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Empiricism and Rationalism: The Failure of Kant's Synthesis and its Consequences for German Philosophy around 1800

Abstract: Kant's synthesis of empiricism and rationalism is often considered to be one of his most important contributions to philosophy. In this article I investigate the reception of this synthesis in the late 1780s and early 1790s. I show that during this early reception Kant's attempt at a synthesis, and its empiricist side in particular, proved to be a failure when it was confronted with a powerful challenge from the side of Gottlob Ernst Schulze, Salomon Maimon and Karl Leonhard Reinhold. This failure, I argue, resulted in a break within the Kantian movement itself between a rationalist and an empiricist Kantianism.

1 A synthesis of rationalism and empiricism?

Should one ask a general philosophical audience about Immanuel Kant's most important philosophical contributions, one might expect to hear at least a few obvious candidates. The first would almost certainly be his famous categorical imperative. A good second, however, would probably be his synthesis of 'early modern rationalism and empiricism'. This would hardly come as a surprise to anyone. I suspect that there are few introductory lectures on Kant's theoretical philosophy in which this synthesis is not used as a prime example of Kant's importance to philosophy. It is also the very first contribution mentioned in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Rohlf 2014). In the same vein, the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy's* (*IEP*) article on Kant's metaphysics maintains that "[i]n order to understand Kant's position, we must understand the philosophical background that he was reacting to"; this background turns out to be "two major historical movements in the early modern period of philosophy that had a significant impact on Kant: Empiricism and Rationalism" (McCormick 2005).

From the point of view of a historian of philosophy, however, there is much to be said about Kant's supposed synthesis. One problem is the fact that this synthesis is usually taken, as it is in the *IEP* cited above, to have been the solution to a conflict in philosophy which had been raging for centuries, which reached its height in the divide between the three British empiricists (Locke, Berkeley and Hume) and the three continental rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz),

but which has been implicitly present in philosophy since antiquity. Indeed, Kant himself traces the conflict back to Epicurus and Plato.¹

Scholarship in the last few decades has done much to show that this historical thesis is highly problematic. Firstly, there was simply no practice, before Kant, of dividing up the history of philosophy according to the categories of rationalism and empiricism (Engfer 1996, 19). Even the philosophers whom we consider to be the most prototypical early modern ‘empiricists’ and ‘rationalists’ would not have been able to think of themselves as such. A second, and related, point is that even retroactive attributions of these labels are very problematic. While it is of course true that one can identify more empirically- and more *a priori*-minded thinkers in the early modern period, a closer look at these figures tends to reveal peculiarities of their work that sit uneasily with our understanding of what it means to be an empiricist or a rationalist (Engfer 1996; Loeb 1981, 25–75). Furthermore, classifying the German philosophers who were famous in Kant’s own time, and who form his immediate intellectual context, according to these labels is equally problematic (Pietsch 2010, 19; Beiser 1987, 166). One could therefore argue that Kant’s synthesis is a solution to a conflict that he first had to create himself. If we now find such a categorisation natural, or even self-evident, this is in large part due to the influence of Kant’s own work.

Naturally, the fact that the rationalist-empiricist division is of limited use as a tool for the historian who studies pre-Kantian philosophy does not mean that this division, or Kant’s attempt to bridge it, are without philosophical merit. One may simply recognize them for the theoretical constructs that they are, and still maintain that they are of great importance to philosophy. Kant, we may say, was simply the first to clearly recognise and describe these two important, and mutually exclusive, epistemological standpoints. Philosophers from the past can then be seen as leaning more or less strongly towards either of these sides, even if the fact that they did not possess these concepts prevents them from being fully consistent in their leanings.² Anachronistic as this may be, such an

1 See *Critique of Pure Reason* A 471/B 499 and A 853–854/B 881–882. All translated quotes from Kant are from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. All references are to the page numbering of the Akademie Ausgabe (I. Kant, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. königlich preußische (später deutsche) Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin 1900f., abbreviated AA) with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for which I follow the custom of referring to the original page numbering of the A- and B-edition.

2 This seems to have been Kant’s own approach as well. See for example his remark that it is possible to design an *a priori* schema with which would correspond the positions of the most important philosophers of the past “*as though* they had this very schema themselves before their eyes, and had progressed by way of it” (AA 20:342, my italics). See also Engfer (1996, 424–434).

approach to history may be taken to be justifiable as long as it is philosophically helpful. When read like this, Kant could still be credited both for recognising this conflict inherent in metaphysics, as well as for providing a synthesis that was meant to maintain the strong points of each side, while avoiding their weaknesses. The question then merely becomes how successful this synthesis really was.

This question, however, confronts us with a second problem, which will form the focal point of this paper. I will argue that, in the first fifteen years after the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this synthesis proved to be a failure, at least in the eyes of Kant's early successors. I hope to show that in the years around 1790, the empiricist dimension of Kant's synthesis came to face a powerful challenge. During these years, Gottlob Ernst Schulze, Salomon Maimon and Karl Leonhard Reinhold raised various critical arguments against Kant's philosophy. Even though each of these arguments is already strong on its own, they become even more urgent when they are combined together into one broad challenge against what I will call Kant's empiricism. While I do not believe that these authors were themselves aware of the potential force of such a combined argument, I do think that this potential was appreciated by some of Kant's most important successors. If this is true, then understanding this challenge to Kant's empiricism, and the need that arose as a consequence to rethink Kant's synthesis of empiricism and rationalism, will shed light on some of the important choices that were made in the reception of Kant's philosophy around 1800.

If we want to get a clear grip on this challenge we first need to establish what exactly Kant's empiricism and rationalism consist in. This will be the task of the next section, in which I will pay attention especially to Kant's attitude towards empiricism in the first *Critique*. The three sections after that will be dedicated to the reconstruction of the challenge. Here I will discuss the critical arguments made by Schulze, Maimon and Reinhold, and consider the consequences that these arguments have for Kant's particular form of empiricism. In the concluding section of this paper, I will argue that this challenge is indicative of the failure of Kant's synthesis of rationalism and empiricism and suggest that this failure resulted in the development of two divergent forms of Kantianism around 1800: a rationalist and an empiricist Kantianism. Ironically, Kant thereby indirectly occasioned, within his own philosophical project, the very divide that his theoretical philosophy was supposedly meant to bridge.

