

**TRANSCENDENTAL PROPOSITIONS AS INDISPENSABLE CONDITIONS  
OF OUR SELF-UNDERSTANDING AS HUMAN BEINGS  
A BRIEF COMMENTARY ON HANNA'S KANT**

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**Abstract:** In this critical review of Robert Hanna's ingenious book (2006), I aim to support Hanna's main insightful reading of Kant, namely what he calls "a priori truth with a human face," without appealing to Kant's divide between a priori and a posteriori and analytic and synthetic truths. My suggestion is that transcendental propositions are necessary neither in the usual epistemological sense that analytic propositions are, let alone in the metaphysical sense that some empirical propositions are. Instead, they are necessary in the theoretical domain in the weak alternative sense that they make possible the empirical recognition of appearances as an object as an *indispensable* condition of our *self-consciousness experience*, and they are a priori in the practical domain in the sense that their truth is vital for our *self-comprehension as human beings*.

**Keywords:** self-consciousness experience, epistemological, self-comprehension.

**Resumo:** Nesta resenha crítica do engenhoso livro de Robert Hanna (2006), eu busco sustentar a principal leitura perspicaz de Hanna sobre Kant, nomeadamente o que ele chamada "verdade a priori com uma fachada/face humana", sem apelar para a divisão de Kant entre a priori e a posteriori, e verdades analíticas e sintéticas. Minha sugestão é que proposições transcendentais não são necessárias nem no sentido epistemológico usual em que proposições analíticas são, para não dizer do sentido metafísico que algumas proposições empíricas são. Ao invés disso, elas são necessárias no domínio teórico no sentido da alternativa fraca que elas fazem possível o reconhecimento empírico de aparências como um objeto enquanto uma condição indispensável de nossa experiência de auto-consciência, e elas são a priori no domínio prático no sentido que sua verdade é vital para nossa auto-compreensão como seres humanos.

**Palavras chave:** auto consciência, epistemologia, auto-compreensão

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Robert Hanna's second book on Kant, *Kant, Science, and Human Nature* (2006), is the most insightful book about Kant that I have read since Peter Strawson's seminal *The Bounds of Sense* (1966). The book contains numerous original claims and some of the finest readings and analyses of Kant. Moreover, what was most valuable among Hanna's contributions for me was the fact that the book inaugurates a new anti-intellectualist trend in Kantian scholarship: a buttoned-up approach to Kant's

philosophy. In addition, the book has another significant merit: its reviving of Kantian philosophy. Hanna's Kant is a living philosopher, making intriguing contributions to metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, semantics, philosophy of mind, and, of course, epistemology. In contrast, mainstream Kantian scholarship portrays Kant as a mere museum piece, that is, as an old, insignificant philosopher of the eighteenth century.

I must confess that I find it tremendously difficult to disagree with Hanna's reading of Kant's philosophy of mind and perception, and even with his general view about Kant's meta-philosophy. Just like him, I have endorsed since 1986 an anti-intellectualist reading of Kant (at that time, the philosophical concept "nonconceptualism" was not even available) that entails conceptual-independent direct perceptual realism of what appears in space and time. In this area, our disagreements are peripheral. I do not believe that Kant holds a content view of perception. For all I know, Kant (and the tradition before him) is much closer to what is today called the relational view. However, Hanna has recently told me he is also closer to a relational than to a content reading of Kantian sensible intuition. Thus, independently of how nonconceptualism is understood in the contemporary literature if someone is a relationalist (which is not the case for me), I do not see any problem with the thesis that our fundamental perceptual relation to reality is independent of concepts.

I also have a bit of an issue with Hanna's reading of Kant's implicit metaphysics of qualia. Hanna recognizes that Kant is qualia-realist (in the first *Critique*, Kant is quite explicit about that; see, for example, A28-9), or in other words that qualia are intrinsic properties of the experience. However, in his reading of Kant's *Refutation of Idealism*, Hanna claims that according to Kant, experience is transparent in the way that Moore, Harman, and Tye hold. My point here is that qualia-realism and the transparency of experience are claims that do not fit well together. If Kant is a qualia-realist, what he calls *inner sense* is a nonconceptual perception of our mental states. Therefore, mental states or experience are not transparent: I could be *de re* aware of my mental states in time in the same way that I am *de re* aware of things in space. Still, I do agree with Hanna when he reminds me that even being a qualia realist, Kant never intends to hold that sensations

intervene between representational states and the world. Perhaps the best reading of Kantian qualia realism is attributing him some adverbial theory of perception. Thus, even though yellow is an intrinsic property of the experience of something yellow, I do not perceive some yellow data intervening between my representational state and the world. Instead, I see things *yellow-ly*.

