


# A Preface to the *First Critique*: Reason's Desire and Kant's Political History of Metaphysics

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**Abstract:** Kant begins the 1781 Preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason* with a history of metaphysics told as a sequence of failed political regimes. This history has been largely passed over both in the literature on Kant's metaphysics and in that on his political philosophy. This article provides an interpretation of Kant's history of metaphysical regimes as a way of exploring the political themes and aims of the *First Critique*. Kant's opening narrative articulates the role his critique of metaphysics plays in establishing the possibility of a lawful order of reason that defends morality against threats arising from reason's theoretical dissatisfaction. The political history of metaphysics presented in the A Preface reveals Kant's understanding of the public role philosophy must undertake in the context of the modern crisis of reason.

## Introduction

Political and legal metaphors occur throughout Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR).<sup>1</sup> Scholars have discussed how such images shed light on the aims and methods of Kant's efforts to delineate the faculties of human cognition and discover the boundaries of reason. Susan Shell writes of

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<sup>1</sup>Citations follow the standard Akademie pagination (volume: page number), except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which is cited by the A edition of 1781 and/or the B edition of 1787. Emphases within quotations are Kant's, unless otherwise noted. Abbreviations: CPR = *Critique of Pure Reason*; Groundwork = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; MMron = *Metaphysik Mrongovius*; Notes = *Notes and Fragments*; CPJ = *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; Proclamation = *Proclamation of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treaty for Perpetual Peace in Philosophy*.

the rights of reason and theoretical and epistemological property;<sup>2</sup> Dieter Henrich reads Kant's transcendental deduction as a form of legal argument;<sup>3</sup> Onora O'Neill discusses the political analogies in light of Kant's emphasis on public scrutiny;<sup>4</sup> and Sofie C. Møller has published a near-comprehensive treatment of the court-of-reason metaphor.<sup>5</sup> The work of these scholars makes clear that Kant's juridical metaphors are essential to the structure of the argument of the *First Critique*.<sup>6</sup>

It is not as often noted, however, that the *CPR* not only is littered with such images but opens with a memorable and intricate metaphor that places the later use of juridical language in the context of a broader political narrative. The preface to the first edition of the *First Critique*, otherwise known as the A Preface, begins with a history of metaphysics told as the history of failed political regimes.<sup>7</sup> Dogmatic metaphysics, Kant tells us, once ruled with the authority and might of a despot, but this regime crumbled, and its inhabitants dispersed. Some lived like nomads (skeptics), while others tried to reestablish the reign of their former rulers (dogmatists). The inability to reestablish an enduring regime casts doubt for some on the prospect of peaceful cohabitation, which is reflected by the attempts within modernity to turn away from all metaphysical claims (indifferentists). The modern condition resembles that of a "metaphysical state of nature" (*CPR* Axi).<sup>8</sup> After all hope seems to have been exhausted, Kant discovers the critical system, "the only [path] left" (*CPR* Axii). Reason must submit to its self-examination under the due process of the "court of reason" (*CPR* Axi–Axii). Through the process of reason's self-examination, the critical system establishes a legitimate source of authority that can settle metaphysical disputes, provide the grounds for practical action, and bring peace to the realm of metaphysics, thereby moderating passions that are otherwise destructive of a peaceful order.

The A Preface is Kant's apology for the necessity of the critique of reason, and as such it is a defense of the legitimacy of establishing a court of justice. Such

<sup>2</sup>Susan M. Shell, "Kant's Theory of Property," *Political Theory* 6, no. 1 (1978): 75–90; Shell, *The Rights of Reason: A Study of Kant's Philosophy and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>Dieter Henrich, "Kant's Notion of a Deduction and the Methodological Background of the First Critique," in *Kant's Transcendental Deductions*, ed. Eckart Förster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 27–46.

<sup>4</sup>Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup>Sofie C. Møller, *Kant's Tribunal of Reason: Legal Metaphor and Normativity in the "Critique of Pure Reason"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup>For the significance of symbolic language for Kant see *CPR* A179/B221–A181/B223, where he discusses how human cognition is comparative owing to the discursive nature of our reason. See also his later account of symbols in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (*CPJ* 5:351–52).

<sup>7</sup>The A Preface is the preface to the original 1781 edition of the *CPR* while the B Preface was added to the second 1787 edition.

