

Humour, Common Sense, and the Future of Metaphysics in the *Prolegomena*

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Shall we then throw off this belief as having no foundation in reason? Alas! it is not in our power; it triumphs over reason, and laughs at all the arguments of a philosopher. (Reid, *Inquiry* 5.2 [1997, 58])

But if it is true, as Shaftesbury asserts, that a doctrine's ability to withstand ridicule is not a bad touchstone of its truth [...], then the critical philosophy's turn must finally come to laugh last and so laugh best when it sees the systems of those who have talked big for such a long time collapse like houses of cards one after another and their adherents scatter, a fate they cannot avoid. (Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:209)

1. Introduction

It is widely recognised that Kant wrote the *Prolegomena*, at least in part, in response to the poor reception of the 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* — and particularly its notorious first review, published anonymously in the *Göttingische Anzeigen*.¹ The review confused transcendental idealism with the idealism of Berkeley, and complained that Kant missed “the middle path between exuberant scepticism and dogmatism, the right middle path” of common sense.² The authors of the review were the Johann Feder and Christian Garve, both aligned with an ideologically loose movement to popularise philosophy — and in that capacity were among the spiritual brethren of Scottish common-sense philosophy in mid-eighteenth-century Germany.³ Perhaps, then, it is

¹ It is uncertain how much of the *Prolegomena* Kant had actually written before the appearance of that review in January 1782. Parts of the *Prolegomena* address the review in discrete sections, which could easily have been tacked on to an existing draft: Appendix (4:372-80) replies to the review directly; and Notes II and III at the end of Part I (4:288-294) reply, without explicit reference to the review, to its chief misunderstanding about the nature of transcendental idealism. But there is probably no way of knowing how much of the rest of the *Prolegomena* might have been shaped by Kant's stung response to the review.

² See Sassen (2000, 53-58) for an English translation of the review, and (57-58) for this remark. The German for “common sense” here is *gemeiner Menschenverstand* (*Zugabe* 1782, 47).

³ See Kuehn (1987) for an unparalleled study of the reception of Scottish common-sense philosophy in eighteenth-century Germany, with particular attention to *Popularphilosophie*. Feder and Garve did not actually write the review together, and they were not part of the same philosophical circles (see Kuehn 1987, 43-4 and 46-8). The Göttingen review was the result of Feder's editorial work on a review that Garve wrote independently, dramatically reducing its length and sharpening its critical tone. Garve's original review can be compared against the Göttingen review in Sassen (2000).

Garve regretted accepting the invitation to review the *Critique*, as he wrote to Kant: “I recognised as soon as I started to read the book that [...] this work was too difficult for me” (Ak 10:329). Kant's reply (10:336-43) was charitable, though he had not yet read Garve's original review at the time (and was no more satisfied later, once he had). Yet many years later, Kant invokes Garve without any obvious hint of mockery as “a philosopher in the true sense of the word” (MM 6:206), offering his qualified endorsement of Garve's maxim that any philosophical teaching should be capable of being made popular — any teaching, Kant allows, except critical philosophy and the metaphysics that follows from it.

unsurprising that Kant issues a scathing dismissal of the common-sense philosophy of Thomas Reid and his followers, such as James Beattie and James Oswald, in passages that frame the *Prolegomena* (4:258-60, 367-71).

And yet in preparatory notes for the *Prolegomena*, Kant writes: “I am an enthusiastic advocate of common sense” (*enthusiastischer Vertheidiger des gesunden Menschenverstandes*, 20:59). My overarching aim in this paper is to explain this remark and its relation to Kant’s polemics against common-sense philosophy in the *Prolegomena*. Two features of this remark should be immediately flagged. First, Kant claims to be an *enthusiastischer* defender of common sense. Kant’s contemporary, Johann Tetens, had already pointed out that the guiding maxim of the common-sense philosophers, to set aside rational demonstration in order to follow common sense alone, is “a principle that leads to enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*]” — i.e. leads to the visionary kind of enthusiasm that claims access to supersensible reality.⁴ As we will see, the common-sense philosopher ultimately takes common sense — “so-called common sense” by Kant’s lights (P 4:369) — to provide access to the supersensible. Thus Kant charges the common-sense philosopher to be as guilty of *Schwärmerei* as any dogmatic metaphysician; and his own enthusiastic defence turns largely on protecting what he sees as its good name against distorted conceptions of what it is and what it can do.

Second, Kant says that he is the advocate of common sense conceived in a particular way. The Germans drew on a range of terms to render “common sense” in their discussion of Scottish common-sense philosophy, and related home-spun ideas, such as Christian Wolff’s conceptions of “mother wit” and natural logic.⁵ The Latin *sensus communis* was sometimes put to use, along with its most literal German rendering, *Gemeinsinn* — although it typically remained ambiguous whether the “sense” at issue was some capacity of perception or feeling, or instead some disposition to judge or a general way of being minded.⁶ The typical German rendering of “common sense” in translations of the Scottish works, *gemeiner Menschenverstand* (common human

⁴ Tetens (1913, 572 [1777, 584]). Tetens probably has in mind particularly the work of James Oswald, wherein claims to intuit the supersensible become explicit; I will return to this. Kant paraphrases this remark from Tetens just a few sentences later in his notes: “Gesunder Verstand als princip bringt schwärmerey hervor Tetens (20:29) — with the emphasis evidently indicating attribution of the claim (not the error) to Tetens.

