture the unique and total meaning of any rational human life, though it cannot demonstrate that that's possible: first, because the articulated totality that it requires cannot be grasped by any human mind, and, second, because the teleologized command that might fulfil the supposed condition of articulated totality cannot be practically engaged by that same human mind. If so, then Kant's imperative may ac-

tually be irrational—or sublime; it certainly cannot demonstrate that, as Kant also claims, “everything that thinks has a God”: that is, believes in a supreme being who knows the articulated system of the all-inclusive universe (Kant 1993, 248)—or believes “because it is absurd”, a new unity of faith and reason.

Strictly speaking—except for expressions of enthusiasm—science never actually engages the sum total of all the articulated parts and relations of what comprises the universe, and human freedom has never found a convincing way of ordering, within any comprehensive system, all the possible readings of man’s would-be unconditional duties as a rational agent. Kant has sanctioned—how is never made entirely clear—two impossibilities (as if by divine fiat) as the supreme regulative “ideas” or imperatives of his transcendental vision. They function beyond truth and falsity and mundane interests as a sort of insuperable paradigm of a would-be rational life at its noblest, so that every human effort to live rationally may be construed as “approximations” of the ideal conception of the vision itself. Truth is out of the question here. It’s more a matter of coming home to the practices of the world. But, then, that must mean that Kant is mistaken as to there being any one rational answer to the ultimate question. Or is it that pluralism also confirms the ingenuity of Kant’s final philosophical paradox? In either case, Kant’s answer is an answer for a time whose time has passed.

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