<sup>8</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

epistemological legitimacy is propaedeutic to Kant's political doctrine of rights insofar as it delineates what could possibly be appealed to as a legitimate source of authority in political discourse. More significantly, I suggest that the A Preface provides insight into Kant's aims of founding a new regime—one that exists, to be sure, in the airy spaces of metaphysical speculation, but that provides the basis of a political and moral culture that eschews the harshness of an unreflective despotism and protects against various forms of atheistic or moral skepticism unique to the modern scientific age that threaten civic order.<sup>9</sup> Kant's justification of the critical project in political terms helps us grasp his understanding of the public role of philosophy. As Kant's political history of metaphysics turns to the legitimate establishment of the court of reason, we come to see that the critical project deals with themes at the heart of political philosophy, above all, the question of who or what has the right to rule.

Even commentaries on the *First Critique* that discuss the A Preface often overlook the significance of this political history of metaphysics.<sup>10</sup> One reason this aspect of the A Preface has gone largely undiscussed seems to be the attention given to Kant's allusion to Copernicus in the B Preface. While that image has rightly been held to be foundational to Kant's project, it is more concerned with method and less with the underlying need for a critique of reason. The A Preface has also been overshadowed by the concluding section of the *CPR*, titled "The History of Pure Reason." The *CPR* is thus bookended by two accounts of the history of metaphysics; however, this second account appears after the introduction of the critical system. It is the history of metaphysics transformed by reason's self-critique. The history presented in the A Preface, on the other hand, provides an account of Kant's introduction of his new philosophical method, speaking more directly to the purpose and justification of the critical philosophy.

Those few scholars who have discussed the A Preface have often done so in the context of other inquiries or have not given it a full treatment. Richard Velkley points to the significance of the political framing of the A Preface for understanding the aims of the critique of reason.<sup>11</sup> However, his discussion of this political imagery takes place in the context of an exploration of Kant's debt to Rousseau and does not constitute an exhaustive treatment. O'Neill largely passes over the A Preface to focus on the discussion of the "polemical" use of reason in the Doctrine of Method, despite discussing the centrality of

<sup>9</sup>Kant writes in a note dated between 1776 and 1778: "Metaphysics is as it were the police force of our reason with regard to the public security of morals and religion." Immanuel Kant, *Notes* 18:93, in *Notes and Fragments*, trans. Curtis Bowman, Paul Guyer, and Frederick Rauscher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup>Norman Kemp Smith, *A Commentary to Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason"* (London: Macmillan, 1918), 13–16; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant's Philosophical Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 15–20.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Velkley, "Transcending Nature, Unifying Reason: On Kant's Debt to Rousseau," in *Kant on Moral Autonomy*, ed. Oliver Sensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 103–4.

the “politics of reason” to the *CPR*.<sup>12</sup> J. Colin McQuillan concludes that Kant’s appeals to the “rightfulness and lawfulness of reason’s claims” in the A Preface suggest a kind of epistemological republicanism.<sup>13</sup> Møller discusses the A Preface insofar as it makes clear Kant’s aim to establish a court of justice that distinguishes between reason’s “groundless pretensions” and its “rightful claims” (*gerechten Ansprüchen*).<sup>14</sup>

My interpretation of the A Preface contends that this history shows Kant not only offering a political framework for understanding the structure of critical reason, as McQuillan and Møller argue, but grappling with the question of reason’s legitimate right to rule itself. I turn to these metaphors to think through what they reveal about Kant’s understanding of the philosophical and cultural context of his project. This article presents a reading of the first seven paragraphs of the *CPR*, supplemented by the argument in later parts of the work, passages from private notes and lectures written during and after its composition, and the occasional reference to later developments of Kant’s system. Section “Human Reason’s Peculiar Fate” discusses Kant’s opening sentence, which describes reason’s tendency to ask questions that transcend the bounds of experience—a tendency that drives the historical development of metaphysics. I then turn to the political history of metaphysics and analyze the various metaphysical regimes in section “Kant’s Political History of Metaphysics”. Section “Founding the Court of Reason” considers Kant’s founding of the court of reason, offering a summary of its results and inquiring into the source of its legitimacy. The conclusion suggests how this reading of the *CPR* can shed light on Kant’s political writings.

## 1. Human Reason’s Peculiar Fate

To understand the sense in which Kant’s critique of reason serves the aims of reason’s self-governance, it is necessary to examine in more detail his description of reason’s metaphysical drive, or its “lust for knowledge” (*Wißbegierde*), that has been a force behind the historical crisis to which Kant’s philosophy responds (*CPR* Axiii). The opening lines of the First Preface describe the enduring predicament of human reason that Kant’s critique claims to resolve.