2 Kant's Empiricism and Rationalism

Even though every first year student of philosophy will have heard of Kant's synthesis of rationalism and empiricism, it is surprisingly difficult to spell out pre-

cisely what this synthesis consists in. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Kant's treatment of the topic is very brief indeed; there are only two, relatively short, passages in which Kant more or less explicitly discusses the opposition of rationalism and empiricism in the first *Critique*: the section about the interest of reason in the conflicts of the antinomies, and the section about the history of pure reason, at the very end of the book.³ Secondly, Kant's terminology for dealing with this conflict is still very much in flux; he speaks not only of empiricism and rationalism, but also of 'noologism', 'dogmatism', 'intellectual philosophers' [*Intellektualphilosophen*] and 'sensual philosophers' [*Sensualphilosophen*]. Thirdly, he gives varying definitions and characteristics of these terms, all of which are clearly related, but not equivalent. To name just one example, in the 'history' section, Kant defines empiricism as a doctrine concerning the origins of our *a priori* cognitions, whereas in the 'interest' section, the 'principle of empiricism' is characterised as a principle concerning the proper form of explanations. A fourth, and perhaps the most important problem, is that Kant's synthesis cannot merely be seen as the adoption of some elements of empiricism and some of rationalism. Kant obviously wants to do more than that; he wants to overcome the very opposition by questioning the presuppositions that the rationalist and the empiricist share (Engfer 1996, 418).

Despite of these problems, I think that it is still possible to identify a core claim of Kant's critical philosophy that we may rightfully characterise as a form of empiricism. Similarly, I think we can identify a core claim that may be characterised as a form of rationalism. I will discuss Kant's empiricism first, since the next three sections will reconstruct what I consider to be an important challenge to this empiricism. Kant's rationalism can then be characterised briefly as the natural counterpart to his empiricism.

As a first approach, it is tempting to characterise Kant's empiricism in terms of the limitation of all synthetic knowledge to the realm of possible experience. And indeed some authors do exactly this: Hans-Jürgen Engfer, for example, writes:

[...] "Empiricism" [as discussed in the section on the interest of reason in the antinomies] is characterised, according to Kant, by the claim that "the understanding is at every time on its own proper ground, namely the field of possible experiences, whose laws it traces, and by means of which it can endlessly extend its secure and comprehensible cognition". [...] If one takes *this* second concept of "Empiricism", which occurs within the doctrine of the an-

³ See A 462/B 490-A 476/B 504 and A 852/B 880-A 856/B 884. Kant describes the last section as a mere placeholder for a more extensive discussion that is to be written in the future. Unfortunately for our purposes, Kant never wrote this more extensive discussion.

tinomy, to be fundamental in the determination of Kant's own epistemological position, then one gets the [...] result that Kant, in his theoretical philosophy and as an epistemologist, is *himself an empiricist*: He, too, limits – no different from the supporter of the antitheses of the antinomy who is here designated as empiricist – the sphere of theoretical cognition to the field of possible experience. (Engfer 1996, 420, my translation)

Engfer's characterisation is instructive, but misleading. The problem is that it confuses two different claims that are made about limiting the sphere of knowledge to possible experience: one of these Kant ascribes to the empiricist, and the other one he accepts himself. The empiricist, on Kant's reading, insists that we can only ground our knowledge claims in experiences that we actually *have*, that is, in perception. It is in this sense that the empiricist limits the field of knowledge to possible experience; we could not possibly have knowledge about what we cannot actually experience. This claim is equivalent to the denial of *a priori* synthetic knowledge. Kant, on the other hand, insists that we can also have knowledge *about the possibility* of experience. These conditions for the possibility of experience cannot themselves be the object of a possible experience; they must be known *a priori*. This difference between experiences that we could possibly have, and the possibility of experience, is crucial in understanding Kant's position towards empiricism.

If we want to understand what Kant's empiricism entails, we have to understand his evaluation of this empiricist principle, that all our knowledge is necessarily grounded in perception. While Kant obviously does not accept this principle as stated here, he does not wholly reject it either. In fact, he recommends it as a maxim of humility, and a guard against supernatural explanations (A 470/B 498), as long as one recognises its proper boundaries. These boundaries constitute a field of knowledge, within which the principle of empiricism rules supreme. Informally put, this is the field of factual knowledge. Factual knowledge may for this occasion be defined as all knowledge that involves an existential commitment. The reason why the principle of empiricism rules supreme in this field is that the only way to establish existence, according to Kant, is by means of perception: “[P]erception, which yields the material for the concept, is the sole characteristic of actuality” (A 225/B 273).⁴ This thesis implies that claims to factual knowledge are only justified when the object of this cognition is either perceived itself, or when its existence is connected “with some actual perception in accordance with the analogies of experience” (A 225/B 272). The reason why existence can only be established by perception is that, according to Kant, sensibility, the faculty of perception, is the only faculty that brings us

⁴ See also A 373–374.

in a *passive* relation to the objects of knowledge; and this passivity towards the object of knowledge is required in order to distinguish knowledge from mere imagination.

If we want to find the most substantial sense in which Kant is an empiricist, his insistence on the necessity of actual perception for the justification of all factual knowledge claims is the best candidate. His rationalism, then, is the natural counterpart to this empiricism. Unlike the doctrinal empiricist, Kant does not think that the field of factual knowledge is the only field of knowledge. Even if we ignore mathematics, there is after all the field of transcendental philosophy, where we acquire *a priori* knowledge about the conditions for the possibility of experience. His rationalism is thus constituted by the doctrine that we can have substantial (that is to say, synthetic) formal knowledge that is not grounded in perception.

In the next three sections of this paper, Kant's empiricism will take centre stage. In what follows I will also refer to his empiricism as the doctrine of 'the privileged role of perception'. By adopting this doctrine, Kant commits himself to three important claims, which may be conveniently ordered in terms of Kant's three categories of modality: 1) perception, considered as a state of passive reception, must be *real*, 2) it must be *possible* to ground claims to factual knowledge in perception, and 3) grounding factual knowledge in perception is *necessary*; that is, there is no alternative. In the years around 1790, each of these three commitments came under attack. In the next section I will first discuss the influential point made by Gottlob Ernst Schulze, that Kant's assumption of a passive faculty of perception violated the limitations set by Kant's own philosophy on what we can know. In section four I will discuss Salomon Maimon's argument against the possibility, within Kant's philosophical framework, of grounding knowledge in perception. Finally, in section five, I will discuss Karl Leonhard Reinhold's deductivist alternative to Kant's model for the grounding of knowledge, which challenged the necessity of grounding knowledge in perception.

