

Kant's Offer to the Skeptical Empiricist

Charles Goldhaber

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Abstract: There is little consensus about whether Kant intends his *Critique of Pure Reason* to change the mind of a 'skeptical empiricist' such as Hume. I challenge a common assumption made by both sides of the debate. This is the thought that Kant can convince a skeptic only if he does not beg the question against her. Surprisingly, I argue, that is not how Kant sees things. On Kant's view, skeptical empiricism is an inherently unstable and unsatisfying position, which skeptics cannot help wanting to escape. Kant's *Critique*, and especially its Transcendental Deduction, offers thinkers like Hume an appealing means of escape, by explaining a possible relation of the mind to the objects of knowledge which skeptics have overlooked. On Kant's view of the skeptic as inherently dissatisfied with her position, the offer of an explanation can change her mind while neither refuting nor appealing to her skeptical empiricism.

Keywords: Kant, skepticism, empiricism, Hume, transcendental deduction, explanation

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Author byline (BIO): Charles Goldhaber is Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Haverford College. <cgoldhaber@gmail.com>

1. A new question

Kant viewed Hume as a skeptical empiricist. Kant portrayed skeptics first and foremost as wary of our pretensions to engage in metaphysics, an alleged science in which we attempt to extend our knowledge *a priori*—that is, in advance of experience. He portrayed empiricists as committed to a view of the mind on which our concepts, and all substantive knowledge in which they figure, derive from experience. In viewing Hume as a skeptical empiricist, then, Kant portrayed him as challenging our pretensions to metaphysics in a particular way—namely, by challenging the status of concepts which Kant took to be *pure* concepts, or ‘categories.’ Pure concepts originate in the understanding prior to experience, and for that reason seem amenable to use in metaphysics. Kant thought that revealing those concepts’ allegedly pure status to be illusory would deprive us of their use in metaphysics, as there can be no *a priori* use of concepts that are found to derive from experience.¹

¹ I provide textual evidence for these readings below. All citations of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* use the standard A/B pagination. I use Norman Kemp Smith’s 1929 translation. All other citations of Kant use the Kant-Gesellschaft’s standard abbreviations, followed by the *Akademie Ausgabe* page numbers; translations are derived from the Cambridge editions. Following Kemp Smith, I translate ‘*Erkenntnis*’ as ‘knowledge’ because of its familiarity as a non-technical, everyday term.

According to Kant, Hume gave an empiricist account of a prime candidate for a pure concept—namely, the concept ‘cause.’² On that account, “the concept of a cause” is “an illusion” originating in a “*custom*” of associating certain events with others that one has experienced regularly following them (KpV 5:51), and so the concept ‘cause’ does not originate in the understanding prior to experience. The success of such an account would provide grounds for doubting any alleged metaphysical knowledge involving the concept ‘cause’—for example, “the proposition, that the world must have a first beginning” (B18)—as it would be revealed as an attempt to apply the materials of experience beyond all experience. Kant thought Hume’s account raised a doubt that could be generalized to all ‘pure’ concepts (B19–20; Prol 4:260–261), and so be used to take down metaphysics in one fell swoop (Prol 4:258; FM 20:266). In doing so, however, it would call into question any extension of our knowledge which does not draw on actual experience—or, as Kant put it, all synthetic *a priori* knowledge. That, for Kant, would include not only the metaphysician’s supposed knowledge of God, freedom, and immortality, but also the actual systems of knowledge of mathematics and general natural science, as well as the principles we necessarily employ in experience—including, for example, the principle that everything that happens has a cause.³ Calling these latter principles into

² That such a concept is pure, Kant thinks, is clear from the fact that it “manifestly contains the necessity of a connection of an effect and of the strict universality of a rule” (B5), given that “experience never confers on its judgments true or strict...universality” (B3–4; cf. A734/B762).

³ On the conflict of skeptical empiricism with mathematics and general natural science, see B127–28, A760/B788, A765/B793; KpV 5:13, 5:51. On the conflict of skeptical empiricism with

question would in turn call into question even ordinary empirical knowledge, which employs those principles. In this way, Kant concludes, “Hume’s empiricism in principles leads unavoidably to skepticism” and, indeed, “a *universal* skepticism” (KpV 5:52; cf. A760/B789).

There are countless questions to ask about Kant’s relationship to skeptics, to empiricists, and to Hume, and a variety of such questions have long animated scholarship on Kant’s theoretical philosophy. In this essay, I will address the following question: Did Kant expect ‘skeptical empiricists,’ such as Hume, to accept the critical philosophy Kant develops in his *Critique of Pure Reason*?

This question is *not* the same as the question whether Kant intended his arguments in the *Critique* to refute skeptics, or to answer Hume, in a way that does not beg the question against their empiricism. In recent years, that question has become perhaps somewhat tired, despite the continued lack of consensus as to its proper answer. More importantly, I think the question so framed has been an obstacle to understanding Kant’s true intentions. This is because its framing easily leads us to overlook the possibility that Kant intended to change the skeptical empiricist’s mind in a way that, in a certain sense, *does* beg the question against her views—or, at very least, does not constrain itself to using only resources that a skeptical empiricist can embrace while remaining committed to her empiricism. Indeed, as I will argue, Kant intends to change the skeptic’s mind not by arguing from such limited resources to the falsity or incoherence of skepticism or empiricism, but instead by developing and offering an alternative conception of the mind’s relation to the objects of knowledge. He thinks his alternative can appeal, *first*, because it

the principles of experience, including the causal principle, see A760/B788, A765/B793; KpV 5:13.

satisfies explanatory aims which skeptics necessarily, if sometimes only latently, harbor, and, *second*, because skeptics feel dissatisfaction and doubt about their own skeptical position, allowing them to dissociate from that position sufficiently to entertain alternatives. For Kant, skepticism's inherent instability explains how skeptics can be reached using resources which are at odds with their empiricism.

In what follows, I will argue that Kant develops these resources throughout his Doctrine of Elements, though especially in the Transcendental Deduction, and explains how they can appeal to the skeptic largely in the often-overlooked Discipline of Pure Reason.⁴ Before doing this, though, I will introduce, in §2, two dominant readings of Kant's relationship to Hume and to skepticism in general.⁵ The first sees Kant as opposing Hume, while the second sees Kant as inheriting a Humean project. In §3, I reconsider Kant's attitude toward Hume and skepticism in light of his most explicit remarks about them. These remarks suggest that Kant views Hume and skeptics more as allies than as opponents and diagnoses their excessive censorship of reason and the understanding as overlooking a possible explanation of a kind of knowledge which they too

⁴ For a comprehensive reading of the Discipline, see Chance (2013b). I give an alternative reading of Kant's criticism of skepticism in Discipline §II in Goldhaber (forthcoming).

⁵ Kant usually speaks of 'skepticism' or 'doubt' in connection with Hume or empiricism. See A19–x, B19–20, B22–23, B127–28, A758–769/B786–97; Prolegomena 4:256–64, 4:272, 4:310–13; KpV 5:12–14, 5:50–57. Against the idea that Kant was primarily concerned with a 'Cartesian' skeptic, see Ameriks (1978), 273; Engstrom (1994), 360–70; Forster (2010), 6–12; and Dyck (2011), 446–81, 489–96. Against the idea that Kant was concerned with a 'Pyrrhonian' skeptic, see Chignell and McLearn (2010), 233–34, 237–38.

hastily reject. In §4, I provide evidence that Kant gives the core of this explanation in the Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts.⁶ In §§5–6, I respond to the worry that the skeptical empiricist would fail to be moved by Kant’s explanation. Kant, I argue, has a compelling rationale for thinking that skepticism is necessarily unstable and unsatisfying (§5) and that his explanation can appeal to the skeptic by addressing the sources of her dissatisfaction (§6).

What emerges throughout is a picture on which Kant’s exchange with the skeptic is both more amicable and more sound than it is often thought to be. By explaining the possibility of our synthetic *a priori* knowledge, Kant’s Transcendental Deduction *offers* a way out of skeptical empiricism without compelling it.

2. Traditional readings of Kant on Hume

In arguing for my reading, I will partly agree with and partly reject two dominant interpretations of Kant’s relationship to Hume, both about as old as the *Critique* itself. I call these the *oppositional reading* and the *inheritor reading*.

