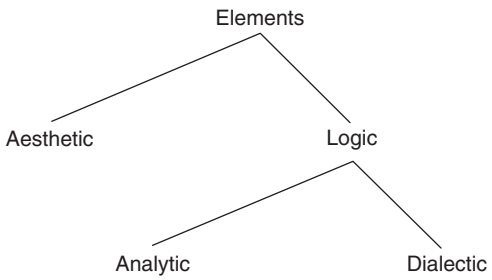
1

Introduction

§1. Locating the subject-matter

The *Critique of Pure Reason* is arranged in a hierarchy of Parts and Books and Divisions and Chapters and so on downwards. This arrangement distorts more than it reflects the real bones and sinews in Kant's work. Let us face this matter squarely right away, and get it behind us.

On the surface, the *Critique*'s main division is into a long portion about 'Elements' and a shorter one about 'Method'. The work's claim to greatness lies wholly in the five-sixths of it which Kant calls 'Transcendental Doctrine of Elements', and our present concerns are restricted to that. Its surface structure is this:



Like many writers on Kant, I prefer to split the work into two roughly equal parts, one containing the Aesthetic and Analytic, and the other containing the Dialectic. The Aesthetic/Logic line is supposed to follow a line between senses and intellect, but really does not. As for the division within the Logic, Kant sees the Analytic as concerned with one intellectual faculty (understanding) and the Dialectic with another (reason), and also sees the Analytic as concerned with satisfactory intellectual operations and the Dialectic with a certain kind of malfunction. (He apparently uses

'dialectic(al)' to mean 'pertaining to error or illusion', giving the word this unusual sense for a reason which seems to be a joke.[1]) Both of those rationales for the Analytic/Dialectic division rest on Kant's theory that the problems treated in the Dialectic result from malpractice by the faculty of reason; and in my last chapter I shall argue for the rejection of that theory.

Kant also has a better picture of the situation: the Aesthetic and Analytic jointly *present and defend* a philosophical position which the Dialectic then *applies* to certain difficulties and disputes. In fact, what is applied is not minute doctrine but only a broad stream of thought, and even that is disturbed by cross-currents; but still this second picture of the *Critique*'s structure has merits, including that of drawing the main line in the right place. That placing is endorsed by anyone who writes a book just on the Aesthetic and Analytic. I now endorse it in a less usual manner, by writing one just on the Dialectic.

On the surface, the Dialectic has four parts: an Introduction, two Books, and an Appendix. Really, though, it is a sandwich, with a thick slice of meat enclosed between two wafers of bread. The meat is the bulk of Book II, comprising several hundred pages of nourishing philosophy which are my main topic. The Introduction, Book I and the first three paragraphs of Book II, occupying altogether about fifty of Kant's pages, present a theory about the meat of the sandwich; and the final Appendix, running to about sixty pages, has more to do with that introductory material than with the central part of the Dialectic.

The bread of the sandwich gives Kant's theory about the nature and origin of the problems treated in Book II. He blames them on our faculty of *reason*, which he says is incurably prone to tempt us into certain kinds of mistake. Tracing the Book II problems to this source is supposed to help us solve them. It is also supposed to explain why Book II has just the contents that it does have; for Kant, typically, claims to have a theoretical basis for listing all the reason-induced errors:

> I have found a way of guarding against all those errors which have hitherto set reason, in its non-empirical employment, at variance with itself. I have not evaded its questions by pleading the insufficiency of human reason. On the contrary, I have specified these questions exhaustively, according to principles; and after locating the point at which,

1 85–6; see also *Commentary*, p. 441.

> through misunderstanding, reason comes into conflict with itself, I have solved them to its complete satisfaction.[2]

The boast is made even more resounding by Kant's view that all metaphysical problems are generated by reason-induced error, so that 'There is not a single metaphysical problem which has not been solved, or for the solution of which the key at least has not been supplied' in the Dialectic.

These extravagant claims are hollow. Kant's theory of reason, as well as being false, has little bearing on the real contents of Book II and is often positively inconsistent with them; and so it cannot help to solve the problems in Book II. Nor does it seriously explain why there are just such and such metaphysical problems: that is just Kant's undignified attempt to derive his choice of topics from the structure of human reason rather than the philosophical preoccupations then current in the German universities.[3]

In a remark I have quoted, Kant speaks of troubles that beset reason 'in its non-empirical employment'. In the title *Critique of Pure Reason*, the word 'pure' means 'non-empirically employed', and so his title means 'a critique of. . .the faculty of reason in general, in respect of all knowledge after which it may strive *independently of all experience*' (A xii). This reflects one aspect of the theory of reason, namely the view that the Dialectic's problems are supposed to arise from reason's having somehow cut itself loose from sense-experience. The troubles which Kant treats in the Dialectic do indeed arise partly from a failure to root one's thoughts in one's experience; but this has nothing to do with reason, and so I cannot take seriously the title of Kant's great masterpiece. Considered as a critique of pure reason, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is negligible.[4]

I postpone discussing Kant's theory of reason until my last chapter, but really there is no satisfactory placing for it. Because some of the terminology of the theory of reason occurs in Book II of the Dialectic, readers who are new to the work might find it helpful to read §§82–5 in my Reason chapter before moving into Chapter 7 and subsequent chapters of this book. Only the final two sections really need to be left until everything else has been read.

