The real problem of pure reason

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Abstract
The problem of Kant's first Critique is the problem of pure reason: how are synthetic judgments possible a priori? Many of his readers have believed that the problem depends upon a delimitation within the class of a priori truths of a class of irreducibly synthetic truths—a delimitation whose possibility is doubtful—because absent this it is not excluded that all a priori truths are analytic. I argue, on the contrary, that the problem depends on nothing more than the human knowers' everyday consciousness of her own finitude: her dependence in thinking and knowing on what is given to her. The problem is a difficulty about how the concepts which figure in metaphysical judgments could represent reality given that they cannot do so in the way in which concepts figuring in empirical judgments do. Empirical judgment here functions as exemplary of thought and knowledge because it is exemplary of finite thought and knowledge. Mere analysis could not, therefore, dissolve the problem even in principle, because to say that a concept can be analyzed is not yet to explain the possibility of its real representative power. The significance of the analytic-synthetic distinction in the context of the problem of pure reason is that its formulation allows Kant to say this.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Critique of Pure Reason is nothing if not Kant's attempt to answer the question: “How are synthetic judgments a priori possible?” [B19]. For this question “contain[s]” the “real problem of pure reason” [ibid]. To understand that problem we must understand the question. To do that we must understand what is meant by “synthetic,” by “a priori,” and by their combination in the idea of a synthetic judgment possible a priori.

Kant introduces his notion of synthetic judgment in contradistinction to that of analytic judgment: a judgment whose subject-concept contains its predicate-concept, which can, therefore, be drawn out of the subject by analysis [A6/B10]. This suggests that his analytic-synthetic distinction is essential to the problem of synthetic judgment.
a priori. Yet even as this distinction has enjoyed a staying power such as any philosopher might envy, it has from the
time of its introduction also been subject to an unenviable series of attacks.² The distinction might be used for differ-
ent theoretical purposes, and different objections bear on different purposes to different extents. But the most men-
acing for Kant would be any which threatened the role of the analytic-synthetic distinction in generating the
problem of pure reason. For if the distinction is essential to the problem, there is no problem, and thereby no need
for a critique of pure reason, a “special science” which “arises” [ergibt sich] from the problem [A11/B24], without it.

My focus in this essay is on an objection alleging that Kant’s distinction leaves it open that all a priori judgments
might be recoverable as analytic, so that there is no synthetic a priori for his problem to be about. I contend that this
objection cannot succeed because the prospect of analytic recovery is irrelevant to the real problem of pure reason;
the objection, therefore, misconstrues the problem. The problem is, I argue, about how the concepts figuring in a
judgment a priori could have the real representative power—the power to represent real possibilities, or realities, in
the traditional idiom—which such a judgment, successfully made, requires. This problem about real representative
power in the case of a priori judgment is recognized when that case is described in contradistinction to the appar-
ently unproblematic case of judgments a posteriori, in which the concepts involved have their real representative
power attested to by actualities to which, in those judgments, they are applied. The reason for which judgments a
posteriori assume this role as an unproblematic exemplar is, I suggest, that they are the paradigmatic exercises of
finite cognition: exercises of thought and, when they are successful, knowledge, which depend constitutively on their
object’s being given to the thinker. The problem of pure reason is thus the problem of how a finite thinker and
knower could, in her conceptual activity, represent the real otherwise than in that paradigmatically finite way. The
problem of pure reason is a structural problem of finitude as such. The notion of analytic judgment plays a didactic
role, forestalling a misunderstanding about what it would take to solve, or dissolve, this problem. In particular, appeal
to analytic judgment cannot dissolve the problem, because the possibility of analysis does not explain that of the real
representative power of the concepts analyzed.³

I begin (Section 2) by reviewing the threat of analytic recovery and one apparently attractive defense against it:
the logical approach developed by Lanier Anderson (2015). Anderson’s interpretation is a useful foil because his prin-
cipal contention is precisely what I deny: that Kant, to secure the problem of pure reason, must foreclose the analytic
recoverability of at least some a priori judgments. To emphasize this contrast with his approach, I call mine, echoing
Kant’s contrast of logical with real possibility, the real approach (Section 3). I then present a reading of the first Cri-
tique’s Introduction according to this approach, accounting for the generation of the problem of pure reason
(Section 4) and the didactic role of analytic judgment (Section 5). Finally, since a significant strength of Anderson’s
position is its promise to make sense of Kant’s relation to his rationalist predecessors, I discuss the way in which, in
the light of the real approach, this relation appears, and some of the crucial differences between the conception of
the problem of pure reason as a structural problem of finitude and conceptions which, like this one, emphasize real
representative power, but according to which the structure of finitude is not the immediate source of the problem
(Section 6). While Anderson and other commentators understand Kant to address an argument to Leibniz and Wolff
with the ambition of immanent conviction, I understand him to cast off one of their fundamental commitments, to
the theological ground of the possibility of thought, and thereby to leave himself the task of finding an alternative:
one which explains the possibility of real representative power a priori on finitude’s own terms, and the need for
which emerges in its urgency only in finitude’s everyday self-consciousness. The real problem of pure reason is the
problem of how the a priori is possible for a finite thinker as such.

2 | THE LOGICAL APPROACH

Anderson claims that we should understand the problem of pure reason in a “dialectical context” defined by “con-
temporary debates” in the eighteenth century (Anderson, 2015, p. 8). In particular, almost all of Kant’s interlocutors
assume, according to Anderson, that—in Kant’s idiom—all true judgments are analytic. Thus, in distinguishing
between analytic and non-analytic judgments, Kant makes a novel claim. Since everyone party to the debate claims
to understand how analytic judgments are possible, the challenge is to understand how non-analytic judgments are
possible. Such, according to Anderson, is the setting for the problem of pure reason. Thus, on his view, Henry
Allison (2004, p. 91) is wrong to characterize the distinction so that synthetic judgment has primacy. The merely
negative characterization of synthetic judgment as not analytic is part and parcel of its possibility’s being a problem for
rationalists like Leibniz and Wolff.

Against this background, Anderson argues for a “logical” interpretation of the analytic-synthetic distinction,
according to which judgments divide into two classes based on a difference in the logical relation among their con-
stituents (Anderson, 2015, p. 22). He contrasts it with what he calls “methodological” and “epistemological” interpre-
tations, according to which the analytic-synthetic distinction records “a difference in our cognitive treatment of
judgments, or propositions, rather than...a difference between the judgments/propositions” themselves (Anderson,
2015, p. 29). He objects that these alternatives “[leave] open the possibility of turning synthetic claims
into analytic ones” (ibid). For nothing in the nature of the judgments themselves would require treating them one
way (say, synthetically) rather than the other (analytically). Thus only on the logical interpretation is Kant invulnerable
to the “rationalist strategy” of “recuperation” of synthetic judgments as analytic (Anderson, 2015, p. 31).

The idea of such a strategy is, as Anderson notes, not alien to Kant. Consider the following note, dated by
Adickes to 1769:

The proposition that every body is impenetrable is analytic, not only because body cannot be thought
without impenetrability, but because it can be thought solely by means of impenetrability; this mark
belongs as a pars to the notion of body. But that every body is inert is a synthetic proposition; for
inertia is comparis with the concept of what is thought by means of the expression “body,” thus to a
whole concept which is combined in a necessary fashion with those partial concepts that belong to
the notion of body. If one had the whole concept of which the notions of subject and predicate are
compartes, synthetic judgments would be transformed into analytic ones. One wonders to what
extent there is something arbitrary here. [R3928 17, p. 350]

Here Kant imagines that the synthetic proposition that every body is inert constitutes the synthesis of a new
concept—call it body*—which contains everything contained in body as well as inert. “Every body is inert” may thus
express either the synthetic proposition in which body and inert figure, or the analytic proposition in which body* and
inert figure.