On the *oppositional reading*, Kant’s primary aim in the *Critique* is to respond to skeptical worries he associates with Hume about the valid application of concepts like ‘cause’ and ‘substance’—and to do so without begging the question against a skeptical empiricist. Just one year after the publication of the *Critique*’s first edition, Kant had already been portrayed in print

⁶ I use ‘Deduction’ (capitalized) to refer to this stretch of text, and ‘deduction’ (lowercase) to refer to deductions in general.

as “disputing” or “rejecting [*bestreiten*]” Hume’s philosophy.⁷ Paul Guyer concurs: “refuting Humean scepticism...is the project...of the first half of the *Critique*” (2003: 9; cf. 1987: 67). Dieter Henrich writes that Kant criticizes Locke, Leibniz, and “physiologists of reason” for failing to do “what ultimately matters in philosophy: justifying the claims of reason against skepticism” (1989: 36–37). As Gary Hatfield describes the view (without endorsing it), “the core of the standard view is that Kant wanted to justify the categories *in the face of skepticism*” (2003: 178).

Proponents of the oppositional reading often view the Transcendental Deduction as the lynchpin in this anti-skeptical project, pointing to the Deduction’s argumentative form for support. Though the two editions’ versions of this proof differ substantially, they are both preceded by the same sketch. Here, Kant says: “The objective validity of the categories as *a priori* concepts rests...on the fact that...through them alone does experience become possible” (A93/B126). If it can be made plausible that the application of the categories to objects of knowledge is a condition on the possibility of experience, the argument would seem to have overwhelming force. As Robert Wolff puts it: “Since not even Hume is prepared to deny that he is conscious,...Kant will, if he can make his argument, have answered Hume” (1981: 28).⁸

⁷ See Chance (2013a), 213–14 for a full quotation and discussion.

⁸ Further proponents of the oppositional reading include Bennett (1966), 100–102; Wilkerson (1971), 351–52; Hoppe (1983), 61–62; Walker (1999), 13; Forster (2010), 40–41; Chance (2011), 342; Chance (2013a), 225–26, 234–236; Sommerlatte (2016), 448–50.

The oppositional reading can seem to portray Kant in a poor light. As many interpreters have noted, Kant's major arguments seem to beg the question against skeptical empiricists. It is not clear, for example, how he could get an empiricist to agree that the valid application of the categories is required for experience, insofar as the empiricist nurtures grounds for doubting that any such concept could figure in substantive knowledge independently of experience.⁹ Alternatively, if Kant could make the categories' valid application plausible, it may then seem he is working with a more robust conception of experience, or empirical knowledge, than the skeptical empiricist would grant.¹⁰ Either way, Kant seems to assume things the skeptic would deny.¹¹ This allegedly blatant failure has motivated some readers to reject the claim that Kant aims to refute skepticism with such arguments. Thus Hatfield criticizes the "standard" anti-skeptical reading for distorting recent assessments of Kant's success. On that oppositional reading, "[t]he Transcendental Deduction was to 'defeat the skeptic,' and one of the most frequent criticisms in recent decades has been that it failed to do so because it argued inconsequently, perhaps by begging the question. This (mistaken) construal of the task of the Deduction has misled interpreters for decades" (2003: 178).¹² If Kant's arguments really would

⁹ See Stroud (1968/2000), 24 for a general version of this worry.

¹⁰ See Guyer (1987), 68, and for a reply, Sommerlatte (2016), 450.

¹¹ Similar points have been made about other candidate anti-skeptical arguments. For instance, Watkins (2004), 485 views the Analogies of Experience as "*begging the question* against Hume."

¹² Compare also Ameriks (1978), 273; Watkins (2004), 453, 485–87; Allais (2010), 102.

beg the question against Hume, charity might then call for a reinterpretation of Kant's relationship to Hume and his skepticism.

On the *inheritor reading*, Kant was not so much defending against Hume as adopting and completing Hume's project of censoring metaphysics. Eric Watkins writes: "Hume is important to Kant not because Hume's position stands in need of refutation, but rather because Hume develops provocative critical insights...that Kant wanted to accommodate within his own system" (2004: 486–87; cf. 2005: 379, 384). In Kant's eyes, one such insight was the illegitimacy of applying concepts like 'cause' to the traditional objects of metaphysics, especially to God. As Karin de Boer puts it, "Kant was first and foremost struck by Hume's account of causality because he considered it to undermine proofs for the existence of God and, more generally, the putative synthetic *a priori* knowledge to which metaphysics aspired" (2019: 377). A sense of Kant's affinity with Hume, especially regarding their negative appraisal of speculative theology, was already in the air by the time the first edition of the *Critique* went to press, when some of Kant's contemporaries referred to him as a "Prussian Hume."¹³ More recently, Manfred Kuehn argued that "Kant clearly thought that he was the executor of Hume's philosophical will" (1983: 191). Karl Schafer agrees: "Kant and his contemporaries were right to see Kant as aiming more to *complete* Hume's project than to *refute* it" (forthcoming: 118).¹⁴

¹³ See, for example, Johann Georg Hamann's 1781 letter to Herder in Hamann (1955), 4:293, 298, 343.

¹⁴ Compare Thöle (1991), 29; Hatfield (2001), 189; Chance (2011), 327, 342.

The oppositional and inheritor readings are two important traditions in Kant interpretation, both with significant textual and philosophical motivation that has kept them alive since Kant's time. But it would be a distortion to think that, in understanding Kant's attitude toward Hume, we essentially have two options.

For one thing, the two readings are not obviously mutually exclusive. Kant may have wanted to respond to Hume's skepticism, thereby rescuing certain *a priori* principles and with them empirical knowledge, while at the same time refining and more carefully laying the ground for Hume's censoring of speculative metaphysics. Brian Chance suggests a rare hybrid reading: "Depending on where one looks, there is...ample reason to think that Kant regarded Hume's philosophy as a cautionary tale and a forerunner to his own" (2011: 342).

Moreover, the oppositional and inheritor readings are also not exhaustive. Indeed, I think both sides are missing something important. Proponents of the inheritor reading typically neglect to ask whether Kant thought skeptics would agree with his conclusions in the *Analytic*. And proponents of *both* readings have assumed that Kant's arguments can change an empiricist's mind only if the empiricist accepts their premises while believing that empiricism is true. But that is not how Kant sees things. For Kant sees his Deduction as offering the skeptical empiricist a way out of her skepticism, even if it deploys premises she would not accept while holding fast to her empiricism. This can sound fantastical. But, I will argue, Kant is reasonable to think this, given his understanding of the sources of skeptical empiricism. This makes room for a distinctive third reading, on which Kant's aim is to change the skeptic's mind without a non-question-begging refutation. I call this the *friendly offer reading*.

How could Kant get the skeptic on board without a non-question-begging refutation? As a first step toward an answer, let us look to Kant's explicit discussions of skepticism.

3. The skeptical empiricist's insights and oversights

Kant initially appears hostile to skeptics. His first discussion of them in the *Critique* exclaims: “Happily they were few in number” (Aix). But both there and elsewhere, he sees skeptics as playing an important role in the progress of metaphysics towards “critique”—namely, “a tribunal which will assure to reason its lawful claims, and dismiss all groundless pretensions, not by despotic decrees, but in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws” (Aix–Axii; cf. B23; A760–61/B788–89; ProI 4:271–75; FM 20:281, 20:342). Kant describes the skeptics’ attempts at censoring the unruly and warring factions of dogmatic metaphysics as warranted and inevitable—“there is really no other available course of action” (A757/B785). And he sees the skeptics’ aim as fundamentally the same as his own in the *Critique*—namely, to “escap[e] from the troublesome affairs of reason...[and] arrive at a permanent peace in philosophy” (A757/B785). He even credits the skeptic with anticipating, though perhaps only hazily, the critical enterprise through which Kant himself proposes to establish this peace. “The sceptic,” he says, “constrains the dogmatic reasoner to develop a sound critique of the understanding and reason,” and thus “prepares the way” to critique (A769/B797).

Kant’s respect for skeptics is especially clear in the case of Hume, his “sagacious predecessor” (ProI 4:260). Repeatedly referring to Hume with the honorable epithet “the acute man”—even “so acute and estimable a man” and “the most ingenious of all the sceptics”—Kant praises his intelligence and character, both of which Kant takes to be “peculiarly fitted for balanced judgment” (ProI 4:273, 4:277, KpV 5:53; A767/B795; A764/B792; A745/B773, respectively; cf. A746/B774; BL 24:217; Br 10:73–74). Kant thought that Hume was remarkably and uniquely close to giving the survey of reason’s capabilities that Kant intends to give in the *Critique*: “something similar to critique of pure reason was found with David Hume” (V-

Met/Mron 29:782; cf. B19). And, famously, Kant portrays his own awakening from “dogmatic slumbers,” and turn toward a critical enterprise, as inspired by “the hint that Hume’s doubts had been able to give” (Prol 4:260, 4:262).¹⁵

But despite its advancements toward critique, “scepticism is...no dwelling-place for permanent settlement” (A761/B789). Hume, Kant tells us, was a “geographer of human reason,” who attempted to show that much of what we pretend to know lies inaccessibly “outside the horizon of human reason” (A760/B788). But because he did not see how to give an exhaustive inquiry into the faculties of reason and understanding, “Hume...foresaw nothing of any such possible formal science [critique], but deposited his ship on the beach (of skepticism) for safekeeping, where it could lie and rot.” For Kant, however, “it is important...to give [the ship] a pilot” (Prol 4:262) that can guide it out of its “skeptical *stasis*” (FM 20:281). This, Kant thought, would require a more thorough inquiry into our faculties than Hume was able to offer.

