**Toward A Kantian Ethics of Belief**

In this essay, my concern will be with the basic relationship between mind and reality, knowing subject and object known in cognition. My initial focus will be on the notions of intellect and will as *rational appetites*. Philosophers have usually taken the intellect to be largely passive with regard to the objects it knows, with most of its cognitive products the result of non-introspectible, non-consciously directed mechanisms. In turn, the role of the knower has been largely confined to acts of affirmation, denial, and suspension of judgment with regard to those products. The inherent dynamism of the intellect has been largely, though not entirely, ignored. William James spoke of human curiosity, of the discomfort and tension that evokes theoretical inquiry, and the gratification to be derived from satisfying one’s curiosity and thereby arriving at a state of “zero need” as the result of successful theoretical inquiry.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is now time to look at this process a little more deeply. We must consider these faculties as appetites, in relation to their objects conceived of as, not as they are in themselves, but as that which completes appetite.

In so doing, we now find that it is will, not intellect that takes the lead role in constituting theoretical inquiry. In that case, theoretical inquiry has to be seen as goal-ordered process in need of a method for achieving the end through the proper means. However, since theoretical inquiry is a rational activity, the appropriate means in this case takes the form of a set of rules or general principles that guide us on the way to the discovery of substantive knowledge and more specifically, norms to govern inquiry. Following the analysis of Baroness O’Neill, I will present, in this essay, an outline of a Kantian approach to the question of method, and to the categorical imperative as the fundamental principle governing theoretical inquiry on our parts, along with some other general principles.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**The Kantian Context**

Kant has many logically independent goals and projects that he is attempting to accomplish in the *First Critique*, which partly explains its apparent “patchwork” quality and general lack of internal coherence. However, as indicated in the very title of the work, one project is uppermost in Kant’s mind: to establish the *a priori* limits of human knowledge. Having been jolted out of his “dogmatic slumber” by Hume and having imbibed from him the empiricist tendency to explicate all knowledge claims in term of sense-experience, Kant proposes to find the error of all previous philosophy in the attempt to apply concepts and principles derived from and directly applicable to objects of (sense-) experience to “things-in-themselves” insofar as these lie beyond the bounds of all possible (sense-) experience. In aid of this project, Kant argues in the Transcendental Analytic, the first half of the *First Critique*, that objects of experience are all subjective, and so far as their formal qualities are concerned, the products of the mind’s own constructive mechanisms, such that objects appearing in consciousness and intuited there are the products of prior synthesis in accordance with a set of rules or principles governing the construction of objects in intuition from externally derived raw materials – roughly, “sense-data” corresponding to Humean “simple ideas.” These principles (space and time as forms of intuition and the twelve categories) Kant regards as *a priori*, inasmuch as they are given prior to and apart from, rather than being derived from, (sense-) experience. These principles, and the non-introspectable, pre-conscious mechanisms that use them to synthesize the phenomenal world (the primary object of experience) are knowable only insofar as they as transcendentally necessary for the very possibility of experience as we enjoy it. In order to establish this for his chosen list of principles, Kant offers a battery of deductions, expositions, and other obscure and difficult arguments that even the most sympathetic critics have difficulty reconstructing as both plausible and relevant to the conclusions they are enlisted to support. The reader is left with the strong suspicion that Kant has first arrived at his substantive views and only then began to cast around for arguments to on behalf of them. However, perhaps a more charitable interpretation is suggested by the scenario that Kant, having arrived at a plausible account of the nature of space and time as we experience them, tried to extend the basic principle of that account to cognition in general; if so, he was neither the first nor the last philosopher to have succumbed to this temptation.

In the *Transcendental Dialectic*, the second half of the *First Critique*, Kant attempts to use the results of the Transcendental Analytic to expose the errors of traditional, “dogmatic” metaphysics. These, it turns out, are a consequence of the tendency of the mind to take phenomena for noumena, or at any rate to suppose that what is true for phenomena can be equally well supposed to be true for noumena. After isolating the fundamental principle(s) corresponding to each division of his table of categories and arguing for their necessity in relation to phenomena as objects of experience, Kant then turns at last to his critique of traditional metaphysics, claiming that the attempt to arrive at substantive truths about noumena using concepts derived from phenomena inevitably produces antinomies, paralogisms, and other logical absurdities. Although scholars generally regard Kant’s arguments for these claims to be both weak and unsuccessful, our concern here is with the propriety of Kant’s very project, given his account of the basic norm governing theoretical inquiry as a process of arriving at truth. Here I think we meet with results that would both surprise and confound Kant if he were to be confronted with them.

Baroness O’Neill’s suggestion that, for Kant, practical reason is more fundamental than theoretical reason suggests that the Categorical Imperative, the fundamental practical norm as interpreted above, ought to be applied to Kant’s own project in the *First Critique* and takes priority over it insofar as it represents an exercise in theoretical inquiry, as it surely does. If we do, however, I suggest we will discover that the project represented by Kant’s theoretical philosophy runs afoul of his own, more fundamental, account of the norms governing theoretical inquiry in general.