Consider, against this background, the implications for Kant’s claim in the first Critique that the judgment that
every alteration has a cause is a synthetic judgment a priori. Suppose that I construct the concept alteration*, which
contains everything contained in alteration as well as caused. Now the same words—“Every alteration has a cause”—
may express an analytic judgment. This procedure is generalizable to every synthetic judgment a priori, thus to every
proposition of metaphysics. And so metaphysics, by this procedure, can be made analytic; since there is no problem
about the possibility of analytic judgment a priori, there is no problem of pure reason.

Kant does not, as far as I know, apply the idea contained in this note from the 1760s to his work of the 1780s.
But his detractors do. J. G. Maaß claims that, given the characterization of the distinction in the first Critique’s Intro-
duction, whether a judgment is analytic or synthetic varies with psychological idiosyncrasy (Maaß, 1789, p. 189).
Anderson’s response is to insist, on Kant’s behalf, that whether one concept is contained in another is an objective
matter. Anything other than his “logical” interpretation of the distinction, in denying the objectivity of the matter in
the relevant sense, leaves open the possibility of recuperation.

There are, broadly speaking, two questions for the logical approach. First, of a metaphysical flavor: what are
these containment facts? How are they realized? We cannot say merely what they are not: that is, psychological. We
must say what they are. Second, of an epistemological or critical flavor: how can we know them? Of course, these
kinds of question are intimately related, since how we know about concepts depends upon their nature.
But I wish to set these questions aside. For we must confront them in the context of the problem of pure reason only if we must take the logical approach, and that, I shall argue, we need not do. For, as I shall argue, even if every true judgment a priori were analytic, still we should need an account of the real representative power of the concepts figuring in it. And for this reason, even if every true judgment a priori were analytic, there would still be a problem of pure reason, because it would still be a mystery how concepts could have the real representative power which metaphysical judgments require. The suggestion of global analyticity, even restricted to the a priori domain, does not address this problem, and, as we shall see, Kant and his appointed expositor Schulz say as much. So the recuperation strategy, even if it can succeed, cannot dissolve the problem of pure reason.

3 | THE REAL APPROACH

One way of characterizing the difference between the real and logical approaches is to say that the former emphasizes not the analytic-synthetic distinction but the a priori-a posteriori distinction. (This, as we shall see, is not to say that the analytic-synthetic distinction is irrelevant.) The expository order of the first Critique's Introduction suggests that Kant expects us to accept that we understand how real representation is possible in the a posteriori case. What is important here is, I suggest, that in this case, we bear an unproblematic kind of cognitive connection to actualities, characteristic of finite knowledge. Then he argues that in the case of metaphysical judgments, we cannot bear that connection to actualities and thus are, with respect to these judgments, at a loss as to how real representation is possible. That is the real problem of pure reason. This is the movement of thought I shall now (Sections 3 and 4) describe in detail.

First, a note on real representative power and why I use this terminology. Kant distinguishes logical from real possibility, but much of the elaboration of this distinction presupposes the positive development of the Critique. Here I want to highlight only what he can assume in the Introduction. In a footnote in the Preface to the Critique's second edition, Kant claims that

\[\text{to cognize an object, it is required that I be able to prove its possibility (whether by the testimony of experience from its actuality or a priori through reason). But I can think whatever I like, as long as I do not contradict myself, that is, as long as my concept is a possible thought, even if I cannot give any assurance whether or not there is a corresponding object somewhere within the sum total of possibilities. [Bxxvi n.]}\]

This remark anticipates others, later in the Critique, in which Kant connects the notion of the “sum total of possibilities” to notions like that of the “formal conditions of experience” [A218/B265]. How to understand this connection is controversial, but that is not my topic here. I wish to suggest only that in the Introduction, Kant does not expect us to have in mind his notion of real possibility in terms of the formal conditions of experience. We are, however, supposed to have a grip on the notion of a possibility: of something lying “within the sum total of possibilities.” And, if this note in the Preface is any indication, we are supposed to appreciate that mere thinking is not enough to represent—or, in any case, knowingly to represent—such a possibility.

In the terms of Kant’s later distinction between the (logical) possibility of a concept and the (real) possibility of a thing [e.g., A596/B624n.], the countable “possibility” here appears to mean “real possibility,” or what has been called, in the tradition, “reality.”5,6 The real possibilities, or realities, include felinity, rectangularity, and viviparity: things might be feline; things might be rectangular; things might be animals which give birth to live young.7 Real possibilities need not be actualized; there are ways things might be, but aren’t. Things which are, on the other hand, I call “actualities,” again in accordance with the tradition.8 I use these terms because they disambiguate notions like “object” and “thing.”9 For example, in talking about cats, I might be talking about cats in general or as such—the cat überhaupt—and only about actual cats per accidens.
A concept with real representative power expresses a real possibility. According to the passage from the Preface, it is not sufficient, for a concept to have real representative power, that it not be self-contradictory. There is, for Kant, such a thing as a concept without such power. He here departs from a view held by many of his predecessors and which he himself held in the precritical period. But he and they agree that if there is a scientific metaphysics, the concepts involved in it have real representative power. They are not mere symbols in a game with fixed rules. Thus a purely conceptual metaphysics, as imagined by the rationalist, is not “merely” conceptual, if this means a system articulating conceptual contents in abstraction from their power to represent realities. For metaphysics is nothing if not the science of the real. So if Kant can show that there is a problem about how concepts figuring in metaphysical judgments can have the required power, there is a problem of pure reason which does not depend on the foreclosure of analytic recuperation.

4 EXPERIENCE AS EXEMPLARY

Let us return to the Introduction. Kant’s first examples of analytic and synthetic judgments are “All bodies are extended” and “All bodies are heavy,” respectively [A7/B11]. He explains the possibility of the latter thus:

It is thus experience on which the possibility of the synthesis of the predicate of weight with the concept of body is grounded, since both concepts, though the one is not contained in the other, nevertheless belong together, though only contingently, as parts of a whole, namely experience, which is itself a synthetic combination of intuitions. [A8/B12]

Thus this judgment is a “judgment of experience” [Erfahrungsurteil] [A7/B11]. I find, by observing bodies, that “weight is also always connected” with the other “marks” contained in the concept [A8/B12].

Kant seems to expect us to find such empirical judgments unproblematic. And it is in explicit contradistinction to them that he introduces the problematic case of the synthetic a priori:

But in synthetic a priori judgments this means of help is entirely lacking. If I am to go beyond the concept A in order to cognize another B as combined with it, what is it on which I depend and by means of which the synthesis becomes possible, since I here do not have the advantage of looking around for it in the field of experience? [A9/B13; my underlining]

The form of the question here is: if not experience, then what? Kant characterizes synthetic a posteriori judgment positively: judgment in which experience enables the relation of predicate to subject. In light of this, he characterizes synthetic a priori judgment negatively: judgment in which the relation of predicate to subject is enabled by an ‘unknown = X’ which “cannot be experience” [A9/B13].

I suggest that the contrast of empirical with a priori judgment is essential to the problem of pure reason in the following way: the synthetic a posteriori is intelligible as synthetic, because it is the exemplary kind of synthetic judgment, in terms of which we begin to understand the synthetic as such. This kind of judgment is synthetic because it is grounded in a third thing, which, as object, stands over and against the thinker and enables her judgment. What I mean by that—which-stands-over-and-against is what Kant describes Plato as foregoing in abandoning the world of the senses: “[h]e did not notice that he made no headway by his efforts, for he had no resistance, no support [Unterlage], as it were, by which he could stiffen himself, and to which he could apply his powers in order to put his understanding into motion” [A5/B9]. We first understand such a structural description—“judgment grounded in a given object”—by considering its empirical exemplification. This is why Kant immediately specifies his discussion of synthetic judgment to the empirical case.
In my view, this is our initial grip on the notion of cognition [Erkenntnis]: the structure described as “judgment grounded in a given object.” This may strike some readers as surprising, because it is often thought that cognition just is a mental state involving the operation of two faculties which Kant attributes to us: sensibility and understanding. If we take this as the first indication of what cognition is, Kant may seem to assume his faculty psychology at the outset of his project. I think that what he assumes is rather that the reader will recognize in her empirical judgments a familiar intellectual activity describable as “judgment grounded in a given object,” which will help her get a grip on this structure in general. (This grip secured, he can then elucidate the structure of the activity in terms of the faculties; if such an elucidation is necessitated by the structure itself, he can say that the reader has, in understanding the structure, already implicitly understood herself to possess the faculties in question. But this can only come later.) By “cognition” I will mean this structure.