3 Aenesidemus-Schulze and Kant's theory of affection

The first line of criticism that I will discuss is aimed at Kant's first empiricist commitment: the commitment to the reality of perception as a state of passive

reception. I will discuss this critique as it is formulated in G.E. Schulze's influential *Aenesidemus*-book.⁵

The essence of Schulze's critique can be stated in a very simple manner: Kant maintains that while the subject provides the *a priori* forms of experience, the content of this experience has to be provided by the object of cognition. And this is, as Kant already states in §1 of the first *Critique*, only possible when this object affects our senses:

In whatever way and through whatever means a cognition may relate to objects, that through which it relates immediately to them, and at which all thought as a means is directed as an end, is intuition. This, however, takes place only insofar as the object is given to us, but this in turn is possible only if it affects the mind in a certain way. The capacity (receptivity) to acquire representations through the way in which we are affected by objects is called sensibility. (A 19/B 33)

Unfortunately, Schulze argues, this doctrine of affection conflicts with a doctrine that is even more central to Kant's project. This is the doctrine that the pure categories of the understanding, such as causality and substantiality, cannot legitimately be applied outside of the realm of experience. But, Schulze notes, the claim that objects affect our senses clearly involves an application of the category of causality. And since affection is part of what makes experience possible, it cannot itself be inside the realm of experience. It follows that the application of the category of causality in the doctrine of affection is transcendent, and therefore illegitimate.

When one [...] assumes that the principle of causality may never be applied to things in themselves, but that it only has validity with regard to that what is there, merely subjectively, as experience in us [...]; then the possibility of showing the connection of certain parts of our cognition with things that do not belong to this cognition itself disappears, and if the principle of causality is not valid outside of our experience, then it is an abuse of the laws of the understanding when one applies the concept of *cause* to something that is said to be there outside of our experiences and entirely independent of it. Even though the critical philosophy does not straightforwardly deny that there are things in themselves that, as a cause, give us the content of our empirical cognition, nevertheless it should really, according to its own principles, deny the reality and truth of such an assumed objective and transcendental cause of the content of our empirical cognition, and according to its own principles, therefore, not only the origin of the content of empirical cognition, but even its

⁵ As Schulze himself mentions (Schulze 1969, 294) he was not the first to voice this point of criticism: Jacobi and Maimon had already made similar arguments (Frank 1997, 91). I focus on the Schulze-formulation here, because it is the most clear and precise, and because it turned out to be the most influential.

entire reality, or its actual connection to something external to our representations, is completely uncertain and for us = x. (Schulze 1969, 298–299, my translation)

In spite of its straightforward syllogistic nature, many modern commentators have not been impressed by Schulze's argument. The common objection is not that the argument is not valid, but rather that it is based on a misinterpretation of the nature of Kant's project. This objection is given a clear formulation by Frederick Beiser:

[Schulze's skepticism suffers] from a psychologistic interpretation of the critical philosophy. The main premise behind this interpretation is that Kant's transcendental inquiry is only a first-order psychological investigation into the cognitive faculties of the mind [...]. Such an interpretation, however, is surely a simplification of Kant's transcendental enterprise. However important the 'subjective deduction' might be, Kant's primary aim in the *Kritik* is to conduct a second-order investigation into our synthetic a priori judgments about things, not a first-order investigation into the faculty of mind. He does not want to know the causal conditions of representation as much as the truth conditions of synthetic a priori judgments. (Beiser 1987, 282–283)

Beiser further comments that the main contribution of Schulze's skepticism is the test that it provides for students of Kant's philosophy: "If a student of Kant does not know how to reply to Schulze, then chances are that he does not understand the idea of transcendental philosophy itself" (1987, 280).

Given the success of Schulze's *Aenesidemus*-book in the 1790s (Di Giovanni and Harris 2000, 20), however, this is quite an extraordinary claim. It was broadly acknowledged that if the critical philosophy was to be successful, *Aenesidemus* had to be refuted. If we want to understand the developments in German philosophy in the 1790s, it would be wise to refrain from judging that this success, too, was due to a complete misunderstanding of transcendental philosophy by the public. Instead, we should take *Aenesidemus* seriously, and try to find out why it made such an impression when it was first published. I hope to make plausible that, if we consider Schulze's criticism from the perspective of Kant's empiricism, it does indeed uncover a vulnerable aspect of Kant's philosophy. If it is successful, Schulze's argument undermines our confidence in the first of the claims to which Kant's empiricism commits him; the claim that we have a faculty of perception, by means of which we stand in passive relation to the world.

In order to make Schulze's critique of Kant a little more palatable to the modern reader, let us look at Beiser's assumption that the first- and second-order investigations of which he speaks in the quotation above can be so easily separated when interpreting Kant. Such a separation might seem natural, and

even necessary, for a philosopher brought up in the analytic tradition, but it would in all likelihood not have seemed so self-evident to Kant and his contemporaries. Interpreting Kant on the basis of this distinction leads to at least two important problems.

Firstly, the textual evidence is not as decisive as one might like. In the only passage to which Beiser refers (A xvii), Kant does indeed seem to make a similar distinction. But in this passage Kant is not speaking about his transcendental project as a whole, but only about the deduction of the categories (and then only one part of it). Furthermore, no trace of this or any similar passage can be found in the second edition of the book. If this really were one of the most fundamental points for understanding the nature of Kant's project, one may have expected him to put a lot more emphasis on it. As it is, it is hardly surprising that Kant's early readers did not take notice of it, and that they were far more impressed by Schulze's critique than Beiser is.⁶

Secondly, such a separation of first- and second-order investigations creates an important philosophical problem. A second-order investigation would, according to Beiser, be an investigation into the truth conditions of synthetic *a priori* judgments. Such an investigation would be pointless by itself, however, for it would never answer the question whether these conditions are actually realised. But what good would it do us to know under what conditions metaphysics would be possible, if we cannot find out whether we (and the world) are actually so constituted that metaphysics is possible *for us*? By itself, such an investigation would be a mere playing with concepts that has no true meaning for us whatsoever. Contrary to Beiser's claim, therefore, a 'first-order' investigation into the faculty of the mind cannot be a mere secondary concern; it is a necessary supplement to any such investigation regarding truth conditions.⁷

