# Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics

## That Will be Able to Come Forward as Science

# Contents[a]



[a] This table of contents has been constructed from the section titles. The original editions did not contain a table of contents.

# Preface

These prolegomena are not for the use of apprentices, but of future teachers, and indeed are not to help them to organize the presentation of an already existing science, but to discover this science itself for the first time. [4:255]

There are scholars for whom the history of philosophy (ancient as well as modern) is itself their philosophy; the present prolegomena have not been written for them. They must wait until those who endeavor to draw from the wellsprings of reason itself have finished their business, and then it will be their turn to bring news of these events to the world. Otherwise, in their opinion nothing can be said that has not already been said before; and in fact this opinion can stand for all time as an infallible prediction, for since the human understanding has wandered over countless subjects in various ways through many centuries, it can hardly fail that for anything new something old should be found that has some similarity with it.

My intention is to convince all of those who find it worthwhile to occupy themselves with metaphysics that it is unavoidably necessary to suspend their work for the present, to consider all that has happened until now as if it had not happened, and before all else to pose the question: "whether such a thing as metaphysics is even possible at all."

If metaphysics is a science, why is it that it cannot, as other sciences, attain universal and lasting acclaim? If it is not, how does it happen that, under the pretense of a science it incessantly shows off, and strings along the human understanding with hopes that never dim but are never fulfilled? Whether, therefore, we demonstrate our knowledge or our ignorance, for once we must arrive at something certain concerning the nature of this self-proclaimed science; for things cannot possibly remain on their present footing. It seems almost laughable that, while every other science [4:256]

makes continuous progress, metaphysics, which desires to be wisdom itself, and which everyone consults as an oracle, perpetually turns round on the same spot without coming a step further. Further, it has lost a great many of its adherents, and one does not find that those who feel strong enough to shine in other sciences wish to risk their reputations in this one, where anyone, usually ignorant in all other things, lays claim to a decisive opinion, since in this region there are in fact still no reliable weights and measures with which to distinguish profundity from shallow babble.

It is, after all, not completely unheard of, after long cultivation of a science, that in considering with wonder how much progress has been made someone should finally allow the question to arise: whether and how such a science is possible at all. For human reason is so keen on building that more than once it has erected a tower, and has afterwards torn it down again in order to see how well constituted its foundation may have been. It is never too late to grow reasonable and wise; but if the insight comes late, it is always harder to bring it into play.

To ask whether a science might in fact be possible assumes a doubt about its actuality.[a] Such a doubt, though, offends everyone whose entire belongings may perhaps consist in this supposed jewel; hence he who allows this doubt to develop had better prepare for opposition from all sides. Some, with their metaphysical compendia in hand, will look down on him with scorn, in proud consciousness of their ancient, and hence ostensibly legitimate, possession; others, who nowhere see anything that is not similar to something they have seen somewhere else before, will not understand him; and for a time everything will remain as if nothing at all had happened that might yield fear or hope of an impending change.

Nevertheless I venture to predict that the reader of these prolegomena who thinks for himself will not only come to doubt his previous science,
[4:257] but subsequently will be fully convinced that there can be no such science unless the requirements expressed here, on which its possibility rests, are met, and, as this has never yet been done, that there is as yet no metaphysics at all. Since, however, the demand for it can never be exhausted,*

* Rusticus exspectat, dum defluat amnis, at ille
Labitur et labetur in omne volubilis aevum. Horace.[1]

[a] *Wirklichkeit*

[1] "A rustic waits for the river to flow away, but it flows on, and will so flow for all eternity." Horace *Epistles*, I. ii. 42–3.

because the interest of human reason in general is much too intimately interwoven with it, the reader will admit that a complete reform or rather a rebirth of metaphysics, according to a plan completely unknown before now, is inevitably approaching, however much it may be resisted in the meantime.

Since the Essays of *Locke* and *Leibniz*,[2] or rather since the rise of metaphysics as far as the history of it reaches, no event has occurred that could have been more decisive with respect to the fate of this science than the attack made upon it by *David Hume*.[3] He brought no light to this kind of knowledge,[b] but he certainly struck a spark from which a light could well have been kindled, if it had hit some welcoming tinder whose glow was carefully kept going and made to grow.