2 A xii–xiii. Next quotation: A xiii.

3 See W. H. Walsh, 'Kant', in P. Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York and London, 1967); F. C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (London, 1960), Vol. 6, p. 106.

4 Kant also wrote a *Critique of Practical Reason*, but he has no pure/practical contrast. In those two titles, 'pure' is short for 'pure theoretical', and 'practical' includes 'pure practical', and so theoretical questions about what is the case are being contrasted with practical questions about what ought to be done. See *Practical Reason*, pp. 9–10, n. 21.

§2. The main topics

Book II of the Dialectic has three chapters. Their topics are, respectively, (1) the self or soul or thinking subject, (2) the cosmos, or the world in space and time, and (3) God. Kant pretends that he can also associate them, respectively, with three forms of proposition with which reason may be busy when it goes astray: (1) subject–predicate, (2) if–then, (3) either–or. Anticipating my final two sections, I should say right away that Kant does not integrally connect conditionality with the cosmos, or disjunction with the divine!

The chapter about the soul – about the I of the Cartesian 'I think' – is called 'The Paralogisms of Pure Reason'. A paralogism is a certain kind of invalid argument – a kind which Kant thinks is the typical outcome of reason's going astray when thinking about the soul. This claim is not helpfully true, and Kant fortunately does not press it very hard. He does set up as targets some brief arguments which are perhaps paralogisms, but they are quite inadequate to express the material which Kant really wants to discuss and criticize. I shall use the word 'paralogisms' to refer to the lines of thought – the dense tangles of confusion and error – which are Kant's real topic in this chapter, and not to the jejune syllogisms which purport to embody them.

The Paralogisms chapter is the only part of the Dialectic that Kant thoroughly rewrote for the second edition (B). I shall attend mostly to the version in the first edition (A), which divides the material into four – a division which gets only a passing nod in B. Although this four-way split is not a total success, it is worth more attention than it usually gets. The fourth paralogism, incidentally, is not directly about the soul; but its presence in this chapter will be explained.

The chapter about the cosmos is called 'The Antinomy of Pure Reason'. In Kant's usage, an 'antinomy' is a pair of conflicting propositions each of which is supported by seemingly conclusive arguments. In this chapter he treats four of them, which are supposed to embody the four ways in which pure reason can be 'set at variance with itself' in thinking about the cosmos. That is theory-of-reason stuff; as is Kant's view that there is something inherently antinomal about the cosmological problems he discusses in this chapter (433). In fact, although those problems can be forced into an antinomal form, there is no necessity about this; it is just a matter of expository convenience or, sometimes, inconvenience.

The first two antinomies are genuinely cosmological, in that they have to do with the contents of space and time. The third is about freedom: can

there be an action or event which is 'free' in the sense of not being caused by a prior event? This hardly seems to belong to cosmology, whose subject-matter is supposed to be 'the world-whole' (434). Kant tries to connect it up, by arguing that if freedom is possible then that might be how the world began; but he really cares about freedom's bearing not on the beginning of the world but on the human condition *now*. So the third antinomy is an interloper. Still, it is an interesting one, and I shall give it a chapter.

The fourth antinomy is cosmological, all right; but it heavily overlaps with Kant's theology chapter, and so I shall postpone discussion of it until I reach the latter. This overlap, incidentally, illustrates something one must simply become accustomed to, namely Kant's irresponsibility about the *real* shape, or shapelessness, of his work. This may be partly explained by his obsession with *apparent* shape, his stubborn insistence on having everything labelled and pigeon-holed and numbered, usually in three-by-four formations.

The third chapter is called 'The Ideal of Pure Reason'. Although its subject matter is also supposed to arise from a malfunction of the faculty of reason, the word 'ideal', unlike 'paralogism' and 'antinomy', does not itself stand for any sort of reason-induced error or difficulty. In Kant's technical usage, an 'ideal' is a special sort of concept, of which the concept of God is an example (596). In this chapter, Kant attacks three famous arguments for the existence of God.

Observe that we have an '-ology' for each chapter: psychology, cosmology, theology.

