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The Bounds of Sense

The Bounds of Sense

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The book had a profound effect on the interpretation of Kant's philosophy when it was first published in 1966 and continues to influence discussion of Kant, the soundness of transcendental arguments, and debates in epistemology and metaphysics generally.

This Routledge Classics edition includes a new foreword by Lucy Allais.

Peter Strawson was born in London in 1919. After serving as a captain in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers during World War Two he was appointed a fellow of University College Oxford in 1948. He first gained philosophical fame at the age of 29 in 1950, when he criticised Bertrand Russell's renowned Theory of Descriptions for failing to do justice to the richness of ordinary language. He was Waynflete Professor at Oxford from 1968–1987 and was knighted in 1977. He died in 2006.

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Peter

Strawson

The Bounds of Sense

An Essay on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*

With a new foreword by Lucy Allais

London and New York

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FOREWORD TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

Sir Peter Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense*, first published in 1966, is both a book about Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and an extended philosophical argument that can be read independently of its relation to Kant. Strawson tells us that the *Critique of Pure Reason* is the only work of another philosopher which he engaged as a whole, as 'an integral part of some wider system of thought; in contrast, most of his engagements with the work of other philosophers involved reading specific passages of their work that related to arguments he was working on.[1] He says that in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'I found a depth, a range, a boldness and a power unlike anything I had previously encountered'.[2] He reports himself as having struggled with it as an undergraduate, as a college tutor, and in his own thinking in his 1959 book *Individuals*, and so decided to try to get to grips with the work as a whole by giving a regular lecture series on it, in alternative years from 1959.[3] *The Bounds of Sense* originated in these lectures. He says: 'I have written for those students of the *Critique* who, like myself, have read and re-read the work with a commingled

sense of great insights and great mystification' (xviii). I first read *The Bounds of Sense* as an undergraduate encountering Kant's *Critique* for the first time, in exactly the state of fascination and confusion Strawson describes, and it was in reading Strawson that I first felt I was getting a sense of the deep philosophical questions and insights that can be hidden by Kant's complex and sometimes distracting architectonic. Fifty-two years after its first publication, *The Bounds of Sense* remains a classic work in philosophy; the depth and boldness of Strawson's grappling with Kant's arguments are such that it remains among the most exciting company in thinking through Kant's first *Critique*.

Based in Oxford for most of his career, Strawson was in his lifetime among the leading philosophers in the world. Much of his work was in philosophy of language and logic, at a time in which the history of philosophy was not seen as a central part of analytic philosophy. Indeed, in its positivist and post-positivist phase, analytic philosophy was not even doing much metaphysics, tending, instead, to see philosophy of language and philosophical logic as central. Peter Hacker comments that '[f]rom 1945 until the end of the 1950s analytic philosophy evolved in Britain and elsewhere without any metaphysical pretensions', and that Strawson's 1959 book *Individuals* changed this.[4] *The Bounds of Sense*, similarly, changed the extent to which analytic philosophy engaged the history of philosophy. By writing such a deep, exciting and philosophical work engaging with a historical text Strawson showed how reconstructing and taking on arguments by a past philosopher could be a deeply philosophical project, and that this had a big impact on reviving philosophical attention to the history of philosophy. In Thomas Nagel's memorial address for Strawson he says that:

> [f]or someone entering the field when the most salient conceptions of philosophy were the Wittgensteinian view that it was a kind of illness and the Quinean view that it was a kind of science, Strawson offered a liberating alternative ideal. He kept before our minds the inescapability and uniqueness of philosophical questions, and the continuity between our engagement with those questions and that of Descartes, Hume, and Kant, and other great predecessors.[5]

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* concerns the possibility of metaphysics. One way of thinking about Kant's project—which owes no small part to Strawson's influence—is as containing positive and negative arguments in relation to the possibility of metaphysics which reshape the way we think of what metaphysics is. On the one hand, Kant presents a series of a primarily negative arguments for the view that traditional metaphysics—which he thinks of as being concerned with God, the soul and free will—concerns questions which transcend human experience and with respect to which it is not possible for us to have knowledge. On the other hand, Kant can be taken as establishing the possibility of another kind of non-transcendent metaphysics, a metaphysics of experience, through his exploration of the a priori limiting framework of human experience. The investigation of this limiting structure is referenced in Strawson's title. Kant thinks this a priori framework neither transcends human experience nor is something discovered through empirical, scientific investigation (because it provides the framework or conditions of such investigation), and can be established through arguments investigating the conditions of the possibility of human experience, an argumentative strategy that came to be called a transcendental argument.