*Hume* started mainly from a single but important concept in metaphysics, namely, that of the *connection of cause and effect* (and also its derivative concepts, of force and action, etc.), and called upon reason, which pretends to have generated this concept in her womb, to give him an account of by what right she thinks: that something could be so constituted that, if it is posited, something else necessarily must thereby also be posited; for that is what the concept of cause says. He indisputably proved that it is wholly impossible for reason to think such a connection *a priori* and from concepts, because this connection contains necessity; and it is simply not to be seen how it could be, that because something is, something else necessarily must also be, and therefore how the concept of such a connection could be introduced *a priori*. From this he concluded that reason completely and fully deceives herself with this concept, falsely taking it for her own child, when it is really nothing but a bastard of the [4:258]
imagination, which, impregnated by experience, and having brought certain representations under the law of association, passes off the resulting subjective necessity (i.e., habit) for an objective necessity (from insight). From which he concluded that reason has no power at all to think such connections, not even merely in general, because its concepts would then be bare fictions, and all of its cognitions allegedly established *a priori*

[b] *Erkenntnis*; in most instances, this word has been translated as "cognition."

[2] John Locke (1632–1704), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, in his *Œuvres philosophiques* (Amsterdam and Leipzig, 1765); German translation, 1778–80, though Kant read the French edition soon after its appearance; English translation, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. by P. Remnant and J. Bennett (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[3] David Hume (1711–76). On Kant's relation to the relevant works by Hume, see the Introduction.

would be nothing but falsely marked ordinary experiences; which is so much as to say that there is no metaphysics at all, and cannot be any.*

As premature and erroneous as his conclusion was, nevertheless it was at least founded on inquiry, and this inquiry was of sufficient value, that the best minds of his time might have come together to solve (more happily if possible) the problem in the sense in which he presented it, from which a complete reform of the science must soon have arisen.

But fate, ever ill-disposed toward metaphysics, would have it that *Hume* was understood by no one. One cannot, without feeling a certain pain, behold how utterly and completely his opponents, *Reid, Oswald, Beattie*, and finally *Priestley*,[6] missed the point of his problem, and misjudged his hints for improvement – constantly taking for granted just what he doubted, and, conversely, proving with vehemence and, more often than not, with great insolence exactly what it had never entered his mind to doubt – so that everything remained in its old condition, as if nothing had happened. The question was not, whether the concept of cause is right, useful, and, with respect to all cognition of nature, indispensable, for this Hume had never put in doubt; it was rather whether it is thought
[4:259] through reason *a priori*, and in this way has an inner truth independent

* All the same, *Hume* named this destructive philosophy itself metaphysics and placed great value on it. "Metaphysics and morals," he said (*Essays*, 4th pt., p. 214, German translation), "are the most important branches of science; mathematics and natural science are not worth half so much."[4] The acute man was, however, looking only to the negative benefit that curbing the excessive claims of speculative reason would have, in completely abolishing so many endless and continual conflicts that perplex the human species; he meanwhile lost sight of the positive harm that results if reason is deprived of the most important vistas, from which alone it can stake out for the will the highest goal of all the will's endeavors.[5]

[4] This quotation in Kant's text contains an ellipsis that somewhat distorts Hume's statement, which reads in full: "Monarchies, receiving their chief Stability from a superstitious Reverence to Priests and Princes, have abridged the Liberty of Reasoning, with Regard to Religion and Politics, and consequently Metaphysics and Morals. All these form the most considerable Branches of Science. Mathematics and natural Philosophy, which are the only ones that remain, are not half so valuable" (Essay 5, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," *Essays, Moral and Political*, 2 vols. [Edinburgh, 1741–2], vol. 2, p. 79).

[5] Kant considered the overextension of empirical concepts to be a threat to the idea of freedom and hence to morality; see Selections, pp. 152–4.

[6] Thomas Reid (1710–96), *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (Dublin and Edinburgh, 1764), French translation, 1768, German, 1782; James Oswald (d. 1793), *An Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion* (Edinburgh, 1766), German translation, 1774; James Beattie (1735–1803), *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (Edinburgh, 1770), German translation, 1772; Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), *An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense, Dr. Beattie's Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, and Dr. Oswald's Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion* (London, 1774).

of all experience, and hence also a much more widely extended use that is not limited merely to objects of experience: regarding this *Hume* awaited enlightenment. The discussion was only about the origin of this concept, not about its indispensability in use; if the former were only discovered, the conditions of its use and the sphere in which it can be valid would already be given.