It is useful to compare Kant’s problem of pure reason to what he calls, in a letter to Marcus Herz, “the key to the whole secret of metaphysics, hitherto still hidden from itself” [Briefwechsel (February 21, 1772) 10, p. 130]. Often the differences between the letter and the Introduction are emphasized in such comparisons. I wish to emphasize their similarities. The letter underscores the significance of empirical judgment as an exemplar of cognition by placing alongside it another apparently unproblematic case: action.

If a representation comprises only the manner in which the subject is affected by the object, then it is easy to see how it is in conformity with this object...and it is easy to see how this modification of our mind can represent something, that is, have an object. [...] Similarly, if that in us which we call “representation” were active with regard to the object, that is, if the object itself were created by the representation...the conformity of these representations to their objects could also be understood. [...] However, our understanding, through its representations, is neither the cause of the object...nor is the object the cause of our intellectual representations in the real sense. [Briefwechsel 10, p. 130]

Kant then notes that in the Inaugural Dissertation he characterizes these intellectual representations “in a merely negative way” as “not modifications of the soul brought about by the object.” But the positive characterization—the answer to the question what non-desiderative, non-empirical representation could be—he “silently passed over” [Briefwechsel 10, p. 130].

At the time of this letter, Kant retains the position of the Inaugural Dissertation that these intellectual representations “present things as they are” and not “as they appear” [Briefwechsel 10, p. 131]. While he abandons that position by the time of the first Critique, the structure of the problem is retained. Consider the following passage, which replicates the threefold contrast between the empirical, the practical, and the metaphysical:

There are only two possible cases in which synthetic representation and its objects can come together, necessarily relate to each other, and, as it were, meet each other: Either if the object alone makes the representation possible, or if the representation alone makes the object possible. If it is the first, then this relation is only empirical... But if it is the second, then since representation in itself (for we are not here talking about its causality by means of the will) does not produce its object as far as its existence is concerned, the representation is still determinant of the object a priori if it is possible through it alone to cognize something as an object. [A92/B124-5; see also Bix-x].

Now, these passages concern representation rather than judgment. And the passage from the letter to Herz compares not empirical judgment, action, and metaphysical judgment but affection, creation, and intellection. Nonetheless, the structure of the former threefold contrast is similar to that of the latter, and it can generate a problem of pure reason as that of how the concepts figuring in a metaphysical judgment could, in that judgmental use, “represent something,” in the sense of representing a reality. The key point is the way in which actualities—things which are—are essentially involved in the two unproblematic cases, the two cases in which it seems to be no problem that I
represent realities—ways things might be. For to be affected is to be affected by something actual, and to cause something to become is to make it actual. These causal directions are exhibited in two familiar activities: empirical judgment and action. In an empirical judgment, I am enabled, in the application of a concept, by an actuality, sensibly given. I judge, for example, that this lump of gold is dissolving in \textit{aqua regia}. In an action, I bring about an actuality by myself actualizing a concept. I leave the laboratory and take a stroll in the hills. In both of these acts, in different ways, I apply a concept to an actuality.\textsuperscript{20}

In a successful empirical judgment or action, I know how things might be by knowing how they are. But consider metaphysical judgment. Such a judgment pretends to universality and necessity \textsuperscript{[B3-4]}. This means that, in making one, I take it to represent not just ways things might be but ways things must be. Kant says that this means that no actuality—no number of actualities, no matter how great—could enable me to make such a judgment \textsuperscript{[B4]}. This is to say that the actual cannot serve as the ground of the concepts' application in the judgment. This may serve as a negative characterization of metaphysical judgment as such: such a judgment is one of whose success I cannot be conscious on the basis of actual attestation.\textsuperscript{21,22}

But how can I do this, in the consciousness of the correctness of my doing it, without, as it were, touching the actual—without knowing from it or knowing it by making it? In making a true empirical judgment, in executing a successful action, the actuality in question attests to the real representative power of the concept. This thing is a lump of gold; this act is a stroll in the hills. Thus \textit{gold} and \textit{stroll} express ways things might be; they express realities.\textsuperscript{23}

Indeed, in applying the concept, I am conscious of this attestation; I must be in order to know that my application has been successful: true, in the empirical case, or complete, in the practical case. A metaphysical judgment, on the other hand, can be grounded in no amount of actuality. The attestation by actualities to the real representative power of the concepts figuring in it is not part of what enables me to make the judgment. Nonetheless, if the judgment is successful, then it is true, and the concepts have real representative power. If I make it with consciousness of its success, I make it with consciousness of this power.\textsuperscript{24}

To put it another way: if I say something, and you respond: “but are you talking about anything in using those words?”, I can point to something—either something which is already there, or something I thereby do or make—and say, “here is an example of what I mean.” I can point to the “touchstone of experience” to dissolve your suspicion that in making the utterance I am “frivolously playing with fancies instead of concepts and words instead of things” \textsuperscript{[A710-11/B738-9]}. And being able to answer such challenges in such a way belongs to having a grip on the real representative power of my concepts. But in making a metaphysical judgment, I can be conscious of the real representative power of the concepts figuring in it, independently of any recognition of the attestation to that power by any actuality whatever.

In the empirical and practical cases, actual attestations help to undergird my sense of the real representative power of the concepts I apply. In a metaphysical judgment, “this means of help is entirely lacking” \textsuperscript{[B12]}. How can I know how things must be, and thus how they might be, without help from the actual? How, in such an act, can I “represent something”—represent a reality? This is the problem of pure reason as the problem of the real representative power of concepts figuring in successful metaphysical judgments. We finite thinkers feel the need of actual attestation to convince ourselves of the reality of our concepts, so that if we can make metaphysical judgments, then there is something about ourselves we do not yet understand.\textsuperscript{26,27}

5 | THE ROLE OF ANALYSIS

In characterizing the synthetic in terms of the cognitive connection characteristic of empirical judgment, I characterized it positively, and not merely negatively in contradistinction to analytic judgment. This may seem, unacceptably, to leave the analytic-synthetic distinction with no role to play in the Introduction, in spite of Kant's insistence \textsuperscript{[e.g., B19]} that it has one. Indeed, the Introduction might seem to differ crucially from the letter to Herz on just this point: by the time of the first \textit{Critique}, Kant realizes that his problem is not about \textit{a priori} representation in general
but only its non-analytic species. And so it might seem important that not all judgments, or at least not all judgments \textit{a priori}, are analytic.