⁵ Kuehn (1987:251-69) distinguishes two quite different German traditions of conceiving of common sense — one from Wolff, the other from Christian Thomasius; it lies outside of my scope here to examine this background, but the Wolffian conceptions are unsurprisingly mentioned in Kant’s logic lectures (e.g. at JL 9:17, Log-Wiener 24:791).

⁶ Shaftesbury, in his essay on *sensus communis*, acknowledges that some might think of the “*sensus*” as dispositions or powers of “opinion and judgment” (1999, 37) — but does not explicitly reject or endorse that conception himself.

understanding), picks up more on the latter possibility. But finally, there is the related notion of *gesunder Menschenverstand* (healthy human understanding) for which Kant claims some kind of enthusiasm in the preparatory notes for the *Prolegomena*.⁷ Kant took all of these terms to be distinct, even though standard usage did not manifest much, or any, reflection on the possible distinctions that might be drawn. The record of Kant’s anthropology lectures shows him complaining about the uncared use typically made of the term *sensus communis*: “*sensus* does not, indeed, mean understanding, thus one could say that *sensus communis* should be a sense [ein Sinn]” (Anthropology Menschenkunde [1781-2], 25:1095) — and in published work, Kant accordingly glosses *Gemeinsinn* with *sensus communis* (CPJ 5:238 and 293).⁸ As we will see, the Scottish philosophers conceived of common sense as a power of non-discursive, intuitive insight — an idea that, *prima facie*, is not well rendered by the standard German translation, *gemeiner Menschenverstand*. Kant rejects that we possess any such powers of insight; thus his advocacy is pointedly for healthy human understanding, which he explains as common understanding that meets, or manifests, a certain standard of *correctness* (P 4:369-70).⁹

While the *Prolegomena* is framed by passages attacking Scottish common-sense philosophy, Kant’s relation to its German friends is somewhat more complicated. For Kant, I will argue, addresses the *Prolegomena* to German popular philosophers with both some default sympathy for the common-sense challenge to metaphysics, and yet some misgivings about the project of common-sense philosophy.¹⁰ Now, Kuehn (1987, 29-30) suggests the common-sense philosophers lodged their challenge to metaphysics with Shaftesbury’s “test of ridicule” as a guide: Shaftesbury observed “that, as modes and fashions, so opinions, though ever so ridiculous, are kept up by solemnity” — and, he proposed, best dislodged by appropriately tempered raillery.¹¹ But if Shaftesbury thought to challenge religious enthusiasm with this test, the Scottish common-sense philosophers deployed it against the refinements of modern

⁷ In the German discussion, we also find related notions of common and healthy *reason*; but I set this aside for present purposes.

⁸ Kant ultimately presses a conception of *sensus communis* into service to explain taste in the third *Critique* (as *sensus communis aestheticus*) — though not without distinguishing it from notions of common and healthy understanding as *sensus communis logicus* (CPJ 5:238 and 294-5).

⁹ The distinction between common and healthy understanding is quite longstanding in Kant’s thought, as (e.g.) Anth-Parow (25:359 [c.1772-3]) and Anth (7:198) jointly evince.

¹⁰ Ameriks (2006, 111) suggests that the upshot of Kuehn (1987) is that Kant does not mean to reject Reid in the *Prolegomena*, but rather the German “popular philosophy” that was broadly influenced by him. However, nothing in Kuehn (1987) obviously licences this conclusion, notwithstanding Ameriks’s thought-provoking assessment of the philosophical similarities between Reid and Kant. As I will argue, the framing passages are clearly an attack on common-sense philosophy.

¹¹ Shaftesbury (1999, 8-9). Shaftesbury’s own guide here was Horace: we will return to this.

metaphysics.¹² This Shaftesburian background, which will be further elaborated, enables us to understand the rhetorical strategies of the *Prolegomena*: why Kant there treats the problem of metaphysics as the stuff of comedy, and how he makes use of raillery in an effort to persuade his reader that critical philosophy is the only solution to this problem.

Much of what follows is, then, a kind of literary analysis of the *Prolegomena*'s framing passages on the problem of metaphysics and the common-sense response to it. Such an approach might be defended, against the raising of eyebrows, as a perfectly apt way to examine what is essentially a piece of advertising: for Kant makes quite clear that the *Prolegomena* cannot do the work of the *Critique* (P 4:274-5), the true critical philosophy. It exists to persuade open-minded “future teachers” of metaphysics (4:255) of the need to work through the *Critique*. Yet I think there are philosophical gains to be had from a literary analysis of the *Prolegomena*, and precisely on this point. In the final section of the paper, I show what Kant's rhetorical strategies in the *Prolegomena* teach us about project of the *Critique*, the philosophical undertaking that alone can promise some kind of future for metaphysics.

2. Images of the problem of metaphysics

Between the 1781 *Critique* and the 1783 *Prolegomena*, we can notice a striking shift in tone in the initial framing of the problem of metaphysics. Marshalling Latin epic, Kant first renders the problem of metaphysics with all the heaviness of tragedy. It is the “peculiar fate” of human reason to be “burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer” (Avii). As a result, over two millennia of metaphysical inquiry has produced nothing more than an endless succession of apparently pointless controversy. Its failure is writ clearly in its history, and the “changed fashion of the time brings her only scorn” (Aviii). Metaphysics, once “called queen of all the sciences”, grieves now like Ovid's Hecuba, who counts her dead children in the aftermath of the Trojan War and laments her impending exile (Aviii-ix).¹³ By contrast, the 1783 *Prolegomena* casts the fate of metaphysics in the light of comedy: “It seems almost laughable that

¹² Whether or not the common-sense philosophers deployed this test self-consciously is debatable (and not substantiated by Kuehn); I will return to this in due course.