The Bounds of Sense maps out the central parts of both Kant's positive and negative projects. In terms of the former, Strawson explores Kant's arguments for the role of our representations of space and time, and for certain fundamental a priori concepts (the categories), such as substance and cause, as well as principles containing these concepts. Strawson then follows central parts of Kant's attack on traditional metaphysics as well as the (according to Kant) inescapable movements of thought that leads us to (mistakenly) think we can have knowledge of God and our immortal souls. In engaging with the positive project Strawson presents arguments concerning the necessary structure of experience in which he argues against starting with a sense-data conception of experience (rather than from experience of an objective world); these arguments can be (and are) still engaged with in their own terms independent of any relation to Kant. While he mostly pays attention to the parts of the

Critique that he thinks contain philosophical rewards in relation to these topics, Strawson does also take care to spell out core doctrines of the *Critique*, such as transcendental idealism, with which he disagrees and to work out where he thinks other arguments do and do not depend on it.

He is clearly both deeply fascinated and excited by Kant's arguments and also not reverential—treating the *Critique* as philosophy rather than a sacred document, confidently rejecting parts of it and reserving some of his most striking and memorable phrases for dismissals of key Kantian concepts, thoughts and arguments—'the imaginary subject of transcendental psychology' (21), 'a *non sequitur* of numbing grossness' (136), 'Repeated like spells, these pronominal incantations are as inefficacious as spells' (257)—and saying that 'it must be concluded that Kant really has no clear and general conception of the synthetic *a priori* at all' (33). Despite these criticisms, and despite the important parts of the *Critique* he does not engage with, the book is no mere philosophical riff on the *Critique*: while it is not a commentary, Strawson systematically works through and closely engages with the central philosophical points of the *Critique*, as he sees them, while also constantly keeping an eye on the overall shape of Kant's project.

The Bounds of Sense is completely unlike any book on Kant that could be published today. Strawson says of it that '[m]y book was, you might say, a somewhat ahistorical attempt to recruit Kant to the ranks of the analytical metaphysicians, while discarding those metaphysical elements that refused any such absorption'.[6] Often, in conversation, philosophers have said to me that it is a brilliant book but it is obviously 'not Kant'. One thing they mean by this is that it does not do many of the things Kant scholarship is required to do today. In many senses, this is clearly true. *The Bounds of Sense* does not have a bibliography. Strawson tells us in the preface that the book is 'by no means a work of historical-philosophical scholarship' and that he has 'not been assiduous in studying the writings of Kant's lesser predecessors, his own minor works or the very numerous commentaries which two succeeding centuries have produced' (xviii). This

seems to be something of an understatement: Strawson's quotations from Kant are almost entirely from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, with just a handful from the *Prolegomena*. In terms of other philosophers, there are three references to Hume, one to Locke, one to Austin and only two brief references to other philosophers writing about Kant (Collingwood and Körner). Today, it would simply be impossible for a publisher to accept a book on Kant that has so little engagement with other scholars. One response to this could be to accept it as a criticism but say that it does not detract from the quality and importance of the book in its time, but I think we should go further: it is worth thinking about whether this change in the nature of scholarship does not also represent some loss for us—whether our concerns with context and referencing can sometimes be at the cost of simply trying to engage as deeply as possible with the philosophy. One of the things that strikes me on returning to *The Bounds of Sense*, and which I take to be a salutary part of Strawson's non-scholastic approach, is the extent to which Strawson does not treat the *Critique* as *history* of philosophy; he simply treats it as philosophy. In some ways, this seems to me more respectful of the text—as a piece of philosophy—than some more careful scholarship.

In addition to saying that it does not meet the standards of contemporary scholarship, another thing which philosophers mean when they say that *The Bounds of Sense* is 'not Kant' is that they think Strawson misreads Kant, even to the extent of misreading Kant's fundamental project in the first *Critique*. Strawson sees Kant's central project as being to map out the limits of a conception of experience that we can make intelligible to ourselves, and, in so doing, to present an anti-sceptical response to seeing a sense-data conception of experience as a starting point in philosophy. Two criticisms one might make of this approach are, first, one might argue that Kant's central concern is with the possibility of metaphysics, and second, that Strawson understands 'experience' in something close to the way the word is used in ordinary thought and talk—to refer to conscious awareness of a world—but this is actually some distance from Kant's highly technical use of the term, which seems to mean

something closer to empirical knowledge or even natural science. Further, Strawson entirely rejects as incoherent and unnecessary Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism, which runs through the *Critique* and is central to many of its most fundamental concerns. Strawson sees transcendental idealism as separable from all of what are, in his view, Kant's key insights, and describes 'the doctrinal fantasies of transcendental idealism' (44) as 'a crude and incoherent model' (254), 'an extra wheel, zealously but idly turning' (267).

