

Jonathan Bennett

Kant's Dialectic

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Kant's Dialectic

Preface to this edition

KARL AMERIKS



Jonathan Bennett's *Kant's Dialectic* is a landmark work in modern scholarship. Its appearance in 1974 was one of the first expressions of a confluence of three major trends that for fifty years now have played a major role in philosophy. The first trend is the general re-emergence of metaphysics as a source of positive attraction for the best and the brightest in the field. A second surprising trend has been the renaissance of studies in the history of philosophy. Whereas earlier, history and philosophy were often contrasted as two different fields, a historical turn has now taken the form of an avalanche of detailed studies of major modern figures (e.g., Bennett's *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes*, 1971), as well as an incorporation of historical considerations directly in the content of significant systematic argumentation. A third trend is the rehabilitation of Kant's philosophy, and a reconsideration of all aspects of his system as relevant to contemporary thought. Along with P. F. Strawson and Wilfrid Sellars, Jonathan Bennett was a prime analytic instigator of this movement already in the 1960s, with his first book on Kant, *Kant's Analytic* (1966). This book made Bennett famous as a practitioner of an approach that favours reconstructing a concise and interesting form of argument that seems to be present in the text, and then not hesitating to mercilessly expose its apparent shortcomings, all for the purpose of leading to more satisfactory arguments on the important topics under discussion. *Kant's Dialectic* employs a somewhat similar approach but expresses a broader perspective, one enriched with considerably more historical detail and reference to relevant predecessors. After an extremely helpful review, in the first three chapters, of the general themes of the 'Analytic', that is, the first major section of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Kant's Dialectic* launches into a path-breaking and detailed treatment of the key metaphysical terms of the second major section of the *Critique*: substantiality, simplicity, identity, infinity, limits, divisibility, freedom, God, and reason. The mere fact that this part of Kant's text – which had for so long been ignored because of its seemingly old-fashioned themes: rational psychology, cosmology, theology – received such careful attention by Bennett was already a revolution in its time. The content of the attention is even more remarkable, and the issues

that are raised, about matters such as 'quasi-memory', relations, vacuum, agency, and regulative principles, remain just as central in leading work in current philosophy. Bennett's discussion is especially valuable because of his in-depth understanding of Leibniz's relevance (see his new Cambridge edition of Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding*). Among the many highlights of the book, especially for advanced students, is the discussion of 'inflating the first paralogism' (section 25), of the 'weakening move' (section 45) in consideration of the antinomies of the infinite, and the complexities of 'real divisibility' (section 54). There is no better way to prepare oneself for a serious contemporary study of the central concepts of Kant's Dialectic than by working through every page of Bennett's still invaluable commentary.

Preface



This book is a sequel to my *Kant's Analytic*, but it does not presuppose knowledge of the earlier work. It is the only English book-length commentary on the Dialectic in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. It may be suggested that one is one too many – that my book fills a welcome gap in the literature – but I would dispute that. I have found that the Dialectic, together with relevant materials from earlier philosophers, especially Descartes and Leibniz, provides the basis for a satisfactory course of fifty-odd classroom hours for graduate students and able undergraduates. Such a course covers a useful amount of 'history of philosophy', guided throughout by an interest in a varied but not too scattered set of philosophical problems. *Kant's Dialectic* might be a help, but what I am confidently recommending is a different work – Kant's Dialectic.

I continue to be, in the words of an unhappy reviewer of my earlier work, 'one of those commentators who are more interested in what Kant ought to have thought than in what he actually did think'. Still, I try to describe the Dialectic accurately and in some detail. This part of Kant's work is at once knottier and more interesting than is commonly supposed, but the interest is lost if the knots are left tied, and so my philosophical aims have driven me to endeavours which may count as scholarly.

The Dialectic is full of mistakes and inadequacies, or so I shall contend, and *of course* this is consistent with its being a valuable contribution to philosophy. Still, there are doubtless fewer mistakes than I allege: my charge-list has gradually shortened as I have gained in understanding of the work, and presumably it could be reduced further. But I have worked for as long as I am prepared to, and I now offer what now seems to me to be true. Anyway, when there is evidence of error the truth is better served by an open accusation than by a respectful averting of one's eyes, even in cases where the charge of error can eventually be refuted.