Human reason [*Die menschlichen Vernunft*] has the peculiar fate [*das besondere Schicksal*] in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions that it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason. (*CPR* Avii)

<sup>12</sup>O’Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 9–10.

<sup>13</sup>J. Colin McQuillan, *The Very Idea of a Critique of Pure Reason* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 69.

<sup>14</sup>Møller, *Kant’s Tribunal of Reason*.

We are compelled to ask questions that we cannot answer, most fundamentally the three concerns of reason Kant argues to be beyond the bounds of human experience—the existence and character of freedom, immortality, and God.

This peculiar status of human reason arises from the fact that it combines finitude and embodiment with a faculty that longs for totality or the unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*). Kant refers to the human being as a “finite thinking being” and as “a limited rational being.”<sup>15</sup> Due to its finitude, human understanding is discursive: it gains knowledge only through the mediation of universal concepts and step-by-step reasoning. These universal concepts depend on human intuition or sensibility to supply their content. At the same time, the faculty of the understanding provides the form that shapes the sensible manifold into something intelligible (CPR A50/B74). Only through the combination of the spontaneity of the understanding and the receptive passivity of the sensibility can cognition arise (CPR A52/B76). But cognition and knowledge are limited, as Kant seeks to establish, to the sensible world of experience.

The highest faculty of reason, however, seeks out knowledge of the grounds of experience or cognition of objects unavailable to human sensibility or any other faculty. As Kant states in the second paragraph, reason begins its investigation of the world with “principles whose use is unavoidable in the course of experience.” With these principles, reason’s nature requires that it rise “ever higher, to more remote conditions” (CPR Avii). Reason demands a sufficient cause of all things until it leads to an ultimate cause of the whole of things. It soon comes to realize that the “questions never cease” and seeks refuge from the weight of these questions in “principles that overstep all possible use in experience.” Led by a drive to transcend its own capabilities, reason falls into “obscurity and contradictions,” or what Kant will later call dialectical illusion, and finds itself at a loss to discover the source of its errors (CPR Aviii). Kant understands human reason as desiring the transcendence offered by an unconditioned vantage point that it cannot attain, yet it cannot seem to find satisfaction without somehow possessing (or claiming to possess) this knowledge of the unconditioned.

Throughout the critical writings Kant describes reason as a faculty with desires or yearnings, ascribing an emotional or psychological state to reason’s relentless drive and the “fruitless expenditures of [its] powers.”<sup>16</sup> In the Second Introduction, Kant describes reason’s desire as a “natural predisposition (*metaphysica naturalis*).” Reason is not moved by “the mere vanity [*Eitelkeit*] of knowing it all” but rather it “inexorably pushes on, driven by its own need

<sup>15</sup>Yovel, *Kant’s Philosophical Revolution*, 7.

<sup>16</sup>Kant, CPJ 20:230n, in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Kant defines yearning as an “empty desire” for an object beyond our power. Such yearnings weaken the mind by “exhausting its powers.” He adds that “wisdom is obliged to set limits to this instinct” (ibid.).

[*eigenes Bedürfnis*] to such questions that cannot be answered by any experiential use of reason" (CPR B21). As a result of reason's unfulfilled need, the natural condition of reason is characterized by a lack of what it most desires. There is something of the classical notion of *eros* in Kant's account of reason. Yirmiyahu Yovel has noted that "the Kantian texts are studded with expressions that amount to a virtual *erotic glossary* of reason."<sup>17</sup> The preeminent example is Kant's claim that on account of the drive of our reason, "we will always return to metaphysics as to a beloved [*Geliebten*] from whom we have been estranged since reason, because essential ends are at issue here, must work without respite either for sound insight or for the destruction of good insights that are already at hand" (CPR A850/B878).

Kant's description of reason's desire, of course, is not identical with the Platonic notion of *eros*. Whereas Plato separates reason from *eros*, Kant portrays reason itself as desiring. This is not to mention the fact that Kant's account of reason's desire abstracts entirely from the concern for the beautiful. But like the account of philosophical *eros*, as presented in the *Symposium*, Kantian reason's erotic desire is bound up with its concern to possess the good things insofar as its interest is at stake in the most pressing metaphysical questions. These questions always revolve around the "essential ends" of reason and point to the concern for practical life underlying theoretical reason's lust for knowledge (CPR A850/B878).