In this critical commentary of Robert Hanna's book (2006), I aim to support Hanna's main insightful reading of Kant, namely what he calls "a priori truth with a human face," without appealing to Kant's divide between a priori and a posteriori and analytic and synthetic truths. Thus, I am trying to decouple Hanna's insightful view from Kant's contamination from the empiricist tradition. My suggestion is that transcendental propositions are necessary neither in the usual epistemological sense that analytic propositions are, let alone in the metaphysical sense that some empirical propositions are. Rather, they are necessary in the theoretical domain in the weak sense that they make possible the empirical recognition of appearances as an object as an *indispensable* for our *self-consciousness experience*, and they are a priori in the practical domain in the sense that their truth is indispensable for our *self-comprehension as human beings*.

### **The problem of pure reason**

The main problem with the first *Critique* is the foundation of what Kant calls the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments in different fields such as the natural science and mathematics. What Kant had in mind was the Euclidean geometry and Newtonian mechanics such as conservation of mass, inertia, and the equality of action and reaction. According to Hanna, synthetic a priori propositions are "non-logically necessary, substantively meaningful, experience-independent truths" (2006: 22). Hanna describes this key semantic-cognitive target regarding two theses. However, I am only concerned with the first thesis: *Synthetic apriority thesis*, which says that all and only empirically meaningful synthetic a priori propositions express one or more of *the transcendental conditions of the possibility of our human experience of objective appearances*. (Hanna, 2006: 22. Emphasis added)

In those terms, Hanna endorses what he calls Kantian modal dualism: “If the synthetic apriority thesis is true, it follows that there are two irreducibly different kinds of necessary truth, namely, analytic or *logical* a priori necessities and synthetic or *non-logical* a priori necessities” (which, as I mentioned in the Preface, I call *Kant's modal dualism*). (Hanna, 2006: 23)

I have issues with both claims, and since I have issues with the original Kantian project, I endorse Hanna's statement that transcendental truths are the condition of possibility of our human experience. However, I reject both the synthetic apriority thesis and Kant's modal dualism. First, I begin with a simple historical fact: since Einstein's revolution, nobody believes that Newtonian mechanics are synthetic a priori. Newtonian mechanics are no longer universally valid in the first place, and the physical space is certainly not Euclidean. Hanna apparently recognized the enormous impact of Einstein's revolution, suggesting a charitable reading of Kantian notion of matter (2004: 235).

However, even in the light of the charitable reading of Kant's view of the nature of matter, it is hard to swallow Kant's epistemology of physics as constituted by a priori truths immune to revision. Whether or not the truths of physics are necessary, they are certainly not a priori in the traditional empiricist sense of being immune to revision. Of course, Kant could easily be wrong about precisely what propositions permeate into his synthetic a priori class without any bad implications whatsoever for his modal theory: if they are true, then they are synthetic a priori true.

Let me begin here by reminding of the traditional attacks to Kantian analytic/synthetic divide of the last century. First, as most are aware, the dichotomy between analytic and synthetic propositions has come under considerable pressure since Quine's *Two Dogmas* (1950). A proposition is analytic *if* the concept-predicate is contained in the concept-subject. However, this raises the Quinean question: *how do we know that the concept-predicate is at least partially contained in the concept-subject?* Here, the Kantians face the following dilemma: they render the notion of containment a *syntactic notion*, which cannot support the claim of the existence of *material true analytic propositions*, or they beg the question at the very issue. To beg the question is merely to appeal to Kant's ultimate criterion of analyticity, that a proposition is analytic if and only if its denial leads to a contradiction (A151/B190–1)

(see Hanna, 2006: 205). However, Quine complains that such definition is circular. Since the contradiction in question is not formal but material, it must belong to the so-called "intensional family" together with the concepts of analyticity, synonymy, and the intensional operator of "necessary." Still, that is far from being a decisive argument. Even if each member of the "intentional family" is defined circularly regarding the others, that is no reason to give up the entire family. I think that Quine was quite aware of that. That is the reason he has tried to undermine the entire "family" in his *Word and Object* (1960), unsuccessfully to my judgment.