¹³ Kant quotes Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 13.508-10; but see 13.481-532 for context. Kant's memorable language here borrows from Mendelssohn's 1759 letter on Shaftesbury: it was Mendelssohn who imagined metaphysics as “the queen of the sciences” cast in a “tragic play” of “a science in its decline”, and ultimately as a “banished matron” in the “Twentieth Letter” of *Briefe, die der neuste Literatur betreffend* (Nicolai et al. 1759, 129); Mendelssohn himself riffs on the request of Shaftesbury's character Philocles “to bemoan philosophy” who is now “no longer active in the world” and in no state to be brought “with any advantage [...] upon the public stage” (1999 [1714]: 232). On Mendelssohn's interest in Shaftesbury, see Altmann (2011 [1973]: 109-112).

[...] metaphysics, which desires to be wisdom itself, and which everyone consults as an oracle, perpetually turns round on the same spot without coming a step further” (4:256). Oracles require priests to render the speech of the gods, and serve as gatekeepers to the mysteries. We are invited to picture metaphysicians as a league of jealous men in robes, who rebuff any challenger “with metaphysical compendia in hand [...] in proud consciousness of their ancient, and hence ostensibly legitimate, possession” (4:256).

The problem of metaphysics is framed in the *Prolegomena* from the perspective of a challenger, someone to whom the metaphysicians appear as preposterous guards of esoterica. Kant thus addresses a reader who is disposed to find the absurdity in this picture, and sympathise with the challenger. However, he neither straightforwardly endorses, nor long indulges, such sympathies. For metaphysics, Kant contends, is not going anywhere: “the demand for it can never be exhausted, because the interest of human reason in general is much too intimately interwoven with it” (4:257).¹⁴ This thought was already implicit in the 1781 framing of the problem of metaphysics as the “peculiar fate of human reason”: the sound exercise of our cognitive capacities in sensible experience draws on principles that urge us to seek “ever higher, ever more remote, conditions” of experience, leading us ultimately into the “darkness and contradictions”, the “endless battlefield”, of metaphysics (Avii-viii). It is not until the 1787 *Critique* that Kant honours this idea that we are driven — entirely blamelessly — into metaphysics, with a name: *metaphysica naturalis*, or metaphysics as a natural disposition (B21). Metaphysics is, and was, and always will be with us: this, as we will see, serves as a methodological first principle for all further inquiry into the problem of metaphysics.

But first we might ask: who is this challenger? Some might assume it to be David Hume, whose scepticism issued a decisive challenge to metaphysical inquiry in the eighteenth century. For Kant seems to cast Hume in such a role in his developmental history of pure reason: Hume is the source of a “censorship” of pure reason, positioned between its dogmatic “infancy” and the mature adulthood of its true “criticism [*Kritik der Vernunft*]” (A761/B789). But absent what might be assumed about the temperament of adolescents, there is nothing necessarily scornful in Hume’s outlook on prior metaphysical inquiry. Likewise, Kant maintains that no progress in metaphysics can be made through the “stale mockery” of its failures (A395): and there is nothing stale or barren about Hume’s challenge, which Kant famously credits with waking him from his “dogmatic slumber” and leading him ultimately to the discovery of genuine critical philosophy (P 4:260-1). Further, a case could even be made that Hume, perhaps somewhat like Kant, takes metaphysics to be a natural disposition, and its errors our peculiar fate. For Hume drew attention

¹⁴ At this point he quotes Horace, the significance of which we will examine in §3.

to the distinctly *metaphysical* commitments of ordinary human thinking about “matters of fact”, though he argues that we have no epistemic entitlement to those commitments.¹⁵ Of course, the result, for Hume, is not a rehabilitation of metaphysics, but a scepticism that charges ordinary self-understanding with deep-seated confusion.¹⁶ But this is precisely the outcome that led Reid and his followers to brand Hume the chief enemy of common sense, and in that light, the metaphysician *par excellence*.¹⁷ For Reid and his followers, the true challenge to metaphysics, and correction of its errors, can only come from common sense.¹⁸ This is the challenger that Kant has in mind when he first sets out the problem of metaphysics in the *Prolegomena*.

But Kant paints a second picture of the problem of metaphysics early in the *Prolegomena*. The particulars of this image play on a tradition of likening the pursuit of metaphysics to sailing out on rough and unfathomable seas. Thus it was Locke who called for us to “survey[...] the powers of our own minds”, and determine the limits of human understanding, just as a sailor should “know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean” — we must do this lest we become unmoored as we “let loose our thoughts into the vast ocean of being” (*Essay* 1.1.6-7). And it was Hume who presents himself as an exhausted and despondent sailor, nearly shipwrecked at the conclusion of his sceptical inquiries, and prepared to “perish on the barren rock” where he washed up rather than venture again “upon that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity” (*Treatise* 1.4.7.1).¹⁹ Kant points to Hume’s self-portrait in the *Prolegomena* (4:262), so he surely had it in mind when he sketches the state of metaphysics a second time — now with a teasingly bathetic riff on the imagery.