That Hume, and skeptics in general, err, Kant thinks, is clear from the fact that they take their censure of dogmatism too far: “while rightly denying to the understanding what it cannot really supply, they go on to deny it all power of extending itself *a priori*” (A767/B795). As a result, they call into question various things Kant thinks we know to be true, including the principles we employ in experience and our mathematical and natural scientific knowledge.¹⁶ Kant’s diagnosis of Hume’s error is that his assessment was “overly hasty” or “premature” (Prol 4:258): Hume’s negative verdict about the application of pure concepts, and so about the

¹⁵ For helpful discussions of this “hint,” see Kuehn (1983); Ertl (2002); Chance (2011).

¹⁶ See note 3.

possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, was made “in spite of his never having tested [the understanding] as a whole” (A767/B795). Again, “he did not make a systematic review of all the various kinds of *a priori* synthesis ascribable to the understanding” (A767/B795).

What did Hume hastily overlook? What “never occurred to Hume,” Kant says, is the proper “relation of the understanding to experience”—that is, that “the pure concepts of the understanding...[are] not [related] in such a way that they are derived from experience, but that experience is derived from them” (Prol 4:313; B127). In other words, Hume failed to entertain Kant’s Copernican turn—“the new point of view” which Kant thinks “enables us to explain how there can be knowledge *a priori*” (Bxix). This revolutionary way of thinking about the relationship between our minds and the objects of knowledge flips the empiricist’s story, on which the mind conforms to the objects it takes in through experience, deriving all the materials for thought from them. On Kant’s new way of thinking, it is objects of knowledge which “conform to our knowledge,” “to our faculties” and, in particular, “to our concepts” (Bxvi–xvii). If Kant is right, it seems that the appropriate response to skepticism would be to explain the alternative way of thinking about our minds and knowledge which “never occurred to Hume.”

That this is how Kant sees things is strongly suggested by the following passage:

We are actually in possession of *a priori* synthetic modes of knowledge as is shown by the principles of the understanding which anticipate experience. If anyone is quite unable to comprehend the possibility of these principles, he may at first be inclined to doubt whether they actually dwell in us *a priori* but he cannot on this account declare that they are beyond the powers of the understanding, and so represent all the steps which reason takes under their guidance as being null and void.

Here, Kant states that the skeptic's doubt concerning the principles of the understanding, and the understanding's power to validly apply concepts more generally, is based in her being "unable to comprehend the possibility of these principles." An appropriate response to the doubt, then, would be to provide an explanation of how we can have synthetic *a priori* knowledge—an explanation which could allow the skeptic to "comprehend the possibility of these principles." Presumably, this could remove the doubt. It would do so in part by explaining the possible "relation of understanding to experience" which Kant thought Hume hastily overlooked.

The idea that the objects of knowledge conform to our faculties is a complex one, which Kant develops throughout the Doctrine of Elements. For him, grasping the Copernican turn involves recognizing that the faculties jointly responsible for producing knowledge—sensibility and understanding—have purely formal elements, which are discoverable through *a priori* reflection. Revealing the most basic of these formal elements is the task of the Transcendental Aesthetic and the first chapter of the Transcendental Logic, later referred to as the "metaphysical deduction" (B159). In the former, Kant argues from the synthetic *a priori* nature of mathematical knowledge to space and time's being the *a priori* "forms of sensibility" (cf. A89/B121, B169). In the latter, he derives an exhaustive table of pure concepts from the general logical functions of thought, producing an "ancestral registry [*Stammregister*] of the understanding" (A81/B107). In failing to grasp Kant's Copernican turn, then, Hume presumably overlooked these formal elements of our cognitive faculties. If this is right, we might view much of the Doctrine of Elements as constituting what Kant has to offer the skeptical empiricist.

Nevertheless, I will focus mostly on the Transcendental Deduction. As many interpreters have noted, Kant viewed the Deduction as the heart of his critical project. He says: "I know of no

enquiries which are more important for exploring the faculty which we entitle understanding, and for determining the rules and boundaries of its employment” (Axvi). The Deduction concerns the valid application of pure concepts, rather than our mere possession of them. It explains how the forms of sensibility and understanding cooperate in the production of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Without this explanation, Kant’s discoveries about the forms of our cognitive faculties fall short of an explanation of *our knowledge*, and so do not yet provide an overlooked alternative to empiricism. The Deduction thus completes the task for which Kant introduces the Copernican turn, “the new point of view [which] enables us to explain [*erklären*] how there can be knowledge *a priori*” (Bxix).¹⁷ Indeed, as I will now argue, giving such an explanation is precisely what the Deduction does. So it makes sense to view it as the core of Kant’s offer.¹⁸

¹⁷ On the relation between the Copernican turn and the Deduction, see Engstrom (1994). Kant clarifies that the Deduction’s completing this task still leaves a task for the Analytic of Principles—namely, “to exhibit...the judgments which understanding...actually achieves *a priori*” (A148/B187).

¹⁸ Kant at times seems to suggest that the key fact which Hume overlooked is the synthetic status of mathematics. He states several times (B19–20; Prol 4:172–73; cf. KpV 5:52) that if Hume had recognized this status, he would not have cast doubt upon all synthetic *a priori* knowledge. For Kant viewed Hume as having the “good sense” to avoid a position which he would then see undermines “pure mathematics” (B20; for critical discussion, see Thielke 2015). Kant’s point in these passages is *not* that Hume’s recognizing mathematics to be synthetic would cure him of skepticism, however. It is instead that Hume would have grasped the urgency and generality of Kant’s own “general problem of pure reason,” expressible in “the question: How are *a priori*

4. The Deduction's explanatory dimension

As I read Kant, the Deduction offers an *explanation* of just the possibility which the skeptical empiricist overlooks. On what I call the *explanatory reading of the Deduction*, the Deduction has an explanatory dimension that is central to its aims. As we will see, this reading does not deny that the Deduction is a proof or that it supports synthetic judgments. Rather, it insists that the Deduction's task and method are fundamentally explanatory. A full defense of the explanatory reading would both draw from and shed light on the argumentative structure of the Deduction. I will not attempt this here. More modestly, I will introduce and motivate the reading, and use it to support the friendly offer reading of Kant's relationship to skeptical empiricism. Appreciating the Deduction's explanatory dimension opens a way to understanding how it could appeal to a skeptic who may otherwise not find it compelling as a proof.

The strongest evidence for the explanatory reading is the language Kant uses in describing the notion of a transcendental deduction in general, and the task of his Transcendental Deduction of the categories in particular. In a section entitled "The Principles of Any Transcendental Deduction" (A84/B116), Kant introduces the notion of a transcendental deduction. He says: "the *explanation of the manner* [*Erklärung der Art*] in which concepts can thus relate *a priori* to objects I entitle their transcendental deduction" (A85/B117, my emphasis). Transcendental deductions, according to this official characterization, essentially "explain the manner" in which concepts relate *a priori* to the objects of knowledge.

synthetic judgments possible?" (B19). Only an *explanation* of the possibility of such judgments, not mere recognition of their actuality, can answer this question.

An “explanation of the manner” in which certain concepts relate *a priori* to objects can sound too unambitious a goal to someone who thinks the Deduction is meant to refute skepticism. I speculate that this is why Kant’s official characterization of a transcendental deduction has not received due attention. Yet this characterization’s portrayal of a deduction as explanatory is by no means isolated. Kant regularly describes his Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts using similar terms. In the first edition preface, for example, Kant says the Deduction will “*expound and render intelligible [darstellen und begreiflich machen] [the] objective validity*” of the categories (Axvi–xvii, my emphasis). Similar characterizations occur within the first edition’s Deduction. At its beginning, Kant says that “the understanding,...as a faculty of knowledge that is meant to relate to objects, calls for *clarification [Erläuterung]* in regard to the possibility of such relation” (A97, my emphasis). At its conclusion, Kant says that the goal of “the transcendental deduction of the categories [was] *to render comprehensible [begreiflich machen]* this relation of understanding...to all objects of experience” (A128, my emphasis). In the second edition, Kant says the “purpose” [*Absicht*] of the Deduction will have been “fully attained” once “the *a priori* validity of the categories in respect of all objects of our senses has been *explained [erklärt wird]*” (B145, my emphasis). Relatedly, Kant’s one-sentence “outline” of the second edition’s Deduction reads: “The deduction is the *exhibition [Darstellung]* of the pure concepts of the understanding, and therewith of all theoretical *a priori* knowledge, as principles of the possibility of experience” (B168, my emphasis). All of these passages suggest that Kant himself endorsed what I have called the explanatory reading of the Deduction. According to Kant, an explanatory dimension is central to the Deduction. Indeed, a transcendental deduction *is* an explanation.