Throughout, I use existing translations of non-English works, modifying them where accuracy demands it. I follow Kemp Smith's translation of the *Critique* except for a few changes in the interests of clarity and a larger number of corrections of mistranslations which are philosophically significant. The most serious of the latter are noted as they arise. For help with

the German – my knowledge of which is very limited – I am indebted to Lewis White Beck, Petra von Morstein and Margaret Jackson.

Kant's Dialectic grew out of teaching, scattered through a decade, at several universities. My largest block of indebtedness is to students at the University of British Columbia, where I have taught courses on the Dialectic in 1971–3. A few of them are named in the text, in acknowledgment of particular contributions; but to many others – far more than I could appropriately name in a Preface – I owe stimulation, encouragement, criticism and guidance of a high order.

I have been glad of the help of Michael Beebe, who served as my research assistant and gave me, among other things, most of what grasp I have of the issue about absolute space. I am also grateful for help with various parts of the book from my colleagues D. G. Brown, Howard Jackson, Peter Remnant, Richard E. Robinson, Steven Savitt and John Stewart; from J. J. Macintosh; and especially from M. J. Scott-Taggart.

Secretarial and other expenses were met by research grants – here gratefully acknowledged – from the Canada Council and the University of British Columbia.

Vancouver, B.C. J.F.B.
July 1973

System of references



To keep down the number of footnotes, some references are given in the text. Also, sometimes references which could occupy several footnotes are gathered into one. Each composite footnote refers forwards, and never beyond the end of the paragraph.

Numerals occurring alone refer to page-numbers in the second edition ('B') of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Numerals immediately preceded by 'A' refer to pages in the first edition, and concern material omitted from B. The following abbreviations are also used:

* <i>Bounds of Sense</i>	P. F. Strawson, <i>The Bounds of Sense</i> (London, 1966).
* <i>Commentary</i>	N. Kemp Smith, <i>A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason</i> (London, 1918).
<i>Essay</i>	Locke, <i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> .
Gerhardt	C. I. Gerhardt (ed.), <i>Die philosophischen Schriften von G. W. Leibniz</i> (Berlin, 1875–90).
Haldane & Ross	E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (eds.), <i>Philosophical Works of Descartes</i> (Cambridge, 1911–12), Vol. II.
<i>Kant's Analytic</i>	J. Bennett, <i>Kant's Analytic</i> (Cambridge, 1966).
<i>Kant's Arguments</i>	S. J. Al-Azm, <i>The Origins of Kant's Arguments in the Antinomies</i> (Oxford, 1972).
* <i>Leibniz–Arnauld</i>	H. T. Mason (ed.), <i>The Leibniz–Arnauld Correspondence</i> (Manchester, 1967).
* <i>Leibniz–Clarke</i>	G. H. Alexander (ed.), <i>The Leibniz–Clarke Correspondence</i> (Manchester, 1956).
	For references to this work in Chapter 8, see that chapter's first footnote.
<i>Locke, Berkeley, Hume</i>	J. Bennett, <i>Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes</i> (Oxford, 1971).
Loemker	L. E. Loemker (ed.), <i>G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters</i> , 2nd edn (Dordrecht, 1969).
* <i>Metaphysical Foundations</i>	Kant, <i>Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science</i> (trans. J. Ellington, Indianapolis, 1970).

(cont.)

<i>New Essays</i>	Leibniz, <i>New Essays Concerning Human Understanding</i> .
* <i>Practical Reason</i>	L. W. Beck, <i>A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason</i> (Chicago, 1960).
<i>Prolegomena</i>	Kant, <i>Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysic that will be able to present itself as a Science</i> (trans. P. G. Lucas, Manchester, 1953).

* I offer as a Select Bibliography of the most important readily available writings on matters treated in this book: the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Descartes' *Meditations*, and the starred items in the above list.

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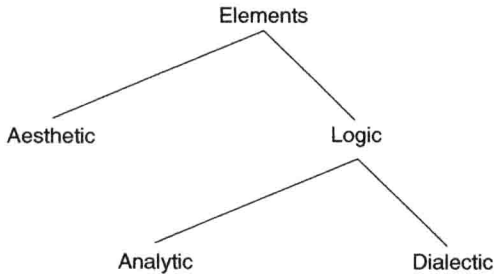
Introduction



§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 antinomial about the cosmological problems he discusses in this chapter (433). In fact, although those problems can be forced into an antinomial 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