But a remark in the Introduction confirms that what is at issue is indeed, as I have urged, the real representative power which concepts figuring in metaphysical judgments need:

\begin{quote}
One can and must regard as undone all attempts made until now to bring about a metaphysics \textit{dogmatically}; for what is analytic in one or the other of them, namely the mere analysis of the concepts that inhabit our reason \textit{a priori}, is not the end at all, but only a preparation for metaphysics proper, namely extending its \textit{a priori} cognition synthetically, and it is useless for this end, because it merely shows what is contained in these concepts, but not how we attain such concepts \textit{a priori} in order thereafter to be able to determine their valid use in regard to the objects of all cognition in general. [B23-24]
\end{quote}

Here Kant says not merely that the analytic metaphysician inevitably makes synthetic judgments because there are some to make. He explains why she must make such judgments: analysis “merely shows what is contained in these concepts,” whereas “metaphysics proper” requires an explanation of their “valid use in regard to the objects of all cognition in general.” What we need to show is how metaphysical judgments can have real representative power “in advance of” any actual attestation to that power, as such universal valid use requires. Here, then, is the explanation of Kant’s formula: how are synthetic judgments possible \textit{a priori}? The possibility of analytic judgment, however much might admit of being judged analytically, does not account for the real representative power that concepts need in figuring in metaphysical judgments. Thus, to answer the question of how analytic judgments are possible \textit{a priori} would take us no distance at all towards an explanation of the possibility of metaphysics. Whereas to account for that just is to answer the question how synthetic judgments are possible \textit{a priori}.28

This conception of the problem of pure reason is also discernible in a discussion of the analytic-synthetic distinction by Johann Schulz, one of Kant’s expositors. Recall Maass’s claim that, given the Introduction’s characterization of the distinction, whether a judgment is analytic or synthetic might vary with psychological idiosyncrasy (Maass, 1789, p. 189). Among the things Schulz says in response is this:

\begin{quote}
Let him place just so many marks (\textit{Merkmale}) in the concept of the subject that the predicate, which he wishes to prove of the subject, can be derived from its concept through the mere principle of contradiction. This trick (\textit{Kunststück}) does not help him at all. For the \textit{Critique} grants to him without dispute this kind of analytic judgment. Then, however, it takes the concept of the subject itself into consideration, and it asks: how did it come about that you have placed so many different marks in this concept that it already contains [TP: what Schulz has characterized as] synthetic propositions? First prove the objective reality of your concept, that is, first prove that any one of its marks really belongs to a possible object, and then, when you have done that, prove that the other marks belong to the same thing that the first one belongs to without themselves belonging to the first mark. [\textit{Rezension von Eberhards Magazin} 20, pp. 408–409; translation adapted from that of Allison (1973, p. 175)]
\end{quote}

Let alteration*, and not alteration, figure in metaphysics; then belonging to metaphysics is an analytic judgment expressed by the sentence “Every alteration has a cause.” Now, Schulz tells us, we should turn to the subject concept: alteration*. What is the proof of its objective reality—of its applicability to a possible object?29 Since I can make a metaphysical judgment with this concept, I must be able to answer this question without pointing to any actuality as attestation of the concept’s real representative power. How I could do that is the problem of pure reason. This is why Schulz says, in the sentence immediately following the quoted passage, that the “dispute as to how much or how little should be contained in the concept of the subject has not the least effect on the merely metaphysical question: how are synthetic judgments possible \textit{a priori}?” [ibid] We may define any word in any way we please, and
thereby extract an analytic judgment. But then, as Lewis White Beck (1965, p. 86) notes, we face the question: “how can this judgment, based on definition, be valid objectively?”

The proponent of the logical approach is not without a response to this argument. Indeed, Anderson says that this kind of argument is not convincing “from a Leibnizian point of view” because for Leibniz, concepts do not need “justification for their applicability to the objects. They are prior to the objects, which are as they are exactly because God has created the possible world represented by these concepts” (Anderson, 2015, p. 143 n. 8). I agree.

In the next section, I suggest that there is a problem of pure reason precisely because Kant rejects theological accounts of the real representative power of concepts. That the argument would not convince Leibniz is thus neither here nor there.

6 | SOURCES OF REAL REPRESENTATION

I said in Section 3 that no rationalist would deny that concepts figuring in metaphysical judgments have real representative power, since metaphysics is nothing if not the science of the real. I then argued that Kant expects us to feel that against the unproblematic exemplars of empirical judgment and action, we do not understand how concepts figuring in metaphysical judgments could have such power. Do his rationalist predecessors feel the force of this problem? Yes and no. Yes, in that they do not deny there is a problem about understanding how the human thinker, considered merely as possessed of the human power of thought, could, in thinking, represent the real. No, in that they claim already to have solved the problem.

According to a traditional rationalist thought, realities inhabit what Kant calls the *ens realissimum*, and we apprehend them by getting in touch with, or imitating, God. In the precritical essay *The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God*, Kant argues that, since it is possible to think about things of a kind—cats, say—without there being, or having been, any actualities of that kind—any historical cats—we must in thinking depend upon such divinely grounded realities. For our representations, though not related to anything actual, must, if they have content, be about something: a universal which could be instantiated. When “possibility...vanishes, ... nothing any longer remains to be thought” [Beweisgrund 2, p. 82]. Since we could think about cats without there being any, their possibility must be grounded otherwise: “[t]herefore, something exists absolutely necessarily” [Beweisgrund 2, p. 83]. God, as repository of universals, as “storehouse of material [Vorrat des Stoffes] from which all possible predicates of things can be taken” [A575/B603], must exist. So goes the only argument which has, according to Kant, any chance at establishing God’s existence.

The idea of God as “storehouse of material” for being is an ancient one. With it, we may hope to ground the real representative power of metaphysical concepts. This image allows us to hope that, in sheer thinking, we entertain, apprehend or know such divinely supported realities. We need not depend on our own apprehension of actualities which express them in order to represent them; we can directly represent the realities themselves. There can be no special problem about how this or that kind of concept has such power, because they all have it in the same way. Thus, Kant notes, “[i]ntuiting everything in God...makes all research into synthetic a priori cognition unnecessary” [R6051 (1776–1780s) 18, p. 438].

So why does Kant not dissolve his problem by falling back upon this image? In the letter to Herz, he mentions three variations on this theological theme, and remarks that “the deus ex machina is the greatest absurdity one could hit upon in the determination of the origin and validity of our cognitions” [Briefwechsel 10, p. 131]. In this remark he does not reject every use of the image of the *omnitudo realitatis*. But he does dismiss any theological explanation of the real representative power of thought. He dismisses it as a *deus ex machina*: a contrived plot device that advances a narrative in an unnatural way, in a way that cannot be accounted to the natures or characters of any of the subjects of the narrative. The subject in question here is the finite thinker: Kant wants to know how such a being is *itself*, by its nature, capable of metaphysical representation. The possibility of such representation is not to be accounted to something external to the thinker, like God. Thus Kant writes in a note dated to 1772 that “[t]o say
that a higher being has already wisely put such concepts and principles in us is to run all philosophy into the ground,” and that the solution to the problem of pure reason “must be sought in the nature of cognition in general” [R4473 17, p. 564].

Anderson recognizes that the *deus ex machina* “did not impress Kant as an adequate solution to his question about how our intellectual representations can relate to objects” (Anderson, 2015, p. 197). But his account of Kant’s attitude is more complicated. He claims that

Kant’s focus on representations’ “relation to an object” (at the expense of their relations to one another, which assumes pride of place in the predicate-in-subject theory) suggests that his new metaphysical program was motivated in significant part by a growing recognition that some truths are irreducibly synthetic. “Relation to the object” is the obvious place to turn for an explanation of such truths, which (per hypothesis) cannot rest on any logical relation among the constituent terms… (ibid)

I agree that Kant’s concern is “relation to an object,” or real representative power. But I do not see how the letter to Herz, in which Kant rejects the *deus ex machina*, suggests a concern with “relation to an object” because it solves a problem about “irreducibly synthetic” truths. Most straightforwardly read, the letter simply rejects the theological account of real representative power, which leaves Kant with the problem of finding an alternative.

