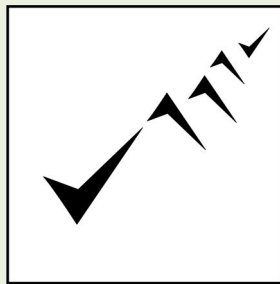


Preliminaries for a Pure Epistemological Interpretation of the *Antinomy* of Pure Reason

Marcel Chelba

Second, revised and expanded English edition



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Kantinomus Verlag e. U.

<http://kantinomus.com>

ISBN (1st ed.): 978-3-911041-26-3

ISBN (2nd ed.): 978-3-911041-27-0

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Artwork:

“First Five Notes” (Richard Wagner—Symphony in C Major)

Original drawing by the author.

Author's Note

This text was originally written as a lecture for the APHIN Symposium: *Reality and Actuality—Finding and Inventing Our World* (Göttingen, 2019).

In part, it summarises ideas first developed in my debut book: *Introducere critică: Despre posibilitatea metafizicii ca știință în perspectiva filosofiei critice kantiene* (Crates, 2004)—*Critical Introduction: On the Possibility of Metaphysics as a Science in the Perspective of Kantian Critical Philosophy* (English translation of the title; the book is in Romanian and has not yet been translated). (Hereafter: *Critical Introduction*)

The present volume represents the second edition of the text, revised and prepared for publication in English.

Tübingen

20 February 2026

Marcel Chelba

Table of Contents

Part I:

Foreword

§ 1. For the sake of peace

§ 2. Critique of pure reason—a transcendental epistemology

Addendum

Part II:

§ 3. The epistemological paradigms of Kant's critical philosophy

§ 4. Antinomy of pure reason—the incandescent core of Kant's *Critique*

§ 5. A strategic epistemological step backward—a clever scientific step forward

§ 6. Transcendental aesthetics—the epistemological paradigm of modern physics

§ 7. About the necessity of discovering a transcendental logic and a discipline of pure reason.

Epilogue

Preliminaries for a Pure Epistemological Interpretation of the Antinomy of Pure Reason

Part I

Foreword

In Kant's view, the antinomy of pure reason has been the central problem of metaphysics, and not just the fate of metaphysics or science, but our destiny as a species has depended on how we solve this problem. This is why Kant set himself the task of solving this problem with the greatest possible scientific scrupulosity. He first reviewed his *heuristic prejudices*, then he developed the necessary *conceptual tools*, and only then did he go to work. This epistemological ritual at the birth of Kantian critical philosophy is what I try to capture in this paper.

§ 1. For the sake of peace

Kant wished to reconcile everyone: Maupertuis and Crusius with Wolff; Mendelssohn with Jacobi; Leibniz with Descartes, on the one hand, or with Locke and Hume, on the other. The reason for this was that this scholastic brawl could not lead anywhere any longer. The time of a compromise solution, a middle way, had come, for the losses were ruinous on all sides.

“Es scheint doch nichts klärer, als dass von zween, [...] ¹ doch einer Recht haben müsse. Ist aber dieses, so ist es, weil die Klarheit auf beiden Seiten gleich ist, doch unmöglich, jemals auszumitteln, auf welcher Seite das Recht sei, und der Streit dauert nach wie vor, wenn die Parteien gleich bei dem Gerichtshofe der Vernunft zur Ruhe verwiesen worden. Es bleibt also kein Mittel übrig, den Streit gründlich und zur Zufriedenheit beider Teile zu endigen, als dass, da sie einander doch so schon widerlegen können, sie endlich überführt werden, dass sie um nichts streiten, und ein gewisser transzendentaler Schein ihnen da eine Wirklichkeit vorgemalt habe, wo keine anzutreffen ist. Diesen Weg der Beilegung eines nicht abzuurteilenden Streits wollen wir jetzt einschlagen.”²

The fundamental *desideratum* of Kantian critical philosophy was the *possibilization of peace*, the finding of a *fair way* of settling conflicts between states, schools and religions, *mapping the intellect* (as Hume attempted) and *identifying the natural frontiers of knowledge* (the powers of reason in its *empirical* and *transcendental* use), recognizable as such by everyone.

Mode of resolution: the sublimation of the object of dispute—in this case, the suspension of *objective reality*, that is, of any *monopoly on the truth*, both to our *sensitive faculty* and our *faculty of judgment*. This was the only path still open in philosophy. All other roads had turned out to be dead ends.

Aristotle's logic, centred on the *principle of consistency (non-contradiction)*, aims to resolve conflicts by *sacrificing one of the combatants*, for *the thesis and the antithesis cannot be simultaneously true*.