However, Quine's key criticism relies on his so-called "confirmation holism" (in my mind a very plausible view). What face the "tribunal of experience" are not propositions in isolation, but whole theories. Given this, in the face of recalcitrant data, we are relatively free to choose to consider what sentences or beliefs of the whole theory are false to accommodate the data. The moral to be drawn is that there is no belief immune to revision when some recalcitrant data appears. The only possible divide is between central beliefs in our global theory in truths that we do not want to give up easily, and peripheral beliefs that we give up far easier.

On closer look, though, Quine's semantic was "epistemologically contaminated." As a man of his time, Quine was also a verificationist (like Carnap, his master, Wittgenstein, and several others) for whom the metaphysics of content is determined by the way we empirically recognize the truth or the falsity of the content in question. Thus, (i) if confirmation holism (an uncontroversial epistemological claim) is true, and (ii) if the way we empirically recognize the truth or falsity of a sentence determines its content, then we cannot divide analytic from synthetic contents of the sentences constituting our whole theory of the universe. However, Quine's conclusion does not follow if we reject the latter of these two propositions.

Still, it is not necessary to assume Quine's verificationism to take issue with Kant's idea of synthetic a priori truths. As Hanna indicates in his second book (2006), another fundamental critique has emerged with Kripke and Putnam's referentialism. In opposition to Quine, Kripke and Quine do not run together epistemological questions and semantic questions: "water" refers to H<sub>2</sub>O (its content) regardless of whether we do possess criteria to identify empirically H<sub>2</sub>O as the extension of "water." The attack is summarized in a well-known passage:

Since Kant, there has been a big split between philosophers who thought that all necessary truths are analytic and philosophers who thought that some necessary truths were synthetic *a priori*. But none of these philosophers thought that a (metaphysically) necessary truth could fail to be *a priori*: *the Kantian tradition was as guilty as the empiricist tradition of equating metaphysical and epistemic necessity*. In this sense, Kripke's challenge to received doctrine goes far beyond the usual empiricism/Kantianism oscillation. (Putnam 1975: 233. Emphasis added)

Now, Hanna's work (2006) focused highly on defending Kant's human-based metaphysics from Kripke and Putnam's essentialist attack. I do believe that Kripke and Putnam are right: both Empiricist and Kantian traditions confound epistemic and metaphysical necessity. I am not going to take issue in this debate. I even do agree with Hanna when he complains that all analytic philosophers have been converted religiously to essentialism since Kripke's *Name and Necessity* (1970/2010). In that sense, I am still a Wittgensteinian when he claimed that major changes in or *Weltanschauung* are made by conversion or persuasion rather than by arguments. In this regard, I must confess that with the massive development of modal logic as metaphysics (see Williamson, 2013), I have a problem with thinking outside "Kripke's box." Still, the crucial problem remains an open question: *how are synthetic a priori truths possible?*

I claim that I do not need to assume either Quine's confirmation holism or Kripke's modal metaphysics to show that Kant's position is untenable. Indeed, the Kantian modal dualism is problematic even in the Kantian framework itself, namely the classical subject-predicate logic. Let us take a closer look at this issue. According to Kant, in his classical subject-predicate framework, a proposition is analytic when the concept-predicate *is contained in part in the concept-subject*. In contrast, a proposition is synthetic when a *tertium* connects both a concept's predicate and subject.

Now, in the case of ordinary empirical propositions, this *tertium* is the empirical intuition. For example, whenever I believe that the sky is blue, to connect the concept-predicate blue to the concept-subject sky, all I need is to look at the sky and see whether it is blue. As Hanna emphasizes correctly, that is a nonconceptual direct perception of the sky. If what I see is blue, the proposition turns out to be

empirically true, otherwise false. In the case of geometric propositions, this *tertium* is the a priori formal intuition, which we use to "construct" the concept-subject. For example, let me assume that I believe that the triangle has 180 degrees. To connect the concept-predicate (that it has 180 degrees) to the concept-subject (the triangle), all I need is to draw the figure of a triangle on a piece of paper or in my pure imagination, and to see whether or not the sum of its angles amounts to 180 degrees. The question is, then, what is the *tertium* in the case of non-mathematic synthetic a priori propositions?