**The Fundamental Norm of Theoretical Inquiry**

We will begin with the fundamental norm that applies to theoretical inquiry, familiar to most philosophers as the Categorical Imperative, and show both that and how it applies to theoretical investigation. As I have already suggested, theoretical inquiry is a goal-directed process oriented toward the acquisition of truth for its own sake. The tension of unrequited curiosity that motivates it can be relieved and dissipated only by arriving at rationally satisfactory answers to questions, though of course what counts as such an answer will vary with the circumstances. If there is something ill-formed about the question itself, or anything misunderstood on the part of the inquirer, then what relieves the tension of inquiry may not, after all, be the genuine truth. The rationality of a belief is not, then, a function of its ability to lay doubt and uncertainty to rest in a particular case; rather, its ability to do this in a useful and decisive way as a consequence of its rational suasion. That something is found satisfactory to a particular inquirer at a particular time is in most cases is only a subjective ground for the truth of the proposed answer. At the same time, it can be significant evidence for and a ground for hope that the proposed answer is true, so much so that in certain cases, as we shall see, it makes substantive acceptance of and belief in the truth of that answer morally permissible for all inquirers.. However, where objective justification of that answer is available to us, it is to be preferred and that answer affirmed even in the face of the convictions of others who are not convinced on the same grounds.

In the same way, there may be issues upon which we observe deep, ongoing differences in opinion among inquirers. Nevertheless, since the goal of theoretical inquiry is the acquisition of truth for its own sake, and what constitutes that truth does not depend on the inquirer but judges the inquirer and his line of inquiry, it behooves every inquirer to be as egoless as possible, and to seek first and foremost the truth for its own sake. In this sense, as Kant puts it, we must both think for ourselves and yet, at the same time, strive to think from and with the perspective of everyone else.[[3]](#footnote-3) The synthesis of these two perspectives becomes the basis for the fundamental norm of theoretical inquiry, a principle that has surprising implications for many current philosophical research programs.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Since theoretical inquiry is an a goal-directed activity with an end or object that it does not constitute simply by means of its own activity – it discovers rather than creates it – it is natural to conceive of it as governed by action-guiding norms intended to direct it toward that end. Since objective truth is constituted independently of theoretical inquiry as such – like all appetites, the intellect motivates us to seek its object without providing us with antecedent knowledge of what that object is – theoretical inquiry has to be seen as a medium or vehicle to objective truth, a Wittgensteinian ladder that we throw away once we have climbed it and reached our goal. In turn, discursive reason (the faculty by means of which theoretical inquiry is pursued) is only a tool or instrument for achieving an end that neither it nor inquiry constitutes or constructs. “Reason,” then, is not a substantive term, the name for a particular attitude or organ of truth that preselects some object rather than another, or can be contrasted or opposed to something else, such as religious faith. A “rationalist” in this sense is simply attempting to pass off a set of deflationary prejudices as the expression of a rational, as opposed to an irrational, orientation to life. In so doing, such persons treat reason as something that it is not, beg all the relevant questions in this area, and actually attempt to limit the scope of intellectual inquiry to some favored branches of inquiry that does not threaten their comfort zone. Reason does not antecedently lead us anywhere or antecedently foreclose any options with regard to what might turn out to be true. It is precisely for this reason that we both need theoretical inquiry and ought to bow to its well-founded results.

At the same time, we need a criterion that will allow us to recognize when the goal of theoretical inquiry has been reached, one that is formal rather than material, since any proposed material principle would beg the question as to what the outcome of theoretical inquiry must be. As a first approximation to such a criterion, then, we can propose the following: a product of theoretical inquiry must be such as to be capable of being affirmed as true by every rational inquirer. Only such a claim could possibly constitute an objective truth. That suggests the following version of the CI to guide theoretical inquiry: *Accept as true only those products of theoretical inquiry that one can affirm, without contradiction, to be objectively true*. At a bare minimum, this requires that we accept as true only those products of theoretical inquiry that could be affirmed by every rational inquirer, i.e. on grounds that could be affirmed by every rational inquirer. This suggests an appropriate rendition of the third version of the CI: *Always address rational inquirers, whether oneself or others, as rational subjects rather than as objects of mere persuasion*. This means that we must never address rational inquirers except on the basis of considerations that they could affirm as objectively true on the basis of those considerations. This, in turn, suggests a further recasting of the fourth version of the CI: *Inquire with the intention of arriving, through your own reason at the objective truth on grounds to which all inquirers could subscribe*. The community of rational inquirers would be those whose theoretical inquiry was animated by these principles, and would therefore constitute the analogue of the Kantian Kingdom of Ends, in which each person strives to use his or her reason to arrive at the objective truth, affirming only those products of theoretical inquiry capable of recommending themselves to other inquirers on the basis of universal, rational grounds. In that case, each inquirer’s reason would recommend those results to him or her on the authority of his or her own reason, while at the same time participating in a consensus of all inquirers based on common rational grounds. Thus, just as each individual’s own reason arrives at the objective truth as a result of its own individual theoretical inquiry, so too does the whole body of rational inquirers as well.