§3. Background materials

Kant wrote the Dialectic with certain predecessors and contemporaries in mind, ranging from such great philosophers as Descartes and Leibniz down to minor figures like Baumgarten and Mendelssohn. I am not equipped to handle the minor figures, and I am prepared to miss the subtleties in Kant's work that reflects them, referring the reader to Beck's admirable account of them.[5] On the other hand, I shall say a good deal about Descartes (psychology and theology) and Leibniz (cosmology). I emphasize Leibniz not just because he is important in the Dialectic's

5 L. W. Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969). See also T. D. Weldon, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1958), Part I, Ch. 2.

background, but also because I want to make amends for my earlier book on Kant in which I wrongly neglected Leibniz in favour of Hume.

One recent writer, Al-Azm, makes Leibniz even more dominant in the background of the Dialectic than I do, contending that all four of the antinomies, which make up Kant's cosmology chapter, are best understood as commentaries upon Leibniz's correspondence with Clarke.[6] The Leibniz–Clarke correspondence is indeed crucial to the first antinomy (see Chapter 8 below), but Al-Azm has not persuaded me of his stronger thesis.

Kant's exposure to Leibnizian thought was largely second-hand, through the work of Christian Wolff. One gathers that Wolff had a second-rate mind, and it is a matter for regret that he came to be interposed, as a distorting glass or a muffling pillow, between the two great geniuses of German philosophy. I am unable to explore Wolff's yard-long shelf of philosophy, in which Leibniz's views are developed inaccurately and in infinite detail. I shall mainly ignore Wolff and write as though Kant's only Leibnizian source were Leibniz. I think that no harm will come of this.

My reason for introducing philosophers other than Kant is philosophical, not historical. If some view of Kant's is high-lighted or clarified by being played off against some view of an earlier thinker, then it is worthwhile so to present it. I do not much care whether Kant actually had that thinker in mind; for what I am doing is not history with a special subject-matter, but philosophy with a special technique.

By far the most important material in the Dialectic's background is by Kant himself. I refer to the general philosophical position which is developed in the Aesthetic and Analytic and then applied to certain problems in the Dialectic.

As I have already remarked, Kant himself sees the Dialectic as applying the doctrines of the Aesthetic and Analytic; but he also sees these two parts of the Critique as related in a different way.

It involves a special view of Kant's about the problems treated in Book II of the Dialectic. Those problems, he thinks, arise from the endeavour of 'pure reason' to prove certain propositions. The proofs are supposed to be 'a priori', i.e. to have no empirical input, to appeal to no special facts about sense-experience; and so the conclusions should also count as a priori propositions, meaning simply propositions which can be known independently of all empirical facts (and therefore known as necessarily true,

6 Al-Azm, *Kant's Arguments*.

or true-come-what-may). But these conclusions are supposed to be 'synthetic', i.e. their truth is supposed not to stem purely from the meanings of the words or structure of the concepts that are involved. Combining the two points, 'Metaphysics consists, at least *in intention*, entirely of *a priori* synthetic propositions.'[7] From this Kant infers that 'The proper problem of pure reason is contained in the question: How are *a priori* synthetic judgments possible?' Kant believes that such judgments are possible: he undertakes to show this for one kind of synthetic a priori judgment in the Aesthetic, and for a second kind in the Analytic. There is, however, a vital difference between these propositions to which Kant accords a synthetic and a priori status and the ones for which 'pure reason' claims that status. Propositions of the latter kind are supposed to express truths about reality, considered just 'in itself' and absolutely apart from any question of how we might experience it; whereas the former kind, which Kant defends as synthetic and a priori in the Aesthetic and Analytic, are propositions about how reality must be experienced. In Kant's slightly unhappy terminology, 'These *a priori* sources of knowledge...apply to objects only...viewed as appearances, and do not present things as they are in themselves.'

Summing up, then: pure reason purports to establish a priori various results about reality 'in itself', never mind how we might experience it; and Kant maintains that genuine synthetic a priori truths always concern what experience must be like, or what the world must be experienced as being like. The Aesthetic and Analytic establish the legitimate sorts of synthetic and a priori propositions, while the Dialectic cuts down the illegitimate sort.

That gloss on the situation, though truthful in its bearing on the Aesthetic and Analytic, is misleading about the content of the Dialectic. The latter is indeed essentially negative, though Kant says that in ruling out knowledge or valid argument on certain topics he has 'made room for faith';[8] but its negations have little to do with synthetic and a priori propositions as such. When a thesis is attacked in the Dialectic, it is attacked on its own demerits rather than as a false claimant to the title 'synthetic and a priori'. So we cannot take too seriously Kant's remark about 'the proper problem of pure reason', or the account of the *Critique*'s structure which goes with it. Significantly, this account, in which primacy

7 18. Next quotations: 19; 56.