Kant was quite aware of this. In fact, he himself gives a version of this argument as the primary reason for rejecting Fichte's project (AA 12:370). And the problem became even more significant for Kantians in the 1790s who, having

⁶ Of course there are some other passages where Kant speaks about the necessity to separate transcendental philosophy from empirical psychology (see for example A 801/B 829 and A 847/B 875). These passages should, however, be treated with great care, because the practice of 'empirical psychology' in Kant's time was completely different from what we call empirical psychology in our own day. That is not to say that these passages are not relevant to the question at hand, but it would be a mistake to uncritically make use of these passages for an anti-psychologistic reading of Kant by projecting our notion of empirical psychology onto them.

⁷ Oddly enough, Beiser mentions a few pages earlier that Schulze employs a version of this argument against Reinhold (Beiser 1987, 287), but apparently does not recognize that the very same argument is just as telling against this defence of Kant.

read Maimon, would have been aware of the urgency of this ‘*Quid Facti?*’ question.

If this is all true then we cannot merely disregard Schulze’s critique on the basis of his ‘psychologistic’ interpretation of Kant. If the first- and second-order investigations cannot be so cleanly separated, Kant has to make some substantial claims about the way that the human mind actually works in order to forestall the criticism that his work is merely empty philosophizing.

One of these substantial claims holds that the content of our perceptions is brought about by means of affection. As we have seen, this claim is essential to Kant’s empiricism, for it is this doctrine of affection that secures the passivity of perception. And this passivity in turn secures a privileged position for perception (as the *only* passive cognitive faculty in Kant’s philosophy) in the justification of claims to factual knowledge. If, however, we would have reason to doubt whether perception really does bring us in a passive relation to the objects of knowledge, it would be unclear why perception should continue to play this privileged role. We may suppose, for instance, that our perceptions are just as much a product of our own spontaneity as Kant supposes our judgments to be, but why should we then believe that perception can play a special role in the justification or correction of such factual judgments?

Schulze’s critique, however, does precisely this: it problematizes the privileged role of perception in the justification of knowledge. If Kant’s doctrine of affection makes a transcendent use of the category of causality, it follows that we do not know whether perception really comes about through our being affected by an object. If this is correct, then it also follows that we do not really know whether we are passive in perception. No doubt, we certainly *feel* passive whenever we perceive, but as Manfred Frank has rightly emphasised, it would be illegitimate to reason from a feeling that something is the case to it actually being the case (Frank 1997, 89).

The consequences for Kant’s empiricism are significant: if it is possible that we are not really passive in our perception, then it is also possible that in perception objects do not really appear to us. But, Kant maintains, it is ridiculous to speak of appearance [*Erscheinung*] when there is no object that appears (B xxvii); we would be left with just illusion [*Schein*]. In other words, we would be left without a reason to trust our senses.

4 Salomon Maimon and the Intuition-Concept Gap

Schulze's critique challenges Kant's empiricism by questioning his commitment to the existence of sensibility as a passive faculty. In this section I will discuss a line of criticism developed by Solomon Maimon in his *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, which extends this challenge to Kant's empiricism, and amplifies its strength. Maimon's critique, as we will see, is that even if Kant's doctrine of affection is correct, perception on his account still cannot possibly play the privileged role (as the ultimate source of justification for factual judgments) that Kant assigns to it. If this is correct, then the second of Kant's empiricist commitments, too, becomes highly problematic.

The starting point of Maimon's critique is a qualitative distinction that Kant emphasizes, in contrast to Leibniz, between concepts and intuitions. For Leibniz and his followers the difference between these two kinds of representations was merely gradual; intuitions were considered to be the obscure comprehension of concepts by a finite mind.⁸ An infinite mind, such as God, would not have intuitions, for such a mind would have a clear (conceptual) comprehension of the entire world. This in turn means that for God there is no brute facticity, but merely conceptual relations; every truth for God, in other words, is an analytic truth. This idea of a gradual distinction between concept and intuition dominated German philosophy before the publication of the first *Critique*.

Kant, however, chose to abandon this picture by emphasizing the indispensability of both concepts and intuitions. For Kant, intuitions are not merely defective apprehensions of conceptual relations. There is rather a qualitative difference between the two kinds of representations:

[Cognition] is either an **intuition** or a **concept** [...]. The former is immediately related to the object and is singular; the latter is mediate, by means of a mark, which can be common to several things. (A 320/B 377)

Both kinds of representations are, as said, indispensable for human knowledge. Through intuition we become aware of the object in its individuality, and by means of the application of concepts this object is categorised as being of a specific kind, and as having specific properties. Without intuition we would not be

⁸ For a helpful discussion of the Leibnizian framework, and Kant's reasons for abandoning it, see Heidemann (2013).

come aware of the existence of objects; without concepts we would not know anything about them except for their pure presence.

But as Maimon points out, this picture of the acquisition of knowledge is problematic. The essence of his criticism is that if concepts are as qualitatively different from intuitions as Kant considers them to be, it becomes unclear how there can be any justified application of the former to the latter. And, Maimon adds, this is a strong point in favour of Leibniz's theory:

[H]ow can the understanding subject something (the given object) to its power (to its rules) that is not in its power? In the Kantian system, namely where sensibility and understanding are two totally different sources of our cognition, this question is insoluble as I have shown; on the other hand in the Leibnizian-Wolffian system, both flow from one and the same cognitive source (the difference lies only in the degree of completeness of the cognition) and so the question is easily resolved. (Maimon 2010, 63–64)

We need to delve deeper into the matter, however. Rather than merely pointing out this heterogeneity of concepts and intuitions, it will be instructive to analyse it further, and explicate why exactly it causes a problem for Kant's empiricism.