To understand the explanatory reading, it is worth pausing to ask what kind of explanation Kant thinks a transcendental deduction is. After all, in the quoted passages, Kant uses a diverse set of terms to characterize deductions as explanatory in nature. Some of these expressions are terms of art within Kant's critical system, and some have multiple senses. As Kant notes, the German word '*Erklärung*,' which figures in his official characterization of such a deduction, is ambiguous between four different Latin terms: "*exposition, explication, declaration, and definition*" (A730/B758). Kant never says which he has in mind. But two can easily be ruled out. 'Declaration' [*Deklaration*] seems inapt. For in giving a declaration one "invents" a concept that is "not given to him by the nature of understanding or by experience but [instead] is such as he has deliberately made it to be" (A729/B757). Since deductions concern concepts which lie in the understanding *a priori*, they cannot be declarations. Nor can deductions be definitions [*Definitionen*], which "present the complete and original concept of a thing within the boundaries of its concept" (A727/B755). Since we can never be sure that our given empirical and *a priori* concepts are complete, definitions belong only in mathematics, whose concepts are fully determined by "an arbitrary synthesis that admits of *a priori* construction" (A729/B757).

Philosophical explanations, in contrast, are "analyses of given concepts," since philosophy "presuppose[s] the prior presence of concepts, although in a confused state" (A730/B758). Kant deems the not necessarily exhaustive presentation of what belongs to a concept its 'exposition' [*Exposition*] (A729/B757; cf. A23/B38; Log 9:105). As the Latin term suggests, expositions draw or put [-*pos*-] out [*ex*-] into the open what is at first hidden within a concept. Exposition's playing a role in philosophy makes it a candidate for the kind of explanation which figures in the Deduction. Kant's identification of the Latin term with the German expression '*Erörterung*' provides additional evidence (A23/B38; Log 9:142). This is

because it is the term Kant uses in his “transcendental exposition [*Erörterung*]” of space (B40, A27/B44), which he later calls a “transcendental deduction” of the concept of space (B119–21). The Transcendental Exposition counts as a deduction insofar as it “explains [*begreiflich machen*] how the concepts of space and time...must necessarily relate to objects” (B121).¹⁹ By the same token, transcendental deductions in general may be a kind of *exposition*—in particular, expositions which draw out the *a priori* relation of concepts to objects.

When disambiguating the four senses of ‘*Erklärung*,’ Kant says nothing of the remaining sense: explication [*Explikation*]. But Kant discusses this Latin term in his logic—for example, when he contrasts empty tautologies (such as ‘man is man’) with “propositions that are identical *implicite*.” These latter propositions, he says, “make clear the predicate that lay undeveloped (*implicite*) in the concept of the subject through *development* [*Entwicklung*] (*explicatio*)” (Log 9:111). Again, the Latin term suggests clarifying or coming to a better grasp of something without adding to or extending it—in this case, an unfolding or, more literally, a folding [*-plic-*] out [*ex-*]. The German ‘*Entwicklung*’ (lit.: unwinding) also suggests development without expansion. Kant speaks of ‘*Explikation*’ in connection with deduction.²⁰ And, as noted above, he describes the Deduction as an ‘*Erläuterung*’ or ‘clarification’ (A97). This term has a closely related meaning, insofar as Kant contrasts ‘*Läuterung*,’ meaning clearing or refining, with ‘*Erweiterung*,’ meaning extending. The contrast appears in an important characterization of critique as not itself “a doctrine” of knowledge: “critique[’s]...utility, in speculation, ought

¹⁹ On Kant’s portrayal of the Transcendental Exposition as a deduction, see Ameriks (1978), 273–76 and Warren (1998), 222n57. See Merritt (2010) for an alternative reading.

²⁰ At KU 5:412, Kant glosses ‘*Erklärung*’ with both ‘*Deduktion*’ and ‘*Explikation*.’

properly to be only negative, not to extend [*erweitern*], but only to clarify [*läutern*] our reason, and keep it free from error” (A11/B25).²¹ This negative characterization of critique suggests that the kind of explanation given in the Deduction, a crucial step in the critical enterprise, unfolds or unwinds the pure concepts. It clarifies our knowledge without extending it beyond what we already implicitly recognize in having such concepts.

The explanation provided in the Deduction, it then seems, is an exposition or explication of what we already, if only hazily, recognize about the *a priori* application of our concepts.

In describing these two kinds of explanation, I have spoken of analysis, clarification, and predicates that already lie in the concept of the subject. Such talk can seem inconsistent with the widespread interpretation of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction as making and defending synthetic judgments, whose predicates add something new to the concept of the subject they are predicated of. If reading the Deduction as an explanation implies that it contains or supports only analytic judgment, that reading would seem to be a mischaracterization.²²

But this is not an implication of the reading. Perhaps one paradigm of clarification is conceptual analysis. But a clarification can also support synthetic judgment. That Kant thinks

²¹ Compare Kant’s characterization of critique as the “clarification of our concepts [*Aufklärung unserer Begriffe*]” (A735/B764).

²² Many have found that the Deduction’s containing only analysis would establish only a disappointingly hypothetical result—namely, that *if* I am to have empirical knowledge of objects, the categories must apply to them. That would seem to leave open the possibility that I have no such knowledge. See Allison (1993), 249.

this is borne out in his describing a “transcendental exposition” as “the explanation [*Erklärung*] of a concept, as a principle from which the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge can be understood” (B40). Such an exposition is “transcendental,” but it is an exposition nevertheless. So when Kant gives a general characterization of exposition earlier in the Aesthetic as “the clear, though not necessarily exhaustive, representation of that which belongs [*gehört*] to a concept” (A23/B38), we should understand the representation as potentially including not only the predicates that “belong to” the concept but also the concept’s manner of application to sensibility.²³ Recall Kant’s characterization of transcendental deductions generally as

²³ Indeed, Kant says that pure concepts “include [*enthält*]...the synthesis of possible appearances” (A719/B747). And Kant views such syntheses as constituting “synthetic propositions” of a certain kind—namely, “transcendental propositions” (A720/B748). This mode of synthesis is represented when the exposition is “transcendental,” and so concerned with the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge.

How does a clarification forge the connection between concepts and intuitions needed for synthetic judgment (B16–18; A721–22/B749–50)? Kant’s description of the second edition Deduction as an “exhibition [*Darstellung*]” (B168; cf. B159) suggests a possible answer: the clarification makes the *a priori* application of such concepts ‘intuitable’ to us. A *Darstellung*, for Kant, is “the action whereby we give to a concept the corresponding intuition” (V-Lo/Dohna 24:697; cf. KU 5:192–93; for discussion, see Matherne 2015). In calling the Deduction a “*Darstellung*,” Kant may thus be viewing it as “giving” the pure concepts a “corresponding intuition”—presumably, the pure intuition established in the Transcendental Aesthetic.

explanations *of the manner* in which concepts apply *a priori* to objects of experience. These explanations do not simply analyze concepts such as ‘cause’. They clarify the *a priori* application of these concepts to objects of experience. Calling the Deduction an explanation, exposition, or clarification is compatible with its involving or supporting synthetic judgments.

Similarly, Kant’s characterizing his Deduction as an explanation is compatible with viewing it as a proof or argument. It is normal for explanations to be or involve a series of inferences. In explaining how a steam train moves, I may conclude that the train’s speed can *thus* be controlled by adjusting a regulator valve, drawing this inference from earlier parts of the explanation—for example, that the valve’s angle affects how much steam pressure travels to the piston, that the piston’s movement rotates the wheels, etc. Moreover, Kant clearly characterizes the Deduction as a proof [*Beweis*] (A84/B116, B144n, B145, A794/B822; MAN 4:474–46). The Deduction can be a proof because, for Kant, some *explanations* are proofs. He indicates this in a discussion of “explanation [*Erklärung*] (deduction)” (KU 5:411) in the third *Critique*, where he says that, in this context, “to explain [*erklären*] means to derive from a principle [*von einem Princip ableiten*]” (KU 5:412). A derivation from a principle would seem to constitute proof. If that is right, it is not strange for Kant to say that the Deduction “explain[s] how there can be knowledge *a priori*” and is one of his “proofs of the laws which form the *a priori* basis of nature” in nearly the same breath (Bxix).