Our practical concerns give rise to our theoretical desire to know the whole. Kant states in the *Metaphysik Mrongovius* lectures, delivered in the period of 1782–1783 just after the publication of the CPR, that "human understanding is also impelled by natural needs to know where all of its ends lead."<sup>18</sup> He continues: "It is not satisfied with what the sensible world delivers to it; rather it must know what the future has in store for it—whoever believes that everything ends in death must have a low concept of his life. These needs, to be acquainted with God and the other world, which are so closely connected with the interest of human reason, went beyond nature."<sup>19</sup> Kant seems to suggest here that our metaphysical longings arise from what we might hope regarding the fulfillment of reason's interest either in the future of this world or in the next. These longings are "natural" and "as old as reason."<sup>20</sup>

It is widely recognized that the account of reason's longing is central to the justification of Kant's critique and his account of the teleological structure of reason. Kristi Sweet argues that reason's demand for the unconditioned is the point of departure for both Kant's task of limiting theoretical reason's

<sup>17</sup>Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 16, emphasis original.

<sup>18</sup>Kant, *MMron* 29:757, in *Lectures on Metaphysics*, trans. Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup>*MMron* 29:757.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*



pretensions and for understanding the proper interests of practical reason. As such, it is key to understanding the organic unity of Kant's project.<sup>21</sup> Velkley speaks both of reason's theoretical desire and of Kant's discovery of the teleological structure of reason such that it is oriented by its practical ends and legislation.<sup>22</sup> This orientation toward the practical is present before Kant's critique of reason, albeit in a confused way. The desire for theoretical knowledge of unconditioned truths partly arises from the desire to know whether the conditions necessary for the fulfillment of our interests exist. In other words, reason's status as an end-setting and legislative faculty is behind the psychology of reason's desire.

And Kant, to be sure, distinguishes between reason's theoretical interests and its practical interests, but such distinctions emerge as a result of the self-examination of the tribunal of reason. The starting-point of Kant's critical philosophy is the recognition of the phenomenon of reason's longing. One task of the critical project is not simply to delineate the faculties of reason but to provide insight into the nature of this longing by articulating the proper *interests* of reason. This delineation begins in the Doctrine of Method where Kant, turning from the juridical metaphor, speaks of providing a "blueprint" for the architectonic of reason (*CPR* A707/B735). As Yovel points out, Kant even distinguishes the "metaphysical interest," "critical interest," and "architectonic interest" of theoretical reason.<sup>23</sup> However, Kant's discussion of reason's peculiar fate in the A Preface refers to the phenomenon of reason's desire as it appears to precritical reason. It is the panic to satisfy this undifferentiated longing, not yet put under critical self-examination, that drives the logic of Kant's political history of metaphysics.

For the purposes of the present discussion, then, it is enough to recognize Kant's claim that since human beings cannot escape the compulsive longings inherent in reason's interests, "a certain sort of metaphysics has actually been present in all human beings [*allen Menschen*] as soon as reason [*Vernunft*] has extended itself to speculation in them, and it will always remain there" (*CPR* B21). This fundamental experience constitutes the core of Kant's philosophical anthropology; it is a given fact that the critical system attempts to explain and a drive that it hopes to redirect. We are characterized by this drive to ask questions that we cannot answer and the *CPR* provides a transcendental account (that is, the conditions of the possibility) of this longing. Kant's understanding of the human being, of his relationship to the natural world, and of the task of philosophy all follow from the assumption that human reason naturally finds itself in a state of neediness.

<sup>21</sup>Kristi Sweet, *Kant on Practical Life: From Duty to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 21–35.

<sup>22</sup>Richard Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundations of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup>Yovel, *Kant's Philosophical Revolution*, 18.

This neediness not only characterizes human thought but also determines the nature of moral and political action. What reason most desires to know are those concerns that are inseparable from the question of how to lead a moral or good life. These questions must be tentatively answered for a person or people to live well and peacefully, which leads to the political problem of adjudicating between different conceptions of the good. Those making claims concerning the good have no common court of appeal in which they can settle their differences since the principles on which these claims rest “no longer recognize any touchstone of experience.” The theoretical dissatisfaction of human reason leads to “the battlefield [*Kampfplatz*] of those endless controversies called metaphysics” (CPR Aviii). This metaphor stresses the potential for violence inherent in the human being’s natural, precritical, and prejudicial situation. The precritical condition is, Kant will later claim, a metaphysical state of nature (CPR A751/B779–A752/B780).