For long before we began to question nature methodically, we began to question just our isolated reason, which already was practiced to a certain extent through common experience: for reason surely is present to us always, but laws of nature must normally be

¹⁵ See Hume, *Enquiry* §§IV-V; for evidence that Kant understood Hume along such lines, consider his discussion of the justificatory task of the Transcendental Deduction (A84-5/B166-7) along with (B127) and P (4:260-1).

¹⁶ The best example that ordinary self-understanding is thus confused might be found in Hume’s account of our belief in enduring objects as a convenient “fiction” in *Treatise of Human Nature* (1.4.2). But Kant makes the point with reference to his account of causality: by Hume’s lights, the objectively “necessary connection” that we think in the concept of causality is *really* only a psychological compulsion founded on custom (see, e.g., B127, B168, A760/B788).

¹⁷ Reid mockingly deems Hume “undoubtedly one of the most acute metaphysicians that this or any age hath produced”, whose errors “proceed not from defect of understanding, but from an excess of refinement” (Reid, *Inquiry* 2.6 [1997, 32-33]).

¹⁸ Reid, *Inquiry* 1.4 (1997, 19).

¹⁹ Kant also alludes to the seafarer image of the metaphysician in the Phenomena and Noumena chapter of the *Critique* (A235-6/B294-5), as he is about to set out on the assessment of the errors of all past metaphysics.

sought out painstakingly; and so metaphysics was floating at the top like foam, though in such a way that as soon as what had been drawn off had dissolved, more showed itself on the surface, which some always gathered up eagerly, while others, instead of seeking the cause of this phenomenon in the depths, thought themselves wise in mocking the fruitless toil of the former. (P 4:272-3)

Kant invokes here the idea of metaphysics as a natural disposition. We need only query “our isolated reason” to pursue it, which we can readily do, since reason is always “present” in every exercise of our cognitive capacities. Normal cognitive activity casts frothy shapes up to the surface, which the metaphysician gathers up as if they constituted the objects of inquiries into the supersensible. The metaphysician is not here depicted as a brave sailor embarking on unfathomable and rough seas: this metaphysician risks nothing and gains nothing, but only stands at the edge of a churning pool and skims up its foam.

Kant invites us to laugh at this, but straightway chastises anyone who does. The challenger *takes himself to be wise* in mocking the vain labours of foam-skimmers, when there is real work to be done. The challenger is not a brave opponent of unfounded epistemic authority, but an odious heckler.

Kant’s unflattering portrayal of the challenger’s ridicule was not out of step with mainstream attitudes in German philosophy at the time. Even Feder’s *Göttingische Anzeigen* complained that the followers of Reid were too readily satisfied with ridicule as an argumentative tactic against Hume and modern metaphysicians, and prone to forego proper philosophical investigation of the arguments.²⁰ For Kant, however, the chief methodological error of common-sense philosophy was not its use of sarcasm, nor did he find anything amiss in the sporting use of raillery to make a philosophical point, as we will see next.

3. The “test of ridicule”, and its upshot, in the *Prolegomena*

I have just noted that the mocking tone that Reid and his followers took against Hume and modern metaphysicians was not readily approved in Germany, even among the “popular philosophers” most deeply sympathetic to the Scottish project. Moreover, even if Reid and his followers were self-consciously deploying Shaftesbury’s “test of ridicule” in taking this tack, they

²⁰ See Kuehn (1987, 56-59), on 1771 and 1773 reviews of Oswald’s *Appeal* and Beattie’s *Essay*. Kuehn argues that this reviewer is Feder himself (1987, 75n16).

Although Reid expressed frequent sarcasm for (e.g.) the “real genius and deep penetration” of Hume (*Inquiry* 2.6, [1997, 33]), this sort of attack was taken to a new register by his followers. Beattie, for example, mock-commands us to “adore those men of *great talents*, those daring spirits, those patterns of modesty, gentleness and candour, those prodigies of genius, those heroes in beneficence, who have thus laboured — to strip you of every rational consolation, and to make your condition ten thousand times worse than that of the beasts that perish” (Beattie 1778 [1770], 478-9).

did so with outcomes often quite out of step with Shaftesbury’s original advocacy for the gentle use of humour as a tool of civil discourse.²¹ Here Shaftesbury looks to Horace, who said that a jesting approach very often cuts through lofty things more forcefully and effectively than one that is earnest and severe.²² Shaftesbury renders this stylistic advice into a maxim for enlightened thought. “Gravity is of the very essence of imposture”, he contends: it is the common trapping of presumed epistemic and moral authority. Such presumed authorities, he continues, “can better bear to have their impostures railed at, with all the bitterness and vehemence imaginable, than to have them touched ever so gently in this other way”.²³ Severity endorses and augments the presumption of seriousness and importance, whereas mirth undoes it, exposing the imposture for what it is.

There are certainly traces of this strategy in Kant’s initial framing of the problem of metaphysics in the *Prolegomena*, with its absurd metaphysicians who stare down any challenger “compendia in hand”. As we saw, this picture engages a default sympathy for the challenger, whom we identified as the common-sense philosopher. Here we come to a twist: Kant quotes Horace himself to make sporting jest of this challenger who regards metaphysics as an intellectual fashion that is due to run its course. Such an attitude is made explicit by Reid’s follower James Beattie, in the expression of optimism that concludes his *Essay*: “One thing we certainly know: the fashion of sceptical and metaphysical systems soon passeth away” (Beattie 1778 [1770], 482).²⁴ Kant now marshals Horace (quoting just the underlined portion below) in retort:

dare to be wise; begin! He who puts off the hour of right living is like the bumpkin waiting for the river to run out: yet on it glides, and on it will glide, rolling its flood forever.