The exact workings of such a *Darstellung* must wait for a fuller discussion of the structure of the Deduction. What is relevant for present purposes is *that* Kant thought that the Deduction’s explanation could support synthetic judgment.

A complete defense of the explanatory reading would require close readings not only of Kant's descriptions of his task in the Deduction, but also of the Deduction itself, and especially of the way it combines explanation and proof.²⁴ The latter would more properly be the subject of a book-length project and is not my aim here. My aim is more modest. It is to highlight the Deduction's explanatory dimension. Taking seriously Kant's own treatment of his deductions as explanations helps us better understand his philosophy's appeal to a skeptic. For skeptics can be left cold by the Deduction's argument, but nevertheless gripped by the way the Deduction allows them to comprehend a possibility they had previously overlooked. The Deduction's exposition or explication explains the way pure concepts apply to the objects of possible experience. It thus clarifies the pure concepts' application in synthetic *a priori* knowledge, which skeptics can thereby recognize themselves to possess. We can appreciate these philosophical upshots of the reading even before filling in all its details. Moreover, my exploration of Kant's language in describing the Deduction has an interpretive upshot. It establishes criteria for a reading of the Deduction's aims and structure. A successful reading of the Deduction should make sense of how it can be both a proof and an explanation—indeed, an exposition or explication of what we already, if only hazily, recognize in thinking or experiencing the way we do.

²⁴ See Edgar (2010) for a discussion of how viewing the Deduction as an explanation resolves a classic puzzle about its argumentative structure: Henrich (1969)'s "problem of the two-steps-in-one-proof."

5. The instability of skeptical empiricism

The Deduction of the Pure Concepts offers the skeptical empiricist a way out of his skepticism by providing him with an explanation of an overlooked relationship between the mind and the objects of knowledge. If he listens to this explanation, he could come to see how pure concepts can validly apply to such objects. In doing so, he would come to see how concepts which originate in the understanding prior to experience can figure in substantive knowledge about the objects of experience. By coming to see how substantive *a priori* knowledge is possible, he would also come to see how we can have the ordinary empirical knowledge he called into question. He would thus cease to be an empiricist and cease to be a skeptic.

If the skeptical empiricist is receptive to Kant's explanation, it can cure his skepticism. But it can seem hopelessly naïve to think that he will be. The Deduction explains how concepts apply *a priori* to the objects of experience. But an empiricist proposes that we view all our thought as arising from the materials of experience. Wielding this commitment, he can reject all alleged substantive *a priori* knowledge as nonsense or pretense. Similarly, any attempt at explaining the valid application of *a priori* concepts should strike him as vain, if even intelligible. Worse yet, insofar as Kant offers his explanation as a means to progress beyond skepticism, Kant may appear to the empiricist as a sort of snake oil salesman, peddling supposed cures for a condition the empiricist does not yet recognize to be a disease. Shouldn't Kant have realized that he was begging the question against the skeptical empiricist? Expecting the skeptical empiricist to abandon his empiricism and embrace Kant's alternative may seem tantamount to expecting sudden, inexplicable conversion. If this was Kant's expectation, it may then seem that he utterly failed to grasp who the skeptical empiricist is, and why he holds the commitments he does.

I want to argue that the opposite is true. Kant's hope that he could change a skeptical empiricist's mind reflects a deep and subtle understanding of skepticism and its sources, centered on "The Impossibility of a Sceptical Satisfaction of Pure Reason" (A758–69/B786–97). Kant offers a compelling rationale for thinking even the most determined skeptical empiricists must be partly dissatisfied with their position in a way that makes his explanation necessarily appealing to them.

One source of a skeptic's dissatisfaction may be the continued disarray in philosophy. As we saw, Kant viewed skeptics as sharing his aims of "a sound critique of the understanding and reason," "arousing reason to circumspection," and "arriv[ing] at a permanent peace in philosophy" (A769/B797, A757/B785). Hume's interest in "subvert[ing] that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon" which leads to so much disagreement and misunderstanding and "cultivat[ing] true metaphysics" through careful "mental geography" (EHU 1.12–13, SBN 12–13), are, for Kant, points of commonality.²⁵ A skeptic who feels dissatisfied with empiricism's failure to achieve these aims may then be motivated to hear out an alternative that promises to end dogmatic disputes and obtain "peace and security" (Bxxv).

More crucially, for Kant, the skeptic must also be dissatisfied with his own skepticism, *qua* reasoner. He cannot be at peace even with himself. According to Kant, the drive to ask and answer metaphysical questions is a basic and inevitable "natural disposition" of human reason (B21, B22; cf. Bxiv, A842/B860; ProI 4:279–80). We humans are "impetuously driven by an inward need to questions such as cannot be answered by empirical employment of reason" (B21).

²⁵ All citations of Hume use the standard abbreviations and citation styles of the Hume Society; text derives from the Clarendon Press editions.

Again, “human reason...is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore” (Axii). This “inward need” or “drive” or “itch” (VNAEF, 8:414) of reason encourages us to answer substantive questions that cannot be resolved by appeal to any experiences we have had or even could have. It especially urges us to form judgments concerning the objects of traditional or ‘transcendent’ metaphysics—namely, God, the immortal soul, and the freedom of the will—knowledge of which is the “ultimate aim to which the speculation of reason in its transcendental employment is directed” (A798/B826; cf. A3/B7, B395n).

Again, it might seem that the empiricist has grounds for quieting these urges. Hume reports that “despair has almost the same effect upon us with enjoyment, and that we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes” (T Intro.9, SBN xviii). If that is right, finding out that it is impossible to answer questions whose resolution demands insight beyond what experience can deliver would destroy our desire to answer such questions. Insofar as Hume’s empiricist principles trace all our ideas back to experience, those principles can seem to prove the impossibility of satisfying such a desire. This suggests that the drive to metaphysics should vanish along with the adoption of skeptical empiricism, or at least once one has worked out the implications of that position.

One would be hard pressed to find someone who agrees with Hume about the ease with which our desires vanish. We do not stop wanting to talk to our parents as soon as they die, or stop wanting chocolate after eating the last piece. Even if some unfulfillable desires wither over time, others may not. A sailor shipwrecked on a deserted island may never lose her natural desire for companionship. Similarly, for Kant, skeptical empiricism can never succeed at purging our natural desire to answer metaphysical questions. He says: “to allow ourselves simply to

acquiesce in [skeptical] doubts...is a futile procedure, and can never suffice to overcome the restlessness of reason” (A757/B785).

Kant’s rationale for thinking that the skeptical empiricist cannot succeed in purging the desire to answer metaphysical questions is not simply that this urge is ineradicable. It is also that the skeptical empiricist has insufficient grounds for thinking that metaphysics is impossible. To see why Kant thinks this, it is helpful to note that he found skeptical empiricism, and in particular the “sceptical teachings” of Hume, to be “based on facts which are contingent, not on principles which can constrain to a necessary renunciation of all right to dogmatic assertions” (A767–68/B795–96). These “facts [*Fakta*],” Kant tells us, concern “all unsuccessful dogmatic attempts of reason” (A763–64/B791–92).

Kant was not always a careful reader of other philosophers, and it is doubtful that he was able to read much of Hume’s *Treatise*. But I believe he here characterizes the grounds of Hume’s philosophical approach quite similarly to Hume’s own portrayal of them in the introduction to the *Treatise*. There, Hume describes a sorry state of “metaphysical reasonings,” a “bustle” full of “noise and clamour” in which “disputes are multiplied” (T Intro.2–3, SBN xiii–xiv). These embarrassments in philosophy, for Hume, motivate the need to try out a new method. Noting the explosive successes in the natural sciences in the century following Bacon’s experimentalism, Hume proposes to follow a line of recent English empiricist philosophers in “the application of experimental philosophy” to philosophical topics (T Intro.7 and 7n, SBN xvii). If philosophy is going to progress beyond needless bickering and talking past one another, Hume suggests, the “science must be laid on experience and observation” (T Intro.7, SBN xvii). In short, Hume seems to adopt an experimental method on the grounds of his observations of the failures and obscurities of past metaphysicians and of the successes and precision of the natural sciences. If

that is right, Kant would be correct to view Hume's method, and the "sceptical teachings" which its application leads to, as "based only on facts which are contingent," insofar as Hume adopts the method in response to facts about how the history of philosophy and the sciences happens to have played out so far.