Transcendental idealism involves a distinction between the world of human experience and the world as it is in itself, together with the claim that the former is mind-dependent (in some sense, and to some extent) and the latter is something of which it is not possible for us to have cognition. Interpreting it requires giving an account of what the distinction is supposed to amount to, giving an account of the sense in which the world of human experience (appearances) is supposed to be mind-dependent, and giving an account of the status of the world as it is in itself, as well as of Kant's claim that we cannot have knowledge of it. Strawson sees Kant as a phenomenalistic idealist about objects in space and time (as holding that appearances exist merely in minds, as constructions out of ideas) and as holding that reality consists of super-sensible, non-spatio-temporal things in themselves, a totally different kind of thing from the objects of our experience. Many people (including me) have argued against his interpretation of transcendental idealism.[7] But I do not take this to mean that Strawson is not presenting a serious engagement with Kant, and one from which we cannot still learn. That one agrees with the interpretation cannot be the standard for whether an author is engaging with a historical philosopher, especially one like Kant with respect to whom there is so little interpretative agreement, and so much philosophical richness that develops from competing interpretations.

While Kant sees his transcendental idealism as key both to his establishment of the conditions of the possibility of empirical knowledge and to his critique of transcendent metaphysics, Strawson sees Kant's transcendental idealism as incoherent and unnecessary for all that is of value in the *Critique*. One can question both Strawson's

interpretation of transcendental idealism and his view of the relation between transcendental idealism and Kant's key concerns while still finding a number of parts of his approach useful and important. Strawson pushes hard on whether and how key arguments really depend on transcendental idealism. This seems to me to be a question that remains very much unresolved, and also crucial for understanding the *Critique*: it is not obvious, with respect to the key argument called the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, whether the idealism is supposed to support or follow from the argument, where exactly it is supposed to come in, nor which parts of the idealism are relevant.

Strawson constantly looks at both more and less moderate readings of transcendental idealism, and at exactly how much of the position and how strong a version of the position is doing work at any one point; this too seems to me a philosophically useful approach to the *Critique*. And while I disagree with his interpretation of transcendental idealism, Strawson's challenges to the coherence of the doctrine remain important not just for those who read transcendental idealism as he does, but also for more moderate metaphysical interpretations. Most fundamentally, he challenges us to find a way to make sense of Kant's account of the self in the light of his assertion that space and time are merely the forms appearances that do not present us with things as they are in themselves. Strawson asks: 'what sort of a truth . . . is it, that we appear to ourselves in a temporal guise? Do we really so appear to ourselves or only appear to ourselves so to appear to ourselves?' (28). He says:

> If the appearances of x to x occur in time, they cannot be assigned to the history of the transcendental, supersensible subject, for that being has no history. That is to say, they cannot justifiably be described as appearances to myself as I (supersensibly) am in myself, nor – since what they are appearances to they are also appearances of – as appearances of myself as I (supersensibly) am in myself. . . . If, on the other hand, we are not to put a temporal construction on the verb *to appear*, how are we to understand it? Are we to say that it non-temporally appears to be the case, to the

> transcendental subject, that it enjoys a series of temporally ordered states? The limits of intelligibility are here traversed, on any standard. And if they were not, we should still be as far as ever from making good the identity which is in question. What has the non-history of the transcendental subject to do with us? (257–8).

We still need answers to these questions, and it seems to me that this can guide us in interpreting transcendental idealism, not least, in relation to Kant's practical philosophy, where we need the transcendentally free subject to also be the subject of ordinary moral thought. We need an interpretation of transcendental idealism that enables it to avoid these charges of incoherence and this is no easy task; Strawson's challenge remains live.

The parts of the *Critique* Strawson finds most rewarding are the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories and the Analogies of Experience. The Deduction is, arguably, the centrepiece of the *Critique*; it may also be the part on which there is least interpretative agreement. Kant tells us that it cost him his greatest labours, and the thought that this is true also for his readers occurs to many commentators. The Deduction is the argument in which Kant aims to vindicate our use of the fundamental a priori concepts he calls the categories—to show that despite not deriving these concepts from experience or being able to justify their use empirically, we are justified in applying them to the objects of experience, and that they necessarily apply to objects in space and time. Commentators barely agree on what the conclusion of the argument is supposed to be, certainly not on its premises, structure and strategy. It contains reflections about the nature of self-consciousness, the unity of consciousness and the nature of objective experience, but what exactly the claims are, the relations between them, how the argument is supposed to work, and how it relates to Kant's transcendental idealism remain hotly disputed. These connections remain fascinating but elusive, and it is in this part of the book that Strawson's thinking with Kant at his most abstract seems to me most fruitful both for scholars of Kant and for philosophy more generally. Strawson says that '[t]he extraordinary

generality of Kant's thinking is constantly straining against what he himself recognized as the limits of intelligibility' (264). In the first *Critique* in general but the Deduction in particular Kant thinks at dizzying heights of abstraction (this is one of the things that makes the book so difficult and so exciting); Strawson is not afraid to follow him there, seeming to move effortlessly in an argumentative space in which most of us are gasping for oxygen.