The human being’s inability to live in a perennial state of theoretical dissatisfaction drives Kant’s story of the political regimes of metaphysics. Reason’s thwarted desire to know precisely what its limited powers preclude it from knowing leads to a spirited assertion of a right to rule. Each claim to rule attempts to respond to some need—rational or psychological—inherent in the human being’s peculiar status as a finite rational being. It is Kant’s task to show that we can escape the metaphysical state of nature only once there is proof of what can rightfully be possessed as knowledge by reason and once dogmatic claims about the good are shown to be no more than specious assertions or unjust claims of possession (CPR Bxv).

## 2. Kant’s Political History of Metaphysics

Before making the case for reason’s legitimate right to rule, Kant surveys the ruins of collapsed regimes and offers an account of why his historical moment gives rise to reason’s self-critique. Kant’s story begins by comparing the once-exalted position of metaphysics with its current pathetic state. The history begins:

There was a time when metaphysics was called the *queen* of all the sciences [*Wissenschaften*], and if the will be taken for the deed, it deserved this title of honor, on account of the preeminent importance of its object. Now, in accordance with the fashion of the age [*Modeton des Zeitalters*], the queen proves despised on all sides; and the matron, outcast and forsaken, mourns like Hecuba. *Modo maxima rerum, tot generis natisque potens—nunc trahor exul, inops.* (CPR Aviii–Aix).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Kant quotes from Hecuba’s speech in book 13 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “I was once the most powerful woman / in all the world; I was strong in my husband, my sons, and my daughters. / Now I’ve been torn from my loved ones’ graves and am



Metaphysics was once honored but for the wrong reasons. The preeminence of its subject matter alone is not enough to claim legitimate authority. There is some justification for the tragic condition of metaphysics, which while lamentable, may be understood as the deserved consequence of excessive pride. The fact that this original form of metaphysics is no longer powerful is, for Kant, a positive development, like the fall of any despotism. However, the tendency to despise metaphysics in accordance with the “fashion of the age” overreaches because it does not fully account for the metaphysical predisposition of reason.

On the one hand, the allusion to Hecuba underscores the impotence of modern metaphysics. Hecuba, the queen of Troy and wife of King Priam, was enslaved by the Achaeans after the fall of the city. Kant quotes from Ovid’s account of her fate which ends with Hecuba’s descent into madness through the grief of losing her children. Her grief makes her lose the capacity for rational speech and instead she begins barking like a dog.<sup>25</sup> If we are to take the allusion seriously, this account does not portend well for the fate of a precritical metaphysics. Hecuba’s fate might suggest reason’s descent into incomprehensibility and a proliferation of positions that, like a dog’s barks, possess meanings unavailable to ordinary human beings (see *CPR* B434). On the other hand, Hecuba’s grief gives way to rage before madness. After seeing her dead son’s body, Hecuba returns to Polymestor, the tyrant who killed him, and in her rage, gouges out his eyes. Only then does the rage of Hecuba give way to speechless sounds. Metaphysics, as Kant will assert only a few sentences later, cannot simply be cast aside. We cannot remain indifferent to its concerns without risk.

Even if one does not consider the ultimate fate of Hecuba, the way she mourns for her children suggests another analogy. Metaphysics, in its modern condition, is left to mourn for its offspring; it is powerless not only to rule but to ensure the continuation of its progeny.<sup>26</sup> Modern metaphysics cannot adequately provide a firm basis for modern science that is compatible with a system of morality. Accordingly, it is not the case that Kant’s primary concern is for the *theoretical* grounds of natural science and mathematics, but rather for its cultural grounds. The continued development of modern science threatens to undermine the cultural conditions that make the scientific examination of natural causes possible.

Kant’s history explains this fall of metaphysics from the queen of the sciences to a forsaken outcast. The narrative begins again at the start of the fourth paragraph:

In the beginning [*Anfänglich*], under the administration [*Verwaltung*] of the dogmatists, her rule [*Herrschaft*] was *despotic*. Yet because her legislation

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helplessly dragged / into exile.” Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 521–22.

<sup>25</sup>Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 13. See also Hyginus, *Fabulae* 243; Dante, *Inferno* 30.13–20.

<sup>26</sup>See *CPR* A794/B822 for Kant’s late allusion to Hecuba.

