

# A TRAVELLER'S JOURNAL

## OF THE CRITIQUE:

### Adventure in the Land of Transcendental Metaphysics

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## Introduction

*How is mathematics possible? How is physics possible? Is metaphysics as a science possible at all?* These are some of the questions which Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* attempts to answer, through a systematic, and entirely novel presentation of a *transcendental* metaphysics. Over the course of some eight hundred-odd pages, Kant examines the human faculties of *sensibility*, *understanding*, and *reason*, culminating in a complete metaphysical system with the ambition to serve as a foundation to all physics and a posteriori knowledge. Just exactly how successful is Kant's endeavour, which even he himself likens to a 'Copernican Revolution?' What *exactly* is the 'synthetic unity of apperception?' What do the dialectical 'illusions' of pure reason hold, for the nature of truth in Philosophy? And are the mathematical and physical sciences truly *empirical*, under the terms of Kant's transcendental foundation? This paper seeks to explore these questions, and more, in a critical discourse of Kant's Critique. Thus, one may call this essay a Critique of the Critique of Pure Reason: a paper that seeks not to refute Kant's thesis, but rather more of a traveller's journal. A journal that documents our expedition through this strange new country, that asks both the tourist's questions – as well as record all the sights and marvels of the trip.

We will begin our metaphysical adventure with the Critique's *Transcendental Doctrine of the Elements*, where we walk along with Kant on his journey to discover the a priori foundations (i.e. the epitomous *elements*) of all human knowledge. Starting at the trailhead of *Transcendental Aesthetics*, we will explore the human faculty of sensibility, to find the a priori forms which underpin all sensate intuition. Moving on to the *Transcendental Logic*, we will attempt the very same campaign upon the faculty of understanding, making the demonstrative leap from *judgements* to *categories*, all in pursuit of the *pure concepts of understanding*. With our prize in hand, we will follow Kant as he unifies the two faculties, and explore *cognition* – the only heir to *sensibility* and *understanding*'s union. And finally, once we have summited the peaks of this Analytic mountain, we will at last be able to survey the island of Kant's *transcendental metaphysics*. We will see both the beaches of a priori certainty – as well as the farther fogbanks of the stormy, dialectical sea.

## The Transcendental Aesthetic

Our expedition begins with the *transcendental aesthetics* – that philosophical trailhead, which separates the orderly boulevards of physics from the uncharted wilderness of metaphysics. For what better way there is to explore beyond the physical – μετὰ τὰ φυσικά – than by starting with the very foundation of our means of physical perception? Indeed through Kant’s introductory division of knowledge as *a priori* and *a posteriori*, we are already driven to aesthetics, as it is the very means in which we know things *a posteriori*.<sup>1</sup> The faculty of sensibility is shown to us as a means in which we (i.e. the subject, the reasoning human), have the power to intuit *sensations*, which are presented to us by objects that are external to us. The study of sensations, sensibility, and the intuitions which we yield is the science of aesthetics. And it is from this perch of aesthetics, where Kant performs the Copernican leap that upturns our world.

For we ask ourselves the question: “can there be any *a priori* knowledge?” To which Kant responds with the demonstration that: although cognitions are composed of concepts which are in reference to objects, all concepts by necessity do not directly refer to their underlying object, but rather only to a sensible *intuition*. However, our faculty of sensibility is never an active one. We reach out and ‘grasp’ the objects that we wish to sense with some sort of sensory ectoplasm. Rather, the faculty of sensibility is entirely passive – it is solely our capacity for the *receptivity* of sensation, our ability to be *affected* by objects that are external to us:

The capacity (a receptivity) to acquire presentations as a result of the way in which we are affected by objects is called **sensibility**. Hence by means of sensibility objects are *given* to us, and it alone supplies us with *intuitions*.

(Kant et al. B33)

The objective, material study of our sensibility (i.e. the means in which we are receptive to sensation) is an empirical science, one that is perhaps a closer kin to ophthalmology<sup>2</sup>, than that of any rank befitting a philosopher. Hence, it is no surprise that Kant dusts away the empirical trappings of a mundane aesthetic science, to ask: “when we abstract away all matter of intuition, what is left there to remain?” For the *matter* of intuition is always an object (and hence, objective, and therefore, empirical) – to strip intuitions of their matter is to leave only their *form*. There can be only two possibilities regarding the *formal* nature of intuition. Either we are to deny its existence altogether – as to say that the evaporation of intuitive matter yields only a bare, depositless vapour – or we are to acknowledge that there is indeed some metaphysical residue, a crystallisation of formal structure that underlies all human intuition.

The first case is an apparent impossibility to Kant, one that even a tourist can understand on grounds both metaphysical and mundane. For to argue that there is no formal nature behind human intuition is

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<sup>1</sup> A priori knowledge comes *prior* to experience, lit. ‘from earlier.’ A posteriori knowledge comes *posterior* to experience, lit. ‘from later.’

<sup>2</sup> The medical science of eyeballs.

to accept that all intuitions are inherently structureless. It is to accept that there is no deep, underlying relationship between sensory intuitions – a nihilistic capitulation so kraven that Kant devotes the majority of the Critique’s introduction (as well as a good part of his *Prolegomena*) in refuting. He argues that the lack of an a priori, formal structure behind intuition will prevent the apodeictic<sup>3</sup> certainty of mathematics and geometry. Likewise, to use a more mundane analogy – the mundane, material nature of the human sensory organs by necessity create some formal structure which will underpin our intuition. It is no great leap to take such mundane, aesthetic a prioriae, and to make a further jump that abstracts away even the material nature of our sensory biology – and ask the *transcendental* question, of what are the a priori forms behind intuition:

There must, therefore, be a science of all principles of a priori sensibility; I call such a science *transcendental aesthetic*. It constitutes the first part of the transcendental doctrine of elements, and stands in contrast to that [part of the] transcendental doctrine of elements which contains the principles of pure thought and is called transcendental logic.

(B36)

So what do we find, in this new-found, metaphysical science, of the transcendental aesthetic? What are the underlying a priori forms behind pure intuition? Kant, the ever-obliging tour guide, is happy to answer us, as we begin our hike within the boundaries of the transcendental aesthetic itself. “In the course of that inquiry it will be found that there are two pure forms of sensible intuition, which are principles for a priori cognition: viz., space and time. We now proceed to the task of examining these” (B37).

## The Transcendental Analytic

## The Transcendental Dialectic

## Conclusion

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<sup>3</sup>necessarily or self-evidently true.

## Bibliography

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