In order to do justice to the problem, however, the opponents of this celebrated man would have had to penetrate very deeply into the nature of reason so far as it is occupied solely with pure thought, something that did not suit them. They therefore found a more expedient means to be obstinate without any insight, namely, the appeal to **ordinary common sense**.[7] It is in fact a great gift from heaven to possess right (or, as it has recently been called, plain) common sense. But it must be proven through deeds, by the considered and reasonable things one thinks and says, and not by appealing to it as an oracle when one knows of nothing clever to advance in one's defense. To appeal to ordinary common sense when insight and science[c] run short, and not before, is one of the subtle discoveries of recent times, whereby the dullest windbag can confidently take on the most profound thinker and hold his own with him. So long as a small residue of insight remains, however, one would do well to avoid resorting to this emergency help. And seen in the light of day, this appeal is nothing other than a call to the judgment of the multitude; applause at which the philosopher blushes, but at which the popular wag becomes triumphant and defiant. I should think, however, that *Hume* could lay just as much claim to sound common sense as *Beattie*, and on top of this to something that the latter certainly did not possess, namely, a critical reason, which keeps ordinary common sense in check, so that it doesn't lose itself in speculations, or, if these are the sole topic of discussion, doesn't want to decide anything, since it doesn't understand the justification for its own principles; for only so will it remain sound common sense. Hammer and chisel are perfectly fine for working raw lumber, but for copperplate one must use an etching needle. Likewise, sound common sense and speculative understanding are both useful, but each in its own way; the [4:260] one, when it is a matter of judgments that find their immediate application in experience, the other, however, when judgments are to be made in a

[c] *Wissenschaft*

[7] The words translated as "common sense" include the German root *Verstand*, or "understanding."

universal mode, out of mere concepts, as in metaphysics, where what calls itself (but often *per antiphrasin*)[8] sound common sense has no judgment whatsoever.

I freely admit that the remembrance[9] of *David Hume* was the very thing that many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy. I was very far from listening to him with respect to his conclusions, which arose solely because he did not completely set out his problem, but only touched on a part of it, which, without the whole being taken into account, can provide no enlightenment. If we begin from a well-grounded though undeveloped thought that another bequeaths us, then we can well hope, by continued reflection, to take it further than could the sagacious man whom one has to thank for the first spark of this light.

So I tried first whether *Hume*'s objection might not be presented in a general manner, and I soon found that the concept of the connection of cause and effect is far from being the only concept through which the understanding thinks connections of things *a priori*; rather, metaphysics consists wholly of such concepts. I sought to ascertain their number, and as I had successfully attained this in the way I wished, namely from a single principle, I proceeded to the deduction of these concepts,[10] from which I henceforth became assured that they were not, as *Hume* had feared, derived from experience, but had arisen from the pure understanding. This deduction, which appeared impossible to my sagacious predecessor, and which had never even occurred to anyone but him, even though everyone confidently made use of these concepts without asking what their objective validity is based on – this deduction, I say, was the most difficult thing that could ever be undertaken on behalf of metaphysics; and the worst thing about it is that metaphysics, as much of it as might be present anywhere at all, could not give me even the slightest help with this, because this very deduction must first settle the possibility of a metaphysics. As I had now succeeded in the solution of the Humean problem not only in a single case but with respect to the entire faculty of

[8] "by way of expression through the opposite."

[9] The German word *Erinnerung* can mean a "memory" or "remembrance" (as shown here), or it can mean a "reminder," "admonition," or "warning." Kant used the term both ways (e.g., Ak 1:173, 472; 2:267, 291, 362; *Critique* A vii, A 30 / B 45, A 98, B 414 note). Thus, his words here need not imply a specific act of remembering Hume's work, but may simply be invoking Hume's admonition or warning about the use of the causal concept in traditional metaphysics.

[10] On the idea of a "deduction," see Selections, pp. 166–8.