

WHAT SHOULD CRITIQUE DO? ON THE THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines three main ways of interpreting transcendental philosophy—metaphysical, psychological and epistemological—to investigate their significance for contemporary thought. I aim to show that different views of critical philosophy depend on how the ontological status of the transcendental conditions of possible experience is determined. In metaphysical interpretations, the transcendental refers to the metaphysical sphere of becoming or manifestation constituted by the activity of the subject or nature; in psychological ones, to the functions, capacities and faculties of the mind; and in epistemological ones, to the necessary norms or principles of scientific knowledge. The three interpretations oscillate between two models of critique, reflected in two naval metaphors that Kant used to illustrate his philosophy. In the model of the island of certainty, critical philosophy searches for necessary and immutable conditions of objects, functions of the mind or norms of rationality. In the model of navigation of the uncertain sea, critical philosophy aims to orient thinking to avoid extremes of dogmatism and scepticism. I will argue that since the concept of conditions of experience was subject to objections proving their contingency and revisability, the model of the island of certainty is untenable. However, the transcendental method could help us avoid dogmatism and scepticism in our approach to metaphysical discourse, cognitive science and the implications of scientific discourse for our self-understanding. In short, the aim of transcendental philosophy is to navigate the changing meanings of the ideas of metaphysical ground, mind and rationality.

KEYWORDS: Transcendental critique; Metaphysics; Normativity; Psychologism

1. MINIMAL DEFINITION OF TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Quentin Meillassoux opened a new debate on the concept of ‘transcendental’ through his observation that 20th-century philosophy, even when it distanced itself from the transcendental method, accepted Immanuel Kant’s essential hallmark of critical philosophy as opposed to dogmatism, which is the necessary

correlation between the subject and the object of knowledge¹. Although Meillassoux offered this diagnosis to reject transcendental constraints on speculative thought within continental philosophy, he also inspired attempts to rethink the significance of the transcendental for critical rationality. But which transcendental? Once again, the intriguing ambiguity of the concept became evident. In their interpretations of Schelling, Ian Hamilton Grant and Ben Woodard explored the metaphysical project of transcendental naturalism, including thinking and subjectivity as part of absolute nature.² Catherine Malabou proposed a negotiated break with the transcendental in her reading of Kant's phrase 'the epigenesis of pure reason' through the lens of contemporary epigenetics.³ Peter Wolfendale and Ray Brassier agreed with Meillassoux's attack on metaphysical meaning correlation but defended its epistemological necessity⁴. If the transcendental method is to be rehabilitated, would it be through a metaphysical, psychological or epistemological reading?

The first aim of this article is to clarify the three main meanings of the term 'transcendental' in the reception of Kant's philosophy. I will argue that different views of the 'spirit of critique' (what critique does and how it operates) depend on how the ontological status of the transcendental conditions of possible experience is determined. In metaphysical interpretations, the transcendental refers to the metaphysical sphere of becoming or manifestation constituted by the activity of the subject or nature; in psychological ones, to the functions, capacities and faculties of the mind; and in epistemological ones, to the necessary norms or principles of scientific knowledge. I will focus more on continuations and modifications of critical philosophy than on scholarly books. The second aim is to show that Kant's transcendental is a struggle between two views of critique:

¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, London; New York, Continuum, 2008, pp. 3–9.

² Although Grant's book was written before *After Finitude*, it became directly involved in debates around speculative realism. Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*, London; New York, Continuum, 2006; Ben Woodard, *Schelling's Naturalism: Motion, Space and the Volition of Thought*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

³ Catherine Malabou, *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality*, trans. Carolyn Shread, Cambridge, MA, Polity, 2016.

⁴ Peter Wolfendale, 'Essay on Transcendental Realism', in *Revenge of Reason*, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2025, pp. 225–292; Ray Brassier, 'Correlation, Speculation, and the Modal Kant-Sellars Thesis', in *The Legacy of Kant in Sellars and Meillassoux: Analytic and Continental Kantianism*, ed. Fabio Gironi, London; New York, Routledge, 2017.

the search for certain and universal conditions of thought and the navigation between scepticism and dogmatism. I will argue that only in the latter sense can the three interpretations of the transcendental method offer something to contemporary thought.

Can we, however, distinguish interpretations of transcendental philosophy from some original, Kantian meaning of the transcendental? The answer is: no. Critical philosophy, which sought to criticise ‘the battlefield of endless controversies’ called metaphysics, has itself become the subject of endless interpretive disputes between its continuers and interpreters. One often encounters the argument that a given philosopher did not understand Kant, but does it really matter if his philosophy has been interpreted in so many ways? Disputes about the meaning of transcendental philosophy are caused neither by Kant’s imprecision nor by the misunderstanding of his interpreters. Rather, it is the very spirit of critical philosophy that goes far beyond its letter, opens up problems that have not been resolved in it, the possibility of distinctions that are invisible from its perspective, as well as various paths of interpretation, which can be radicalised by rejecting some of Kant’s claims.

Various philosophers who associate the transcendental with different terms, such as idealism, phenomenology, naturalism, realism and materialism, have a minimal commitment not only to the problem area but also to the transcendental method. The definition of ‘transcendental cognition’ from the introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason* is well suited for determining minimal commitment to transcendental philosophy:

I call transcendental all cognition that deals not so much with objects as rather with our way of cognizing objects in general insofar as that way of cognizing is to be possible a priori. A system of such concepts would be called transcendental philosophy.⁵

The above definition implicitly contains three main meanings of the term ‘transcendental’: (1) the transcendental method, i.e., treating certain concepts as ways of cognising objects possible *a priori*; (2) the transcendental argument, which proves that certain ways of cognising objects are *a priori*; (3) transcendental philosophy as a system of concepts resulting from the combination of the method

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis; Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 1996, p. 64.

and argument.⁶ The minimal definition does not yet specify the interpretation of the method and argument, but it implies two distinctions. The first is between the object of cognition and the ways the object is cognised or represented. The second is between *a posteriori* cognition (justified by experience) and *a priori* cognition (justified independently of experience). The term *a priori*, in the strong, traditional interpretation adopted by Kant, also implies necessity and universal validity (though some interpretations choose to soften or modify this meaning).