8 See xxv–xxxv. Final reference in this paragraph is to Kant's *Prolegomena*; see especially §§5, 31.

is given to the notion of synthetic and a priori propositions, was first offered by Kant in the *Prolegomena*, a semi-popular work based upon A, and only in B did it find its way into the *Critique* itself.

However, as I said before, the Dialectic connects with the Aesthetic and the Analytic in other and more substantial ways than that. In my next two chapters I shall introduce some of the background material – Kantian and other – referred to in the present section. Some of the material in these chapters is distilled from – and some implicitly quarrels with – fuller treatments of the same topics in my *Kant's Analytic*. It will usually be clear where the earlier work is relevant, and I shall not give detailed references to it.

2

Concepts and intuitions

§4. The sensory/intellectual continuum

Two philosophical traditions – the rationalist and the empiricist – came together in Kant's philosophy, not in an inconsistent jumble but in a coherent synthesis of truths drawn from each. Underlying this positive achievement is a crucial negative one, namely Kant's avoiding of a certain error which was common to the empiricists and the rationalists. I shall chart this error in the present section and the next, and Kant's correction of it in §§6–8. Topics related to this will occupy the rest of the chapter.

The error is that of assimilating the sensory to the intellectual aspects of the human condition. No one would fail to distinguish seeing a man from thinking about men, hearing a whistle from understanding a lecture about whistles, feeling running water from drawing a conclusion; but the philosophers I am concerned with put all these matters on a continuum, representing as a difference of degree what is really one of kind.

A common vehicle for this mistake is the word 'idea'. Some philosophers have said that 'ideas' are what one has or is confronted with in ordinary sense-experience, in hallucinations, in some kinds of imagining and so on, and that they are also involved in thinking and understanding – so that having a meaning for a word is associating it with an 'idea', and thinking through a problem is mentally manipulating 'ideas'. Descartes clearly commits himself to using 'idea' as widely as that. He takes the term 'idea' to stand for 'whatever the mind directly perceives',[1] and he says explicitly that 'perception' covers 'sense-perception, imagining, and even conceiving things that are purely intelligible'. Descartes' detailed procedures also show him allowing 'idea' to sprawl across the whole realm of the mental. On the sensory side, for example, he says: 'If I now hear some

1 Reply to Third Objections, Haldane & Ross, pp. 67–8. Next three quotations: *Principles of Philosophy*, Part I, §32; *Third Meditation*, about one fifth of the way through; *ibid.*, a little past the mid-point.

sound, if I see the sun, or feel heat,. . .I can perhaps persuade myself that these ideas are adventitious', where 'these ideas' are clearly items of sensory intake that occur in hearing, seeing etc. But there is nothing sensory about Descartes' 'idea' of God, when he asks what there is 'in that idea', and bases his answer on the fact that 'By the name God I mean a substance that is infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, omniscient, omnipotent. . .'. In this passage, an idea of God is a meaning for the word 'God', and there is nothing sensory about that. There is indeed nothing sensory about any meaning, e.g. the meaning of the word 'red'; but where the word in question is 'God' it is more obvious – though no more true – that having a meaning for it is not like being in a sensory state.

The double use of 'idea', and the sensory/intellectual assimilation it embodies, are even more prevalent in Locke's writings. The *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* abounds with evidence that Lockean 'ideas' are sometimes sense-data. For example: 'The idea of *solidity* we receive by our touch. . .There is no idea which we receive more constantly from sensation than solidity.'[2] But 'ideas' also flourish as the raw materials of 'thinking', not in the Cartesian sense in which 'thinking' covers the whole range of the mental, but in a more normal sense in which thinking is a strictly intellectual, ratiocinative activity: 'Thinking, in the propriety of the English tongue, signifies that sort of operation in the mind about its ideas, wherein the mind is active.' Also on the intellectual side, Lockean 'ideas' are meanings. For someone to have real language and not just parrot-chatter, Locke says, he must 'be able to use these sounds. . .as marks for the ideas within his own mind, whereby they might be made known to others'. Also: 'So far as words are of use and signification, so far is there a constant connexion between the sound and the idea.'

Berkeley also mainly accepted the Lockean theory of meaning, I think, but the point is controversial. He certainly regarded thinking as a mental involvement with 'ideas' which are also something like sense-data. This was his basis for a notorious attempt to prove that nothing could exist when not perceived. Try to think of something existing when not perceived: to succeed you must think of something, i.e. conceive it, i.e. have an idea of it, i.e. perceive it; and so you must fail. It follows that the existence of an object when unperceived cannot be thought, and so is inconceivable, and so is impossible.[3] This is not the place to dissect this

2 *Essay* II. iv. 1. Next three quotations: II. ix. 1; III. i. 2; III. ii. 7.
3 *Principles of Human Knowledge* §23.