¹ By this bracket I suppressed the following phrase: “deren der eine behauptet: die Welt hat einen Anfang, der andere: die Welt hat keinen Anfang, sondern sie ist von Ewigkeit her”. I preferred to put this phrase in footnotes to let Kant's concept of *solution* be emphasised—a concept he applied not only to cosmological antinomies but to all other theoretical and practical litigations of reason.

² KrV, A501-502/B529-530.

Transcendental logic, centred on the *principle of completeness*, aims at *saving combatants by sacrificing the subject of the conflict*, splitting the *subject* into two parts, and showing that the whole conflict arises from the fact that the *subject is viewed (thought) from two radically different perspectives (which are not contradictory, but complementary)*. In the *transcendental topic*, *thesis* and *antithesis* are simultaneously true, but in different *logical places*³.

This is the *royal way* of settling a conflict, Kant wants to say, and the gateway is the *transcendental illusion (the confusion of logical places)*, which, as soon as it is perceived as such, automatically opens and turns into a *triumphal arch* of pure reason.

In the same way that King Solomon (in his proverbial judgment)⁴ revealed the truth and restored justice between the two women who were claiming the maternity of one and the same child, ordering (formally) that the child be cut in two, Kant tried to calm the spirits in philosophy by epistemologically cutting the truth in two and giving their share of justice to all (empiricists and rationalists, realists and nominalists, materialists and idealists etc.), pointing out that, in fact, they are disputing about nothing, and that the real conflict is in their own head, an internal conflict of reason itself.

The postulate that, *in reality, no one knows reality* and that *all our empirical or transcendental certainties are but appearances of reality, shaped by our own*

³ For what Kant called *logical place*, see: KrV, A268/B324.

⁴ 1 Kings 3:25–27 (New International Version):

25 He then gave an order: “Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other.”

26 The woman whose son was alive was deeply moved out of love for her son and said to the king, “Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don’t kill him!” But the other said, “Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!”

27 Then the king gave his ruling: “Give the living baby to the first woman. Do not kill him; she is his mother.”

faculties of knowledge, is the wisest verdict that reason can give in its dispute with itself.

Only in this way can *scandalous neighbours* be calmed: showing that *neither of them is right* and that the real cause of scandal is their own *procesomanie*.

Kant's *critical solution to the problem of antinomy of pure reason* is in fact a solution by *defusing and freezing the conflict*, not by brutally cutting it. *Vicious circles* cannot be solved with Alexander the Great's method in the *Gordian node problem*.

In fact, Kant discovered, at the origin of all our conflicts there is a *conflict of reason with itself*, actually, a conflict between the *two fundamental perspectives of thinking* that arise from the *two possible uses of reason*: the *empirical* and the *transcendental* one.

This discovery is most likely the source of *the light of 1769*, as Vleeschauwer⁵ claimed. His arguments: *Reflection 5037*⁶, a phrase from *Prolegomena*⁷, and Kant's famous letter of *September 21 (1798)* to

⁵ Herman J. de Vleeschauwer, *L'évolution de la pensée kantienne*, Librairie Félix Alcan, Paris, 1939.

⁶ "Wenn ich nur so viel erreiche, daß ich überzeuge, man müsse die Bearbeitung dieser Wissenschaft so lange aussetzen, bis man diesen Punkt ausgemacht hat, so hat diese Schrift ihren Zweck erreicht. Ich sahe anfänglich diesen Lehrbegriff wie in einer Dämmerung. Ich versuchte es ganz ernstlich, Sätze zu beweisen und ihr Gegenteil, nicht um eine Zweifellehre zu errichten, sondern weil ich eine Illusion des Verstandes vermuthete, zu entdecken, worin sie stecke. Das Jahr '69 gab mir großes Licht." (*Kants Werke*. Akademie-Ausgabe, Bd. XVIII, *Reflexion 5037*, AA XVIII, S. 69)

⁷ "Dieses Produkt der reinen Vernunft in ihrem transzendenten Gebrauch ist das merkwürdigste Phänomen derselben, welches auch unter allen am kräftigsten wirkt, die Philosophie aus ihrem dogmatischen Schlummer zu erwecken, und sie zu dem schweren Geschäfte der Kritik der Vernunft selbst zu bewegen." *Prolegomena*, A 142.

his friend *Christian Garve*, where Kant explicitly stated that the problem raised by the *antinomies of pure reason* is what *first* (that is, before of *Hume*) awakened him from his *dogmatic sleep* and led him to a *critique of reason*, meant to end once and for all the *scandal caused by the apparent conflict of reason with itself*.⁸

Practically, by successive sublimations, Kant succeeded in reducing the old *quarrel of the universals*⁹ to a *quarrel of our cognitive faculties*.