Strawson says that Kant's concern in the Deduction is how the diverse elements in a subject's experience must be united for that subject to be capable of conceptualizing them, and he sees Kant as arguing that this unity requires 'just such a unity as is also required for experience to have the character of experience of a unified objective world and hence to be capable of being articulated in objective empirical judgements' (83). As I have mentioned, critics argue that Kant's technical use of 'experience' in the *Critique* refers to something more like what we would call empirical knowledge than the conception of experience with which Strawson is concerned. However, the implications of this point are not obvious with respect to the Deduction, in part because it is not clear that Kant thinks that the materials we have by the end of the Deduction are close to sufficient for experience in his sense. Further, despite the way Strawson uses the word 'experience', the details of his account of the argument concern something more than the mere having of a conscious life or even perception of a world: Strawson sees the Deduction as concerned with the question of '[h]ow in general must we conceive of objects if we are to make empirical judgements, determinable as true or false, in which we predicate concepts of identified objects of reference? or: What in general must be true of a world of objects of which we make such judgements?' (77). While this is controversial, it seems to me entirely compelling that this is one of Kant's central concerns in the Deduction, and that Strawson remains relevant in trying to understand Kant's answer. Finally, Strawson has a general description of the Deduction which strikes me as one of the most useful things to tell someone who is beginning to grapple with this torturous yet thrilling text: 'though

the Transcendental Deduction is indeed an argument, it is not only an argument. It is also an explanation, a description, a story' (81).

Strawson sees the argument of the Deduction as culminating in the Analogies of Experience, where Kant argues for the conservation of substance and the claim that every event in space and time has a necessitating cause. He raises a question for the Analogies which still stands as one we need to have in mind when approaching the text, whether the principles merely give us 'historical metaphysics: accounts of the fundamental framework of ideas within which scientific thinking has been conducted at this or that period, or is conducted now' (119).[8] Strawson thinks they give us more than fundamental principles of outdated science, and despite his dismissive accounts of Kant's arguments in the Analogies, he finds in these sections thoughts which are fascinating in themselves and, in my view, exceptionally helpful for making sense of the Analogies, based on the idea that the experiences of a person 'must themselves be so conceptualized as to determine a distinction between the subjective route of his experiences and the objective world through which it is a route' (100).

Fifty-two years after its publication, *The Bounds of Sense* still reads with a breathtaking freshness, audacity, and Sir Peter Strawson's unique, seemingly-effortlessly elegant prose. It created enormous interest in the anti-sceptical possibility of transcendental arguments[9] as well as in the nature of experience of objectivity and the unity of consciousness,[10] and is still relevant to philosophers working on these topics. It is surely one of the most influential books on Kant ever written and has had an enormous impact on philosophy and history of philosophy: on generations of Kant scholars, on analytic philosophy and on analytic philosophy's relationship with the history of philosophy.

Lucy Allais

NOTES

1 Strawson, P. F., 'A Bit of Intellectual Autobiography', in Glock, (ed.), *Strawson and Kant*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p 8.

2 Strawson 2003, p 8.
3 Strawson 2003, p 8.
4 Hacker, P., 'On Strawson's Rehabilitation of Metaphysics', in Glock, (ed.), *Strawson and Kant*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p 49.
5 Nagel, T., A Tribute to Sir Peter Strawson, Magdalen College Occasional Paper 7, Oxford: Magdalen College, 2008, 10.
6 Strawson 2003, p 9.
7 Allais, L., *Manifest Reality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015. Prominent philosophers who reject Strawson's interpretation include Allison, H., *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, revised and enlarged edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004; Ameriks, K., 'Kantian Idealism Today', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 1992, 9(3): 329–42. Bird, G., *The Revolutionary Kant*, Illinois: Open Court, 2006.
8 See Friedman, M., *Kant and the Exact Sciences*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998 for a defence of this view.
9 Stern, R. (ed.), *Transcendental arguments: problems and prospects*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1999. Stroud, B., 'The goal of transcendental arguments', in R. Stern (ed.), *Transcendental arguments: problems and prospects*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. A number of philosophers have questioned the anti-sceptical force of such arguments, saying that they seem to establish only something about how we must conceive of reality, not how reality must actually be. See Cassam, Q., 'Knowledge and its Objects: Revisiting the Bounds of Sense', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2017: 907–919; Gomes, A., 'Unity, Objectivity, and the Passivity of Experience', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2016: 946–969; Stroud 1999.
10 See, for example, Burge, T., *Origins of Objectivity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; Cassam 2017; Gomes 2016; Moore, A., 'One World', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1996: 934–945.