First of all, we cannot overlook that Newtonian laws and Kantian transcendental propositions belong to different levels of inquiry. As Kant says, Transcendental Philosophy is a meta-discipline that is occupied not so much with a priori knowledge, but rather with the a priori conditions of the possibility of a priori knowledge (B25). Thus, transcendental propositions must be seen as second-order metaphysical propositions that constrain what could be captured in any set of conservation laws, e.g., for quantities of energy.

That said, our first question is, what is *the tertium* that connects the concept-predicate to the concept-subject in the synthetic a priori laws of physics? It cannot be an empirical or pure intuition. Otherwise, the Newtonian law would not be a priori or would be reduced to a mathematic proposition. The first alternative is to take the *tertium* as the a priori concept of substance. The result strikes me as odd. If Kant is connecting the concept-predicate to the concept-subject in the law of conservation of mass using the concept of substance, he is thereby rendering the Newtonian law into an analytical proposition according to his classical logic. A much more plausible reading is the suggestion that the *tertium* is not the concept of substance, but rather the application of that concept to what is given: the principle of the First Analogy. However, in that case, the Newtonian law of conservation of mass becomes an a priori proposition immune to revision. That also sounds odd.

If that sounds meaningful, the problem becomes even worse when we turn our attention from the first-order Newtonian laws to the second-order transcendental propositions themselves. The question is the same as before: what is the *tertium* that connects the concept-predicate to the concept-subject in the case of transcendental propositions? All Kantians know the answer to this: "*something*

*entirely contingent*, namely **the possible experience**" (A737/B765; the emphasis in bold is original while the emphasis in italics is added). Further, by the possibility of experience, what Kant has in mind is the possibility of *knowing something* as an object of experience. The idea is that transcendental propositions are synthetic a priori truths because without them, no knowledge of objects would be possible.

Nevertheless, the same question arises all over again: how should we conceive the "knowledge of something as an object of experience" as *the tertium* in transcendental propositions? Here we have a list of candidates: (i) an intuition, (ii) a concept, and (iii) the mind's synthetic activity a priori. To be sure, the first alternative is untenable. It cannot be an intuition. There are two obvious reasons for that. First, if *the tertium* is an a priori intuition, the transcendental proposition turns out to be mathematical (*Mathemata*). Second, if that *tertium* is an intellectual intuition, the transcendental proposition turns out to be a *Dogmata*. Third, if the *tertium* is an empirical intuition, the proposition turns out to be empirical rather than transcendental.

Thus, in the Kantian framework, a second alternative is to conceive this *tertium* as a **further concept**, the concept of possible experience. Now, however, what is supposed to be a synthetic proposition *turns out to be an analytical one!* Bennett was the first to suggest this reading (1966/2011: 14). He distinguished trivial or tautological analytic propositions (all bachelors are unmarried) from the *non-trivial informative* ones. Still, such a reading strikes me as quite odd when we take a closer look at the best candidates of transcendental propositions, Kant's "Analogies of experience." The first states that the substance persists by all change in the appearances (A182/B224). The second states that all change takes place according to the laws of connection between cause and effect (A138/B232). Those propositions are not Newtonian laws; they are metaphysical rather than physical. Thus, is it reasonable to claim that they are analytic? Perhaps Bennett would reply that the Analogies are not analytic, and further that *what are analytic are rather the third-order propositions that analogies are conditions of experience*. Even so, this still strikes me as odd.

The third alternative is to conceive *the tertium* as the mental synthetic activity. With all due respect to Kant and the Kantians that follow this idea, that is a



rhetorical solution. I cannot accept this for logical reasons; how can a mind activity of synthesizing make some proposition true of the world even in the worst scenario, namely that what we call the outside world is nothing but a Berkeleyan world of representations? The truth of a proposition is not up to what our minds do, but rather up to how the world of appearances and representations behaves.