In 1769 Kant realised that the fundamental task of philosophy is to understand and regulate this conflict. All Kant did next was to try to turn the path that opened up before his eyes in the *year '69* into a *royal road*—which, incidentally, he also recommended to his readers¹⁰.

Critical philosophy is, through its very program, a *pacifist philosophy*—a philosophy of *reconciling perspectives of thinking*, not of *discriminating* one

⁸ “Nicht die Untersuchung vom Daseyn Gottes, der Unsterblichkeit etc. ist der Punct gewesen von dem ich ausgegangen bin, sondern die Antinomie der r. V.: ‘Die Welt hat einen Anfang –: sie hat keinen Anfang etc. bis zur vierten: Es ist Freyheit im Menschen,—gegen den: es ist keine Freyheit, sondern alles ist in ihm Naturnothwendigkeit’; diese war es welche mich aus dem dogmatischen Schlummer zuerst aufweckte und zur Critik der Vernunft selbst hintrieb, um das Scandal des scheinbaren Widerspruchs der Vernunft mit ihr selbst zu heben.” *Kants Werke*. Akademie-Ausgabe, AA XII, Briefwechsel 1798, S. 256.

⁹ A syntagma of Alain de Libera, in *La Querelle des universaux, de Platon à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1996.

¹⁰ “Wenn der Leser diesen in meiner Gesellschaft durchzuwandern Gefälligkeit und Geduld gehabt hat, so mag er jetzt urtheilen, ob oicht, wenn es ihm beliebt, das Seinige dazu beizutragen, um diesen Fussessteig zur Heeresstrasse zu machen, dasjenige, was viele Jahrhunderte nicht leisten konnten, noch vor Ablauf des gegenwärtigen erreicht werden möge: nämlich, die menschliche Vernunft in dem, was ihre Wissbegierde jederzeit, bisher aber vergeblich, beschäftigt hat, zur völligen Befriedigung zu bringen.” (KrV, A856/B884)

in favour of another. With this specification, I fully subscribe, in principle, to Palmquist's *perspectival interpretation*¹¹.

Kant's *transcendental logic* is a logic aimed at *reconciling opposites*, which recognises the right of both to exist, but which, by setting clear borders, seeks to prevent them from struggling with each other. This is Kant's *critical solution* to the antinomy of pure reason.

Reality transcends both the *senses* and the *intellect*. That is why we can never grasp the true *face of reality*. All that we can know about what *is in reality* remains under the sign of the *hypothesis*. *Reality* is an objective that we can approach only by successive *assumptions* and *approximations*, by shaping and combining creatively the products of sensitivity and intellect, as in a puzzle game which is created precisely to the extent that it is discovered.

Sensitivity and intellect both claim reality like dogs fighting over a bone, and the soundest solution, Kant wants to say, is the confiscation of the bone—the rejection of exclusivity claims to both of them.

But how to take the bone from the dog's mouth, without being bitten?¹² Obviously, showing him a big stick and using it if necessary.

Here Kant felt the need to bring an *ethical amendment* to his *critical solution*:

¹¹ Stephen R. Palmquist, *Kant's System of Perspectives: An Architectonic Interpretation of the Critical Philosophy*, University Press of America, 1993.

¹² In fact, exactly that's happened to Kant into the history of philosophy: trying to reconcile everyone, Kant eventually became the target of all. Kant, the *judge in charge* at the *Court of Reason*, had no means of persuasion at hand, moreover, he seemed at a certain time completely abandoned and allowed to be torn by the detractors.

If justice, without the executive power on its side, is impracticable, then the executive power, without having the justice on its side, loses any political legitimacy and becomes itself the cause of all social abuses and injustices.

As Pascal also said: “Justice without might is helpless; might without justice is tyrannical.”¹³

This is why Kant places the *moral will* at the keystone of his critical edifice.

Moral will, that is, the will to achieve the good as such, without any other finality, is the only possible *a priori guarantee* of the moral validity of our decisions. The *categorical imperative* is or should be the compass (the conducive principle) of our rational thinking.

In a way, Kant was the first to ratify in modern epistemology the principle *contraria non contradictoria sed complementa sunt* (the later motto of modern physics) as an analytical compromise of Cusanus’s famous *coincidentia oppositorum*.

The *opposites*, in Kant’s vision, are *complementary* and correspond to each other (in the perspective of a larger, *transcendent unit*)—but not *categorically*, only *probabilistically*. This is the problematic context of Kantian *transcendental logic*.

Aristotle’s logic is a *reductionist* and *uniformizing* logic, which, in the name of its *consistency (its inner peace)*, actually sets the foundation for tyranny.