Finally, the concept of the conditions of the possibility of experience integrates the two above distinctions. It refers to the ways of representing the objects of experience that are necessary for the very possibility of knowledge about them. How does this relate to the critical character of Kant's philosophy?

2. KANT'S THEORY OF METAPHYSICAL DISCOURSE

The concept of the transcendental conditions of experience was fundamental to Kant's aim of finding a third way between the rationalist and empiricist (sceptical) view on the meaning of metaphysical propositions (i.e., synthetic *a priori* judgements). Kant argued that judgements of rationalist metaphysics could not be analytically deduced from the meaning of the concepts of substance and self-evident assumptions. In fact, they are synthetic judgements that go beyond the meaning of the concept of substance without any justification in experience. Instead, they were supported by unjustified and therefore dogmatic inferences with the reference to innate ideas and ontological proof of the existence of God. According to Kant, an empiricist conception of metaphysical judgement as contingent propositions based on the observation of experience led to scepticism about the possibility of scientific cognition (scientific laws should be universal and necessary) and morality.

As an alternative to these two schools of modern philosophy, and simultaneously as a way of reconciling them, Kant proposed a theory of metaphysical judgements that referred not to objects but to the necessary conditions of experience. Critical philosophy distinguishes three types of metaphysical concepts: forms of sensibility, categories of understanding and ideas

⁶ I borrow this distinction from Jürgen Mittelstrass. Jürgen Mittelstrass, 'On "Transcendental"', in *Constructivism and Science: Essays in Recent German Philosophy*, ed. Robert E. Butts and James Robert Brown, Dordrecht, Springer Netherlands, 1989.

of reason. Before examining interpretative disputes, let me briefly describe them, setting aside the interpretative differences between the two editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

For Kant, space and time are a priori pure intuitions, i.e., necessary forms of the content of sensible experience. For something to be an object of experience, it must be ordered according to spatiotemporal relations. Twelve categories of understanding are necessary conditions for thinking about the object of experience, i.e., pure syntheses, which are forms of synthesis of content that are assumed by judgments about objective experience (e.g., one–many–all, subject–predicate, cause–effect). In the transcendental deduction of the categories, Kant argues that experience is conditioned by three original syntheses: apprehension (of one intuition), imagination (of one object) and apperception (of one subject of one experience). Without categories, judgements referring to unified experience would not be possible. Regulative ideas of the absolute subject (the soul), the world (freedom) and the absolute (God) are necessary conditions of judgements about totality beyond experience (e.g., infinite world or complete system of knowledge). They refer to the suprasensible totality and can be used to organise cognition, but they do not prove the existence or properties of any objects. The three above ideas give meaning to moral discourse, while ideas of beauty and the sublime, introduced in the third *Critique*, are necessary for aesthetic judgements.

Three types of concepts simultaneously interact and limit each other, demarcating the area of legitimate use and determining the shape of Kant's philosophy:

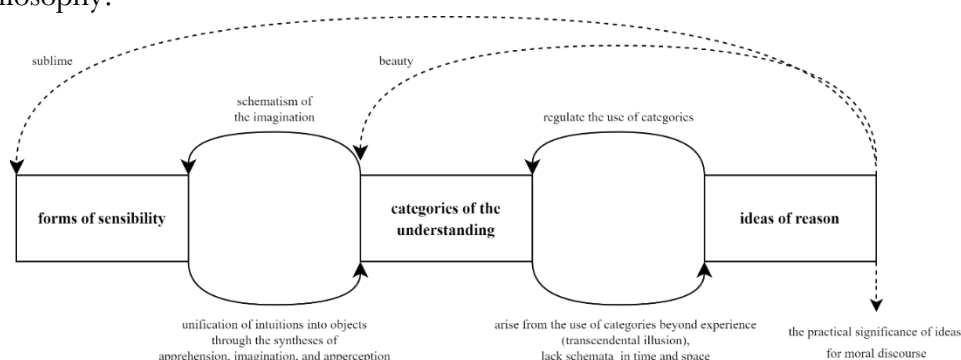


Fig. 1. The interrelationship of the three types of metaphysical concepts in Kant's philosophy.

The categories of understanding have no meaning outside the area of possible experience, which is delimited by the forms of sensibility (time and space), but sense impressions cannot be the source of knowledge without the participation of judgement. Categories organise sense impressions into objects but gain meaning through their schematisation in forms of sensibility. This determines the difference between categories, which can be schematised in time and space, and ideas, for which this is impossible. Judgments referring to ideas in speculative use are justified only in relation to the problems and illusions imposed by the use of categories, but complete knowledge cannot be obtained through categories alone and requires the use of ideas. The regulative function of ideas opens the way for their practical significance in moral discourse, while the experience of beauty and the sublime allows reason to directly influence the imagination and sensibility.

The movement of thought resulting from the connection of forms of sensibility, categories and ideas expresses the abandoned spirit of Kant's system. As we shall see, interpretations felt the need to negate elements of this division in order to achieve the greatest possible consistency.