[*Gesetzgebung*] still retained traces of ancient barbarism [*der alten Barbarei*], this rule gradually degenerated through internal wars into complete *anarchy*; and the skeptics, a kind of nomad who abhor all permanent cultivation of the soil, shattered civil unity [*bürgerliche Vereinigung*] from time to time. (CPR A1x)

As with human beings in the state of nature, there is a natural desire for peace and security. Despotism in the realm of metaphysics fails to provide a settled ground for these questions owing to “traces of ancient barbarism.” It governs arbitrarily and without the rule of law. Kant later defines dogmatism as “the procedure of pure reason, *without an antecedent critique of its own capacity*” (CPR Bxxxv). Dogmatism is not aware of the limits of its rule and seeks to extend its power beyond the boundaries of its legitimacy.

The orderly rule of dogmatism is admirable for Kant, even if it has not inquired into the conditions of its authority. Kant’s hoped-for science of metaphysics must be dogmatic insofar as a science must “prove its conclusions strictly *a priori* from secure principles” (CPR Bxxxvi). The critique of reason is propaedeutic to a true dogmatism, an ordered rule by legitimate law grounded in the examination of the conditions of the possibility of human knowledge. The future science of metaphysics, resting on the solid grounds provided in the *First Critique*, will be “carried out systematically in accordance with the strictest requirement, hence according to scholastic rigor (and not in a popular way)” (ibid.). With this last caveat, Kant seeks to distinguish the critical examination of reason from skepticism and indifferentism, the movements in the history of metaphysics following dogmatism.

Returning to the narrative, one sees that different factions arise that rebel against the arbitrary and irrational rule of dogmatism by providing new claims for legitimate rule (that is, new answers to the questions concerning the status of God, freedom, and immortality). The competing claims made by schools of rival dogmatists result in a sort of anarchy. However, the nomadic skeptics present a threat of an altogether different kind. Kant writes in a private reflection that skepticism is a “principle adopted to break with dogmatism” for the mere sake of “toppling the persuasion of others.”<sup>27</sup> It is an “artificial” inclination arising from the “usurpation of dogmatism.”<sup>28</sup> And yet, it does not arise out of “stupid malice,” and dogmatism cannot complain about “the injustice of the resistance of the misologue.”<sup>29</sup>

Avoiding establishing any grounds on which to approach metaphysical questions, skepticism provides an unstable basis for addressing reason’s theoretical desires. The skeptic’s negative attitude toward “all permanent cultivation of the soil” fails to provide the necessary presuppositions from which one can begin an investigation or establish a common arena for debate

<sup>27</sup>Kant, *Notes* 18:294.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

(CPR Aix). Skepticism is, then, unsatisfactory on two counts: it fails to provide an adequate response to the human being's desire for metaphysical questions and it fails to provide the basis for politics—no “culture” can develop because all culture depends on cultivation or settlement. Taking up theoretical positions hypothetically but claiming no standard of argument or action to exist is akin politically to being a patriot today and a traitor tomorrow. There are no grounds (in two senses of the word) for debate. The skeptic's unwillingness to commit to a cultivated way of life makes even a true school of skepticism impossible (see CPR A761/B789).

Since there can be no civilization of skeptics, Kant's narrative returns to the dogmatists who always unsuccessfully try to rebuild in the likeness of their original kingdom: “But since there were fortunately only a few of [the skeptics], they could not prevent the dogmatists from continually attempting to rebuild though never according to a plan unanimously accepted among themselves.” The dogmatists are unable to rebuild not because they see no value in “cultivation” but rather because they resemble those early men at the Tower of Babel who had their language confounded so that they could not understand each other's speech. Unable to agree on a “unanimously accepted” plan, the new nondespotic dogmatists cannot solve the problem of conflicting accounts of the good (CPR Aix). The attempts to rebuild are never unified or in one place but instead are scattered about the earth. It seems from such a state of affairs that only a condition of war could follow, one where the rival dogmatists appeal not to the court of reason but to heaven's judgment.