¹³ Pascal, *Pensées*, W.F. Trotter (Translator), Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 61.

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.pdf>

Transcendental logic is an antinomic logic, not a manichaeist one—it puts the conflict at its centre but aims at reconciling the opposites. The *excluded tertium* of Aristotle’s logic is, in Kant’s transcendental logic, the *boundary and link of opposites*.

Mutatis mutandis, empirical epistemology is a monocular epistemology, that looks at the world from a single perspective: that of our own senses. Empiricists are a kind of Cyclops who see the world through a single eye, or a kind of deaf-blind people who perceive the world only through the touch sense.

Kant’s *transcendental logic* is a *constructivist epistemology*, that recognises the *veto right* of experience, but also recognises the *contribution of our own productive imagination* to the configuration of our *sensitive world*.

Metaphysics does not deserve the degree of contempt manifested by empiricists in the last two or three centuries. In spite of empiricists, modern sciences are following Kant’s footsteps, that is, without denying the *decisive contribution of empirical experience*, they are increasingly recognizing the contribution of our own *heuristic fictions*.¹⁴ to the modelling of scientific truth.

Despite all the persecutions, metaphysics remains alive and continues to work quietly in the kitchen of modern sciences, like *Cinderella*. Metaphysics—the former Queen (a kind of *Hecuba* dethroned and exiled by her own relatives)¹⁵—seems to have fallen into disgrace today. It would be time for metaphysics to regain its *legitimate rights*. The history of science itself demands it.

Any *physicist*, when finding himself in a state of *epistemological crisis*, as Planck was before the discovery of the *constant of action* or

¹⁴ *heuristische Fiktionen*—the famous Kantian concept consecrated by Hans Vaihinger in *Die Philosophie des Als-Ob* (1911). To see: KrV, A771/ B799 and A616-7/B644-5.

¹⁵ Kantian comparison, in KrV, AVIII.

Schrödinger before the discovery of the *wave function*, is a metaphysician. Only after the *physicist* makes the connection between *experimental data* and his *purely theoretical desiderata* (*formal* or *transcendental*, in terms of Kant), creating a new *mathematical interpretation model of the experience*, only then does he become a *real physicist*.

Modern cosmologists, in their attempts to construct a mathematical model of the universe, are *pure metaphysicians* without knowing it. All their new epistemological dilemmas are logically congruent with the old dilemmas of metaphysics. They merely reiterate, in a different language, the old theogony and theomachy of ancient cosmogony.

Without the exercise of *philosophical reflection*, I mean, without *metaphysics*, the scientist is nothing more than a kind of blind who tries to touch the light.

What kind of craftsman is the one who does not know his own tools? The scientist uses a lot of tools, but among them the most important is *his own thinking*. That's exactly what Kant did through *Critique of pure reason*: he tried to bring out the virtues and weaknesses of our main epistemological tool.

That is why Kantian epistemology should be part of the philosophical culture of any modern scientist. All the great *coryphaeus* of modern physics have more or less explicitly recognised Kant's influence on their own epistemological vision, including Einstein, according to Stephen Palmquist's research¹⁶.

¹⁶ Stephen Palmquist, *The Kantian Grounding of Einstein's Worldview: (I) The Early Influence of Kant's System of Perspectives*, POLISH JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY, Vol. IV, No. 1 (Spring 2010), 45-64, and Stephen Palmquist, *The Kantian Grounding of Einstein's Worldview: (II) Simultaneity, Synthetic Apriority and the Mystical*, POLISH JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY, Vol. V, No. 1 (Spring 2011), 97-116.

However, a holistic view of nature will never be anything but a metaphysics in the most authentic sense of the word, precisely because the whole of nature, including us as being and consciousness, together with our measuring instruments, cannot be measured.

“Einstein’s physics is metaphysics because, in essence, it is a way of guessing from the outside what the objective physical world is like on the inside, starting, therefore, from within ourselves, hypothetically and deductively, as a product of our imagination...” “Global physics, the physics of the world, a unified theory of a global physical reality ... will no longer be an experimental science ... but will inevitably be a transcendental science, that is, a metaphysics, in Kant’s sense.” (Marcel Chelba, *Critical Introduction*)

“When the subject of physics is not testable (as is the universe as a whole), the physics becomes a metaphysics” – I once commented on an article of Natalie Wolchover on *Quanta Magazine* (“A Fight for the Soul of Science”, *December 16, 2015*)¹⁷

As for the whole, we are really blind.