Contradiction in this context should not be conceived of as limited merely to formal logical contradiction. In accordance with a parallel distinction in Kant’s practical philosophy, we may distinguish here between *contradiction in the affirmed* and *contradiction in the affirming*. The first form of contradiction in this sense exists when the defective act of affirmation is due to the content of the affirmed, or what Kant would call its matter. This will be the case when what we affirm is logically self-contradictory, incoherent, or otherwise incapable of being clearly and consistently articulated according to the appropriate standards for clarity and consistency, which of necessity will vary with the context. The second sort, contradiction in the affirming, will occur when the act of affirming itself is impossible, being self-refuting or self-undermining in relation to its content. This will occur whenever the truth of what is affirmed rules out the possibility of its being affirmed on the basis either of the proffered evidence or even in principle. The upshot of this discussion is that the first norm of theoretical inquiry is to eschew self-contradictory, self-refuting, and self-stultifying positions, i.e., positions that foreclose, limit, or attempt to derail theoretical inquiry on the basis of *a priori* strictures on what theoretical inquiry can investigate, other than those either presupposed by theoretical inquiry or discovered in the course of carrying it through to its conclusion. The application of this to Kant’s own strictures on the possible objects of theoretical inquiry will have already occurred to some readers; we will consider this topic more fully below.[[5]](#footnote-5) Here let me just make a preliminary feint.

**Application to Kant’s Theoretical Philosophy** In his practical philosophy, Kant requires God, freedom, and immortality as postulates of pure practical reason, on the ground that morality cannot be categorically obligatory unless it is possible, in principle, for us to act in accordance with its dictates. Although Kant admits that we cannot prove that moral agents exist, and indeed that we are such, he nevertheless takes it to be the case that, to the extent that we adopt the perspective of a rational, autonomous moral agent, we cannot help but see ourselves as rational moral agents subject to categorical obligation. Since only on the suppositions that we have free will, are immortal, and can depend on a just God to see to it that happiness and worthiness to be happy ultimately coincide can morality be anything other than absurd, we are entitled to adopt these postulates, even in abeyance of any positive proof, in the conviction that the moral life is neither impossible nor pointless despite being obligatory. To this extent, we are morally obligated to believe these things if we have moral obligations at all. Our concern here is not with the cogency of Kant’s reasoning here, but instead with the lack of parallel between his handling of these ideas and the regulative ideas of reason that loom so large in the transcendental dialectic in the first critique and the function of teleology in the third.

Kant apparently concedes that the inherent dynamism of the intellect leads us to seek the unconditioned as the final object of inquiry, in three forms or under three “ideas”: God, the ultimate cause and *ens realissimum*, the soul, as the ultimate subject which is both simple and immortal, and the world-system, as the ultimate object in which all others are unified and comprehended as proper parts. However, Kant insists that these ideas, if taken to be “constitutive” (i.e. something actual or real capable of serving as the stopping point of theoretical inquiry) inevitably lead reason to contradict itself. He attempts to prove this by showing that these we can have equally compelling arguments for contrary conclusions in regard to each of these taken as objects. Thus, we can argue successfully for the claim that the universe is both finite in space and time and also that time and space are actually infinite, that there must be a first cause and that no such cause is possible, that the self is a substance and that it cannot be a substance, and so on. Since the arguments for these contrary conclusions are equally sound, the difficulty must reside in the *misuse* of reason. In this case the error lies not in the formal, logical character of our reasoning, but instead in its subject matter. Kant decides that the error here is the consequence of attempting to apply the categories, which apply only within experience and to objects of possible experience, to *noumena*. To do this is illegitimate because we have no way of knowing whether the categories apply to things-in-themselves, things as they exist independently of experience. Instead, the ideas of the substantial self, the world-system, and God *qua* first cause must be treated as merely regulative rather than constitutive ideas, intended simply to orient our reasoning toward a hypothetical limit that we can never actually even conceive of, let alone achieve. The apparent goal of the dynamism of the intellect is thus merely a transcendental illusion, one which sober philosophizing has to resist. Thus, as Kant exhorts us in the *Prolegomena*, we must “discipline” our reason by confining it within the limits and the objects of “possible experience.”