Anderson argues that his reading is supported by R4473, in which Kant wonders how “we can, from within ourselves, validly connect properties and predicates with the represented objects, although no experience has shown them to us [as] so connected,” and in which he rejects the theological account as “[running] all philosophy into the ground” [R4473 17, p. 564]. Anderson remarks that if the predicates “in question were related to one another by analytic containment, then there would be no mystery at all about how the one representation in me could be connected to the other […] Thus, Kant’s puzzle can only get off the ground if he is assuming that the predicates in question stand in an irreducibly synthetic relation to one another” (Anderson, 2015, p. 200). But I do not see how the passage quoted from R4473 suggests that the irreducible syntheticity of the relation between predicates grounds the need for an account of their real representative power. First, Kant is talking about the valid connection of predicates “with the represented objects” [emphasis mine]. Second, to all appearances, he is concerned with the real representative power of our concepts, and is concerned with that as a problem: not as a solution to another problem about how non-analytic judgments are possible. I do not see why anything is required for this problem to “get off the ground”; it is a pressing problem in itself.

For as we have seen, and as Anderson notes, the rationalists are not wanting for an account of real representative power; they explain it theologally. In this sense, they can recognize the problem and, to their own satisfaction, solve it. Indeed, it is hard to see how their predicate-in-the-subject theory of truth would be comprehensible as a theory of *truth* absent this explanation. Take God away, and all they have are collections of marks: symbols in a game. Rules may be written for the game and called by such esteemed appellations as “principle of contradiction,” but unless it is explained how the symbols have something to do with anything, they have nothing to do with cognition either. The rationalists do not dispute this; they account for real representative power theologically. Thus, if the theological account is rejected, the recuperation strategy is neither here nor there; something else must explain how these marks can be more than symbols in a game. This explanatory task, in connection with the concepts figuring in metaphysical judgments, is the real problem of pure reason.

It might be alleged, finally, that even if this is so, Kant must have an argument against the theological account of real representative power, which might appeal to the irreducible syntheticity of a certain class of truths. But, however such an argument might be developed, what Kant says is that the theological account is “the greatest absurdity one could hit upon in the determination of the origin and validity of our cognitions” and that it “runs all philosophy into the ground.” To all appearances, these are his arguments against the theological account. He rejects it because it is a *deus ex machina* in the sense I have described. It might be noted in this connection that the first philosopher
mentioned in his dismissal of the *deus ex machina* is not any early modern rationalist with dreams of “recuperation,” but Plato. This suggests that these remarks are meant not principally as an allusion to an argument against one or another variation on the theme espoused by one or another rationalist, but as a wholesale dismissal of a broadly Platonic-Augustinian theological account of the possibility of thought. Kant is, in short, painting with a broader brush than Anderson suggests.

What Kant is saying, then, is that if we could get in touch with God, we could comprehend possibility “before” we knew actuality. But we cannot. We comprehend possibility only in and through knowing actuality. We do not depend, for the real representative power of our concepts, on God. That is not the character of our finitude. What we depend on, in the case we think we understand, the empirical case, is the sensibly given. It is this deicide in the theory of thought which leaves Kant with a problem of pure reason: with the problem of the real representative power which a metaphysical judgment requires of its concepts. In extinguishing the divine light, he gives finite reason the task, terrifying and thrilling in equal measure, of finding illumination in itself.

It is worthwhile, finally, to distinguish the proposal I have made from another prominent in recent commentary, with which it shares an emphasis on real representative power. For in spite of this commonality, there is a significant difference. According to this other line of thinking, there is some special reason, over and above our finitude, to suppose that there is a problem about securing or establishing the real possibility of things to which our concepts would apply. One candidate for such a reason is that we cannot, by means of mere thought, rule out that there is real repugnance between two predicates (Abac, 2019, p. 197; see also, for background, Chignell (2009, p. 174)), so that the rules for conceptual combination grounded in general logic and conceptual content alone might leave us vulnerable to ontologically illicit combinations. Thus we must, for example (on the critical Kant’s view) resort to experience, something additional to thought, to prove real possibility.

On this conception, it is as though mere thought might have “tracked” real possibility, though, unhappily, it does not. Kant’s problem of pure reason—insofar as the problem of “proving real possibility” is connected to it—is identified as arising ultimately from an obstacle we encounter when we try to understand mere thought as sufficient to track real possibility. Thus, as much as this conception emphasizes real representative power, it is structurally akin to Anderson’s logical approach, according to which the problem of pure reason ultimately arises from an obstacle we encounter when we try to understand analytic judgment as sufficient to capture the *a priori*. It assumes that there is nothing in what Kant means by “mere thought” that excludes that mere thought might track real possibility, just as Anderson assumes that there is nothing in what Kant means by “analytic judgment” that excludes that analytic judgment might be sufficient to capture the *a priori*.

On my view, on the contrary, we need encounter no particular obstacle of this kind to appreciate the real problem of pure reason. The problem is simply that, when we consider metaphysical concepts, we are left, temporarily, without an idea of anything recognizable as thought: we are left with the feeling of non-empirical thought as a mere play “with fancies instead of concepts” [A710-11/B738-9]. We finite beings appear to ourselves to need a cognitively significant connection to the actual, not to make up for a particular deficiency which we discover mere thought to possess, but precisely because mere thought is mere thought, which means, in this context, the same as this: that we are finite.

From a certain interpretive point of view, this suggestion is no doubt objectionable. Consider Andrew Chignell’s criticism of the “hylomorphic images” implicated in Kant’s allegation that, in Chignell’s words, “the ‘form’ of our concepts has to be connected to the ‘matter’ of experience in order for us to go beyond mere groping among ‘thought-entities’” (Chignell, 2014, p. 579). My characterization of the problem of pure reason is reminiscent of this. The notion of form in need of matter is, in this context, analogous to that of the finite thinker’s capacity in need of affection by an actuality. Chignell objects that “the talk of emptiness, matter, and groping is metaphorical” and accuses Kant of begging the question against the rationalist by adopting a variation on the scholastic slogan *nihil in intellectu nisi prius in sensu*: “no substantial knowledge in the understanding that isn’t first in sensibility” (Chignell, 2014, p. 580).
About this I wish to make two points. First, a negative point: we should note that, however objectionable a reader might find Kant’s hylomorphic idiom or its application in this sort of context, the idiom is all over Kant’s texts, as are such images—the ones I want to emphasize here—as that of the finite thinker shrouded in darkness without the light of sensibility, or that of Plato’s dove, or that of the understanding fancying instead of thinking (“der Verstand, der denken soll, an dessen Statt schwärmt”) [Prolegomena 4, p. 317] when it takes leave of sensibility. If we wish to make sense of Kant’s project as he presented and executed it, as I do, we cannot dismiss this as so much rhetoric. Second, and more importantly, in the present context, a positive point: I am in this essay making a plea for precisely what Kant means to capture in these images and in his hylomorphic idiom (which I do not read as metaphorical). What Chignell rightly identifies as a scholastic tendency in Kant, especially as it figures in the problem of pure reason, is not a question-begging stipulation. I have tried to argue that it captures the way in which the common understanding thinks about itself: for that understanding, I have suggested, is the audience of the Critique’s Introduction. I do not think that Kant takes his principal interlocutor in this work to be the rationalist (though he has much to say about rationalism and owes a great debt to the rationalist tradition); thus, his principal discursive obligation is not to the rationalist but to the common understanding, to which rationalist principles “do violence” [Fortschritte 20, p. 282]. Kant does not “need an argument” (Chignell, 2014, p. 580) for thinking that the ‘form’ of our concepts has to be connected to the ‘matter’ of experience in order for us to go beyond mere groping among ‘thought-entities’. For, in his opinion, this is what the common, healthy understanding already feels, recognizing itself to be finite. That is all that is required for the problem of pure reason: the distinction, as Kant later elaborates it, between the finite knower, for whom the matter of thought is given from without, and an infinite knower, whose thought would itself give the matter [B135]. And it is precisely for this reason that this understanding feels, with urgency, the force of the problem of pure reason. It feels both that it needs a sensible relation to the actual for the real representative power of its concepts, because this is the kind of thinking and knowing that belongs to it as such, and yet it knows that it possesses some concepts which have such power prior to any such relation. It faces, in the problem of pure reason, a kind of transcendental identity crisis: it recognizes that it just must possess a kind of knowledge which is not, it seems, the kind of knowledge that it can possess, given the kind of knower it is. (This is why “every perceptive reader, if he carefully ponders what this problem demands, is bound to consider it insoluble and, if such pure synthetic cognitions a priori were not actual, altogether impossible” [Prolegomena 4, p. 277].)