Preface

This book originated in lectures on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* given in alternate years from 1959 onwards in the University of Oxford. As any Kantian scholar who may read it will quickly detect, it is by no means a work of historical-philosophical scholarship. I have not been assiduous in studying the writings of Kant's lesser predecessors, his own minor works or the very numerous commentaries which two succeeding centuries have produced. I have written for those students of the *Critique* who, like myself, have read and re-read the work with a commingled sense of great insights and great mystification. I have tried to present a clear, uncluttered and unified interpretation, at least strongly supported by the text as it stands, of the system of thought which the *Critique* contains; I have tried to show how certain great parts of the structure can be held apart from each other, while showing also how, within the system itself, they are conceived of as related; I have tried to give decisive reasons for rejecting some parts altogether; and I have tried to indicate, though no more than indicate, how the arguments and conclusions of other parts might

be so modified or reconstructed as to be made more acceptable. In pursuit of these aims I have relegated some features of the work to a very subordinate place, notably much architectonic detail and much of the theory of "transcendental psychology". It is not that I think that nothing can be made of the latter. The attempt to reconstruct it would be, at least, a profitable exercise in the philosophy of mind. But I have thought that some loss of balance and of clarity of line would certainly result if I made such an attempt in the present book.

I have given the book its title not only in partial echo of a title Kant himself considered but also because it alludes compendiously to the three main strands in his thought. In two ways he draws the bounds of sense, and in a third he traverses them. He argues, on the one hand, that a certain minimum structure is essential to any conception of experience which we can make truly intelligible to ourselves; on the other, that the attempt to extend beyond the limits of experience the use of structural concepts, or of any other concepts, leads only to claims empty of meaning. Dogmatic rationalism exceeds the upper bound of sense, as classical empiricism falls short of the lower. But Kant's arguments for these limiting conclusions are developed within the framework of a set of doctrines which themselves appear to violate his own critical principles. He seeks to draw the bounds of sense from a point outside them, a point which, if they are rightly drawn, cannot exist.

In the General Review, with which this book opens, I have distinguished these three main strands of thought under the headings "The Metaphysics of Experience", "Transcendent Metaphysics" and "The Metaphysics of Transcendental Idealism", each of which forms the title of one of the three major succeeding Parts. But these parts are not, and cannot be, wholly independent of each other. Only when the picture is complete can the significance of any part of it be fully grasped.

I wish to acknowledge my great indebtedness to Professor H. L. A. Hart, who read the entire book in manuscript and for whose help and encouragement I am very grateful; to the governing body of my College, which gave me leave of absence from my duties from

January to June of 1965, during which time, and the ensuing long vacation, the greater part of the book, in its present form, was written; and to Miss Ruby Meager, who read the proofs and made many valuable suggestions for improvements, most of which I have adopted.

All quotations from the *Critique* are taken, with very few modifications, from Kemp Smith's translation. References are given with the usual "A" and "B" numbering, both numbers being given for passages common to the first and second editions.

P. F. S.

Oxford
June, 1966

Part One

GENERAL REVIEW

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GENERAL REVIEW

1. TWO FACES OF THE *CRITIQUE*

It is possible to imagine kinds of world very different from the world as we know it. It is possible to describe types of experience very different from the experience we actually have. But not any purported and grammatically permissible description of a possible kind of experience would be a truly intelligible description. There are limits to what we can conceive of, or make intelligible to ourselves, as a possible general structure of experience. The investigation of these limits, the investigation of the set of ideas which forms the limiting framework of all our thought about the world and experience of the world, is, evidently, an important and interesting philosophical undertaking. No philosopher has made a more strenuous attempt on it than Kant.

A central difficulty in understanding his attempt lies in the fact that he himself thought of it in terms of a certain misleading analogy. It is a commonplace of casual, and of scientific, observation, that the

character of our experience, the way things appear to us, is partly determined by our human constitution, by the nature of our sense organs and nervous system. The workings of the human perceptual mechanism, the ways in which our experience is causally dependent on those workings, are matters for empirical, or scientific, not philosophical, investigation. Kant was well aware of this; he knew very well that such an empirical inquiry was of a quite different kind from the investigation he proposed into the fundamental structure of ideas in terms of which alone we can make intelligible to ourselves the idea of experience of the world. Yet, in spite of this awareness, he conceived the latter investigation on a kind of strained analogy with the former. Wherever he found limiting or necessary general features of experience, he declared their source to lie in our own cognitive constitution; and this doctrine he considered indispensable as an explanation of the possibility of knowledge of the necessary structure of experience. Yet there is no doubt that this doctrine is incoherent in itself and masks, rather than explains, the real character of his inquiry; so that a central problem in understanding the *Critique* is precisely that of disentangling all that hangs on this doctrine from the analytical argument which is in fact independent of it.

The separation of these two strands in the *Critique*, however, is only part of a wider task of division between what remains fruitful and interesting and what no longer appears acceptable, or even promising, in its doctrines. Accordingly, I shall begin this introductory survey by setting out, in rough opposition, the elements of this division. I shall follow this with a slightly fuller but still introductory account of some of the central themes of the work.