Although Kant believes that the regulative ideas of reason still play a significant role in the pursuit of knowledge by providing a direction or focus for theoretical inquiry, he nevertheless supposes that we must treat this goal as not merely beyond being achieved by us, but more than this is not even conceivable by us without involving ourselves in irresolvable incoherence.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is far from clear that such ideas, then, can serve the function that Kant assigns to them. More than this, the comparison between transcendental and optical illusion is completely flawed.[[7]](#footnote-7) Optical illusions are the product of special conditions that in which perceptual powers that generally lead us correctly result in false spontaneous judgments. If the dynamism of reason is directed by its very nature on an illusory goal apprehended under these three incoherent ideas, then it is clearly not to be trusted on any score, since it is based at its very heart on the pursuit of an illusion. The goal of theoretical inquiry, then, is not only unapproachable as an ideal, but could not even be asymptotically approached, and if achieved would completely destroy itself. The entire program of a critique of pure reason, then, is really an attempt to destroy reason as a source of substantive knowledge about reality, and is thus opposed to reason in its very nature. Worse than this, it attempts to use reason itself in order to realize this end.

Kant would no doubt protest that he has explained how reason can be justified in what it arrives at so long as it restricts its claims to objects of possible experience. Unfortunately, Kant is far from clear about what possible experience is, and what the objects that are that compose it, and thus constitute its subject matter. In many contexts, something is an object of possible experience if it is subject to the categories. However, there is no non-circular way to identify such objects, since our knowledge of the nature of the categories, in turn, has to be garnered from our experience of objects. In other contexts, in which Kant is most closely adhering to Humean empiricism, objects of experience correspond to what I have elsewhere called phenomenal objects, structured complexes of sense-data that are the product of the Kantian imaginative synthesis that employs the schematized categories to produce mental images. These phenomenal objects are then treated as though they were self-contained and hermetically sealed off from the realm of real things (things-in-themselves or *noumena*) of which we are told we can know nothing. Even the empirical self is merely a phenomenal object, the representation of an enduring “I” accompanying the stream of temporally ordered events revealed by “inner sense.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In these contexts, Kant has an easy time enforcing his strict epistemic distinction between what we can know and what cannot be known, between that to which the categories can be applied and lies beyond their limits.

The difficulty is that Kant does not consistently hew to this phenomenalist account experience, and thus of possible experience. Indeed, in the *Refutation of Idealism* he does his best to dissociate himself from Berkeleyan phenomenalism, apparently having forgotten that his own Humean position commits him precisely to that view in those passages in which he insists on a strict distinction between phenomena and noumena as objects of knowledge. Further, in other places he treats objects of experience as though they were not merely appearances, but appearances of things-in-themselves, somehow existing in (or at least as related to) consciousness insofar as phenomena present or represent them to us. In that case, things-in-themselves, though they may have noumenal aspects, do not wholly transcend experience and thus are knowable (and indeed actually known) by means of it. More than this, Kant discusses the transcendental unity of apprehension and matter as though these were things-in-themselves knowable through the transcendental analysis of experience, thus as transcendental objects existing in the intelligible world. He can hardly deny, then, that we can know *noumena* if by what we mean by that are non-phenomenal realities understood as objects existing independently of experience. While Kant always chooses phenomenalism when he becomes aware that his analysis is leading him to make substantive claims about things-in-themselves, it is doubtful that he can justify even his most cherished assertions without presupposing some of these claims as literal truths about things existing outside of consciousness.[[9]](#footnote-9)

A good example of this is furnished by Kant’s discussion of teleology in the *Third Critique*.[[10]](#footnote-10) Hume had conceded that it is both natural and inevitable that we should see the order and purpose in nature as the product of intelligent design, however much he resisted the claims of those who claimed to be able to understand the nature of God and His providence through the study of nature. Kant does Hume one better, by claiming that the very possibility of natural science as a form of rational, theoretical inquiry, absolutely requires that nature exist as an ordered, teleologically structured system as a necessary condition for its intelligibility to finite minds. At the same time, his commitment to Galilean physicalism and Newtonian mechanism about the external world – a commitment he cannot sustain on his own principles – requires Kant to deny that there are any final causes or genuinely teleological processes occurring in nature. He is thereby forced to declare that the teleological perspective on nature is a *necessary illusion*, indispensable despite being false, much as some determinists have claimed that free will is an illusion we are foredoomed to live, even if and though we know there is no free will. Many philosophers will respond to this claim by denying Kant’s position outright, or by offering criticisms of his particular arguments for this view. Whatever the fate of Kant’s own argument, I believe that such a criticism can be made. Theoretical inquiry, of which natural science is one variety, is possible only if human cognition is both end-directed and autonomously truth-tracking. That means that the brain processes that subserve that process must themselves be themselves be directed on that end and capable of conducting us to it. This, in turn, means that the brain must have evolved to serve the interests of cognition, not merely produced cognition as an accidental byproduct. This argument can be extended to other brain processes as well and beyond that, to all bodily processes and elements that contribute to the economy of animal existence. Evolution presupposes and does not explain natural teleology, and can function only in a teleologically structured world. Knowledge of ends, however, cannot be derived from the study of matter, because it is a consequence of substantial form, which though educed from matter is nevertheless an explanatory and causal factor in its own right, without which not even naturalistic explanations (true as far as they go) are possible for us. Apart from form, matter has no character, structure, or intelligibility. It is the ideal of naturalistic explanation that is an illusion, however deeply some people are committed to it for reasons that have nothing to do with, and in fact ultimately oppose, the goals of theoretical inquiry.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Kant’s strictures, then, represent an attempt to stifle the dynamism of the human intellect and thus are self-stultifying in a manner that brings it into conflict with the first principle of theoretical inquiry, the categorical imperative. Further, inasmuch as in this context practical reason is more fundamental than theoretical reason, the presuppositions of pure practical reason are likewise the presuppositions of theoretical inquiry as well. That means that God, free will and the immateriality of mind are just as necessary for theoretical as for practical inquiry. Thus, if we are to engage in theoretical inquiry at all, we must already countenance these notions so that, if we can argue that the self and God can be apprehended, not by means of sense-data but by being present in and to consciousness in virtue of their contribution to its constitution, there can be no argument for stifling the natural dynamism of the intellect. In that case, this dynamism will otherwise carry us to the affirmation of the substantial self, God, and the world-order as both the ultimate objects of theoretical inquiry and genuine realities existing independently of the consciousness that apprehends them.