The transcendental turn leads to a new approach to metaphysical discourse. Critical philosophy demonstrates that metaphysical concepts are meaningless if they refer to objects, but they can have meaning in relation to activities [*Handlungen*] of the subject. The activity of cognition can be understood in phenomenalist terms as the organisation of sense impressions, which allows for unconscious acts, or, more modestly, as the activity of making judgments. The most important interpretive question of transcendental philosophy is: what exactly are the activities that are necessary for the possibility of experience? What is their ontological status? What are they if not objects of an experience or logical principles? There are three general answers and therefore three ways of interpreting transcendental philosophy: metaphysical, psychological and epistemological⁷. Each of these interpretations has its representatives in the early

⁷ A very similar distinction is proposed by Frederick Beiser; however, for him, metaphysical interpretation treats transcendental conditions as intelligible archetypes, while for me, they determine the status of the transcendental by the idea or principle of metaphysical activity (I, nature or phenomenological consciousness). Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781–1801*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 163–179.

reception of Kant in German philosophy, as well as its contemporary defenders. The next three sections will describe how the determination of the ontological status of transcendental conditions shapes their view of the transcendental method, the transcendental argument and the spirit of critical philosophy.

3. METAPHYSICAL INTERPRETATIONS: HOW IS THINKING POSSIBLE?

Metaphysical interpretations of transcendental philosophy, which were developed most intensively in German Idealism and phenomenology, viewed it as the discovery of a new area of metaphysical thought that was, however, not sufficiently defined by Kant. The key role in the reception of transcendental philosophy in German Idealism was played by the problem of metacritique: how can critical philosophy ground metaphysics if her own judgements lack sufficient foundation? The description of cognitive powers and the concept of moral law lack sufficient justification for the demands set by critical philosophy itself. To address the shortcomings of transcendental idealism, Fichte and Schelling argue that transcendental deduction in the *Critique of Pure Reason* implicitly assumes the founding metaphysical principle of critical philosophy: the absolute identity of the 'I'. Starting from the unconditional idea of self-knowledge (or nature in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*), they derive cognitive powers and the concepts of practical philosophy genetically, as transcendental conditions necessary for realisation of the idea (the 'I' becoming self-conscious of its own acts or 'nature' producing the experience).

According to Fichte and Schelling, the new metaphysical principle can only be conceived as an idea that grounds forms of sensibility and categories, thus determining their ontological status. The idea of the absolute I or absolute nature consists of the set of activities necessary for the experience of the object. These activities are themselves understood metaphysically. For Fichte, they are acts of freedom of the I, while for Schelling, they are a dynamical succession of stages [*Stufenfolge*] in nature (or consciousness). In either case, time, space and categories are understood as necessary conditions of the becoming of objects (for consciousness) and the realisation of self-knowledge of the subject. The transcendental method is thereby modified into a new way of metaphysical

deduction⁸ (speculation), while the transcendental argument is primarily aimed at justifying the idealistic position, i.e., that time and space, empirical objects and causality do not exist independently of the activity of the transcendental subject. The distinction between criticism and dogmatism is reduced to the difference between idealism and materialism.

The phenomenological reception of transcendental philosophy, although different from German Idealism, also interprets critique as an exploration of a new, fundamental metaphysical sphere. For Edmund Husserl, the transcendental refers to the conditions of possibility of the appearance of the world for intentional consciousness. Martin Heidegger argued that Kant's attempt to establish the foundation of metaphysical discourse itself encounters a lack of ground in the temporal activity of transcendental imagination. According to Heidegger, metaphysics needs to be re-established in the discourse of fundamental ontology, which reveals the relationship between Being and temporality through a phenomenological description of *Dasein*—being that exists in the world.⁹ Thus, for phenomenologists, the transcendental philosophy is developed thanks to the method of phenomenological reduction, which suspends assumptions about the existence of the world in order to focus on the structures of experience itself, while the transcendental argument proves the irreducibility of these structures to objects of scientific discourse.¹⁰

According to metaphysical interpretations, the spirit of critical philosophy lies in the rejection of static, dogmatic metaphysics that naively start from an object or subject. Instead, it favours a more fundamental metaphysics of the activities necessary for the experience of objects. Speculation is not rejected but modified

⁸ Gilles Deleuze's transcendental empiricism can also be included among the metaphysical interpretations. In *Difference and Repetition* and *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze uses the transcendental method to develop an 'impersonal transcendental field', i.e., the conditions of possibility for the expression of difference by itself.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. James S. Churchill, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1962.

¹⁰ Alexander Schnell makes the point that, although the transcendental method of phenomenology pioneered by Husserl is distinct from both Kant's formalism and psychologism because it concerns the conditions of the living and dynamic origin of being, the transcendental deduction in the *Critique of Pure Reason* should already be regarded as the realisation of such a "living philosophy" as opposed to a dead philosophy starting from the object. Alexander Schnell, *Zeit, Einbildung, Ich. Phänomenologische Interpretation von Kants »Transzendentaler Kategorien-Deduktion«*, Frankfurt am Main, Verlag Vittorio Klostermann, 2022, pp. 17–25.

by critique. This allows certain traditional metaphysical concepts to be retained, not in relation to stable and identical objects but to dynamic processes and structures. However, their main danger was the return to the dogmatic thought patterns criticised by Kant, such as intellectual intuition, absolute knowledge or the certainty of inner experience. As the famous distinction between phenomena and ‘things-in-itself’ cannot be maintained for Fichte, Schelling or phenomenology, the sense-perception-limiting function and critique of metaphysical speculation lose their significance. Moreover, the close relationship between metaphysics and scientific discourse is abandoned. The new metaphysical sphere, whether as a theory of knowledge, a philosophy of nature, a ‘world of life’ [*Lebenswelt*] or ‘being-in-the-world’ is thought to be more fundamental than scientific discourse and inaccessible from its perspective.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS: HOW MUST WE THINK?