Our only ‘sense organ’, specifically designed for the perception of the *whole*, is our own *thinking*. All other senses are provided for the perception of the *part*—the exterior and the opposite of our consciousness—and our observation and measurement instruments can change nothing in this regard.

That is why the universe, as a whole, can only be the object of some mental experiments, and through our own consciousness the universe itself can do nothing but take note of its own ambiguity.

¹⁷ <https://www.quantamagazine.org/a-fight-for-the-soul-of-science-20151216/>

In Russell's terms, we could say, the *whole* is the *concept of a set that cannot contain itself*, that is, in terms of so-called *continental philosophy*, *the whole is transcendent to its parts*. (The same idea, in two different approaches.)

“In the case of all things which have several parts and in which the totality is not, as it were, a mere heap, but the whole is something besides the parts, there is a cause”—Aristotle said¹⁸.

The whole is something different, beyond or more than the sum of its parts, according to 20th-century *gestaltists* and *holonomists*, following Aristotle.

Not the part gives the measure of the whole, but the whole gives the measure of its parts.

The whole is the part of metaphysics. No science can usurp this *right of possession* of metaphysics except at the cost of *metamorphosing its own way of thinking and transforming itself into metaphysics*, for the *logic of the whole* can only be a *self-referential* one, that is, a *paradoxical* one—precisely as Kantian *transcendental logic*, the only one who, by conceptualizing its own *illusions* and *antinomies*, manages to *surpass its own epistemological limits*.

The central Kantian project was *the epistemological rehabilitation of metaphysics and its engagement in the service of peace*. Peace, in Kant's vision, is the moral equivalent of the *aesthetic sublime*—the upper limit of our social coexistence, meant to give the true measure of our species as a whole. *Ethics*—in *Kant's vision*—is an *aesthetic of life*. The role of *practical reason* is to teach us *how to live beautifully without destroying the lives of others*.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VIII, 1045a8–10.

This is, in my opinion, the *hermeneutical matrix* through which the entire Kantian work should be read.

In fact, by finding a solution to the *antinomy of pure reason*, Kant, *the pietist*, wanted nothing but to *help humanity find peace and reconciliation with itself*.

For this *krummes Holz* that man is, Kant had only *deep compassion*. Kant did not want to hurt anyone. His decision to denounce the *transcendental illusion* as the true source of the endless scandal in the history of philosophy and, in fact, in the entire history of our human race is nothing but the expression of his congenital horror of *lies* and *hypocrisy*.

§ 2. Critique of Pure Reason—a transcendental epistemology

The first question of metaphysics is “*Was kann ich wissen?*”¹⁹ or, in a broader context, “*Wie ist Metaphysik als Wissenschaft möglich?*”²⁰

The whole *Critique of Pure Reason* is Kant’s answer to this epistemological question.

In Kant’s view, metaphysics is the science of its own possibility—an eminently self-referential science—whose only heuristic object or program is the establishment of its own epistemological competence, and which, unlike the natural sciences, can draw its confirmation from nowhere other than from itself, just as mathematics, but not through the *construction of concepts*²¹, but by their *transcendental deduction*²².

¹⁹ KrV, A805/B833.

²⁰ KrV, B22.

²¹ KrV, A844/B872.

²² KrV, B117.

Metaphysics, said essentially Kant, *must be able to reach certainty, either with regard to what it may know, or with regard to what it cannot know, that is, either with regard to its own skills, or with regard to its own limits*²³.

Technically speaking, the fundamental questions of Kantian philosophical criticism were these:

.....

End of Reading Sample

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²³ “Da sich aber bei allen bisherigen Versuchen, diese natürliche Fragen, z.B. ob die Welt einen Anfang habe, oder von Ewigkeit her sei, u.s.w. zu beantworten, jederzeit unvermeidliche Widersprüche gefunden haben, so kann man es nicht bei der blossen Naturanlage zur Metaphysik, d. i. dem reinen Vernunftvermögen selbst, woraus zwar immer irgend eine Metaphysik (es sei welche es wolle) erwächst, bewenden lassen, sondern es muss möglich sein, mit ihr es zur Gewissheit zu bringen, entweder ins Wissen oder Nicht-Wissen der Gegenstände, d.i. entweder der Entscheidung über die Gegenstände ihrer Fragen, oder über das Vermögen und Unvermögen der Vernunft, in Ansehung ihrer etwas zu urteilen, also entweder unsere reine Vernunft mit Zuverlässigkeit zu erweitern, oder ihr bestimmte und sichere Schranken zu setzen. Diese letzte Frage, die aus der obigen allgemeinen Aufgabe fließt, würde mit Recht diese sein: Wie ist Metaphysik als Wissenschaft möglich?” (KrV, B22)