[...]sapere aude;
incipit qui recte vivendi prorogat horam
rusticus expectat dum defluat amnis; at ille
labitur et labetur in omne volubis aevum. (*Epistles* I.ii.40-43)²⁵

²¹ See Klein (1994).

²² *Satires* I.x.14-15: “ridiculum acri / fortius et melius magnas pleumque secat res”.

²³ Shaftesbury (1999, 8-9).

²⁴ Kuehn (1987, 57) notes that Beattie’s *Essay* was particularly widely discussed in Germany; thus Kant may well have known this provocative remark, even if he did not read the *Essay* himself.

²⁵ Kant quotes the underlined portion at *Prolegomena* 4:257n; I will explain the significance of the previous line and a half later in this section. I’ve quoted the more literal Fairclough translation, but Ferry’s translation provides a good guide to its sense.

Kant casts the common-sense philosopher in the role of the “bumpkin” who stands by the side of the river waiting for it to run out before he tries to get to the other side. But the river is not going to run out, and metaphysics is not an intellectual fashion.

Thus Kant effectively calls the common-sense philosopher *uncultivated* — though this is a mantle that common-sense philosophers took up proudly when they denounced the excess refinement of modern metaphysics.²⁶ Further, they championed a conception of common sense as a kind of instinct that requires no cultivation. When Beattie canvasses the possible meanings of “common sense”, he endorses the following conception for his own work: “that power of the mind which perceives truth, or commands belief, not by progressive argumentation, but by an instantaneous, instinctive, and irresistible impulse; derived neither from education nor from habit, but from nature”; and “like other instincts” common sense “arrives at maturity with almost no care of ours” (1778 [1770], 45 and 47).²⁷ The appreciation of fundamental truths of common sense is instinctive and intuitive: we cannot help believing certain things, and we cannot justify these beliefs through reasoning. We believe any “intuitive principle” of common sense “without being able to assign any other reason for our belief than this, that the law of our nature determines us to believe it” (46). Although Beattie never asks whether we are *right* to believe what we are thus compelled to believe, the overall tenor of his discussion is a thoroughgoing expression of confidence on the matter.²⁸

The objection can readily be made that such a project is uncritical, in a rather straightforward sense: to deem something a principle of common sense is to say that it cannot be, and so should not be, subject to dispute and justification.²⁹ And this seems to be Kant’s objection when he returns to the relation of common sense and metaphysics in the final section of the *Prolegomena*, “Solution to the General Question of the Prolegomena: How is Metaphysics Possible as a Science?” (4:365-371). The answer, of course, is that metaphysics is possible as a science only through *critique* — which requires submitting the sorts of claims that the common-sense philosopher regards as untouchable to a justificatory examination that must itself proceed in a scientific manner. In *Prolegomena* §31, Kant classifies the common-sense philosopher as a

²⁶ See, e.g., n17 above.

²⁷ Kant later remarks on the strangeness of the view that common sense requires no cultivation (*Cultur*) and may even be undermined by it (Anth 7:139), which plausibly alludes particularly to this remark in Beattie’s *Essay*, corroborating the point that he knew it reasonably well.

²⁸ Kuehn notes that while the Scottish common-sense philosophers rejected, on principle, any need to justify common sense, the German *Popularphilosophen* — even the likes of Feder — took such justification to be “a natural and necessary enterprise” (1987, 84).

²⁹ Pakaluk (2002) places Scottish common-sense philosophy in the encyclopaedist tradition, and in that way aims to defend it against this and related objections; I cannot evaluate Pakaluk’s view here.

“naturalist of pure reason [...i.e.] he who trusts himself, without any science, to decide in matters of metaphysics” and who takes himself to have long grasped the essential epistemological lesson of the critical philosophy, that pure reason can never lead us beyond the realm of possible experience (4:314). Question this philosopher, though, and he will have to admit that he accepts principles that “he has not drawn from experience”: so that then this philosopher must be asked

how and on what grounds will he then hold within limits the dogmatist (and himself), who makes use of these concepts and principles beyond all possible experience [...]. And even he, this adept of sound common sense [dieser Adept der gesunden Vernunft], is not so steadfast that, despite all of his presumed and cheaply gained wisdom, he will not stumble unawares out beyond the objects of experience into the field of chimeras [Hirngespinnste]. (4:314)

Examples of common-sense philosophers stumbling into such fields are not hard to come by, beginning with Reid, who takes “it for granted, upon the testimony of common sense” that his “mind is a substance” (*Inquiry* 7.5 [1997, 217]). But richer fodder comes from Reid’s follower, James Oswald, who expressly extended the domain of common sense to include “the primary truths of religion and morality”, where he found it natural to observe that while “we are long accustomed to the contemplation of realities that are objects of sense before we get acquainted with those that are not”, nevertheless “there is something within us that bears testimony to realities which are not objects of sense” (1768 [1766], 219).