The failure of past attempts may very well be probable evidence that future attempts too will fail. But it does not show that they *must*. The skeptical empiricist is not entitled to say that success in reasoning is impossible without a basis in experience.²⁶ But past failures never imply that no kind of reasoning can succeed. For Kant, any universal conclusion based on empirical grounds leaves room for doubt to creep in: "Thus the fate that waits upon all scepticism likewise befalls Hume, namely, that his own sceptical teaching comes to be doubted, as being based only on facts which are contingent, not on principles which can constrain to a necessary renunciation of all right to dogmatic assertions" (A767–68/B795–96). The empiricist's commitment to the experimental method is shaky, Kant thinks, being itself first formed in response to contingent, empirical evidence. This instability is inherited by the skepticism to which that method leads.

Watkins sums up Kant's assessment of skeptical empiricism as follows: "skepticism does not represent a stable position...since nothing can keep it from being used against itself" (2005: 377; cf. Chance 2013b: 102).²⁷ But we need not view Kant as using *skepticism* against skepticism. The claim that empirical grounds for universal claims leave room for doubt is one that Kant accepts on his own terms. And, if true, the claim reveals the instability of skepticism

²⁶ As Hume does at T 1.3.2.4, SBN 74–75.

²⁷ I discuss Watkins and Chance's readings in more detail in Goldhaber (forthcoming).

regardless of whether it is used “against” the skeptic. At any rate, Kant goes a step further. He does not only argue that the empiricist’s grounds for rejecting synthetic *a priori* knowledge are inadequate, but also that there can be no better grounds. According to Kant, we could never come to know that we can have no substantive knowledge *independently of experience*. He says:

Nothing worse could happen to [the development of systems of synthetic *a priori* knowledge] than that someone should make the unexpected discovery that there is and can be no [synthetic] *a priori* knowledge at all. But there is no danger of this. It would be tantamount to someone’s wanting to prove by reason that there is no reason. For, we say that we know something by reason only when we are aware that we could have known it even if it had not presented itself to us as it did in experience. It is an outright contradiction to want to extract necessity from an empirical proposition (*ex pumice aquam*) and to give a judgment, along with necessity, true universality.

KpV 5:12

For Kant, the conclusion that synthetic *a priori* knowledge is impossible would have to hold *a priori*, given its modality and universal scope: “experience never confers on its judgments true or strict...universality” (B3–4; A734/B762). The conclusion is also synthetic, since the concept of synthetic *a priori* knowledge does not already contain the concept of impossibility. So the conclusion would be synthetic *a priori*, and so provide a counterexample to itself, if known. It thus cannot be known.

We should not mistake this argument to be a refutation of skeptical empiricism, put forward by Kant to compel the skeptical empiricist to recognize the inconsistency of her own position. As Kant sees it, the skeptical empiricist agrees that we do not know that substantive

knowledge independent of experience is *impossible*, despite her tendency to occasionally assert this. After all, he portrays her as concluding that metaphysics has poor prospects on the probable evidence of past experience. Kant's argument does not challenge this claim. Instead, the argument reinforces Kant's point that the empiricist's skepticism about metaphysics must be "based only on facts which are contingent" and so is liable "to be doubted" (A767–68/B795–96). Her skepticism can only be based on contingent grounds, since it is contradictory to think there could be *a priori* grounds for denying there can be synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Showing this does not compel the skeptic to give up her position. But, granting Kant's view that contingent grounds are liable to doubt, it reveals skepticism to be necessarily unstable.

Since empirical grounds are insufficient for concluding that we cannot know, Kant thinks, the right response at this point is to continue inquiring. He says: "The consciousness of my ignorance (unless at the same time this ignorance is recognised as being necessary), instead of ending my enquiries, ought rather to be itself the reason for entering upon them" (A758/B786). Moreover, as we saw, for Kant, reason itself poses metaphysical questions. On his view, this implies that only reason can quell its metaphysical drive, either by satisfying it through the resolution of metaphysical problems or else by discovering its own incapacity to resolve them. It follows that "we have no right to ignore these problems...and...on the [skeptical empiricist's] plea of our incapacity, decline to occupy ourselves with their further investigation, for since reason is the sole begetter of these ideas, it is under obligation to give an account of their validity or of their illusory, dialectical nature" (A763/B791). Consciousness of our own ignorance about matters in which, as reasoners, we are inherently interested rightly drives us to continue inquiring into them. Recognizing this, "reason insists on giving free rein to itself,"

having “not in the least been disturbed, but only temporarily impeded” by the skeptical empiricists’ assaults (A768/B796).

The skeptical empiricist, as Kant sees her, is necessarily at war with herself. As a skeptical empiricist, she has given up on reason’s inquiries into the possibility of what Kant calls synthetic *a priori* knowledge, albeit in an empirically grounded way which leaves room for a hope of understanding the possibility and possession of such knowledge. But as a reasoner, she remains interested in whether and how she might possess synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Kant thus characterizes the skeptical empiricist’s “doubt” [*Zweifel*] as a kind of “despair [*Verzweiflung*] as regards satisfaction of reason’s most important aims” (Prol 4:271).²⁸ As Kant sees it, empiricists such as Hume are struck by a repeated failure to successfully answer metaphysical questions that arise from the nature of reason itself—so struck that, on the basis of these observed failures, they “despair” about the possibility of success, without a proof that success is impossible.

Nothing, then, locks the skeptical empiricist into her view beyond her despairing doubt. Although previous failures lend some initial support to that doubt, that support is inconclusive, and in conflict with her natural “drives” as a reasoner. In these two ways, her skepticism is unstable. She may then be drawn out of her despair by an explanation that satisfyingly “renders intelligible” synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Kant’s Deduction gives a thorough explanation of a possible relationship between concepts and objects which he thinks empiricists like Hume have so far failed to entertain. It is reasonable to think, then, that Kant’s explanation of this

²⁸ Compare “skeptical hopelessness [*skeptischen Hoffnungslosigkeit*]” (A704/B434).

relationship could engage the skeptic's imagination and get her to comprehend the possibility that she previously did not see. This could allow her to progress beyond her skepticism.

6. Why the skeptical empiricist will accept the offer

The instability and dissatisfaction which Kant attributes to the skeptical empiricist explain why she would be willing to entertain an alternative perspective like the one exhibited in Kant's offer. Even if Kant's explanation of the mind's relation to the objects of knowledge is at odds with her commitments, those commitments are weak and unsatisfying enough for her to hear out the offer.

We now have half our story. We can see why, for Kant, the skeptical empiricist would be willing to give his offer serious consideration, rather than dismissing it as inconsistent with her position. But why would the skeptic *accept* Kant's offer, rather than merely entertaining it? Kant's answer is that the offer addresses the sources of the skeptic's dissatisfaction and provides a more satisfying conception of the mind's relations to the objects of knowledge.

Can his conception be more satisfying? In the end, Kant does not think that we can gain knowledge of the traditional topics of metaphysics. According to him, showing this is the primary "utility" of his critique, which "ought properly to be only negative, not to extend, but only to clarify our reason, and keep it free from errors" (A11/B25). At the close of the Deduction, Kant concludes that "there can be no *a priori* knowledge, except of objects of possible experience" (B166). If we can know of nothing beyond the bounds of all possible experience, we cannot have knowledge of the traditional objects of transcendent metaphysics: God, freedom, and the soul. So, in the end, Kant's Deduction cannot satisfy any hope we might

have to gain metaphysical knowledge of such objects. This can seem to drain his offer of its appeal.

But unlike skepticism, the Deduction can, Kant thinks, succeed at quieting the desire for such metaphysical knowledge. It does this “by sufficiently clarifying our concepts to recall [reason] from its presumptuous speculative pursuits to modest but thorough self-knowledge” (A735/B763). This clarification is the core of what Kant calls critique, a task reason itself undertakes in pursuit of “self-knowledge” about the boundaries of its own rightful use (Axi, A849/B877). Through critique, reason comes to know what it can and cannot know *a priori*. In determining what reason must necessarily remain ignorant about, then, “sober critique” provides “a true cathartic” for our desire to form beliefs about things beyond the bounds of all possible experience, thus “effectively guard[ing] us against such groundless beliefs” (A486/B514; cf. A53/B78). Reason can then control or constrain its desire to answer certain metaphysical questions on the basis *not* of experience of past failures but of knowledge of its own operations. This seems to be Kant’s point when he says that his critique of metaphysics, unlike skepticism’s censure, is “based on principles” (A761/B789; Prol 4:260–61, 4:270).