We can find a good starting point for such an analysis in Kant's explicit characterisation of the nature of intuitions and concepts, which we have quoted above. There are several possible distinctions to be made with regard to intuitions and concepts, such as between their different origins, or in terms of spontaneity versus passivity.⁹ In Kant's official 'definition' (if the A 320/B 377 passage may be called such)¹⁰, however, the distinction is made in terms of particularity versus generality.¹¹

I think that it is important, if we want to understand Maimon, to focus on this distinction. If one does not, and chooses to focus, for example, on their ori-

9 See for example (Beiser 1987, 291): "These faculties (sensibility and the understanding) are independent of each other because the understanding creates a priori concepts that do not derive from sensibility, whereas sensibility receives intuitions that do not come from the understanding. They are also heterogeneous since the understanding is purely intellectual, active, and beyond space and time."

10 That is, whereas Kant gives characterisations of the notions of 'concept' and 'intuitions' at various locations in the *Critique*, this is the only passage in which he does so in the traditional form of definition, by explicitly determining the species by means of the genus and the differentiae.

11 It may seem at first that in this definition, too, there are two different pairs of distinction at work: particularity versus generality, and immediate versus mediate cognition. When one considers the matter more closely, however, one finds that they really come down to the same thing. Immediate cognition is immediate for the simple fact that it does not require the mediation of a general attribute [*Merkmal*].

gins in different faculties, the problem has to be phrased in terms of the difficulties of an interaction between these two faculties. This can make it tempting to think of the problem in terms of psychological causality.¹² Maimon, however, is quite explicit that the main problem is one of justification. He does not ask ‘How is the (factual) application of concepts to intuitions possible?’ Rather, he asks ‘*Quid juris?*’, or: ‘*With what right* do we apply concepts to intuitions?’¹³

What does this problem of justification have to do with the distinction of intuitions and concepts in terms of generality versus particularity? Maimon’s critical point is this: all justification of the application of a concept to intuition must presuppose a criterion for the correct or incorrect application of this concept. Such a criterion, however, must always be conceptual itself.

This requires some clarification. Suppose, to take one of Kant’s examples (A 137/B 176), that I judge something to be a plate [*Teller*]. If someone asked me to justify the application of this concept I might point out that it is a circular object, made from stoneware, and set upon a table. This is fine if we are merely interested in justifying the application of the concept ‘plate’, but a problem occurs if we are interested in the problem of justifying the application of concepts to intuitions more generally. Since, after all, the justification of the application of the concept ‘plate’ consists in the application of further concepts to intuition (such as ‘round’, ‘made from stoneware’, ‘table’, and even ‘object’), the problem regarding the justification of the application of concepts to intuition is merely pushed back one step, namely to these further concepts. In order to solve this problem one would (*per impossibile*) need a universal criterion for the applica-

¹² Beiser, at times seems to do exactly this: “Understanding has to *act upon* sensibility to produce the form of of experience”, and a little later “But, Maimon asks, how can understanding and sensibility *interact* with each other in this manner if they are such completely independent and heterogeneous faculties? How can the understanding *create* an intelligible form out of that which is nonintelligible and formless? How can it bring what is not under its control (the given) under its control? How indeed can its purely spaceless and timeless activity *act upon* the spatial and temporal world created by the forms of sensibility?” (Beiser 1987, 291–292, my italics). This interpretation is understandable given Maimon’s explicit claim that the problem of the gap between concept and intuition is identical with (and not just, as Beiser claims (1987, 291–292), analogous to) Descartes’ mind-body problem, a problem that is often understood in terms of mental causality. If my interpretation is correct, however, Maimon would claim that this is mistaken; the mind-body problem is not a problem of mental causality, but of the justified application of concepts.

¹³ See Maimon (2010, 62) and his letter to Kant (AA 11:15).

tion of concepts; that is, one criterion that would determine for every application of *any concept* whether it is correct or incorrect.¹⁴

The problem then, it seems, is that no matter how far we proceed in such a justification, we will never be able to make the necessary step from the generality of the concept to the particularity of the intuition, to which the concept is applied. But if this is right, then it becomes impossible to explain how there can be any justified application of concepts to reality at all.

Kant, however, does not seem to have been aware of this problem.¹⁵ The natural place for a discussion of this kind would have been the chapter on the schematism of the understanding, which has the application of concepts to intuition as its topic. In this section, however, Kant focuses almost exclusively on the problem of how the *a priori* categories can be applied to *a posteriori* intuitions. He sees it as the main task of the schematism to bridge this gap between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, and he solves this problem by arguing that there is an *a priori* element (the pure forms of space and time) in every empirical intuition. As Maimon points out in a letter to Kant, however, it is not only the *a priori-a posteriori* gap that needs to be bridged, but that between concepts and intuitions in general:

The question, *Quid Juris?* This question, because of its importance, deserves the attention of a Kant. If one spells it out the way you yourself do, it becomes: How can something a priori be applied with certainty to something a posteriori? The answer or deduction that you give in your book is, as the answer of only a Kant can be, totally satisfying. But if one wishes to amplify the question, one asks: How can an a priori concept be applied to an intuition, even an a priori intuition? This question must await the master's attention, if it is to be answered satisfactorily. (AA 11:16)¹⁶

14 This line of argument is not immediately apparent within the *Versuch*, taken by itself. It becomes clear however when we read the argument of the *Versuch* in combination with his polemical exchange with J.H. Tieftrunk (a staunch defender of Kant), published in the same year in the *Berlinisches Journal für Aufklärung* (Maimon 1965, 443–499, 523–566) in which he makes precisely this demand for a universal criterion for correct application of concepts. Tieftrunk, unfortunately, does not seem to have grasped the full extent of the problem, and only replies that (of course) we do not have such a universal criterion (other than the purely negative criterion of the law of non-contradiction), but that particular criteria for different concepts suffice.

15 See A 84/B 116–117: “We make use of a multitude of empirical concepts without objection from anyone, and take ourselves to be justified in granting them a sense and a supposed signification even without any deduction, because we always have experience ready at hand to prove their objective reality.”

16 We should not take the fact that Maimon only speaks of a priori concepts here as an argument against the interpretation defended above. This way of talking is rather just the natural consequence of his critique. An empirical concept would be a concept of which the content is given to us in intuition. The content of a concept, however, is, as we have seen, general, whereas

Kant did write an answer, but it is unlikely that it satisfied Maimon, for it simply misses the point of the objection.¹⁷ The essence of Kant's reply is a repetition of a claim that was already central in the first *Critique*, namely that without an application of the categories to intuition, experience would be impossible. This, however, merely concerns the necessity of the fact of application. But this is something that Maimon never disputed. He gladly admits that we do in fact apply concepts to intuition; and even that this application (particularly the application of the pure categories) is a necessary condition for experience. He merely argues that on Kant's account, every such application can only be arbitrary, and can therefore never lead to real knowledge.