Like many of his predecessors and successors, Kant laid stress on the fact that the results hitherto achieved in philosophy contrasted unfavourably with those achieved in mathematics and natural science. If philosophy too was to be set "on the sure path of a science", one requisite was that it should limit its pretensions; and a major instrument of this necessary limitation was a principle repeatedly enunciated and applied by Kant throughout the *Critique*. This is the principle that there can be no legitimate, or even meaningful, employment of ideas or

concepts which does not relate them to empirical or experiential conditions of their application. If we wish to use a concept in a certain way, but are unable to specify the kind of experience-situation to which the concept, used in that way, would apply, then we are not really envisaging any legitimate use of that concept at all.[1] In so using it, we shall not merely be saying what we do not know; we shall not really know what we are saying.

This principle, which I shall refer to as Kant's principle of significance, is one with which empiricist philosophers have no difficulty in sympathizing. They sympathize just as readily with the consequence which Kant drew from it: viz. the complete repudiation of transcendent metaphysics. Whole regions of philosophy – regions of maximum pretension and minimum agreement – owed their existence, he maintained, to disregard of the principle of significance. Freed from the obligation to specify the empirical conditions of application of the concepts they used, philosophers might seem to be giving information about the nature of Reality as it is in itself, instead of as it appears in the limited and sense-bound experience of creatures such as ourselves; but their seeming knowledge was delusion, and the first task of a critical and scientific philosophy was to ensure that it was recognized as such. The first task of philosophy is to set its own limits.

Kant was not content merely to draw this general negative conclusion about the impossibility of transcendent metaphysics. He thought that the propensity to think in terms of ideas for which no empirical conditions of application could be specified was not merely a philosophers' aberration, but a natural and inevitable propensity of human reason. It was even, in some ways, a beneficial propensity. Certain ideas which had in themselves no empirical application or significance nevertheless inevitably arose in the course of scientific inquiry, and might even serve a useful function in stimulating the indefinite extension of empirical knowledge.[2] The illusion of *metaphysical* knowledge arose only when it was thought that there must be realities answering to these ideas and that it was possible to obtain knowledge of these realities by pure thought, unmixed with experience. It was in this kind of thinking that the principle of

significance was violated. A substantial proportion of the *Critique* is devoted to showing how, in particular celebrated instances, we are tempted to violate the principle and to demonstrating the empty, and sometimes conflicting, character of the metaphysical knowledge-claims which result from our doing so.

Transcendent metaphysics, then, is declared in general, and demonstrated in detail, to be impossible as a form of knowledge, or, as Kant would say, as a science. But this does not mean that no form of scientific metaphysics is possible at all. On the contrary, there is a large positive task for a genuinely scientific metaphysics, a task which, according to Kant, can be discharged once for all, and which is at least partially carried out by him in the most original, interesting, and difficult part of the *Critique*. This is the task I have already referred to: the investigation of that limiting framework of ideas and principles the use and application of which are essential to empirical knowledge, and which are implicit in any coherent conception of experience which we can form. It is of course possible to feel and express scepticism, not only about the details of Kant's execution of this programme, but about the programme itself; it may be thought unlikely that such an inquiry could yield any but the slenderest results. But if these doubts are unjustified, and a fruitful inquiry of this kind is possible, then it will fully deserve the title of metaphysics. It will be, as metaphysics was always said to be, the most general and fundamental of studies; and its method will be non-empirical, or *a priori*, not because, like transcendent metaphysics, it claims to be concerned with a realm of objects inaccessible to experience, but because it is concerned with the conceptual structure which is presupposed in all empirical inquiries. This kind of investigation Kant sometimes calls "transcendental", as distinct from "transcendent", though he is by no means consistent in his use of this expression.

In his espousal of the principle of significance and in his consequential repudiation of transcendent metaphysics, Kant is close to the tradition of classical empiricism, the tradition of Berkeley and Hume, which has probably, at least in England, received its clearest

modern expression in the writings of A. J. Ayer. But in the elaboration of his positive metaphysics of experience, Kant departs sharply from that tradition. The central problem of classical empiricism was set by the assumption that experience really offers us nothing but separate and fleeting sense-impressions, images and feelings; and the problem was to show how, on this exiguous basis, we could supply a rational justification of our ordinary picture of the world as containing continuously and independently existing and interacting material things and persons. Hume, it is true, rejected the problem in this form, holding that such a justification was impossible, but also unnecessary, since the gaps found, and left, by reason were filled by the helpful fictions of the imagination. Between the views of Hume, the most sophisticated of the classical empiricists, and those of Kant, there is a subtle and interesting parallelism. But there is also a great gap. For Kant rejected the basic empiricist dogma which Hume never questioned. He did not reject it in the spirit of naïve, or refined, common sense which has sometimes, in England, seemed to be the twentieth-century alternative to classical empiricism. His rejection took the form, rather, of a proof that the minimal empiricist conception of experience was incoherent in isolation, that it made sense only within a larger framework which necessarily included the use and application in experience of concepts of an objective world. Thus the execution of Kant's programme for a positive metaphysics is held to entail the rejection of what he calls "problematic" idealism, even if such idealism is only the methodological starting-point, rather than the terminus, of philosophical reflection. Any philosopher who invites, or challenges, us to justify our belief in the objective world by working outwards, as it were, from the private data of individual consciousness thereby demonstrates his failure to have grasped the conditions of the possibility of experience in general. Philosophers as unlike in other respects as Descartes and Hume are held to be alike in this respect, to be alike guilty of this failure.