With this in mind, let’s return to the *Prolegomena*’s framing discussion of the problem of metaphysics and its solution. On the front end, he defends Hume against the “insolence” of his common-sense attackers, who failed to appreciate the very point of his scepticism (4:258). Even if we should not follow Oswald into the field of supersensible chimeras, many of the principles that are plausibly recognised as tenets of common sense can only hold *a priori*. Recognising this, Hume asked the crucial question: how could such principles be justified? Such a question did not figure for the Scottish philosophers who appealed to common sense “as an oracle when one knows nothing clever to advance in one’s defence” (4:259). On the back end, Kant says he “must forbid only two things” of any philosopher who claims to understand the problem of metaphysics and seeks its solution: “first, the plaything of *probability* and conjecture [...]; second, decision by means of the dousing rod of so-called *sound common sense*, which does not bend for everyone, but is guided by personal qualities” (4:369). A dousing rod is a forked stick that is said to guide the search for water and minerals hidden underground. The method cannot be explained: its use is chalked up to a knack that some have, and others lack. Qua douser, the common-sense philosopher is after hidden — that is to say, supersensible — objects. While this philosopher avowedly rejects the *tradition* of metaphysics — the hierophants who guard access to

the esoteric texts — he claims in its place an arbitrary power to access the supersensible. He is a metaphysician *malgré lui*.³⁰

Now let us return to Kant’s quotation of Horace, which begins just a line and a half after the famous command, *sapere aude*: dare to be wise. Kant quotes these two words of Horace at the outset of his essay on enlightenment — and does so without any attribution, since it was already known as the *de facto* motto of the Berlin Enlightenment. We can find it, for example, on the frontispiece of the official Berlin Academy of Sciences publication of the winning prize essay of 1767: a round stamp depicting Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, with SAPERE AUDE inscribed in its upward arch.³¹ Whether Kant would have expected the reader of the *Prolegomena* to trace the lines about the bumpkin to the same passage of Horace as the famous *sapere aude* is uncertain. Yet the fact that they are traced to the same few lines of Horace suggests that Kant has a point to make. The upshot of the part that Kant *does* quote casts the common-sense philosopher as the bumpkin who takes metaphysics to be an intellectual fashion when in fact it is a natural disposition; to avoid his preposterous fate, one must “dare to be wise” and “get started” on a program of right living. That program is none other than the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

A certain model of metaphysical inquiry is implicit in much of the water imagery that we have been considering in this section. We can think of it as an *oracular* model, since it takes the objects of metaphysics to lie in some yonder realm that can only be accessed in special, and fundamentally mysterious, ways.³² When Kant asks, in *Prolegomena* §1, after the “sources” — *Quellen* — of metaphysics, he perhaps introduces his own water imagery, since a source in this sense is originally, and quite literally, a spring or a fountainhead; at any rate, his answer to the question rejects the oracular model. The source of metaphysics is pure reason itself. The same idea appears in Kant’s wonderful letter to Christian Garve, when he explains that the *Critique* is not doing metaphysics, but rather is itself “a whole new science, never before attempted, namely, the critique of *an a priori judging* reason” (10:340). Although Kant recognised that others before him had recognised that the necessary propaedeutic to metaphysics was some assessment of our cognitive power, in the letter to Garve he presents the examination of an “isolated” reason as a chief innovation of critical philosophy. *Prima facie*, this is curious when laid beside the question

³⁰ There is real work to be done, in other words: this is a general charge against “oracular” metaphysics, whether via common sense or some other expedient, that fails to appreciate this. In a later essay, Kant condemns a mystical neo-Platonist stripe of oracular metaphysics with proclaiming “an alleged philosophy [...] in which one does not have to *work* but need only hearken and attend to the oracle within” (RPT 8:390).

³¹ See the title page of Cochius (1769). The stamp appears to be some kind of descendant of a medal struck by the Berlin Societas Alethophilorum: see Venturi (1972 [2017], 39), and also Beck (1969, 260).

³² See also Kant’s later remarks about oracular “mystery-mongering” metaphysics (RPT 8:405-6n).

of the Introduction to the *Critique's* Transcendental Dialectic: “Can we isolate reason, and is it, so regarded, an independent source of concepts and judgments which spring from it alone and by means of which it relates to objects” (A305/B362)? For there the answer to this question is surely a resounding *no*: one cannot derive substantive theoretical principles from pure reason alone. However, Kant has something somewhat different in mind in the *Prolegomena* and the letter to Garve: he is thinking of reason in the broad sense, as the agent and subject of the critical investigation.³³ So Kant says to Garve:

To no one has it even occurred that this faculty is the object of a formal and necessary, yes, an extremely broad, science, requiring such a manifold of divisions (without deviating from the limitation that it consider solely that uniquely pure faculty of knowing) and at the same time (something marvellous) deducing out of its own nature all the objects within its scope [...]. Absolutely no other science attempts this, that is, to develop a priori out of the mere concept of a cognitive faculty (when that concept is precisely defined) all the objects, everything that can be known of them, yes, even what one is involuntarily but deceptively constrained to believe about them. (10:340)

This idea of the critical project entails the rejection of the oracular model: the objects of metaphysics do not lie out in some beyond, awaiting discovery by reason, but rather are — in some sense to be clarified — drawn from this source.³⁴ For consider what Kant singles out as particularly “marvellous” about the *Critique*: namely, that it *develops* from an appropriately precise concept of pure reason “all the objects” of this faculty.

This marvellous thing is, indeed, the “synthetic” method of the *Critique*, which Kant explains only in the *Prolegomena* (P 4:263-4 and 274-5). Although this is not the place to give a fully elaborated account of the *Critique's* synthetic method, in the next section we will consider it briefly in order to see how Kant situates it in the context of the debates about metaphysics and common sense that have been occupying us thus far.