Now, this may be the point to discuss a counterargument to the critique discussed above, which will surely have occurred to some readers. Even though Kant does not refer to it in the letter in which he replies to Maimon, one may argue, Kant has a far stronger line of defence available to him. This line of defence is to argue that Maimon has misunderstood the nature of the distinction between concepts and intuitions. The strict distinction between the two, it may be argued, is a theoretical abstraction for the sake of definition. In actual experience, however, the two elements of knowledge are never so strictly separated, because the manifold of every intuition has already been subjected to a passive (as opposed to spontaneous) conceptual synthesis. There is therefore no real gap between the (spontaneous) application of a concept within a judgment and the intuition to which it is applied, because this intuition has already been conceptually organised.¹⁸

intuitions can only be particular. Strictly speaking, then, there can, at least on Kant's account, be no such things as empirical concepts, because this would itself presuppose that the gap between concepts and intuitions can be bridged. Rather, every concept must have its origin in the spontaneity of the understanding. The only justified distinction that can be made between concepts is not in terms of pure versus empirical, but rather in terms of necessary versus contingent (every subject must possess the concept of causality, but not every subject must possess the concept of a tree).

¹⁷ See AA 11:48. Admittedly, Kant is not fully to blame for this. The full force of Maimon's critique is impossible to extract from the very abbreviated and even ambiguous form that it is given in the letter to Kant. And even in combination with his *Essay* it still takes, as we have seen, quite a bit of work and reconstruction to make it clear.

¹⁸ Such a reading of Kant is defended by, amongst others, John McDowell. See McDowell (2009, 256–274, especially 260f.).

Whether this is a correct interpretation of Kant is a matter of dispute,¹⁹ but there are two passages in the first *Critique* that strongly support it. In these passages Kant speaks of a blind synthesis of the imagination, which produces unity in intuition, in the same manner as the conscious synthesis of judgment produces unity amongst different representations. (A 78–79/B 103–105). A similar point is made in the transcendental deduction of the B-edition, where Kant calls to the imagination “a faculty for determining the sensibility *a priori*” (B 152) in accord with the categories. In the same passage Kant is fairly explicit in his characterization of the faculty of imagination as the bridge between intuition and concept, when he says that it belongs equally to sensibility and to the understanding.

Interestingly, as we have seen, Kant does not employ this argument in his answer to Maimon, but we may nevertheless ask whether it would suffice as an answer. While such an interpretation of Kant’s doctrine considerably complicates the evaluation of Maimon’s critique, I think that we still ought to answer this question in the negative. The main problem is that this move does not so much solve the problem, as move it back one step. Whereas the problem initially lay in bridging the gap between the intuition and the concept (as spontaneously applied in a judgment), a similar gap now appears between the synthesising activity of the imagination, and the given manifold that is synthesised.

According to Kant, on this reading, the faculty of imagination synthesises the given manifold according to concepts. These concepts provide the rules for this synthesis. Wherever we can meaningfully speak of a rule, however, there has to be a criterion to decide which instances fall under the rule. And here the same problem we encountered above reoccurs: any such criterion must again be generally applicable, or, in other words, it must be conceptual. Since the given pre-intuitive manifold is presumed to be non-conceptual, however, there is no meaningful way in which it can be said to fall under such a rule. It then follows that the synthesising activity of the understanding must either be arbitrary, or that there must be a general (conceptual) element in the manifold after all, pushing the problem back a step yet again.

Maimon’s critique therefore does not receive a satisfactory answer. It seems to be that the only way for Kant to avoid it is by abandoning the idea that there must be an element within knowledge that is qualitatively distinct from the concept. But this would entail precisely what Maimon wanted to achieve; a return to

19 Hanna (2011) lists a number of passages from the *Critique* that emphasize the independence of intuition from all activity of the understanding. These passages form a strong argument against an interpretation of Kant as a conceptualist about intuition.

the Leibnizian paradigm, in which there is only a difference in degree of clarity between concept and intuition.

I have stated above that Maimon's critique extends, and amplifies the strength of, the challenge to Kant's empiricism. Schulze had already attacked Kant's first empiricist commitment, namely the commitment to sensibility's being a passive faculty. Maimon adds that even if it were true that our sensibility is affected by an independently existing world, perception still would not be able to play the privileged role that Kant demands of it. Such affection may well cause us to have certain thoughts and beliefs, but as long as we maintain the qualitative gap between intuitions and concepts, it would never be able to justify them. Perception would therefore not be able to play any epistemic role in the justification of claims to factual knowledge whatsoever. This would effectively undermine Kant's second empiricist commitment.²⁰

5 Reinhold's alternative model

In the previous two sections, we saw how the first two of Kant's empiricist commitments came under heavy attack from the side of Schulze and Maimon. This only leaves the third claim to which Kant is committed: that claims to factual knowledge are *necessarily* grounded in perception; or, in other words, that there are no non-empirical grounds that could justify such claims.

This commitment has already been made highly problematic by the two critiques discussed above; if we have reason to doubt both the reality of perception (as Kant conceived of it) and the possibility of grounding claims to factual knowledge in perception, it should be clear that any claim regarding the necessity of grounding factual knowledge in perception is likewise in trouble. It is, however, insufficient to merely point out these problems; if no actual alternative to Kant's conception of empirical grounding is presented, such worries threaten to lead to the radical skeptical conclusion that perhaps claims to factual knowledge cannot be properly grounded at all. Of course there were some philosophers in the 1790s who would not shy away from such skeptical conclusions (Maimon himself is the most notable example), but this skepticism would have been unaccept-

²⁰ These philosophical debates around 1800 have an interesting analogue in our own time. McDowell, in his influential *Mind and World* (McDowell 1994) in effect accepts Maimon's analysis that we need to abandon the idea of a non-conceptual element of knowledge, but, strikingly, does not abandon Kant's idea that perception has a privileged role to play in the justification of knowledge-claims. Whether this can be made consistent is a question that can unfortunately not be answered here.

able to most philosophically inclined people. The challenge to Kant's empiricism would therefore hardly be complete as long as there was no alternative model available for the grounding of factual knowledge-claims.