**The Postulates of Pure Practical Reason Revisited**

We began this essay by following Kant’s lead and taking practical reason to be more fundamental than theoretical reason, on the ground that theoretical inquiry itself is a goal-directed activity aimed at objective truth, an object that it does not constitute through its own activity. It must thus be governed by norms. I have argued that the Categorical Imperative states one, and perhaps the most fundamental, of those norms. Before we leave this issue, however, I wish to re-examine the further presuppositions of theoretical inquiry I have elsewhere identified, and note that they are, in fact, identical to the postulates of pure practical reason identified by Kant. Although Kant wants these postulates to function solely within the realm of moral philosophy, I have argued above they have clear and obvious application in the realm of theoretical inquiry as well.[[12]](#footnote-12) Once again, then, God, freedom and the immateriality of the intellect (which here takes the place of, though it also secures rational hope[[13]](#footnote-13) for, immortality) can be seen to be transcendentally necessary conditions for theoretical inquiry understood as a process governed by pure practical reason.

Let us begin, then, with free will. If theoretical inquiry is to be governed by norms, then it will be possible only for beings whose actions can be governed by such norms. In turn, such beings will have to be capable of understanding and acting as bidden by those norms. However, since those norms take the form of an ought, conformity to those norms *as such* will only be possible for beings whose behavior can be governed by an ought. Such a being cannot be such that it automatically and instinctively acts as those norms require, since in that case those norms would be descriptive rather than prescriptive and the “ought” would be otiose in that case. On the other hand, if the activity involved in theoretical inquiry were governed by nonrational and thus at best accidentally rational processes or mechanisms, then we would be unable to regulate our behavior in accordance with those norms in such a way as to be governed by them. We would either ineluctably conform to them, or fail to do so (as the case may be) at the behest of forces outside of our control. In that case, the “ought” would once again be otiose. Thus, in the sense that the slogan “ought implies can” applies in this context, it also implies the real possibility of noncompliance with the demands of that ought. As such, only a being that possesses free will can possibly engage in theoretical inquiry as described above. Free will, understood as the power of free choice between open alternatives, is thus required for the possibility of theoretical inquiry as a normatively-governed employment of discursive reason.

Kant, of course, saw no way of securing this sort of freedom from within the perspective of the phenomenal world.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to Kant, it is a necessary condition for our being able to experience anything at all that every element of experience be integrated into a rigidly determined series of causes and this apparently includes all of our mental states along with all of our thoughts and judgments, not sparing those produced by discursive reasoning. This seems to rule out the possibility of free will with regard to both theoretical and practical reason. Kant’s solution, as everyone knows, is to appeal to the operation of the noumenal self as part of the intelligible world, of which the empirical self is merely an appearance to “inner sense.” I have criticized this view elsewhere as incoherent and as just another example of the way in which Kant’s strictures on what I can know (given in terms of “possible experience”) force Kant into the very antimonies and paralogisms that he then attributes to discursive reason itself by a kind of Humean projection.[[15]](#footnote-15) There is only one self, the self-conscious rational subject that each of us is. This self cannot be a mere appearance – we need only ask “To whom would it be appearing and to what end?” Further, neither the rationality of the results of theoretical inquiry nor my moral responsibility for my actions can be secured if they are the products the activity of a noumenal self whose operation, be it ever so free, is inaccessible to and incapable of being directed by me *qua* self-conscious rational subject. Unlike Kant, we must make bold to affirm that the self is an independently existent substance, a noumenal being some of whose states are present to it and some of whose powers are consciously exercised by it in consciousness. This, of course, is perfectly consistent with notion that there are aspects of the self as soul that are not accessible to consciousness and thus can only be theoretically comprehended as the transcendentally necessary conditions for the very possibility of theoretical comprehension itself. In this respect, the soul as substance belongs to the intelligible world of noumena or things-in-themselves, knowable by us only in virtue of their effects on, as present in and to, consciousness. Kant is in some respects still a good guide to some of these once his questionable, Hume-inspired limits on human knowledge have been put aside.