The metaphysical interpretations developed in German Idealism were opposed by psychological readings of Kant's philosophy. In this context, ‘psychologism’ does not mean the reduction of logical laws to psychology. Rather, it is the view that the conditions for the possibility of experience relate to the psychological aspects of human cognition. Early psychologism, represented by Jakob Friedrich Fries and his followers, interpreted critical philosophy as an anthropological study of the mind's cognitive capacities employing a method of observation-based reflection.¹¹

Because it was the most frequently and most sharply attacked interpretation of Kant's philosophy, psychologism is often overlooked or considered to be obviously wrong. This view can no longer be upheld for two reasons. Firstly, there is solid justification of this interpretation in certain passages of *Critique of Pure Reason*. Secondly, there are interesting contemporary attempts to rehabilitate psychologism by Patricia Kitcher, Andrew Brook and Catherine Malabou. For example, in her book *Kant's Transcendental Psychology*, Patricia Kitcher defines Kant's ‘weak psychologism’ as the view that psychological facts are relevant to philosophical or normative statements, even if they do not justify them. Much of

¹¹ Jakob Friedrich Fries, *Neue oder anthropologische Kritik der Vernunft*, 2nd edn, vol. 1, Jena, Christian Friedrich Winter, 1828; Jürgen Bona Meyer, *Kant's Psychologie: Dargestellt und erörtert*, Berlin, Verlag von Wilhelm Hertz, 1870

the *Critique of Pure Reason* must appear incomprehensible if one fails to see that it concerns the universal and necessary capacities of the mind for cognition and experience.¹²

Unlike Fries, new psychological interpretations reject observation and interpret the transcendental method as a demonstration of the necessary, albeit unobservable, functions of the mind. According to Kitcher, the forms of sensibility are Kant's contribution to debates on vision. Conversely, the syntheses of apprehension, imagination and apperception are constituent functions of the thinking subject. As Kant's critique of the proofs of the existence of the soul demonstrates, these functions cannot be confused with the subject as a sort of thing. It is the subject that thinks, not the brain.¹³

For psychological interpretations, the activities of the subject refer to the functions of the mind or even the brain. The transcendental argument demonstrates that these forms, dispositions and functions of the mind describe how we must think for experience to be possible. Transcendental deduction thus becomes a new kind of empirical deduction that is oriented not bottom-up (from experience to concept, as for John Locke) but top-down (from necessary conditions to possible experience).¹⁴ The critical function of psychology consists of drawing conclusions about the capacities and limitations of the human mind with regard to metaphysical discourse (for example, the rejection of dogmatic eternal truths¹⁵ or the proof of personal identity). Peter Wolfendale aptly summarises the psychological aspect of critical philosophy:

Kant is trying to understand what it is to be a system exchanging information with one's environment in such a way that one becomes capable of thinking and saying things about it that could possibly be true or false, reasoning with and revising them, bundling them into

¹² Patricia Kitcher, *Kant's Transcendental Psychology*, New York; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 9–25.

¹³ Kitcher, *Kant's Transcendental Psychology*, pp. 30–59, 61–77, 96–120, 202–4.

¹⁴ Andrew Brook views transcendental argumentation as a method adopted by the functionalist theory of the mind and neurobiology. It involves identifying the conditions necessary for a phenomenon to occur, enabling discussion of processes that cannot be observed. The renowned German scientist Hermann von Helmholtz highlighted the sane link between the emerging field of psychological research and Kant's top-down argument. Andrew Brook, *Kant and the Mind*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 12; Hermann von Helmholtz, 'Ueber das Sehen des Menschen', in *Vorträge und Reden*, 5th edn, vol. 1, Braunschweig, Friedrich Vieweg und Sohn, 1903.

¹⁵ See Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy', in *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, vol. 1, New York, Dover Publications, 1969, p. 421.

theories; acting and reacting, desiring and demanding, and more or less living through them. In short, what it is to have a mind and be a person.¹⁶

Psychologism was the most criticised interpretation of Kant's philosophy for two reasons. One was that the table of categories and the autonomy of moral subject¹⁷ could not be defended in a purely psychological reading. The second reason was the collapse of the difference between the transcendental and empirical levels, because the theory of the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experience was derived from an empirical psychological investigation. This can be considered an advantage, as it mitigates the untenable belief in necessary, universal and irreversible metaphysical judgements. However, the psychological redefinition of *a priori* was considered too dangerous for metaphysical and epistemological interpretations, since it threatened to reduce the laws of thought, the axioms of science and the metaphysical principles to contingent, physical dispositions of the mind.

5. EPISTEMOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS: HOW OUGHT WE TO THINK?

Epistemological interpretations aimed to overcome both metaphysical and psychological readings of critical philosophy. They were initially developed within the Baden and Marburg schools of neo-Kantianism. The main idea of these schools was to interpret the transcendental method as distinct from the metaphysical and empirical ways of justifying necessary norms or axioms of cognition, moral action and aesthetic experience.

Wilhelm Windelband, a representative of the Baden School, argued that the conditions of possibility of experience are the necessary norms that ought to be met for true knowledge, moral action or a beautiful works of art to be possible ('norm' is a fundamental concept, and its ontological status is not further defined). The task of critical philosophy is to examine the claims of various discourses to value and universality.¹⁸ While for the Baden School the transcendental method

¹⁶ Peter Wolfendale, 'Fragment on Transcendental Logic', in *Revenge of Reason*, Urbanomic, 2025, pp. 225–292, p.350.

¹⁷ See Patricia Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 238–247.

¹⁸ Wilhelm Windelband, 'Immanuel Kant. Zur Säkularfeier seiner Philosophie', in *Präludien. Aufsätze und Reden zur Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 2021, pp.103–132;

concerns the possibility of the value of judgements, the Marburg school focuses on principles and axioms of scientific cognition. Hermann Cohen, its most important representative, interprets the transcendental conditions as the necessary methods, means and ways of mathematical natural science to achieve the concept of a scientific object. The task of critical philosophy is to verify and understand how objects and laws of mathematical experience are constructed and the contribution of science to metaphysics.¹⁹

Neo-Kantianism influenced the predominantly epistemological reception of transcendental philosophy in the English-speaking world. While I cannot examine this vast interpretative field in detail here, it is possible to highlight its three most significant positions, as presented by Frederick Strawson, Henry Allison and Wilfrid Sellars.