To be clear, Kant does not think that critique can entirely remove our desire to answer metaphysical questions. According to him, even critical self-knowledge cannot prevent what he calls “transcendental illusion,” an ineradicable tendency which “exerts its influence on the principles” and “carries us altogether beyond the empirical employment of categories” (A295/B352). We remain tempted to apply pure concepts to transcendent things like God or the world taken as a whole (A297/B353) “in spite of the plainest and most urgent warnings” (A726/B754). Nonetheless, Kant thinks that, when we are faced with illusion, knowledge of its illusory nature can keep us from making judgments on its basis. He says: “the astronomer

can[not] prevent the moon from appearing larger at its rising [when it is near the horizon], although he is not deceived by the illusion” (A297/B354). Critique allows us to recognize the illusion for what it is, and so can deprive it of some measure of its pull. Even if critique does not inoculate us against the desire to answer transcendent questions, it is a better medicine than the skeptic’s prescription of doubt. The latter not only has the unwanted side-effect of excessive censure but also fails to inform us as to why transcendental illusion is illusory. “Particular errors can be got rid of by *censure*, their causes by *criticism*” (A711/B739).

Moreover, even if criticism cannot satisfy our desire for theoretical knowledge of God and the soul by delivering that knowledge, its revealing our ignorance of such matters to be necessary provides a ‘satisfaction’ which skeptical doubt could not: closure. An analogy will help. Consider a woman whose military husband has long been missing in action. She may take the twenty months since his last letter arrived as grounds for doubting that she will see him again. Still, she finds herself hoping and imagining him alive. This only inflames her desire to reunite. The desire is made torturous by her doubt that she can fulfill it. *Knowledge* that her husband has died, as painful as it would be, could help her escape this torturous cycle. Of course, her desire to reunite may persist beyond her receiving an official notice of his death. But, over time, the notice may nonetheless pacify her desire by foreclosing the hope which exacerbates it. It offers her closure and helps her move on. In a similar way, critical self-knowledge of our necessary ignorance of God and the soul can “pacify” [*befriedegen*] (A758/B786, A769/B797) an unruly desire to speculate about such matters, even without removing it. By being based on conclusive grounds, it addresses the desire more effectively than the skeptical doubt, which leaves sufficient room to hope for future successes.

This notion of ‘pacifying’ a desire can help us see why Kant says that only critique is a “true cathartic,” despite his also holding that critique does not fully purge the desire for metaphysical knowledge. The military wife’s desire to be with her husband is neither satisfied nor eradicated by the news of his death. But after months of tortured hoping, the news can nevertheless be cathartic for her. It can bring her peace [*Frieden*], and so remove the dissatisfaction which previously characterized her longing. She may then be able to put her longing to more productive ends. She may, for example, redirect it toward efforts to uphold her husband’s values or honor his memory. Similarly, the sense in which Kant’s offer addresses the dissatisfaction the skeptic feels from leaving metaphysical questions unanswered is neither the fulfillment nor the eradication of the desire for those answers. It offers the skeptical empiricist a “true cathartic” by bringing him peace and closure, including an insight into the sources of his dissatisfaction. Moreover, Kant suggests that any desire for metaphysical knowledge which persists can be sublimated into practical thinking, rather than theoretical knowing, about reason’s most important aims, like God and the immortal soul (Bxviii–xxii, A254–56/B310–12, A744–46/B772–74).

These features of Kant’s offer present real advantages that can lead a skeptical empiricist to accept the offer. It also offers another kind of satisfaction. Kant’s explanation of our knowledge in the Deduction gives the skeptic a way to comprehend our possession of *some* synthetic *a priori* knowledge of objects—namely, knowledge of the principles of the understanding which we employ in all empirical experience (A159/B198, A180/B233). Though Kant goes on to enumerate these principles only after the Deduction, the Deduction helps to explain how we can know them. It does this by explaining the valid application of the pure concepts employed by these principles. These *a priori* principles include, for example, the

principle that “all alterations take place in conformity with the law of the connection of cause and effect” (A198/B232)—a principle which Kant sees the skeptical empiricist as casting doubt upon. For Kant, the principles we employ in experience are recognized to be true in our common employment of them. This is suggested, for example, in the Third Analogy, where Kant discusses the principle of coexistence in accordance with reciprocal laws. He says: “*We may easily recognise from our experience* that only the continuous influence in all parts of space can lead our senses from one object to another” (A213/B260, my emphasis). If we indeed “easily recognize” the principles of the understanding by employing them in experience, it seems that even common reason has knowledge of them or else can come to it without the aid of philosophy. Kant may suggest as much in saying: “[a]n *a priori* proposition that precedes all experience is certain, for what is more certain than experience” (V-Met/Mron 29:805; cf. 29:794). Again, “sound common sense will always assert its rights in this domain” (Prol 4:351; cf. B4). A skeptical empiricist may adopt a methodology on which it is hard to see how we could know any such principle, or may deny that we ever can. In doing so, she erects an obstacle to understanding how she can know what she can, in experience, easily recognize to be true. If she does, on some level, recognize the truth of such principles in her employment of them in experience, as Kant thinks we “easily” do, she could become conscious of a tension within her thought. Her consciousness of this tension could spur a desire to clear away any obstacles to her understanding how she can know the principles she employs. Kant’s Deduction can satisfy that desire, by explaining how pure concepts can validly apply to the objects of experience, and so figure in substantive *a priori* knowledge. So the explanation it provides can appeal to the skeptical empiricist not only because it addresses our desire for metaphysical knowledge, about which she must remain curious, but because it can reconcile the skeptic with our common sense

knowledge of the principles of the understanding and, hence, with the ordinary empirical knowledge in which those principles are employed.²⁹ The explanation thus resolves a tension in the skeptic's thinking not only about metaphysical knowledge, but about empirical knowledge as well.

Kant's offer promises to address several sources of dissatisfaction which he finds inherent to skepticism. But we need not view the skeptical empiricist's acceptance of Kant's offer as based on pragmatic grounds. Broadly pragmatic or psychological concerns may play a role in distancing the skeptic from her empiricist commitments. But once that obstacle has been removed, and Kant's alternative explained, the skeptic could presumably come to accept Kant's conclusions on the grounds of his arguments. They could lead her to "self-knowledge [*Selbsterkenntnis*]" (A735/B763) of the principles of experience and recognition of our empirical knowledge of substances standing in reciprocal causal relations.

²⁹ A parallel point may be made concerning natural scientific and mathematical knowledge, both of which Kant repeatedly claims we can recognize to be "actual" (B4–5, B14–18, B20, B127–28; Prol 4:279–80, 4:294–95), despite the skeptical empiricist's doubt about or denial of synthetic *a priori* knowledge (B127–28, A760/B78, A765/B793; KpV 5:13, 5:51). But the point is complicated in the case of mathematical knowledge by the possibility that a skeptic may be entirely unaware of his position's conflicting with it, as Kant thought Hume was (see note 17). Indeed, Kant thought that the fact that "*mathematical judgments* are one and all synthetic...appears to have completely escaped the observations of analysts of human reason up to the present" (Prol 4:268).

Still, we might worry that such “self-knowledge” will never come—that even the promise of self-understanding, peace, or closure could never entice the skeptical empiricist to accept Kant’s conclusions. For the skeptical empiricist holds philosophical commitments which would seem to give her reason to reject the offer. Hume, for example, subscribed to a principle now known as “Hume’s fork.”³⁰ According to this principle, “all the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds[:] *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*.” The former “are discoverable by the mere operation of thought,” while the latter must be found in experience (EHU 4.1, SBN 25). Kant took this principle to commit Hume to the idea that all *a priori* judgments are analytic (Prol 4:270; cf. 4:272).³¹ If the skeptical empiricist holds this commitment, it would seem to give her reason to reject the Deduction’s conclusion that pure concepts validly figure in “theoretical *a priori* knowledge, as principles of the possibility of experience” (B168). She might then view the offer’s promise to remove any sense of dissatisfaction in her rejecting the principles as a false promise. Shouldn’t Kant have seen this?

This concern underestimates the importance of the skeptic’s dissatisfaction. For Kant, dissatisfaction can distance the skeptic from her own empiricist principles, which, as we have already seen, he thinks are held on insufficient grounds and so liable to doubt. The dissatisfaction may suffice for her entertaining the offer. If she then comprehends it, she is given a reason to leave her empiricist principles behind. Without considering that concepts such as ‘cause’ might make the objects of knowledge possible, Hume “was constrained to derive them from

³⁰ I consider only the version in the first *Enquiry*. On whether this is equivalent to other versions, see Millican (2017).

³¹ On whether Hume endorses this idea, see Thielke (2015), 266–76.

experience” (B127), depriving them of their use in synthetic *a priori* knowledge and so making the fork appear plausible. But Kant’s offer removes this constraint, by helping the skeptic comprehend a possibility that undermines Hume’s fork. The offer *explains* how “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact” do not exhaust all the valid judgments we can make. The dissatisfied skeptical empiricist can then reject the fork, rather than using it to reject Kant’s offer.