Given that the soul as self-conscious rational subject is a noumenal being or substance, we must further affirm that this subject is free in the exercise of its conscious powers, among which we must include discursive reason and moral choice. If that is so, then the view that (following Kant) we might call *transcendental materialism* must be false. The soul is not, in its free intellectual operations, subject to any form of dispositive external causal influence, as many (including Kant) have assumed to be the case. The freedom of the will, then, can only be a power inherent in an immaterial substance, one not wholly subject to external, mechanical causation but capable both of existing independently of the material order and, insofar as it is dependent on that order, nevertheless active in relation to the material order even in those respects in which it interacts with and is influenced by it. In this case, “immaterial” has only a negative connotation, expressing independence from the sort of mechanical, “physical” causation that we attribute to material things understood as noumenal physical objects. The nature of this immaterial or spiritual substance is a matter for further theoretical inquiry involving both transcendental analysis and hypothetical (speculative) construction the limits of which will emerge through the course of investigation. Immaterialism in this sense, then, is a second presupposition of the possibility of theoretical inquiry conceived of as an exercise of discursive reason governed by norms.

In accordance with what I have argued elsewhere, I contend that the existence of God is transcendentally necessary both for knowledge and morality. First, the divine veracity is transcendentally necessary for the reliability of our cognitive faculties, as Descartes argues. Second, while I agree with Kant that human reason is sufficient to grasp the content of the moral law through its own resources, I deny that it has the authority to impose that law upon itself in such a way as to bind itself categorically and thus to impose that law on itself (or on any other rational agent) as practically necessary. Only the Divine Will can place us under a categorical obligation and thus no such obligation can exist unless there is a God. As such, the existence of God is a necessary condition for the possibility of the moral law. In a similar manner, we can see in this context that existence of God is a presupposition of the possibility of theoretical inquiry as a teleologically ordered exercise of discursive reason whose end and object it does not constitute through its own activity. In this case, we can have reason to believe that that theoretical inquiry so conceived is possible only if our cognitive faculties are designed to be “truth-tracking” or “truth-seeking,” so that in their proper employment they will naturally lead us toward that object. However, as Descartes points out, we have no reason to suppose that a process governed by chance and necessity alone would ever produce such faculties, so that it is highly unlikely that they were produced in such a way. We can have reason to believe that our cognitive faculties are truth-tracking, then, only if they are the product of deliberate, intentional design. Since no human designer could possibly provide this design, we must either have recourse to a divine designer, or admit that we have no reason to accept the deliverances of our cognitive faculties.

I also argue, along familiar lines, that the appeal to evolution has no plausibility as an account of how truth-tracking cognitive faculties might have come about. Evolution neither has an end nor is it directed on anything, let alone truth for its own sake. Neither is it capable of provisioning the hapless creatures caught in its web for their future flourishing. It can only “reward” those traits that offer an immediate payoff in terms of differential reproduction for those organisms that possess them. On such terms, the likelihood that evolution would have produced any cognitive faculties at all, let alone truth-tracking ones, still less *truth-seeking* ones must be judged, as Plantinga argues, as low to inscrutable.[[16]](#footnote-16) Further, the appeal to evolution in order to explain the truth-seeking character of our cognitive faculties is circular on many levels. I cannot argue for the reliability of my cognitive faculties on the basis of evolution, since my belief in evolution is itself the product of those very cognitive faculties whose character as truth-directed is in question. Thus, I can trust the products of theoretical inquiry produced by those faculties only on the supposition that they are, in fact, truth-directed, which is the very point at issue. Attempts to evade this point by reformulating the claim simply cause the circularity to obtrude somewhere else. Nor can I depend on pragmatic success or scientific consensus as grounds for supposing that my cognitive faculties are truth-directed. In the first place, I am in a position to argue that these successes or this consensus are evidence for the truth-directedness of my cognitive faculties only if I am justified in supposing this. However, such a claim is neither knowable *a priori* nor justifiable empirically without, once again, begging the question. In the second place, the question is not whether we have truth-directed cognitive faculties, but whether it is at all likely that those faculties were produced by unaided evolution, for which the argument has already been made that it is not.

At the same time, we cannot foreclose on the methods by means of which God designed our truth-directed cognitive faculties in order to suit our own fancies about what it would be proper or fitting for God to do in this regard. There is no reason why evolution cannot have played a role in the development of these faculties, though in this case it is surely consciousness, rather than some purely organic process of brain development, that plays the leading part in the process by means of which the organic brain becomes suitable to serve the needs of theoretical inquiry. In this case consciousness, being itself by its very nature intentional, and thus teleologically focused on objects and goals, becomes the ultimate “skyhook,” a factor in evolutionary development with its own agenda, to a large extent indifferent to the pursuit of differential reproduction. Consciousness thus transcends explanation in terms of biological evolution or any non-trivial quasi-evolutionary scheme of explanation intended to account for our beliefs or behaviors in “biological” or sociobiological terms. Mature, unprejudiced minds need to put these self-stultifying speculations aside in favor of the real work of philosophy and social science, where intention and purpose are recognized for what they are – the driving force behind the observable behavior expressive of states of mind in rational beings.