Kant is asking the reader to feel the urgency of a question, not in a position in which a variety of sophisticated philosophical developments are available as candidate answers—“I have not argued against systems, and so forth” [R5019 (1776–78) 18, p. 62]—but in the position of everyday finite self-consciousness. Thus Kant says in the Preface to the Prolegomena that to consider his problem properly requires that the metaphysicians “consider all that has happened until now as if it had not happened, and before all else to pose the question: whether such a thing as metaphysics is even possible at all?” [Prolegomena 4, p. 255; emphasis mine]. He insists also that the reader abandon the prejudice that his “new science...can be judged by means of one’s putative cognitions already otherwise obtained” [Prolegomena 4, p. 262], and this applies equally to the question which leads him to develop that science in the first place. This is, in my view, no embarrassment. It is not a liability but a great attraction of Kant’s critical philosophy: that in it we start with our everyday finite self-consciousness, and not with a checklist of philosophical opinions to argue against. 41 The problem of pure reason is not constituted in a scenario of disputation, one in which Kant is faced with a set of interlocutors, one in which a charge of petitio principii is apt. It is constituted in a scenario of self-reflection. 42, 43

7 CONCLUSION

It is a familiar thought, in the interpretation of Kant and in contemporary philosophy alike, that if there is an analytic–synthetic distinction, it divides judgments into two classes. And so if judgments are not, after all, subject to any such division—the thought continues—Kant’s problem of pure reason can never arise. While I have not argued that Kant
rejects such a division, I have argued that it does not play the role one might expect in generating the problem of pure reason. This is not to deny that the problem is about the possibility of synthetic judgments \textit{a priori}. But as I have interpreted it, that problem is about how concepts can have the real representative power needed to figure in metaphysical judgments. That is: it is the problem of how we can know a concept to represent reality in independence of any attestation to its real representative power by the actual, of any such attestation as is constitutively contained in the apparently unproblematic cases of self-consciously successful conceptual application, in the apparently unproblematic exercises of finite cognition and desire, empirical judgment and action. The possibility of analytic judgment, an act in which I draw out the content of a concept, cannot be cited to answer this question, to explain the possibility of a concept's real representative power, be the concept empirical or \textit{a priori}. And that, I have said, is why the formula of synthetic judgment's possibility \textit{a priori} expresses the real problem of pure reason.

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**ENDNOTES**

1 Like Kant, “I consider only affirmative judgments,” not, however, because “the application to negative ones is easy” [A9/B10], but because a comprehensive account of Kantian analytic judgment is not necessary here. But see n. 4 for an indication of my own views on this matter.

2 Eberhard (1789, pp. 312–332) complains that the notion of containment conflates the different universals of the traditional logic. Maaß, as we shall see, joins Eberhard in objecting that containment is psychologically idiosyncratic. Quine's criticism (Quine, 1951, p. 21) is more familiar to the contemporary reader, though his topic is not Kant's distinction but that of the logical empiricists. Beck (1965, pp. 81–82) claims that unless a “definite criterion” for analyticity, absent from Kant's texts themselves, can be given, “an important member of the structure of [Kant's] philosophy must be given up.”

3 The position I defend is closest to one defended by Beck (1965); see Section 5. Allison (2004) also connects the notions of analytic judgment and real representation; see n. 29.

4 In my own view, for which I cannot provide a proper defense here, it is a mistake to think of Kantian concepts as fixed logical entities which we access in analytic judgments. Rather, an analytic judgment is (or is the result of) a kind of act called “analysis” to which we can subject the concepts we possess. For us to possess these concepts is, in the case in which they have real representative power—the basic case, in my view, but not, of course, the only case, since there are concepts without such power—is for us to understand the realities they represent. And what a concept is, in my view, is to be understood in terms of what it is for us to possess one. (See Newton (2015, pp. 474–475) for discussion.) So, at least in the case of concepts with real representative power, our possession of them is an “objective” matter, since they embody an understanding—factively construed—of the realities they represent, and they may thereby be said to be “objective” themselves. But they are not thereby logical entities over and above the realities our understanding of which constitutes our possession of those concepts. It may be objected that it must be an objective matter what is contained even in concepts without real representative power. That is true, but it does not, in my view, require that we hypostasize these concepts. In brief, even these concepts are essentially related to concepts that do possess real representative power. Our concept of the divine will is, for example, related to that of the human will by analogy [Prolegomena 4, p. 356]. This secures for them a kind of objectivity of content which is not, however, independent of the objectivity constituted by real representative power, even when they themselves lack real representative power. All of this has a natural affinity with what I argue in this essay, but the argument does not, so far as I can tell, depend on it. My point is not to present a comprehensive interpretation of Kant's notion of analytic judgment but to argue that the problem of pure reason in particular does not depend upon any exclusive, exhaustive “logical” distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments considered independently of our cognitive activity.

5 Kant's category of reality [A80/B106 and passim], though related to this notion, is not the same. In this essay I always mean, by “reality,” real possibility, sometimes favoring the former locution for its comparative elegance.
It might be suggested that Kant is sloppy here, that (the countable) “possibility” should always, when a reality is meant, be qualified by “real,” because there are, alongside the realities, also the merely logical possibilities. But it is not obvious that Kant’s distinction licenses this idiomactic demand, since real possibility pertains to things, logical possibility (not, at least in the first instance, to things but) to thoughts or concepts. But I pursue this no further here.

Biangularity is, in contrast, not a reality and “must...not be counted among the possibilities” [A291/B347], though there is, according to Kant, no contradiction in its concept [A292/B348]. Nothing can be biangular.

Other traditional terms are the countable “essence” (for “reality”) and “existence” (for “actuality”). Cognates of these terms appear in rationalist texts, including books from which Kant lectured: see, for example, Baumgarten (2013, pp. 55–56) and Wolff (2009, pp. 389, 544). See also Kant’s “substantival” use of “reality”: for example, Vigilantius 29, p. 1000.

For “under thing is understood (1) object in general, (2) the possible, (3) the positive or reality, (4) that which is actual” [M镑ngovius 29, p. 811]. Disambiguation is required.

It is not that the precritical Kant and other rationalists identify, without further ado, reality with mere consistency. Rather, as Abaci (2019, pp. 42–43), for example, points out, figures like Leibniz embrace a material condition on the possibility which is (in the case of the possibility of individuals, which is what I mean here), fulfilled wherever the formal condition is fulfilled. For more on the critical Kant’s point of departure from this tradition, see Section 6 below.

Kant himself clearly understands the rationalist in this way: that is, not as indifferent to whether the concepts she articulates represent reality, but as simply presupposing that they do. He says, for example, of Leibniz that “he, adhering to the Platonic school, assumed innate, pure intellectual intuitions called ideas, which are encountered in the human mind, though now only obscurely; and to whose analysis and illumination by means of attention alone we owe the cognition of objects, as they are in themselves” [Anthropologie 7, p. 141n.]. As I explain in Section 6 below, Kant elaborates this Platonic doctrine of intellectual intuition in terms of the finite thinker’s dependence on God. Thus, as I explain in that section, it is not that the rationalist denies that metaphysical concepts need represent reality; it is that the rationalist presupposes a theological explanation of that real representative power.