Strawson argues that Kant's valuable insights, such as his theory of the constraints of meaningful use of judgement and his idea of descriptive metaphysics, focusing on basic concepts used to think about reality, can be separated from the transcendental jargon entangled in the problems of traditional metaphysics, which critical philosophy aimed to undermine.²⁰ Allison defends Kant's transcendental idealism by radicalising the contrast between the epistemological and metaphysical perspectives: "rather than making an original move within the same game (traditional ontology), Kant might be taken as introducing a whole new game (transcendental philosophy)"²¹. The rules of the new game no longer concern anything metaphysical but only the epistemological turn from theocentric (dogmatic) to anthropocentric (discursive) model of cognition. Sellars offers a naturalistic account of transcendental philosophy where concepts, judgments, rules and reasons are fundamental conditions of knowledge and action, whether in everyday experience or in scientific discourse.

Wilhelm Windelband, 'Kritische oder genetische Methode?', in *Präludien. Aufsätze und Reden zur Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 2021, pp. 351–382.

¹⁹ Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, Berlin, Ferd. Dümmlers Verlagsbuchhandlung, Harrwitz und Gossmann, 1885.

²⁰ Peter Frederick Strawson, *Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, London; New York, Routledge, 2006; Peter Frederick Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London; New York, Routledge, 2003.

²¹ Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, Revised and enlarged edition, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 120.

He argues that the normative game of giving and asking for reasons cannot be eliminated in empiricist or behaviourist frameworks.²²

Overall, the spirit of critique in epistemological interpretations has three faces. The first, as in Allison's famous interpretation, is the therapeutic function of transcendental philosophy, which reminds metaphysics of the limits of human knowledge, in particular of divine insight into the essence of things and the proof of the existence of objects by means of concept alone. It also refutes scepticism, which presupposes a divine model of cognition while trying to demonstrate its impossibility. The second lies in its ability to justify the main principles of scientific and moral discourse as necessary conditions of scientific or moral judgement. In the third view, critique investigates the necessarily normative, social and linguistic character of rationality and reconciles it with a naturalistic view of the world.

The greatest strength of epistemological interpretations was their ability to adapt transcendental philosophy to the changing paradigms of 20th-century science. Riemann's non-Euclidean geometry and Einstein's theory of relativity challenged the universal validity of Newton's understanding of time and space, on which Kant's proofs were based. To adapt to these changes, critical philosophy became either a minimalist, therapeutic theory of cognition or a theory of pure thinking in the Marburg interpretation, which decided to reduce time and space as forms of sensibility to categories of understanding. However, I believe that both approaches were uncompetitive against logical positivism, pragmatism and other currents of analytical philosophy, which could critically limit cognition and privilege scientific discourse without commitment to metaphysical idealism. The naturalistic and normative approaches to transcendental philosophy, initiated by Sellars and further developed by Brandom, Brassier and Wolfendale, seek to challenge the empiricism of logical positivism while strengthening the normative role of reason beyond that found in pragmatism or other currents of analytical philosophy.

²² Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968; Wilfrid Sellars, *Kant and Pre-Kantian Themes: Lectures by Wilfrid Sellars*, Atascadero, CA, Ridgeview Publishing Company, 2002.

6. TWO METAPHORS OF CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY: THE ISLAND OF CERTAINTY AND THE NAVIGATION OF UNCERTAINTY

It should also be noted that hybrid classes perform well in the transcendental interpretation game. For example, Schopenhauer combines a psychological understanding of the conditions of the possibility of experience with metaphysics of the will. Wolfendale often combines psychological and epistemological readings. Fichte's metaphysics has a strongly epistemological flavour. However, it is very difficult to combine all three positions since, in order to achieve the greatest coherence, each must reject different parts of Kant's philosophy in the name of its spirit.²³ They all have their strengths and weaknesses. Which one offers the most for critical philosophy today?

I believe that, although we can gain valuable insights into contemporary challenges of critical philosophy from every interpretation, all of them inherit serious problems from Kant's notion of the transcendental. They are subject to battle between two models of critique, reflected in two naval metaphors that Kant used to illustrate his philosophy. The first is the metaphor of the island of certainty from *The Critique of Pure Reason*:

We have now not only travelled throughout the land of pure understanding and carefully inspected its every part, but have also surveyed it throughout, determining for each thing in this land its proper place. This land, however, is an island, and is enclosed by nature itself within unchangeable bounds. It is the land of truth (a charming name), and is surrounded by a vast and stormy ocean, where illusion properly resides and many fog banks and much fast-melting ice feign new-found lands. This sea incessantly deludes the seafarer with empty hopes as he roves through his discoveries, and thus entangles him in adventures that he can never relinquish, nor ever bring to an end. But before we venture upon this sea, to search its latitudes for certainty as to whether there is in them anything to be hoped, it will be useful to begin by casting another glance on the map of the land that we are about to leave, and to ask two questions. We should ask, first, whether we might not perhaps be content with what this land contains, or even must be content with it from necessity if there is no other territory at all on which we could settle. And we should ask, second, by what title we possess even this land and can keep ourselves secure against all hostile claims.²⁴

²³ The weakest point in Allison's defence of Kant's philosophy as an organic whole is his interpretation of transcendental aesthetics, which is usually dismissed in epistemological interpretations. Allison's reading is extremely modest, reducing Kant's proofs to the almost tautological necessity of time and space for representation. See Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, pp. 100–108.

²⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 303–304 (A236–37, B295).

In the 'island of certainty' model, critical thinking is tasked with limiting and conquering the territory of certain knowledge. It must deal with its illusions and discourage dangerous expeditions where there is no safe ground. Instead, criticism occupies a more modest territory where it safeguards the interests of morality from the hostile claims of scepticism and fanaticism. Once the island has been secured, it is sufficient to protect it and beware of the dangers of sailing into the unknown.

The second metaphor comes from *Prolegomena* and concerns maritime navigation:

Hume also foresaw nothing of any such possible formal science [critical philosophy – P.K.], but deposited his ship on the beach (of skepticism) for safekeeping, where it could then lie and rot, whereas it is important to me to give it a pilot, who, provided with complete sea-charts and a compass, might safely navigate the ship wherever seems good to him, following sound principles of the helmsman's art drawn from a knowledge of the globe.²⁵

It directly refers to Hume's metaphor of scepticism, as a choice "to perish on the barren rock (...) rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean, which runs out to immensity".²⁶ Unlike the metaphor of the island, critique does not seek a small and certain territory, nor does it forbid ventures into the uncertain sea. Its main task is to provide reason with the tools to navigate uncertainty, orient oneself in thought to avoid two dangers: running aground on scepticism (total doubt in the capabilities of reason) and, as it should be added here, dogmatism (being misguided by unjustified beliefs). The ship of knowledge could be guided in different directions, according to the sailor's desires and goals.

In the face of the many objections that have been raised to Kant's philosophy, the project of critique as the colonisation of the island of certainty is untenable. Non-Euclidean geometry and relativistic physics undermined the belief that time and space are exclusively forms of sensibility. Physical time-space is not necessarily correlated with human sensory experience. Moreover, it cannot be proved that the table of categories is exhaustive with regard to any of the possible criteria. If it depends on the classification of the types of judgements, it should be affected by the revolutions in logic after Frege. If it depends on the concept of

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Revised Edition, trans. Gary Hatfield, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 11–12.

²⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1960, p. 264.

the scientific object, it should be modified along the lines of overcoming the paradigm of Newtonian physics. If it concerns the metaphysical assumptions of an object, it is difficult to exclude different theories of categories, such as those of Hegel and Husserl. Kant is also wrong in attributing the ideas of the soul, freedom and God in their specific Protestant understanding a universal significance to guide cognition, moral action and teleological judgements. It is difficult to defend the theory of synthetic *a priori* judgments as necessary and irrefutable metaphysical truths against the arguments of Rudolf Carnap, Willard Quine and Richard Rorty showing that any judgement can be revised by changes in linguistic conventions or by confrontation with experience.

From the outset, the island of certainty is plagued by internal rebellions concerning its metaphysical assumptions. The final blow to its colonisers comes from outside in the form of scientific, artistic and moral revolutions (especially the discrediting of 'blind duty'). An attempt to rescue the universal and certain dimension of Kant's claims would lead to an interpretation of his philosophy as an oppressive regime of reason, whose illusory rule over the island is based only on the thought police and violent discipline.

Nevertheless, the transcendental method and argument do not have to necessarily be viewed as an attempt to prove certain and irrefutable metaphysical claims. Kant's transcendental deduction is not based on directly certain axioms, as in the philosophy of Descartes, Spinoza or Leibniz, but is built upon three key components: (1) speculation about the conditions of possibility of the object of experience; (2) a theory of cognitive faculties; (3) metaphysical presuppositions of scientific theories (namely Newtonian mechanics). Synthetic *a priori* judgements, in their new critical interpretation, would only have to be immutable if the three above components of the transcendental method were immutable. Kant thought they were, but he was wrong on this point. Theories about cognitive powers change with the development of cognitive science and could change further because of modification of the socio-technological environment of our minds. As we have seen in the 20th century, shifts in scientific paradigms may lead to a revision of the necessary metaphysical assumptions for their experiments. Even speculation about necessary conditions of experience is, as Fichte and Schelling have argued, dependent on the main, unconditional idea founding the critical system. Theories of transcendental conditions can be based on different ideas, as

the difference between Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* and the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger demonstrates. Such a weakened notion of the a priori, where the necessity of the conditions of experience is relative to the uncertainty and contingency of cognitive powers, scientific theories and metaphysical ideas, makes possible a negotiated break with the transcendental.

7. ILLUSIONS OF THE ISLAND

Each of the three interpretations of Kant's transcendental philosophy is characterised by the tension between the two models of critique, and none of them has resisted the temptations of the island of certainty. For Fichte and Schelling, as well as for Husserl's and (early) Heidegger's phenomenology, the metaphysical sphere of the conditions of possibility of experience is the ultimate foundation of every possible discourse, science included. However, the autonomy of the metaphysical sphere is illusory, above all because philosophical speculation cannot exhaust it. Fichte's and Schelling's systems fail at their task of grounding of all knowledge in the sphere of activities of unconditioned transcendental subject. Their systems crack at the point of entrance, where a dogmatic theory of immediate, intellectual intuition of the absolute is required, and at the culminating point of assimilation of the outside within the transcendental sphere, when limitation of the I by external resistance (Fichte) or difference with timeless absolute (Schelling) remains unexplained. Similarly, it has been pointed out that phenomenology cannot be a complete theory of conscious experiences, because elements that are not phenomenologically accessible can be analysed from the perspective of neurobiology²⁷, as well from the point of view of anthropology or natural history.²⁸ Critical philosophy is not able to defend the superiority of the transcendental metaphysical sphere over other discourses.

The psychological theory of the necessary functions of the mind also faces the problem of its outside: the possibility of other minds that do not comply with the conditions described by transcendental philosophy. The most frequently

²⁷ David Roden, 'Nature's Dark Domain: An Argument for a Naturalized Phenomenology', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, vol. 72, 2013, pp. 169–88.