Just as consciousness is intentional, and thus goal-directed, so too must the brain that has evolved to serve its needs be structured for this teleological project, each of its tissues and structures having functional as well as physiological differentiation in the overall economy of the brain’s operation. Indeed, these tissues and structures have significance for us largely, if not solely, insofar as they subserve consciousness and connect it to the world of material things. In the same way, the body as a whole, as understood by medical science, is also seen as a teleologically ordered whole in which the individual tissues and organs have their own distinct functions which are nevertheless ordered to the overall economy of life and health of the body, from which objective standards of proper functioning for those tissues and organs can be derived by medical science. More than this, ecological science shows us that the entire ecosystem is an interconnected, functionally-differentiated system of interdependent environmental conditions, niches, and species all of whom have an indispensable role to play in the “circle of life” and upon which, again, an objective conception of environmental “health” can be devised. Beyond even that, the entire universe can be seen as teleologically ordered to the end of making such an order possible through natural means, the conditions of which are so specific and so antecedently unlikely as to make it virtually impossible that they should come about by mere chance. As such, the requirements necessary for theoretical inquiry extend even to the basic laws that govern the universe, and thus all natural processes as well. At every point, then, teleological conceptions trump any and all attempts to explain things “naturalistically” by showing that what superficially appears to be merely the product of chance and necessity can only ultimately be understood by reference to purposes and goals. Since these purposes and goals are not the intentions of the material things by means of which they are instantiated and realized in nature, we naturally and quite properly suppose that these intentions must be those of the Designer of Nature in accordance with His plan for the physical universe He has created. Since we cannot judge of His overall plan from our own limited perspective, we can only speculate about what those ends or purposes might be – a harmless enterprise so long as we refrain from supposing that we are in any position to judge the propriety of those ends, the plan that realizes them, or its consequences from the perspective of our own, limited self-interest.

For the foregoing reason, we must once again part ways with Kant, whose commitment to Galilean physicalism about the noumenal world is betrayed by his insistence that, while we inevitably and ineluctably interpret nature as a teleological system, this being a necessary condition for understanding it, that all of this is nevertheless merely a matter of “transcendental illusion.” If the teleological account of nature is both ineluctable and yet transcendentally false, then our cognitive faculties are not truth-directed after all and we have no reason to invest any credence in their deliverances. For the same reason, we will have no reason to trust or accept any of the results of theoretical inquiry, including those recommended in Kant’s third critique. Worse than this, since we cannot think at all unless we regard our own thoughts as ordered to an object that it is not constituted by thinking alone, it follows that our own thinking as “represented” to us in inner sense is the product of an illusion and so illusory. As such, Kant’s attempt to limit our knowledge to what falls within the bounds of “possible experience” once again leads us to self-stultification and the impossibility of even conceiving the claims embodying those supposed limits to be true. We can affirm them as true only if they can be the object of a rational judgment to that effect, in which case we conceive of them as the object of an intellectual act that intends them and thus as teleologically ordered to that object. However, if teleology wherever we encounter it is illusory, then so is rationality and theoretical inquiry as well. It follows that we can never have any reason for affirming that claim *as true* on the basis of any argument. Indeed, if we take such a claim seriously, we cannot think to any purpose at all. In that case, thinking can be no more than what Hume claims it is, simply a stream of ever changing sense-data consisting of sensations, feelings, and felt impulses to act which are, nevertheless, ownerless and connected to one another simply by external relations of association. Our mental life, so described, can never rise to anything like the sophisticated philosophical reasoning that leads Hume and Kant to these ultimately untenable views.

On the ontology of material things that I have elsewhere recommended, the real world is a world of material things, composites of substantial form and matter possessing real natures. These real natures, in turn, ground the characteristic capacities of things, distinguishable into their active powers and their passive liabilities for change. In virtue of this, we can distinguish between a thing’s actuality at any given time and its potentialities for change rooted in that actuality. In virtue of a thing’s nature, it has an *ergon* (characteristic activity or operation) that provides it with a *telos* (end, purpose, terminal or optimal state of operation), such that a good example of any kind is one that exercises its *ergon* well and through so doing approximates the full realization of its *telos*. Such an account of things from the point of view of their form is teleological through and through and is incomplete. It needs to be supplemented by an account of the thing’s matter, according to which the various forms, substantial and accidental, that inhere in a substance are educed from what today we would call its physical microstructure, which is available to us only as a product of theoretical activity and, while approximately correct, is still non-literal and analogical. However, none of this prevents the teleological account of things from being true, and even literally true, of its object despite being in one sense superficial.