4. Critique and common sense

My aim in this final section is to show how the *Prolegomena's* account of critical philosophy — its nature and method — takes shape against the background discussion of common sense and the problem of metaphysics. So far, the broad upshot of our examination of that discussion is that Kant's *enthusiastische* defence of common sense must not be confused with those who “esteem it

³³ The higher cognitive faculty is divided into understanding (in the narrow sense), reason (in the narrow sense), and the power of judgment (A130-1/B169; Anth 7:196-7). Kant sometimes calls the higher cognitive faculty as such “understanding in general” (A131/B169), but refers to it as *reason* in certain circumstances (A835/B863) — e.g. when reflecting broadly on the *Critique* as reason's self-examination through and through.

³⁴ It prefigures, of course, the famous Copernican analogy in the 1787 *Critique* (Bxvi-xviii).

to the point of enthusiasm [*zur Schwärmerei*]” and treat “its pronouncement as an oracle”, as he puts it many years later in the *Anthropology* (7:139). He means to defend common sense against ill-begotten ideas of what it is and what it is good for. This is why he pointedly asks, in the closing passage of the *Prolegomena*, just what common sense is:

For what is *sound common sense* [der *gesunde Verstand*]? It is the *common sense* [der *gemeine Verstand*] in so far as it judges correctly. And what now is common sense? It is the faculty of cognition and of the use of rules *in concreto*, as distinguished from the *speculative understanding*, which is a faculty of cognition of rules *in abstracto*. Common sense [der *gemeine Verstand*] will, then, hardly be able to understand the rule: that everything which happens is determined by its cause, and it will never be able to have insight into it in such a general way. It therefore demands an example from experience, and when it hears that this rule means nothing other than what it had always thought when a windowpane was broken or a household article had disappeared, it then understands the principle and grants it. (4:369-70)³⁵

Common sense grasps rules or principles *tacitly*, in the practice of judgment. But it does not grasp the principles explicitly, as principles. There is some sense in which we perfectly well grasp the principle of causality, or the principle of the permanence of substance (see P 4:335-6n), simply inasmuch as we are capable of genuine experience and coherent thought about an objective, material world. As Kant puts it in the third *Critique*, as long as we are talking about common sense as *gemeiner Verstand* rather than *Gemeinsinn*, we must be thinking in terms of some grasp of rules and principles — but a tacit grasp, which is to say that *gemeiner Verstand* “judges [...] according to *obscurely represented* principles” (CPJ 5:238, my emphasis; see also Anth 7:140).

Thus common sense as *gemeiner Verstand* already has tacit grasp of the principles of pure understanding. In the *Critique*, Kant acknowledges that such a result may be underwhelming from the perspective of common sense: “If, [...] from this critical inquiry we learn nothing more than what, in the merely empirical employment of understanding, we should in any case have practiced without any such subtle inquiry, it would seem as if the advantage derived from it in no way repays the labour expended” (A237/B296). This is, effectively, a challenge to critical philosophy from the quarters of common sense. Kant’s answer is that an explicit grasp of these principles is needed in order to address the crucial justificatory question on which the future of metaphysics rests. Let us now take a closer look at how Kant raises these issues in the opening passage of the *Prolegomena*.

After Kant chastises common-sense philosophers for entirely missing the point of Hume’s scepticism, he praises Hume for enabling him to see clearly the general problem of

³⁵ In other contexts, Kant draws the same contrast between common and *learned* (rather than “speculative”) understanding; for a table of Kant’s usage, see Merritt (2018, 80).

metaphysics. Metaphysical cognition as such claims to hold of necessity but pertain to matters of fact. Metaphysics accordingly “consists wholly” of concepts “through which the understanding thinks connections of things *a priori*” (4:260). Hume’s scepticism set in sharp relief the difficulty of establishing how any such knowledge could be possible; but he “only touched on part” of this question (4:260). Kant’s understanding of how a response to this problem should work begins with the idea, already noted, that pure reason is “an isolated domain” — a point which Kant then explains as follows: “there is nothing outside of it that could correct our judgment within it” (4:263). Here he alludes to the widespread view that common sense might correct the judgments of pure reason, and keep speculative inquiry from going off the rails into utter absurdity. It is not only the orthodox Scottish version of this view that Kant has in mind, but also versions held by those German contemporaries that Kant regarded as his natural allies, and hoped to sign on to the task of promoting the work of the *Critique* to a wider audience.³⁶

Yet how can we proceed, if nothing outside of pure reason can correct our judgments within pure reason? Kant’s answer is that the correction is possible through a teleologically governed account of the whole:

But pure reason is such an isolated domain, within itself so thoroughly connected, that no part of it can be encroached upon without disturbing all the rest, nor adjusted without having previously determined for each part its place and its influence on the others; for since there is nothing outside of it that could correct our judgment within it, the validity and use of each part depends on the relation in which it stands to the others within reason itself, and, as with the structure of an organised body, the purpose of any member can be derived only from the complete concept of the whole. That is why it can be said of such a critique, that it is never trustworthy unless it is *entirely complete* down to the least elements of pure reason, and that in the domain of this faculty one must determine and settle either *all* or *nothing*. (4:263)