Fortunately, however, for those who were impressed by the challenge to Kant's empiricism, such an alternative model was in fact made available at the beginning of the 1790s, through the highly influential early work of Karl Leonhard Reinhold. It is important to remark that Reinhold did not initially develop this model as an alternative to Kant's empiricism. On the contrary, as he emphasises in an early paper (which later functioned as the preface to his *Essay on a new Theory of the Human Capacity for Representation*) Reinhold considered the truth of Kant's philosophy (as he understood it) to be beyond doubt, if only its principles were properly understood:

He [that is, Reinhold himself] is here content [...] just to admit: that by means of the newly acquired principles all his philosophical doubts have been answered completely satisfactorily for both the mind and the heart, in a completely decisive (be it wholly unexpected) way; and that he is for himself completely convinced that the Critique of R. will bring about one of the most general, remarkable and beneficial revolutions that has ever occurred in the realm of human concepts. (Reinhold 2010, 56, my translation)²¹

But this confronted Reinhold with a major problem: the almost universal disagreement amongst interpreters, not only with regard to the truth of the critical philosophy, but also with regard to what Kant actually meant, showed that Kant's premises had not been truly understood; neither by his critics, nor by his defenders. The problem was that they were open to so many different interpretations, that the original struggle between different metaphysical systems, which Kant had intended to bring to an end, had now been turned into an equally vicious struggle between different interpreters of Kant's philosophy (Reinhold 2010, 58–62). Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie* was therefore not only, or even primarily, meant to provide a foundation for its truth, but more importantly, it was meant to ground its *meaning*.²² Such grounding was necessary, Reinhold thought, because philosophy, unlike other sciences, works with concepts the realisation of which cannot be given in immediate intuition, but can only be thought (2003, 149–150). As a consequence, a novel approach needed to be developed, for any traditional exposition of Kant's philosophy was bound only to multiply the many misunderstandings. And while it had not been intended as

²¹ See also Reinhold (2003, 152); Beiser (1987, 73–74).

²² We should therefore take the title of the *Beiträge* very seriously indeed. It is primarily intended to correct *misunderstandings*. Further references to this problem are made throughout many of his early works. See for example Reinhold (1978, 6–8, 38–39, 349–353).

such, it was this novel approach that was to function as the alternative to Kant's empiricism.

Reinhold's solution to this problem is undoubtedly elegant. His idea is that if one could somehow make the meaning of a philosophical system dependent on its truth, and vice versa, one could kill two birds with one stone. That is, if one could find a proposition which stated nothing but a fact that is immediately evident to everyone who thinks it, because of the very act of thinking it, its meaning is secured by its object. It is safe from misinterpretation (by any unbiased interpreter), first, because its relation to the object is not further mediated by other concepts and propositions, and, second, because this object is instantiated by the very act of thinking this proposition. Any misinterpretation would immediately be brought to light, because the object of the proposition is, by means of the very act of thinking it, always directly present to consciousness for comparison.

This [various forms of misunderstanding] is entirely impossible for the proposition that has been determined by itself. Because the characteristics [*Merkmale*] that it contains have been completely determined by the act of judgment itself it *can* either *not* be thought at all, or it *must be thought correctly*; and insofar it can neither be asserted nor denied because of misunderstandings. (Reinhold 1978, 356, my translation)²³

The same strategy also secures the truth of this proposition; error and disagreement in philosophical reasoning, so Reinhold thinks, is only possible because of the misunderstanding of what is contained in a concept (1978, 341). Such misunderstanding, however, is not possible with regard to the foundational proposition, because what is contained within the concepts of which it makes use is entirely determined by the object of the principle. Both its meaning and its truth are therefore beyond question. If this is correct, and if such a proposition can be found, then the true philosophical system, according to Reinhold, could be constructed by linking further propositions to this initial foundational proposition; this would in turn secure the meaning and truth of these further propositions as well.

While Kant himself would certainly never have endorsed such a programme, it was still strongly connected to Kant's philosophical project in at least one important respect. Kant, after all, had stressed strict systematicity as an essential criterion for a true science. And he had furthermore defined a system as a body of knowledge subsumed under a single principle (A 832/B 860). Reinhold accepts both these claims, but he drives the point one step further. Kant had

²³ See also Reinhold (2003, 144)

thought of this single principle as an organizing principle, which determines the place of each element of knowledge within the system (AA 20:214). Reinhold, however, maintains that the fundamental principle should not merely organise a body of knowledge, but should be utilized for the deduction [*Ableitung*] of this body of knowledge. Reinhold never tires in emphasizing that this is the only manner in which a philosophical system can be constructed that is both evident and free from ambiguity.

Whether Reinhold's intentions were as radical as they here appear is quite doubtful. The main reason for this is that Reinhold does not give a clear account of what 'deduction' is supposed to mean. While it is true that some passages strongly seem to support a radical deductivist reading of Reinhold's project, there are other passages in which Reinhold takes on a far more moderate tone (cf. Reinhold 2003, 116, 118, 433). For our purposes, however, Reinhold's true intentions are largely irrelevant. What matters primarily is the fact that Reinhold's model opened up possibilities for avoiding Kant's empiricist model of grounding claims to factual knowledge (and thereby also avoiding the critiques developed by Schulze and Maimon. Reinhold's foundational principle was in fact already a principle with existential import, for he explicitly claimed it to be the expression of a *fact*. Furthermore, Reinhold insisted that the knowledge of this fact could not be acquired empirically; that is, it has an *a priori* status (2003, 143–144). This shatters Kant's neat division between the necessarily empirical knowledge of matters of fact, and the *a priori* knowledge of formal conditions. Even though Reinhold's most famous successor, Fichte, would almost immediately afterwards abandon the idea that the foundational proposition must express a fact, he nevertheless followed Reinhold's strategy of blurring the lines between the realm of the empirical, and the realm of the *a priori* (Fichte 1965, 206), and therefore between factual and formal knowledge, as Kant had conceived of it. When this strict separation is removed, however, there is no more reason to maintain Kant's claim that all claims to knowledge with regard to matters of fact is necessarily grounded empirically. Hence, Kant's third empiricist commitment is also undermined, and this completes the challenge against Kant's empiricism.