²⁸ See Peter Sloterdijk's reflections on the concepts of being-in-the-world, unconcealment (*aletheia*) and language in Heidegger's philosophy. Peter Sloterdijk, *Not Saved: Essays after Heidegger*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner, Cambridge, Polity, 2017.

discussed example was that of beings whose minds would not communicate through judgments but through the direct exchange of information between brains.²⁹ It is difficult to prove that such minds are impossible. Moreover, as David Roden argues, there are reasons to think that humans themselves and the technology they create could lead to their emergence.³⁰ Even if one narrows down transcendental psychology to present-day human minds, it cannot be ruled out that the development of cognitive science and artificial intelligence will significantly affect our belief about what experience, cognition and knowledge are. While Kitcher points out that the transcendental investigation of the functions of the mind's cognitive faculties can serve as an inspiration for psychology and neuroscience³¹, she overlooks the fact that the opposite is the case: the transcendental argumentation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself was dependent on the understanding of cognitive faculties in Kant's own time. The mind becomes an island for psychological interpretations when, like Kant, they treat cognitive faculties as given, unproblematic, unchanging and independent of technological and social conditions.

Epistemological interpretations find an island of certainty in the theory of necessary and universal norms of rationality. As Windelband argued, the task of critical philosophy was not to prove norms of cognition, moral acts or art once and for all but to constantly examine and test discourses' claim to universal validity. He considered the scope of the universality of norms to be greatest in logic, much smaller in ethics and smallest in aesthetics.³² But is it possible today, in the face of the multiplicity of formal logical systems or revolutions in science and art, to find norms or axioms that cannot be rejected? Although Kant's transcendental arguments could convince us that there are norms that cannot be rejected from the point of view of a particular goal, for example, justifying metaphysical assumptions of Newtonian physics, it is very difficult to give an example of a single transcendental norm that could not be replaced by another due to changes in our knowledge. Two best candidates for universal norms are

²⁹ See Paul M. Churchland, 'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes', *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 78, no. 2, 1981, pp. 67–90.

³⁰ David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human*, London, Routledge, 2014.

³¹ Kitcher, *Kant's Transcendental Psychology*, pp. 25–26.

³² Windelband, 'Kritische Oder Genetische Methode?', pp. 381–82.

the necessity of experience in time and space and the necessity of experience belonging to the standpoint of the particular I. But beyond these two, isn't the critical search for universal validity wasting time searching for inexistent lands?

Wilfrid Sellars and his followers, such as Brandom, Wolfendale and Brassier, argue that there are indeed transcendental, necessary norms of rationality, such as participation in a game of giving and asking for reasons, rule-governed behaviour or consistency in beliefs and commitments. Kant's transcendental philosophy was a first step towards a normative, discursive and social concept of rationality, compatible with revisionist, naturalist metaphysics. While the attempt to rehabilitate the infamous notion of the rational subject (or even the 'animal rationale') is worth exploring, it faces two difficulties. Firstly, it is hopelessly anthropocentric as it excludes animals and artificial systems from thinking and acting, not to mention knowing something. Animal studies and the development of machine learning and neural networks strongly contradict the claim that the propositional and intentional model of thought is the only one possible.³³ Secondly, it is unclear how the normative space of reason relates to power relations, institutions and cultural differences in what counts as rational, as investigated by genealogical and post-structuralist approaches. Isn't the space of reason an island that dogmatically prohibits investigation into non-human and artificial ways of thinking as well as the ideological and institutional conditions of its own domination?

Peter Wolfendale's "Essay on Transcendental Realism" offers two responses to these difficulties. Wolfendale argues that historical critique (or genealogy) is concerned with specific concepts rather than with the general framework established by transcendental philosophy. However, this might not hold in the case of the strongest postcolonial arguments, which point out that the very idea of judging human beings as more or less rational or of viewing the space of reason as pure and unrelated to power relations may itself serve the purposes of colonial domination. The second argument echoes Windelband's idea: historical critique should be used to expose false universals and to uncover the proper transcendental limits of knowledge. It is therefore vulnerable to a similar doubt

³³ Roden, *Posthuman Life*, pp. 78–79.

that there are no universal rules independent of specific contexts³⁴. Robert Brandom rightly emphasises the retrospective, recollective form of reason³⁵, yet much remains to be done by neorationalists to reconsider the relation between reason and oppression.

8. TOWARDS A NAVIGATIONAL MODEL OF TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Critique is always a limitation, a distinction between legitimate (limited) use of concepts and two kinds of illegitimate use: the dogmatic transgression of the conditions of knowledge and the sceptical failure to meet them. After abandoning the island of certainty, each of the three interpretations has the potential to open one component of the transcendental argument (metaphysical ideas, the theory of cognitive faculties and the facts of science or culture) transforming critical limitation from an unnegotiable given into the infinite task of navigation through the adventures and catastrophes of our knowledge.

Alongside the failed foundationalist project of ultimate grounding of metaphysics, Fichte and Schelling developed the use of the regulative idea as a ground of the philosophical system only sketched in *Critique of Pure Reason*. They demonstrated the necessity and function of unconditioned ideas for the activity of philosophical systems and existential problems of life. They also emphasised that every act of knowledge carries something unconscious within it, making boundaries between dogmatic and critical thinking much less certain. A navigational critique of metaphysics (which I can merely sketch here) would investigate the function of ideas or categories for the activity of the particular system in relation to the historical problems of life and knowledge. Transcendental logic can be thus interpreted as a response to the question whether metaphysical discourse means anything that would avoid the extremes of scepticism (the view that metaphysical judgements are meaningless) and dogmatism (inattentiveness to whether metaphysical judgements mean anything at all). Metaphysical disputes make sense only if they could differently organise our thinking about objects of experience.