In the letter to Garve, Kant specifies the governing idea: “*an a priori judging reason*”. Reason, so conceived, is a power to judge synthetically, yet *a priori*. Sensibility must be among the elements of such a power; and this sensibility must be constituted *a priori*, so that there is something that can be determined *a priori* about how objects can be given to us. This is why the Transcendental Aesthetic, ostensibly a “science of sensibility”, belongs alongside the Transcendental Logic in the

³⁶ Writing to Garve he names them as: “*Garve, Mendelssohn, and Tetens*” (10:341) — though he was ultimately, of course, disappointed. See Tetens (1913 [1777], 572-3) on how the claims of reasoning and of common sense might correct one another; or Mendelssohn (2011 [1785]) on the need to find agreement between common sense and speculation on the grounds that they are both expressions of reason. Kant reinterprets Mendelssohn’s proposal about how common sense properly “orients” speculative thought in his 1786 essay, “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking”; this development in Kant’s views about the relation between metaphysics and common sense cannot be entered into here.

Doctrine of Elements: sensibility, so constituted, must be an element of such a cognitive power.³⁷ The recognition that understanding must be constituted *a priori* by pure concepts was, simply as such, much less of a philosophical innovation; however, Kant claims that the account of this power must itself be complete — claims which again rest on a teleological conception of the understanding as a faculty to judge (A64-66/B89-91), so that a complete table of constitutive concepts can be derived from pure general logic’s table of the functions of judgment (A69/B94).

There is much that is controversial in all of this, of course; but our concern is only with the overall shape of Kant’s answer to “the main question on which everything depends” (10:339), how synthetic a priori judging is possible. It was Hume that taught Kant to raise this as a justificatory question. To answer it, Kant needs to unite what he had separately identified as the constitutive elements of reason, as the power to judge in this way. He needs a unifying principle, which emerges early in the justificatory argument of the *Critique*, the Transcendental Deduction. That argument proceeds from the perspective of pure reason, speaking in the first person: “The *I think* must be *able* to accompany all of my representations” (B131). This principle is scarcely mentioned in the *Prolegomena* (4:318, 334n). It is not deployed in the argument of the *Prolegomena*, which fittingly contains, in turn, no Transcendental Deduction, no genuine answer to the justificatory question. The “analytic” procedure of the *Prolegomena* takes as given the actuality of synthetic a priori sciences (pure mathematics, pure natural science) to derive, in piecemeal fashion, the sensible and intellectual representations that must be involved in synthetic a priori judgment. But it cannot show *how* they derive from the “source” of pure reason itself in a manner that might justify the epistemic claims that issue from them. The “synthetic” method of the *Critique*, by contrast, “takes no foundation as given except reason itself, and [...] tries to develop cognition out of its original seeds without relying on any fact whatever” (P 4:274-5). So the voice of reason in the Deduction recognises first that all of its representations must be unified under the necessary conditions of thought, and that this point must hold for its *sensible* representations as well (B132). It is this move that ultimately, after prodigious complexity of argument, underwrites the conclusion that the categories are necessarily applicable to whatever may come before the senses.³⁸

It is crucial to recognise that Hume’s guidance in framing the justificatory question requires a starting conception of “an a priori judging reason” that must incorporate sensibility —

³⁷ See A15-16/B29-30 and A21/B35. The task of the Aesthetic is then to legitimate this idea.

³⁸ This and the previous paragraph draw on the work of my 2004 PhD dissertation on the synthetic method of the *Critique*, aspects of which were published in Merritt (2006 and 2007). For a recent study that draws attention to some of the same, fundamentally teleological, structural principles of critical philosophy more broadly, see Fugate (2014).

inasmuch as this sensibility is constituted *a priori* — among its elements. It must include such an element if the justificatory question is to stand a chance of an answer. It follows in turn that the only argument for the *justification* of the concepts at issue — those “through which the understanding thinks connections of things *a priori*” — will also, in the same breath, demonstrate their limitation to objects of possible experience. Hence Kant supposes that the objects of pure reason in its theoretical employment can be “developed” from the appropriately articulated concept of this faculty: indeed, this is what he tells Garve is “marvellous” about the synthetic method of the *Critique*. Kant uses this result to explain how we are naturally liable to confusion about the limits of our cognitive power. Although the *Critique* cannot cure us of this liability, its goal is a cultivation of human reason that leaves us less susceptible to being led into error by it.

In this, and other, and other ways, the *Critique* is a normative project: Kant conceives of it as a final step to bring about “the mature and adult power of judgment” in speculative inquiry (A761/B789). It is, arguably, the jewel in the crown of Kant’s nearly lifelong preoccupation with the ideal of enlightenment. But Kant articulates this ideal in other ways, and ultimately conceives of healthy human understanding (*gesunder Menschenverstand*) as a more basic standard of good cognitive character. His discussion of common sense in the *Prolegomena*, and its preparatory notes, appears to be an origin of that later-developing line of thought.³⁹ Yet while the “critical” maturity of reason and the more basic standard of “healthy human understanding” are elements of one picture of enlightened human thought, for Kant they must remain somewhat independent of one another. Common sense, so conceived, is a standard that should hold for *anyone* who judges about anything at all (CPJ 5:169); but only those who are inclined to take up speculative metaphysics must think through the *Critique*.

³⁹ As I argue in Merritt (2018); this development begins with the articulation of the “three maxims” of *gesunder Menschenverstand* in the third *Critique*, the *Anthropology*, and other texts.

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