These themes of the *Critique* which I have so far referred to have an evident harmony. Together they form, one might be tempted to claim, the framework of a truly empiricist philosophy, freed, on the

one hand, from the delusions of transcendent metaphysics, on the other, from the classical empiricist obsession with the private contents of consciousness. Together they present the blander, the more acceptable face of the *Critique*. But it would be a very one-sided account of the work which referred to these themes alone. Their exposition and development is throughout interwoven with more questionable doctrines, one of the sources of which I have already indicated. It is true that Kant thought of himself as investigating the general structure of ideas and principles which is presupposed in all our empirical knowledge; but he thought of this investigation as possible only because he conceived of it also, and primarily, as an investigation into the structure and workings of the cognitive capacities of beings such as ourselves. The idiom of the work is throughout a psychological idiom. Whatever necessities Kant found in our conception of experience he ascribed to the nature of our faculties.

He prepares the ground for this ascription by the manner in which he presents a certain fundamental duality, inescapable in any philosophical thinking about experience or empirical knowledge. This is the duality of general concepts, on the one hand, and particular instances of general concepts, encountered in experience, on the other. If any item is even to enter our conscious experience we must be able to classify it in some way, to recognize it as possessing some general characteristics. To say that we must have general concepts in order for empirical knowledge to be possible is just to say that we must have such recognitional abilities as these. No less evidently, if these abilities are ever to be exercised, we must have material on which to exercise them; particular instances of general concepts must be encountered in experience. The importance of this fundamental duality is fully recognized by Kant. His word for awareness in experience of particular instances of general concepts is "intuition"; and the point epitomized in his famous dictum, that "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind",[3] is one which he repeatedly emphasizes.

There are many idioms in which this inescapable duality can be expressed. Kant's idiom is psychological, the idiom of departments or

faculties of the mind. He distinguishes between the *receptive* faculty of *sensibility*, through which we have intuitions, and the *active* faculty of *understanding*, which is the source of concepts; and thereby prepares the way for ascribing to these faculties, as their source, those limiting features which he finds in the notion of experience in general. Thus it seems that there is no conceivable way in which concepts could be instantiated in our experience except by our being aware of instances of them in space and time – or, at least, in time. Space and time themselves are accordingly declared to be "in us", to be simply the forms of our sensibility, nothing but our ways of being aware of particular things capable of being brought under concepts. Again, it is argued that unless the concepts we employed in application to our experience implicitly involved the application of certain very general notions (the categories), it would be impossible that there should be any such thing as self-conscious awareness of the succession of experience in time. The applicability of these notions is, then, a further necessary condition of the possibility of anything which deserves the name of experience or empirical knowledge. But this necessity once more is presented as a consequence of our cognitive constitution; only it is assigned, this time, to our faculty of understanding, which is described as acting on our sensibility to bring about the satisfaction of its own requirements.

These allocations contain already the seeds of that disastrous model which, as we shall see, Kant had such powerful motives for prizing. The natural world as we know it, the whole content of our experience, is thoroughly conditioned by the features just referred to: our experience is essentially experience of a spatiotemporal world of law-governed objects conceived of as distinct from our temporally successive experiences of them. But all these limiting features alike simply represent ways in which things must appear in the experience of beings constituted as we are, with such a sensibility and such an understanding as ours. Of things as they are in themselves as opposed to these appearances of them, we have, and can have, no knowledge whatever; for knowledge is possible only of what can be experienced, and nothing can be experienced except as subjected to the forms imposed by our sensibility and our understanding.

This "transcendental idealism", according to which the whole world of Nature is merely appearance, is sharply distinguished by Kant from other forms of idealism. The typical "empirical" idealist, as Kant calls him, takes as certainly real the temporally successive states of consciousness and questions or denies the real existence, or our knowledge of the existence, of bodies in space. The transcendental idealist, on the other hand, is, Kant says, an empirical realist, according no superiority of status, as regards reality or certainty of existence, to states of consciousness over physical objects. When we see how Kant supports this claim, however, we must view it with scepticism. It is true that he grants us as immediate a knowledge of the physical objects of "outer sense", whose form is space, as he does of the psychological states, the objects of "inner sense", whose form is time. It is true, too, that he says that our inner-directed experience no more yields us knowledge of ourselves as we are in ourselves than our outer-directed experience yields us knowledge of other things as they are in themselves. But *these* parities do not really amount to according equal reality to bodies in space ("outer objects") and states of consciousness ("inner determinations"). The doctrine that the material and the mental constituents of the natural world are alike only appearances turns out, in the end, to bear with unequal weight on bodies and states of consciousness. Kant, as transcendental idealist, is closer to Berkeley than he acknowledges.