Kant's history continues with the introduction of modern attempts to resolve the problem of metaphysics, including the promising but incomplete epistemology of John Locke. Kant writes: “Once in recent times it even seemed as though an end would be put to all these controversies, and the lawfulness of all competing claims would be completely decided, through a certain *physiology* of the human understanding (by the famous Locke).” By tracing the origins of metaphysics back to the senses, to “the rabble of common experience,” Locke seems to have rendered metaphysics' right to rule suspicious (CPR Aix). Kant claims that Locke reduces reason to the body and understands rational concepts in terms of reflections or extensions of the empirical (CPR A271/B327). In other words, Locke does not separate, as Kant does, the concepts of the understanding from the intuitions of sensibility but instead derives all of rationality from experience. However, he extends these principles so far as to “assert that one can prove the existence of God and the immortality of the soul (though both objects lie entirely outside the bounds of possible experience) just as self-evidently as any mathematical theorem” (CPR A854/B882). Claiming to settle metaphysical disputes by appealing only to what can be known through experience, Locke still overreaches and makes unlawful claims about unknowable objects. To extend Kant's metaphor, Locke's empiricism seeks to ground its legitimacy in the democratic authority of experience, but it transforms into a democratic despotism because of the lack of limiting lawful procedures. Thus, despite the influence of Locke's democratic epistemology, Kant argues that

metaphysics after Locke falls back into the old “worm-eaten” polemics of dogmatism. The former queen “asserted her claims” because, as Kant adds, Locke’s “genealogy was attributed to her falsely” (CPR Ax). A legitimate source of sovereignty is found not in the rabble of common experience, but in something far nobler, namely, the transcendental structure of reason.

The shortcomings of Locke’s empiricism combined with a kind of historical exhaustion regarding the problem of metaphysics lead to what Kant calls indifferentism, a threat to the scientific culture of modern Europe.

Now after all paths [*Wege*] (as we persuade ourselves) have been tried in vain, what rules [*herrscht*] is tedium and complete *indifferentism*, the mother of chaos and night in the sciences, but at the same time also the origin, or at least prelude [*Vorspiel*] of their incipient transformation and enlightenment [*Umschaffung und Aufklärung*], when through ill-applied effort they have become obscure, confused, and useless. (CPR Ax)

With the use of “indifferentism,” Kant signifies a variety of reactions within the context of modern thought to the unresolvable burdens of metaphysical questions. Kant likely has in mind such intellectual movements as the Scottish school of common sense or the philosophes of the French Enlightenment—best represented for Kant by David Hume and Voltaire (one could add Kant’s interlocutor Moses Mendelssohn). Due to a general contempt for metaphysics that arises from a historical exhaustion with the vacillation between dogmatism and skepticism, these thinkers and movements reject metaphysics and turn away from reason’s most pressing questions. Yet they seek to hold on to the advances of modern science even as they reject any metaphysical principles on which the method might be based. The indifferentists avoid the possibility that the conclusions reached by the scientific mind might undermine the conditions of morality by themselves appealing to a “popular style” and a widely held contempt for metaphysics (CPR Ax).<sup>30</sup>

The moral decadence arising from the advancement of the arts and sciences, as diagnosed so thoroughly by Rousseau, finds its metaphysical parallel in the danger of indifferentism, which appears alongside the softening effects of modern civilization and its “ripened *power of judgment*” (CPR Axi). It is no accident that indifferentism “occurs amid the flourishing of all sciences,” even if it is directed towards those sciences “we could least do without” (CPR Ax).<sup>31</sup> As a phenomenon unique to modern scientific culture, it describes the moral psychology of a materialist perspective in which the world has become, to borrow an anachronistic term, disenchanted. The indifferentist’s distrust of reason is a product of the thoughtfulness of the modern age (CPR Axi).

<sup>30</sup>Kant makes reference to the public’s contempt for metaphysics throughout the CPR (see Aviii and A844/B872).

<sup>31</sup>Kant is not referring here to the natural sciences or mathematics, since in the only footnote in the A Preface he notes that “mathematics, physics, etc.” maintain “their reputation for well-groundedness, and in the case of natural science, even surpass it” (Axi n.). I suggest that he refers here to the possibility of a “science of metaphysics.”

It is distinct from previous forms of skepticism insofar as its stingy epistemology, which rests on the mistrust of nature inherent in the modern scientific method, leads to a complete turning away from metaphysical speculation.

Encouraged by the hopes and successes of the early Enlightenment, the modern philosopher hopes to apply the universal mathematical method to metaphysics and discover knowledge beyond the sphere of experience. But when such hopes are unfulfilled, many who had cultivated their power of judgment fall, perhaps after a bout of despair, into resignation or even contempt toward metaphysical questions. They turn toward a view of the world that seeks to expunge metaphysical assumptions from human reason. Under the influence of modern civilization's ripened judgment, the indifferentist turns his gaze toward the unsatisfactory nature of scholastic language and its seeming inability to offer anything but "illusory knowledge" (CPR Axi).