Of course, none of this proves that the teleological perspective is true with apodictic certainty. Nevertheless, it shows that we can never have any reason to think that it is false or any prospect of replacing it with some “naturalistic” account of the matter that makes the teleological perspective superfluous. We thus have no way of evading that perspective and can have no reason in principle to think that it is false even if it is. As such, not to affirm the truth of this claim in the light of this would, I think, be evidence of an epistemically scrupulous conscience, one neurotically abstemious with regard to objects of belief. Indeed, one cannot even decline this belief from the rational point of view without tacitly committing oneself to the very presupposition from which one is withholding one’s consent out of deference to a hyperbolic, unspecified, and literally inconceivable scenario. Surely, no plausible ethics of belief can demand this of us, nor even make it permissible from the rational point of view. Let us make bold to affirm it and consider the form that a plausible ethics of belief might take.

**Conclusion**

Time and again, throughout the text of the critical philosophy, Kant’s research leads him to the brink of acknowledging claims that his *a priori* strictures on knowledge will not allow him to affirm, with the result that Kant is forced to deny that those claims are literally true. Instead, Kant ends by insisting that these results really do not prove what they appear to prove, interpreting them in such a way that their *apparent* truth is consistent with their *substantive* falsity and indicate something entirely other than what they appear to entail or justify. Further, Kant insists that the difficulties he uncovers are inherent in the very process of theoretical inquiry itself and thus defeat the end of theoretical inquiry by showing that the truth about reality lies beyond our grasp. Kant’s deflationary project is thus self-stultifying, undermining the very activity for which the CI provides the fundamental norm. If the truth about reality lies beyond our ken, then it is pointless for us to inquire. Thus, in the same way that the moral project is threatened with absurdity if God, freedom, and immortality are rejected, so too do his strictures make theoretical inquiry a hopeless waste of time doomed to inevitable failure, thus eliminating any motive that we might have to undertake it or to proceed in accordance with its norms. This, in turn robs those norms of their action-guiding character.

I have elsewhere offered what I believe to be a better way forward than that suggested by Kant, one that both gives point to the activity of theoretical inquiry and also makes its norms, such as the CI, genuinely action-guiding for theoretical inquirers.[[17]](#footnote-17) In doing so, I hope to have shown more fully how Kant’s *a priori* strictures on knowledge are incompatible with those norms, a result that bids us affirm what, under the influence of Hume, Kant felt required by what Descartes would call “preconceived ideas” to deny, even in the face of their otherwise evident truth.

1. See William James, “The Sentiment of Rationality,” in Alburey Castell, ed., *Essays in Pragmatism*, New York, Hafner, 1955, 3-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Onora O’Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 3-33. For an opposing view that denies that practical reason as such is prior to theoretical reason, see Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000. His comments are irrelevant to the sort of argument I am presenting here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in *Kant on History*, Lewis White Beck, ed., Indianapolis, IN, Hackett Publishing, 1963, 3-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As Kant argues, the first version of the Categorical Imperative (FUL) gives the form of the moral law, the third version (FE) gives its matter, and the fourth version (FA) serves as the unifying synthesis of the other two versions. See Allen Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 182-190. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See below, 18-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See the defense of this view in Michelle Greer, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kant uses this analogy in the *First Critique* A297/B354. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Of course, here one wants to ask “the representation of what, to whom?” As I have argued elsewhere, there is no consciousness at all unless there is a conscious subject to experience the contents of consciousness, and no awareness of an object as such unless that experiencing subject is a *res cogitans*, i.e. a self-conscious rational subject. Anyone who claims not to be such a subject, or even to entertain substantive doubt about this, cannot be taken seriously, since no one can even coherently entertain such doubts – only a self-conscious rational subject could do this – let alone try to convince us by philosophical or scientific arguments that this is the case. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I have discussed this issue at greater length in “Kant and Theoretical Inquiry,” forthcoming on this website. Here I am following the consensus of traditional Kant scholarship from, e.g. Kemp Smith to Paul Guyer and Michael Forster, according to which Kant’s philosophy is deeply flawed and his arguments for his views problematic. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 231-346. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I have made this argument at greater length in an unpublished manuscript, *Physicalism and Scientific Realism*, Chapters X-XII. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I have also argued this at greater length in chapter X of my manuscript, *Reason and Illusion*, unpublished. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In accordance with the account of rational hope presented in James Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See the *Third Antinomy* in the *First Critique* – in the Kemp Smith edition, 409-430. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See my essay “The Inescapable Self,” also on this website; for an alternative to Kant’s view, which nevertheless seeks to preserve what is sound in it, see my “Body, Mind, Space and Time,” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Alvin Plantinga. *Warrant and Proper Function*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, 216-229. See also *Physicalism and Scientific Realism*. For a pithier version of this argument, see my “Descartes’ Refutation of Atheism: A Defense,” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See *The Proof of the External World*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2007, *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)