6 Rationalist and empiricist Kantianism

So far I have been speaking primarily about the challenge to Kant's empiricism, but in the introduction I also suggested that this challenge made it necessary, at least for Kantian-inspired philosophers who were impressed by this challenge, to move beyond the synthesis of rationalism and empiricism as Kant had conceived of it. That is not to say that the ambition to bring about a synthesis of rationalism

and empiricism was given up altogether. On the contrary, the search for such a synthesis remains one of the primary concerns of most of Kant's famous successors. However, in order to respond to the challenge set out above, many of these philosophers were pushed towards stressing either Kant's empiricism or his rationalism, at the expense of its counterpart. To see why this is so, we first need to come back to Kant's attempt at synthesising rationalism and empiricism.

In section two we saw that Kant tries to bring about a synthesis of rationalism and empiricism by distinguishing between two fields of knowledge: the field of factual, and the field of formal knowledge. These two fields are to a great extent independent; each has its own legitimacy, as well as its own norms for justifying and criticizing claims to knowledge that fall within that field. As the Schulze-Maimon-Reinhold challenge makes clear, however, this independence cannot be maintained. The problem is that because Kant allows for a way of grounding knowledge claims that is entirely independent of perception, he provides a vantage point from which it is possible to question not only claims to factual knowledge that are grounded in particular perceptions, but also to question the possibility of empirical grounding altogether. And for philosophers who were impressed by Schulze's and Maimon's criticism, this enquiry did not end on a positive note.

Now, I would suggest (and given the limitations of this paper, it can be no more than a suggestion) that there were two broad strategies that were employed by Kantian-inspired philosophers around 1800 to deal with this conundrum. Both strategies, however, eliminate the independence of the two fields of knowledge, thereby also eliminating the synthesis of rationalism and empiricism as Kant had conceived of it.

The first strategy is to draw the conclusion from the challenge against Kant's empiricism that perception itself stands in need of rational justification. This is a move with important consequences, because the most important philosophers who adopt this strategy around 1800 stay true to Kant's important insight that only the products of rationality itself can be rationally justified in this way. This means that these philosophers need to deny that perception (at least in as far as it plays a role in grounding knowledge) is passive, and instead need to interpret it as being spontaneous and rational (that is to say, thoroughly conceptual); and a common move here is to insist that the only possible proof for the rationality of perception in this sense would be the *a priori* deduction of perception. At this point, I think it is fair to say that the empiricist dimension of Kant's philosophy has been completely swallowed up by his rationalism. Even though philosophers who adopt this strategy may still insist on the importance of perception, for example as a check on philosophical theory, it has completely lost its status as an autonomous ground for knowledge. It would therefore not be

completely misleading to name defenders of this strategy ‘rationalist Kantians’. Fichte is the most obvious proponent of this rationalist strategy, but, on my reading of them, versions of this strategy were endorsed by all the German Idealists.

The proponents of this first strategy have of course had their fair share of attention from historians of philosophy. But there is also a possible second strategy, which has received far less attention in the secondary literature. This strategy is to deny pure reason its presumed right to be the ultimate judge of the claims of perception, by emphasizing that the *a priori* claims of transcendental philosophy are in some sense themselves dependent on empirical knowledge. Concretely speaking, proponents of this strategy primarily attempted to establish the thesis that philosophy, and Kant’s philosophy in particular, was either dependent on empirical psychology, or, more radically, that critical philosophy was itself essentially a system of empirical psychology. Such a strategy would undercut the most radical consequences of the challenge to Kant’s empiricism, because it would eliminate the vantage point, discussed above, from which the question of whether knowledge can be grounded in perception could reasonably be asked. If the domain of *a priori* knowledge is itself in some sense dependent on knowledge so grounded in perception, it would be clearly incoherent to dispute the possibility of grounding claims to knowledge in perception altogether. Since this strategy in effect makes Kant’s rationalism dependent upon his empiricism, it would be fair to speak of proponents of this strategy as ‘empiricist Kantians’. The most explicit defenders of this strategy around 1800 are Jakob Friedrich Fries and Friedrich Eduard Beneke.

This leads us to an interesting situation in the opening decade of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, Kant is still by far the most influential figure in German philosophy around that time, and almost all of his followers are still convinced that a synthesis between rationalism and empiricism is a necessary feature of a successful philosophical system. On the other hand, the failure of Kant’s actual synthesis gave rise to a vast field of opportunities for the more creative of Kant’s successors. Ironically, in these years a gap opened up between empiricist and rationalist followers of Kant that was far more explicit and consequential than the gap between empiricists and rationalists at any time before Kant’s attempted synthesis.

This conclusion has important consequences for the study of German philosophy after 1800. I already mentioned that historians of philosophy have so far almost exclusively focused their attention on some of the proponents of the first, rationalist, strategy, whereas the most important proponents of the second strategy have been almost forgotten. If the above has been at all convincing, then

this is clearly regrettable.²⁴ While I believe that the works of the ‘empiricist Kantians’ mentioned above also contain much that is of philosophical importance in its own respect, I cannot argue that point here. I will, however, suggest that if the Schulze-Maimon-Reinhold challenge has been of historical importance, then a good understanding of the way the ‘empiricist Kantians’ attempt to develop Kant’s philosophy further is of crucial importance, not only for improving our understanding of Kant’s philosophy and its reception, but also for understanding the German Idealists. Until we have learned to understand the philosophical works of the German Idealists not just as the natural consequences of Kant’s philosophy, but as one option amongst several for developing this philosophy further, we will lack a fundamental understanding of German philosophy around 1800.²⁵

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24 Fortunately, there have been some exceptions in recent years, especially with regard to Fries. Pinkard (2002) dedicates a complete chapter to Fries. Franks (2007) discusses Fries’ philosophy at some length and mentions Beneke and C.C.E. Schmid (another important figure for this line of reception). Furthermore, shortly after the current article was submitted for publication Frederick Beiser published a programmatic article in which he directs attention to a much neglected ‘alternative idealist tradition’ that includes Fries, Beneke and also Johann Friedrich Herbart. See Beiser (2014).

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