

“Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science”

Prolegomena. In Greek, *προλεγόμενα* means that which is being said beforehand. So, ‘prolegomena’ are prefatory or introductory words, obviously for the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This is why Kant calls them ‘preparatory exercises’ (*Preface* ¶16), which can also be ‘used as a general synopsis’ (*Appendix* 4:380).

Metaphysics. Since Aristotle, metaphysics is the study of fundamental issues of reality and being. Kant recognises that all of us have a natural inclination to asking metaphysical questions, yet he describes metaphysics as a ‘bottomless abyss’, and compares it to a ‘dark and shoreless ocean, marked by no beacons’.¹ The textbook that Kant used for his lectures defines it as ‘the science of the first principles of human cognition’ (Hatfield, p. xvi), and it has four parts: ontology, psychology, cosmology, and theology.² Consistent with this, but also anticipating his critical philosophy, Kant says metaphysics is the ‘science of the limits of human reason’.³ In the *Prolegomena*, the question is whether metaphysics is possible at all (cf. *CPR*, *Preface* Axii). For Kant, the key feature of metaphysical cognition (i.e. *Erkenntnis*, or *cognitio*) is that it concerns synthetic *a priori* judgements (see *Prolegomena* §2).

Future. So far, metaphysics lacks progress comparable with the natural sciences and mathematics; it is the ‘battleground of endless controversies’ (see *CPR Preface* Aviii; cp. Bxv). Kant’s aspiration and goal is to move forward, and unify, metaphysics by nothing less than a Copernican revolution that changes the way we think about it (*CPR*, *Preface* Bxvff.).

Science. For Kant, science (*Wissenschaft*, or *scientia*) is any systematically organised, or disciplined, body of universal and necessary knowledge grounded in sound principles, and thus certain or proven beyond doubt (apodictic).

The Theme. Thus, the *Prolegomena* sketch some of the founding and necessary ideas for the possibility of metaphysics that is as certain as mathematics and other sciences, priming the study of the more elaborate *CPR*.



1 *The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God* (1763), *Preface* (2:66).

2 In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the ‘Analytic’ deals with the first, and the ‘Dialectic’ with the other three parts.

3 *Dreams of a spirit-seer elucidated by dreams of metaphysics* (1766), 2:368.

Analytic and Synthetic Method

Kant mentions two kinds of expository and argumentative method in the *Preface* (§22) and in *General Question*, §4. Perhaps confusingly, he uses the same terms for two sorts of judgements (see *Preamble*, §2ff.), and a fundamental cognitive function (in *CPR* A77/B103, and then throughout the ‘Transcendental Deduction’).

Analysis. Paradigm: Descartes’s *Meditations*. Apart from what is given in common experience (or the knower’s obvious cognitive powers and capacities), nothing is taken for granted, especially no theoretical assumptions. In a series of steps, one works ‘backwards’ to simple self-evident truths, which can be grasped immediately or ‘intuitively’ (as Descartes says).⁴ The benefit of this method is that one gains insight into crucial first (basic) principles by participating in the process of discovery: “[I]f the reader is willing to follow it and give sufficient attention to all points, he will make the things his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it himself.”⁵ Descartes thinks the analytical method is better suited to metaphysics, where the basic principles themselves are in dispute.

Analysis for Kant. Kant’s characterisation is similar. We proceed by means of (hypothetical) examples or evident (perhaps familiar) facts to essential features or elementary qualities; or from what is grounded to the ground (cf. *Inaugural Dissertation* §1, *Proleg.* §5 4:279):⁶ from effects to causes, and hence regressive—in the *Prolegomena*: science x is actual, so x is possible, but how is x possible? So, we need to explore the conditions for x ’s possibility (transcendental philosophy).

Synthesis. Paradigm: Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Working ‘forward’ in a series of deductive demonstrations to prove particular truths in *geometrical fashion* (inspired by Euclid’s *Elements*), begin with definitions, axioms (self-evident truths), and postulates that make a conclusion inevitable if the steps are valid: according to Descartes, this “can be done even by the less attentive”, and “the reader, however argumentative and stubborn he may be, is compelled to give his assent.”⁷

Synthesis for Kant. Again, a similar characterisation as ‘progressive’ method (*Proleg.* §5 4:276, note): from causes to effects, from the known to the unknown, principles to consequences, simple to composite; and thus a derivative procedure from fundamental assumptions. The *CPR* has to proceed synthetically (cf. *Proleg. Preface* §22; §4 4:274): if metaphysical arguments are used to uncover the grounds for the possibility of that science, then, on pain of circularity, the data, or the actuality, of that science cannot be assumed. Hence, an analytical procedure is impossible.⁸

4 Note that an ‘intuition’ for Kant means something else; *viz.*, roughly a particular or concrete image-like mental representation.

5 Descartes, *Second Replies* AT VII 155 (CSM II 110).

6 See also *M. Immanuel Kant’s announcement of the programme of his lectures for the winter semester 1765–1766*, 2:308.

7 *Op. cit.*, AT VII 156 CSM 111. There can be insight into perhaps surprising consequences, as in Spinoza’s *Ethics* I, Proposition 14: (a) if there cannot be two or more substances that have the same attribute, and (b) if there is a substance that has all possible attributes, *viz.* God, (c) then there could only be one substance, which is God (or Nature).

8 See Bird, G. (2010) ‘Kant’s Analytic Apparatus’ in G. Bird, Ed., *A Companion to Kant*, pp. 125–39. Oxford: Blackwell.