I think that Kant intends this remark to help the reader grasp a familiar kind of groundedness. It should not be dismissed because it is metaphorical. Metaphor and image at this opening stage serve to indicate something whose significance is independent of the sophisticated theoretical developments of, say, pre-Kantian rationalism and empiricism. They serve, when directed to such pre-Kantian tendencies, “to stay that style of thinking little by little in its previous path and, finally, to turn it into the opposite direction by means of gradual impressions”—as Kant writes to Herz [Briefwechsel (after May 11, 1781) 10, p. 269]. In general, I reckon it to Kant’s credit that he begins with our ordinary understanding of empirical judgment rather than, say, a stipulative definition or a theoretical construction. This is not a poor substitute for systematic rigor; that, after all, can come only after we have some idea of what we wish rigorously to systematize. For “in philosophy the definition, as distinctness made precise, must conclude rather than begin the work” [A730-731/B758-759]. For further discussion, see Section 6.

Thus this exemplification of groundedness has causal and epistemic aspects: we are answerable, in empirical judgment, to something which affects us. But Kant does not at this stage analyze empirical groundedness into these aspects; he expects us to appreciate the structure, as it were, on its face.

This has been called “cognition in the narrow sense” (Watkins & Willaschek, 2017, p. 86).

For an argument along these lines, see Engstrom (2016, p. 37).

This structure does not capture all of Kant’s uses of “cognition” [Erkenntnis]. What I mean here is a paradigmatic exercise of the cognitive capacity [Erkenntnisvermågen], as distinguished from the desiderative capacity [Begehungsvermågen] [EE-KU 20, p. 206, KU 5, p. 178, KpV 5, p. 8]. Practical cognition is, in the paradigm case, an exercise of the desiderative capacity (insofar as it is the will, or practical reason [KpV 5, pp. 24–25]). Thus I do not mean “cognition,” as used here, to cover practical cognition, which is structurally distinct, since, being an exercise of desire, it is efficacious with respect to its object, which exercises of the Erkenntnisvermågen are not. Of course, not everything called “practical judgment” is efficacious. But the possibility of efficacious practical judgment (by me, here and now) grounds that of my judgments to the effect that an action at some time, by someone is required (prohibited or good) (bad). It also grounds the possibility of what Kant calls “practical faith.” How it does all this is beyond the scope of this essay. For discussion, see Engstrom (2009, pp. 62–64). In general, although the various possibilities of rational activity are united in a system of the capacities of the human soul, we should not expect that a single structure to apply to all of them univocally. Kant insists that none of the three capacities—cognitive, desiderative, affective—can be reduced to any of the others [EE-KU 20, p. 206]. Nonetheless, each partakes of reason in the human being, so that there are structurally distinct ways of partaking of reason. For further discussion of this theme, see Engstrom (2009, pp. 97–128), Gorodeisky (2019), and Fix and Pendlebury (forthcoming). Kant also uses “cognition” to mean different acts and determinations of the cognitive capacity, including representations belonging both to its higher part (the understanding) and to its lower part (sensibility). I do not claim to have given a
characterization that is univocal even within the domain of the Erkenntnisvermögen. But as I have suggested, this initial characterization of cognition, when elaborated, is seen to require both receptive and spontaneous moments in cognition. (See Anthropologie 7, p. 140.) These moments thus inherit the name “cognition” from the structure. This too is beyond my scope here.

17 See, for example, Allison (2015, pp. 98–101) and Longuenesse (1998: 20f.).

18 The most important difference is that the first Critique’s formulations begin to replace the merely negative characterization of the theoretical a priori with something positive. I think that this change marks Kant’s recognition of how to solve the problem by distinguishing between kinds of dependence. In the theoretical a priori, the representation is “determinant” of the object, but not practically: that is, not with respect to its existence. Of course, everything depends on what this means, but that is no my topic here.

19 The analogy between creation and finite action is made explicit in the letter: “our understanding, through its representations, is [not] the cause of the object (save in the case of moral ends)” [Briefwechsel 10, p. 130].

20 By “action” I mean an exercise of the faculty of desire: “a being’s faculty to be by means of its representations the cause of the actuality [Wirklichkeit] of the objects of these representations” [KpV 5:9n.; trans. modified].

21 This characterization will eventually require refinement, since it does not distinguish mathematical from philosophical judgments, and since metaphysical judgments are philosophical. But Kant’s characterization of that distinction cannot be formulated except in the terms of the positive development of the Critique, precisely those terms which allow this negative characterization to be replaced with a positive one. Thus in the Introduction, it is enough to say that a metaphysical judgment is one of whose success I cannot be conscious on the basis of actualities, and in which figure traditional ontological concepts like substance and cause. The latter conjunct anticipates a division (of philosophical from mathematical judgments a priori) whose fundamental account cannot be given at this stage: the former expresses the explanatory problem which that fundamental account must address.

22 I do not in this essay discuss the reasons Kant gives in the Introduction, and which emerge from his engagement with the philosophy of David Hume, for supposing that there are metaphysical judgments to begin with. I address this matter in detail in other work in preparation.

23 As Wolff writes, “if we reach a judgment by means of experience, then we have cognized that this or that does pertain to a thing, and it is accordingly clear once again that it can pertain to it” (Wolff, 2009, p. 330). As Leibniz writes, “[t]he possibility of a thing is known a posteriori when we know through experience that a thing actually exists, for what actually exists or existed is at very least possible” (Leibniz, 1989, p. 26).

24 Schafer (forthcoming, pp. 13–14) distinguishes his position on cognition and real representative power from the “semantic” interpretation of Hanna (2001) in this way: while Hanna’s interpretation is merely semantic, thus requiring that one’s concept achieve genuine reference (to a possibility), Schafer’s requires in addition that one be conscious of this achievement. I have focused here on the consciousness of real representative power; to this extent, my discussion harmonizes with Schafer’s. One might nonetheless query his characterization of this consciousness of real representative power as additional to that power itself; it is possible that for Kant, in the basic case, my consciousness of a concept’s real representative power is internal to that power.

25 See Schafer (forthcoming, p. 38) for a related discussion of the characteristic power of intuitions to “provide our concepts with the determinacy that cognition requires in such a way that it is possible to prove the real possibility of the resulting determinate object.”

26 I do not mean to suggest that Kant’s ultimate position is that consciousness of the real representative power of a concept requires that we know the reality of the concept from an actuality which exemplifies it. Precisely not: if this were so, there would be, according to Kant, no such thing as a consciousness a priori of that power, and thereby nothing for the problem of pure reason to be about. I mean to say only that at this point in the Critique, we do not know how else real representative power is possible. See Grüne (2017) for an argument, taking into account Kant’s solution to the problem of pure reason, against the claim that, in my terms, a concept’s real representative power (or our consciousness thereof) must involve the consciousness of an attesting actuality.

27 My characterization of this problem as a problem for the reader of the Introduction—the “we” I mean are we, the readers—is not a bit of mere literary analysis which can be ignored in favor of a properly philosophical formulation. It is essential to the character of Kant’s critical project, in my view, that the problem can, to the extent I have indicated, be grounded in the everyday understanding of the common reader. The sense that some mode of empirical relation to the actual is essential to the real representative power, or to our sense or knowledge of the real representative power, of our concepts, may appear to be motivated by theoretical considerations which have their home in empiricist conceptions of mind and knowledge. (This is suggested, in the context of a discussion of the problem grounding the critical turn, by Abaci (2019, p. 128).) To be sure, Kant’s engagement with empiricist philosophy, especially that of Hume, informs his
development, and decisively so. But one need not be a student of empiricism to appreciate the force of the contrast of apparently unproblematic empirical judgment and action with apparently problematic metaphysical judgment. This is an important aspect of the point I wish to make: that the problem of pure reason does not, for its proper philosophical appreciation, require the kind of theoretical construction that has often been supposed essential to its sense and significance. See also n. 12 above and my discussion in Section 6 below.