³⁴ Wolfendale, 'Essay on Transcendental Realism', pp. 286-288.

³⁵ Robert Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, 2009, pp. 78-108.

David Roden convincingly argues that ‘transcendental humanism’, e.g., a theory that limits the possibility of post-humans by discursive agency and propositional psychology or the phenomenological world, is unable to prove necessity of its conditions. However, contrary to Roden’s speculative post-humanism, which is not that interested in claims of what post-humans would be like, the transcendental method can offer a way to investigate and speculate on changes in conditions of experience and thought. The psychological interpretation of the transcendental method could be a useful tool to confront the development of neurobiology, research on artificial intelligence and the transformation of the technological environment of our own minds. Where is critique more necessary than in face of dogmatic beliefs that it is obvious what intelligence is, what it means to think and to experience and how the mind should function socially? Or, on the other hand, scepticism towards the implications of cognitive science or the significance of the development of artificial reasoning? An example of critical rationality confronting neuroscience is the work of Catherine Malabou, who criticises the humanities’ ignorance of the neuroscience revolution but also the ideological neutrality of the image of the ‘neuronal human.’³⁶

According to Malabou, the dialogue between critical philosophy and neuroscience requires a modification of the transcendental method. Interpreting Kant through the encounter of reason and life in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Malabou proposes a theory of the epigenetic paradigm of rationality, inspired by the paradigm shift in neurobiology from thinking of DNA as a program code strictly determining brain development in favour of the epigenetic development of synapses through adaptation to environmental factors that can influence gene expression. Malabou literally interprets Kant’s phrase about the ‘epigenesis of reason’ and claims that the conditions of possibility of experience develop organically from necessary embryos, the final shape of which depends on adaptation to contingent factors.³⁷

Malabou makes a step in the right direction, which allows us to see that the

³⁶ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (Fordham University Press, 2008).

³⁷ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008.

question of the psychological conditions of experience is still open. The necessary functions of the mind are embryos, which could have different expressions and ways of functioning for different minds in different contingent conditions. The knowledge of non-human minds, the simulation of cognitive functions or even changes in our own minds may let us better understand the necessary conditions of having a mind and experience. Similarly, Pete Wolfendale argues that we should investigate different logical models of cognitive functions and intentionality: “transcendental logic may yet give us new purchase on transcendental psychology, and thereby on the problem of building better minds”.³⁸

Epistemological interpretations of neo-Kantians adapted the transcendental method to historical changes in scientific facts and viewed cognition and critique as infinite tasks. Contemporary epistemological interpretations are concerned with the task of navigating the demands of science for the revision of our self-understanding. Wilfrid Sellars posed the famous problem of developing a synoptic picture of the two visions of man: as the subject of intentional action who gives reasons and demands justifications and as an object under the scrutiny of scientific discourse.³⁹ Here, one encounters two oppositions that Kant’s philosophy sought to overcome: the empirical scepticism that questions whether free and rational subjectivity can have a place in the scientific image and the dogmatic rationalism that asserts the irreducibility of the mind, the world of life or the self to scientific objects.

Critical rationalism, as defended, for example, by Ray Brassier, aims to follow the Enlightenment demand for revision, while maintaining the autonomy of rational subjectivity. Brassier challenges the dogmatic limitations of including consciousness, experience and thought within the scientific image, which were used to refuse normative questions about what we can make of ourselves and how to transform the social conditions of life. Simultaneously, he argues that rationality is rule-governed and thus only realised but not constituted by physical patterns. That does not exclude the possibility that rationality could be realised

³⁸ Wolfendale, ‘Fragment on Transcendental Logic’, p.372.

³⁹ Wilfrid Sellars, ‘Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man’, in *Science, Perception & Reality*, Atascadero, CA, Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991.

through different physical processes than human reason.⁴⁰ These themes are also explored in Wolfendale's *Revenge of Reason*. Nevertheless, I believe that the concept of rationality is much more open to dispute and revision than is usually assumed by neorationalists.

In the navigational model of transcendental philosophy, critique does not seek irrefutable and irreversible conditions of experience. Instead, transcendental conditions are tools for orienting oneself amid changes in metaphysical ideas, scientific knowledge and the socio-technological environment. That invites the question of whether critical tools developed by the three interpretations could be integrated into one device. After the rejection of the island of certainty, cognitive powers should be understood as regulative ideas, i.e., concepts that serve the practical interests of cognition but can never be finally determined. Yet what are cognitive powers? Mind or intelligence (as in psychological interpretations), discursive rationality (as in epistemological ones) or expressions of metaphysical ground—activities of spirit, nature or phenomenological consciousness?

The first path would be to unify the three interpretations under a single principle of activity, for example, computation. As in German Idealism, such a radicalisation of critical philosophy would lead to a monistic metaphysics, carrying the same risk of transgressing the limits of meaningful judgement. The second path, which I find more appealing, would not seek to unify these three ideas—metaphysical ground of experience, mind and rationality—but rather to treat them as distinct domains in which the transcendental method can help us determine the changing meanings of key concepts through investigation of their condition of possibility while maintaining, as in Kant's 'Transcendental Dialectics', that they always remain something more than we can articulate within our contemporary theories.

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⁴⁰ See Ray Brassier, 'Prometheanism and Its Critics', in *#Accelerate#*: *The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2014; Ray Brassier, 'The View from Nowhere', *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2011, pp. 7–23; Ray Brassier and Suhail Malik, 'Reason Is Inconsolable and Non-Conciliatory', in *Realism Materialism Art*, ed. Christoph Cox et al., New York; Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2015, pp. 213–230; Ray Brassier, 'Transcendental Logic and True Representings', *Glass Bead*, 2016.