For Kant, the philosophical commitments of Hume and other empiricists present little obstacle to their accepting his offer. In fact, some of their commitments may increase its appeal. It may be, for example, that Kant saw Hume’s giving an important role to imagination in his account of the origin of the concept of ‘cause’ as indicating a readiness to reconsider whether the concept might originate in the understanding prior to experience after all (cf. Prol 4:257–59). Such commitments may perhaps make the skeptic more willing to accept his offer. But thinking that they are the only, or even primary, sources of the appeal would construe the dialectic in a much narrower way than Kant did. For Kant viewed his philosophy as capable of changing a skeptical empiricist’s mind by drawing on the skeptic’s own dissatisfaction, caused in part by the very principles which might otherwise seem to pose obstacles to her accepting it.

The Deduction plays a crucial role in explaining our possession of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, and is offered to the skeptical empiricist as a means to escape her skeptical empiricism. But it is important to see this offer for what it is—an *offer*. An attempt to *compel* the skeptical empiricist to recognize her *a priori* knowledge of principles in virtue of the role they play in making experience possible will beg the question against her, if she has not yet grasped how we can have *a priori* knowledge of objects. So *forcing* the Deduction’s argument upon her will have little effect. Doing so is likely to put her in a defensive posture, in which she holds fast to her empiricism, and so judges the explanation in the Deduction to be of little value. But if the

explanation remains a standing offer, it can appeal to the skeptic when her dissatisfaction with her own position periodically or inevitably creeps through the cracks, either because it thwarts restless reason's aims or because it clashes with common reason's insight.³²

That appeal is both powerful and complex. The explanation pacifies the skeptic's own frustrated desire for metaphysical knowledge, provides insight into the sources of her dissatisfaction, helps her to channel her desire in a more productive direction, and offers a way to comprehend the possession of some synthetic *a priori* knowledge. These advantages give Kant good reason to expect the skeptical empiricist to consider and accept his offer.

³² The “despair” and “melancholy” which Hume feels in response to the skeptical implications of his finding the “trivial” imagination at the root of all belief and reasoning can suggest Hume's dissatisfaction with his own position (T 1.4.7.1, 3, SBN 263, 265). It is true that Hume portrays himself as emerging from this gloom with returned “curiosity” and “ambition” (T 1.4.7.12–13, SBN 270–71). But we might wonder how stable this change in humor is. Hume does not obviously overturn the lines of thought which led him into despair in the first place. Its likely return would give Hume a reason to hear out and accept Kant's offer. Speculatively, Kant could perhaps have judged as much from reading Hamann's 1771 translation of T 1.4.7 under the title “*Nachdenken eines Zweiflers.*” For readings of Hume on which he develops resources for resolving the sources of his despair, see Garrett (1997), Ch. 12; Goldhaber (2021). For concerns, see Qu (2014). For more skeptical readings, see Thielke (2003); Waxman (2003), 266–79.

7. Conclusion

Kant has a rationale for thinking that the explanation he offers will appeal to the skeptic, rather than simply begging the question against her. On his view, skeptical empiricism stands on shaky ground, based only on contingent facts about previous philosophical failures. It denies a kind of knowledge that common human reason recognizes us to have. And all reasoners, including skeptics, must remain interested in the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. By leading to skepticism, empiricism urges us to abandon all attempts to satisfy this interest. For that reason, adopting skeptical empiricism might seem to remove the appeal of an explanation of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. But, for Kant, the opposite occurs. By stifling our necessary interests, and doing so on insufficient grounds, skeptical empiricism turns out to be necessarily unstable. And because the view is unstable, it cannot stably stand in the way of pursuing those interests. A skeptical empiricist cannot be completely satisfied with her skepticism. The more dissatisfied she feels, the more likely she will be to hear out Kant's explanation and accept it.

Kant took the skeptic's empiricist commitments to pose only amply superable obstacles to her acceptance of his offer. But there may be further obstacles—for instance, ineffective communication. Kant's self-acknowledged “dry, purely *scholastic* fashion” of writing, its “large[ness] in bulk,” and its “unsuitability” for “popular consumption” can indeed make him difficult to read and understand (Axviii; cf. Bxxxiv; Prol 4:261, 4:262, 4:274, 4:277–78; Br 10:272–73). Perhaps no part of the *Critique* is more notoriously straining than the Deduction, which cost Kant “the greatest labor” to write (Axvi; cf. Prol 4:260) and has been described more recently as a “mystery,” a “jungle,” and “complex and elusive” (Strawson 1966: 85; Bennett 1966: 100; Henrich 1969: 64, respectively). The Deduction's difficulty could explain why many skeptics never found the way forward that Kant took himself to have offered them.

Another source of obstacles is the various moods and attitudes which often accompany skepticism. Some of these encourage skeptics to become obstinate, poor listeners, even to the friendliest and most digestible offers. A skeptic may, for instance, find a twisted contentment in despair or self-pity and so avoid opportunities to emerge from it, like the unrequited lover who enjoys his dissatisfaction. A skeptic may take pride in her refusal to listen to those outside her ‘in’-group, like shallow punks more concerned with feeling superior than effecting change. The promise of literary fame or professional prestige, too, may motivate a skeptic to concoct clever and novel arguments for his own position—a position which invites attack, yet appears impervious. Pursuit of recognition and relish for ingenuity may divert his restless reason, subduing his metaphysical urges for a while. Such pseudo-satisfactions, and the personalities and moods which tend toward them, can lead a skeptic to leave the offer on the table.

The explanation whose core Kant offers in the Deduction may very well fail to wrest a skeptic out of these moods. But it is extreme to see this as a flaw. Probably no piece of philosophy can appeal to every uncooperative character. The Deduction still offers skeptical empiricists a way out of their predicament, whether or not they are consistently open to it. And though Kant’s offer may not reach all skeptics, in all moods, many will find it a welcome antidote to their despair and a promising path to peace.

Many philosophers invoke Kant’s name and spirit when attempting ambitious refutations of skepticism. They model their arguments on the apparent form of the Deduction, thinking this will imbue them with compelling force.³³ Perhaps this strategy can succeed. But we must not let it overshadow a less aggressive, more cordial response to skepticism. This is to offer the skeptic

³³ See Strawson (1959), 62–63; Putnam (1981), 16; Korsgaard (2009), 32–33.

a way of looking at things that she overlooks—one which explains the possibility of what she doubts or denies. I have argued that we can find this friendly sort of offer in Kant's Deduction. And I think that if we hold Kant's offer in mind, we will be able to see other responses to skepticism along roughly the same lines. This can offer us an easily overlooked strategy for responding to, and curing, skepticism.

This is roughly the same explanatory strategy that might resolve a doubt about the possibility of a mathematical proof of a so far unproven conjecture. Imagine that after twelve honest attempts you find you cannot get the proof to work. You may seem to have good grounds to stop trying, based on your failures so far. You might also conclude that you cannot know the conclusion of the proof. But now someone comes along and says she has completed the proof. You should not respond by saying, "That's not possible! We've failed so many times." You should instead look at her proof. If you see that it succeeds, you may come to know what you had decided could not be known.

The example of a mathematical proof brings out one way in which one might plausibly disagree with Kant. His insistence that ignorance should always prompt continued inquiry unless one has found the ignorance to be necessary seems extreme, even for cases of *a priori* reasoning. We may be right to give up after twelve attempts. The empiricist may likewise have been justified in giving up on the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge after observing the repeated failures of previous metaphysicians. I doubt that this is true, but I have to admit that it is at least initially plausible. Either way, he would be wrong not to listen to the explanation of a possibility someone thinks he has overlooked. And he would be dogmatic to reject the explanation on the grounds of previous failures. In Hume's own words: "a man is guilty of

unpardonable arrogance, who concludes, because an argument has escaped his own investigation, that therefore it does not really exist” (EHU 4.22, SBN 38).

In the case of the mathematical proof, listening to the explanation can lead to genuinely new knowledge. In Kant’s case, the explanation can lead the skeptic to recognize that he has had the knowledge in question all along. In both cases, we can see how the explanation can naturally, and rightly, appeal to the skeptic, at least when he is not at his most stubborn. If Kant is right, this appeal is even stronger in the case of the skeptical empiricist than in that of the mathematical proof. The skeptical empiricist, on Kant’s view, has a necessary interest in the knowledge in question, which no despair can fully eradicate. And he already possesses, albeit in a hazy way, the knowledge he has come to doubt. This makes its clarification more likely to appeal to him, and his doubts all the more unstable.³⁴

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