What, then, of Kant’s putative examples in the Introduction of judgments which cannot be made analytically? Do these play no argumentative role, according to the real approach? They may constitute a sound dialogical path to the need for posing the problem of pure reason. But there are, in principle, any number of such paths; what I claim for the real approach is that it discloses the ground of the problem. That the examples do not is shown by such passages as B23-24, quoted above.

Allison (2004, p. 94) notes that in an analytic judgment “the ‘reality’ of the predicate does not come into consideration,” and this is an important element of my position. He does not note that the reality of the subject does not come into consideration either—which is Schulz’s point—nor that this forecloses an analytic dissolution of the problem of pure reason. But the threat of such dissolution is not his topic.

Now that the elements of this essay’s reading of the Introduction have been elaborated, I wish to address a possible objection to my reading of the problem of pure reason as a problem about the possibility of the real representative power of metaphysical concepts. This objection alleges that the problem is supposed to cover the possibility both of synthetic judgments a priori in which figure concepts with real representative power and that of such judgments in which figure concepts without such power. The latter class of judgments might fall within metaphysics as “natural predisposition” [B21-22]. I think that to interpret the problem as indifferent to this distinction is to paper over an essential aspect of its structure: namely, the way in which Kant’s question of the possibility of metaphysics as natural predisposition is included under the heading of the problem of pure reason [B19-B22]. The question of how synthetic judgments are possible a priori is, in my view, in the first instance about our capacity to make such judgments. A capacity to judge is a capacity to judge correctly, since a capacity is understood in terms of its correct exercise: thus to ask how synthetic judgments are possible a priori is to ask how they may be correct exercises of the capacity to judge. Kant claims in the course of the Critique to show that, for example, the judgment that God is omnipotent is impossible as a correct exercise of that capacity—“there is no canon for [the] speculative use [of reason] at all” [A796/B824]—because the concept God does not have the requisite real representative power. Now, this is not known at the outset, in the Introduction. But the Introduction indicates the possibility of asking, of such judgments as turn out to be impossible as correct exercises of the capacity to judge, why we are nonetheless given, as it were, to attempt them: this, which “cannot rightly be demanded of metaphysics proper” [Prolegomena 4, pp. 362–364], would belong to the investigation of the possibility of metaphysics as natural predisposition. Such an investigation, whose topic is the inevitable pathology of reason, can begin only once the pathology has been diagnosed. And that diagnosis must conclude a demonstration that a concept cannot have real representative power. Thus, the question of the possibility of such power for such concepts essentially precedes and makes possible the latter dialectical investigation. It should also be noted in this connection that though such judgments as that God is omnipotent are impossible as correct exercises of the capacity to judge, because God does not have such real representative power as such correctness would demand, nonetheless Kant insists—after he explains why, in his view, they lack such power—that apparently transcendent concepts must have some “good and purposive vocation” [A669/B697]. This, he concludes, is their role as expressive of the ideal of the systematic unity of empirical concepts. In this role, they are teleologically directed towards the good of the capacity to judge, which is why he allows them an “indeterminate” objective validity [A669/B697]. In an extended sense of “real representative power,” construed in terms of this teleological directedness, it might be said that they are shown, at long last, to have such power after all. But this too is not, in my view, contemplated in the formulation of the Introduction: at this stage, we do not yet know what distinguishes God from substance.

The variations on this theme—see, for example, Jolley (1990) for a study of those of Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz—are diverse, but the details do not bear on my point here.

Or, as Stang (2016, p. 120) argues, our representations must at least be composed of representations that could be instantiated.

Kant describes Plato as concluding that “we could not participate in [cognitions of things in themselves] on our own, consequently only through the communication of divine ideas” by way of “immediate intuitions that we have of the archetypes in the divine understanding” [R6050 (1776–1780) 18, pp. 434–435].

This dismissal is not equivalent to the argument against “preformation-systems” in §27 of the Transcendental Deduction [B167–8]. In the letter to Herz this “implantation” image is associated with Crusius in particular [Briefwechsel 10, p. 131], and this view, according to which there is a pre-established harmony between mind and world, is thus not one according to which we apprehend the realities creatively instantiated in the world. Plato and Malebranche, Kant’s other examples
[ibid], presumably do better (from his point of view) on this score. But they still, according to Kant, fall under the title of a “deus ex machina,” which, whatever its details, “encourages all sorts of wild notions and every pious and speculative brainstorm” [ibid].


37 Kant writes that we might consider Plato’s proposed explanation of knowledge a priori—according to which “we men possess intuitions a priori, which would, however, have their first origin, not in our understanding...but rather in one that was simultaneously the ultimate ground of all things, that is, the divine understanding”—as an answer to the question “how are synthetic propositions possible a priori?”, which “undoubtedly hovered, albeit obscurely” before Plato’s mind [Ton 8, p. 391].

38 In this light, the point of the theological image is not so much that it, for example, allows us to think of our thought as bearing immediately on the actual, in the sense of actual divine ideas or attributes or whatever, as according to discussion emphasis the “actualist principle” endorsed by early modern rationalists—see, for example, Newlands (2013) and Abaci (2019, p. 135 et passim)—but that it allows us to think of our thought as grounded in, and thus expressive of, the real, in some other way than in being grounded in the actual. This is why Kant can attribute this image, in the letter to Herz, not just to early modern figures who endorse metaphysical “actualist” principles, but to Plato.

39 Nicholas F. Stang, to take another example, encourages us to prefer arguments which, unlike those Kant “typically” makes, do not depend essentially on the hallmarks of finite knowledge (e.g., that “we can cognize...objects that can be given to us in intuition” and that “all of our intuition is sensible”), because these premises “would not be granted by all of Kant’s interlocutors” (Stang, 2016, pp. 183–184).

40 This is not to say, precisely not, that the common understanding is to remain common in the course of the Critique. In coming to thematize the a priori form of its own activity and the meaning of the theoretical a priori as such, it becomes thoroughly uncommon, knowing itself as never before. For within the common understanding “a certain secret lies hidden” [es liegt also hier ein gewisses Geheimnis verborgen] [A10], and transcendental philosophy is its revelation.

41 I do not mean to agree with commentators like Friedrich Paulsen, who say that Kant “instantly subordinates the doctrines of others to his own purposes” and that “it was vain to expect from Kant any real consideration of the doubts and objections” raised by “contemporaries who opposed his views” (Paulsen, 1963, p. 68)—or indeed of doubts and objections which his philosophical ancestors might have raised, and which his philosophical descendants did raise. At least, I do not mean to endorse the application of these remarks to the problem of pure reason, as I interpret it. Kant is not perverse refusing to engage. He is electing to engage with someone without, as it were, an immediate philosophical stake, and at the same time the greatest philosophical stake of all: the common understanding.

42 This attraction is not, of course, peculiar to Kant. Even philosophers who come to condemn, or to reinterpret in a radical way, the standpoint of the everyday, nonetheless begin with it. We may take as an example Descartes, who recognizes that, to become a rationalist, the common understanding must undergo a kind of conversion in which it turns from experience towards, as he would have it, the true source of knowledge (Descartes, 1996). Kant, in contrast, wishes the understanding to remain with experience, and to ask, in that position, how there could be anything else.

43 Thus, I disagree with Stang when he says that the “non-question-begging” arguments he prefers are Kant’s “best” arguments (Stang, 2016, p. 184). The arguments Kant “typically” (as Stang notes) gives are, in my view, better, because they begin where philosophy must begin: not in the situation of a rationalist, empiricist, or post-Kantian idealist, but in that of everyday reflection on our rational activity.

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[Anthropologie]. (1798) Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View) [Anthropology, History, and Education].

Lecture notes

Notes and correspondence
[Briefwechsel]. Briefwechsel (Correspondence) [Correspondence]
[R]. Reflexionen (Reflections) [Notes and Fragments].

OTHER WORKS


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