The doctrines of transcendental idealism, and the associated picture of the receiving and ordering apparatus of the mind producing Nature as we know it out of the unknowable reality of things as they are in themselves, are undoubtedly the chief obstacles to a sympathetic understanding of the *Critique*. We may be tempted by weakened interpretations of these doctrines, representing them as expository devices perhaps not wholly understood by their user. Thus the doctrine that we can have knowledge only of things as objects of possible experience, and not of things as they are in themselves, has a certain ambiguity; and we may be tempted, at times, by its subtler or ironical sense, which Kant himself seems, at times, almost to endorse. Again, we may be tempted to interpret the whole model of mind-made Nature as simply a device for

presenting an analytical or conceptual inquiry in a form readily grasped by the picture-loving imagination. All such interpretations would, however, involve reading into much of the *Critique* a tone of at least half-conscious irony quite foreign to its character; and there are other, more decisive reasons for thinking that they would altogether fail to answer to Kant's intentions.

One of them is made clear enough in the Preface. As Kant there says, he is concerned not only to curb the pretensions of dogmatic metaphysics to give us supersensible knowledge; he is concerned also to curb the pretensions of sensibility to be coextensive with the real. The proof of our necessary ignorance of the supersensible safeguards the interests of morality and religion by securing the supersensible realm from our scepticism as well as from our knowledge. There are other indications of a different kind, more important still in the present context, as being more immediately related to the main concerns of this *Critique*. Thus the principle of significance itself, as applied to the categories, is derived by Kant as a *consequence* of the nature of the part played by the faculty of understanding in ordering experience; and the very possibility of knowledge of necessary features of experience is seen by him as dependent upon his transcendental subjectivism, the theory of the mind making Nature. This indeed is the essence of the "Copernican Revolution" which he proudly announced as the key to a reformed and scientific metaphysics. It is only because objects of experience must conform to the constitution of our minds that we can have the sort of *a priori* knowledge of the nature of experience which is demonstrated, in outline, in the *Critique* itself. Finally, Kant's claim to find in the solution of the first Antinomy decisive confirmation of the thesis of the ideality of space and time would be quite extraordinarily misleading if he meant by it no more than that the solution vindicated the application of the principle of significance to the question whether the world is or is not bounded in space and time.

Those interconnected doctrines which centre on the thesis of transcendental idealism are not the only obstacles to sympathetic understanding. Others are attributable in part to the state of scientific knowledge at the time at which Kant wrote. He believed without question in the

finality of Euclidean geometry, Newtonian physics, and Aristotelian logic; and on these beliefs he founded others, still more questionable. Thus he believed that Euclidean geometry provided a unique body, not only of truths, but of necessary truths, about the structure of physical space; and in this belief found what seemed to him a further powerful argument for the thesis that space was transcendentally "in us". Kant's theory of geometry, though not defensible as a whole, contains valuable insights; and, being relatively independent of the main structure of the *Critique*, does not succeed in obscuring anything we may wish to preserve of that structure. It is otherwise with his conviction that what he took to be the presuppositions of Newtonian physics embodied conditions of the possibility of empirical knowledge in general; for the anxiety to arrive, by way of conclusion, at supposed *a priori* principles of natural science really does have the effect of obscuring what there is of substance in the arguments of a central, and crucial, section of the book, viz. the Analogies of Experience. As for the effect of Kant's uncritical acceptance, and unconstrained manipulation, of the forms and classifications of traditional logic, this is of a rather different kind. It may be held in part responsible for his boundless faith in a certain structural framework, elaborate and symmetrical, which he adapts freely from formal logic as he understands it and determinedly imposes on the whole range of his material. Over and over again the same pattern of divisions, distinctions, and connexions is reproduced in different departments of the work. The artificial and elaborate symmetry of this imposed structure has a character which, if anything in philosophy deserves the title of baroque, deserves that title. But this is a feature which, though it may cause us unnecessary trouble and give us irrelevant pleasure, we can in the end discount without anxiety.

2. THE METAPHYSICS OF EXPERIENCE

The heart of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and its most difficult passages, are contained in the Division entitled Transcendental Analytic; for it is there, with some dependence on the earlier section concerned with space and time and called Transcendental Aesthetic, that Kant attempts to show what the limiting features must be of any notion of