I want to suggest a new reading of the possibility of the recognition of something as an object of experience (*the tertium* of the transcendental propositions) based on one of Hanna's most insightful interpretations of his book. He stated:

Kant, as I have mentioned in the Introduction, is an anthropocentric scientific realist. (2006: 49)

More recently, he has added:

In other words, a synthetic a priori truth is a "necessary truth with a human face," that is, an *anthropocentrically necessary truth*, hence it is a necessary truth *even though its negation is logically and conceptually consistent*. It does not tell us what an omniscient God or a disembodied thinking spirit could know by reason alone; instead, it tells what only a rational, but also finite embodied sensible creature like us, could ever know. (2015: 20)

Transcendental propositions are those whose truth are conditions of the possibility of the recognition of some as an object of experience. Here, we add that the empirical recognition of something as an object of experience is also *a condition for our self-comprehensions as humans*. Thus, transcendental metaphysical propositions are true because they make possible the empirical recognition of what appears to space and time as mind-independent objects of experience as a necessary condition for our human self-conscious experience. Indeed, in his Refutation of Idealism, Kant provides us with proof of the fact that the conscious of my existence in time entails the conscious of something permanent in space. Thus, my suggestion amounts to read Hanna's a synthetic "necessary truth with a human face" as a new kind of epistemic modality: the truth of transcendental propositions is *indispensable for self-conscious human experience or our self-comprehension as human beings*.

I base my reading on Kant's Transcendental Methodology and his books of logic. There he opposes "concepts that are *given a priori*" to concepts that are *made a priori* (B756; see also JL AA. ix. 93: 141–2, and VL AA. xxiv.: 914–15). That passage is usually read as Kant explaining the differences between math and metaphysics. Still, I believe that mainstream Kantian scholarship misses something quite interesting. When Kant talks of concepts *given a priori* in opposition to concepts *made a priori*, he also has in mind *the fundamental opposition between concepts that are indispensable for our self-conscious experience and our self-comprehension as human beings, and concepts that we can live without ever having employed*. Thus, I can easily figure out human beings who have never thought of the microphysical properties of matter or about the differential calculation. However, I cannot figure out humans who have never thought about macrophysical properties as solid or soft, or who have never thought about causation, space, and time, or the permanent material objects in space.

With that in mind, I would like to come back to "the problem of two images" raised by Sellars that plays a pivotal role in Hanna's view between Kantian metaphysics and the science-based metaphysics (2006): the scientific image and the manifest image. Despite their names, both are metaphysical claims about the fundamental nature of reality. Hanna (2006: 141) characterizes the first by two claims:

(1) Some knowable things (whether individual material entities, natural kinds, events, processes, or forces) exist in objectively real physical space and not merely in consciousness.

(2) These knowable individual material entities, natural kinds, events, processes, and forces, as described by natural science, have explanatory primacy in our best theory of the natural world.

The Kantian manifest image is described as follows: "*Manifest Realism*: All the essential properties of dynamic individual material substances, natural kinds, events, processes, and forces in objectively real physical space and time are nothing but their directly humanly perceivable or observable intrinsic structural macrophysical properties." (2006: 142)

Hanna claims that those two views are contradictory and irreconcilable. I disagree. I endorse the Sellarsian position. I think that Hanna is running together epistemological and metaphysical questions. The atomistic theory was unanimously rejected in Kantian times by such scholars as Newton, Leibniz, and Kant himself. It was considered a highly speculative hypothesis. However, in the mid-19th century, things changed completely, and we now accept without hesitation the theory that the underlying nature of matter consists of atoms and even smaller particles. The new atomism raises the question of whether this change in our fundamental ontology has shaken the epistemic status of our external-world beliefs. The answer to this question is clearly *no*: the metaphysical assumption that the underlying nature of reality is atomistic does not change the epistemic status of our commonsensical beliefs. Whether or not the underlying nature of reality is atomistic or not, I still know that I am sitting in a chair.

If my reading of Hanna's synthetic "necessary truth with a human face" makes sense, I can have the cake and eat it too. The crucial point is the following. Whether this table in front of me is filled with holes, made of quantum waves, this does not contradict my ordinary belief that there is a solid table in front of me. We do not need to assume that science-based realism is transcendental our noumenal.

Moreover, like the manifest metaphysician realist, I can also assume that those microphysical properties mean almost nothing for our self-understanding as human beings. For one thing, science-based concepts are "made" rather than "given" a priori. Thus, Hanna is right in stating that what matters for our self-conscious experience is what we directly perceive: observable macrophysical properties.

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