Indifferentism leads to a mistrust of speech in matters of metaphysics, morality, and politics that is more radical and thoroughgoing than the mistrust of speech found in ancient forms of skepticism. The indifferentist is the modern embodiment of the threat of misology. In the *Groundwork*, Kant states that a "certain degree of misology, i.e. hatred of reason" arises in those who, for "the purpose of enjoying life," have cultivated reason through the luxury of the arts and sciences (a "luxury of the understanding"), but who have grown dissatisfied when this same cultivation of reason burdens them with unanswerable questions.<sup>32</sup> Like the indifferentists, these cultivated misologists seek refuge in common understanding and even "envy the more common run of people."<sup>33</sup> These indifferentists and misologists envy the common man not because they believe what the common man believes but because they are exhausted by the hardships of thought. Their refined atheism or skeptical agnosticism even undermines common morality and common sense. Kant stresses that the phenomenon of indifferentism is a novel development in the history of metaphysics. As an effort to deny the metaphysical predisposition, it is distinct from the earlier forms of dogmatism and skepticism. Dogmatism and skepticism are natural, if misguided, responses to human reason's pursuit of knowledge insofar as both positions are guided by the desire to possess truth. Indifferentism, on the other hand, tries to opt out of metaphysics altogether and is a result of modern civilization's distance from reason's natural instincts.

Kant's institution of the court of reason will provide a defense of reason both for the sake of securing the foundations of science and for the sake of showing such a foundation to be compatible with morality. This depends on first showing that the indifferentist's misology stems from deflated hopes regarding the possible satisfaction of reason's desire. Kant argues that one cannot abstain from the urge that compels reason to seek transcendence: "For it is pointless to affect *indifference* with respect to such inquiries, to whose object human nature

<sup>32</sup>Kant, *Groundwork* 4:395–96, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

[*menschlichen Natur*] cannot be indifferent." Nor can indifferentists even express themselves consistently as indifferentists, for "to the extent that they think anything at all, [they] always unavoidably fall back into metaphysical assertions" (CPR Axi). Tactics of refusal cannot quench the natural longing of reason. And the misology of the indifferentist betrays him insofar as he must express himself to others and make ethical and practical claims which, according to Kant, are bound up with the most pressing metaphysical concerns. His life as a finite being, as a creature of need, makes the indifferentist dependent on others and the political community and, therefore, on language and the common signs in which are embedded metaphysical presuppositions. Indifferentism promises peace by turning away from metaphysics, but this proves to be a false peace. There can be no coherent view of political life based on the antimetaphysical stance of the indifferentist, even as he falls "unavoidably" into making "metaphysical assertions" (CPR Ax). Metaphysics, like Hecuba returning to gouge out the eyes of Polymestor, comes roaring back in one form or another. The indifferentist's loss of sight regarding the questions of metaphysics causes a distorted view of practical life.

At the same time, Kant is clear that this distinctly modern phenomenon points to the proper conditions for the critical project. Despite both the dangers and the logical inconsistencies of indifferentism, it is a phenomenon "deserving of attention and reflection" (CPR Axi). The same "ripened power of judgment" that provides a necessary condition for the phenomenon of indifferentism reveals the need for a critique of reason insofar as it fosters the inclination to attend carefully to language. More than that, however, the indifferentist's skepticism toward all available metaphysical claims reveals the barrenness of traditional metaphysics. Indifferentism as a phenomenon shows that all other paths are closed. Kant's age is the "genuine age of criticism" partly because it is an age in which indifferentism could arise. Even religion and legislation, which seek to hide behind their holiness and majesty respectively, cannot be exempt from the true "fashion of the age," namely, criticism (CPR Axi n.).

Just as indifferentism brings to light that Kant's age is the genuine age of criticism in which all things must be examined, it also points to the public task of the new critical philosophy. Kant asserts that criticism entails a "free and public examination" of the grounds of a subject (CPR Axi n.). In a sense, indifferentism is the consequence of an age in which the most impious tendencies of philosophical questioning are voiced openly. That is to say, indifferentism, especially insofar as it is expressed in a popular style, is just as much a consequence of the hopes of widespread enlightenment as of its antimetaphysical worldview. The danger indifferentism poses not only to the continued development of the sciences but to a secure foundation for moral life underscores these civic effects of modern philosophy. The most dangerous tendencies of modern philosophy not only open up the question of the human being and his place in the world, but influence philosophy's responsibility for promoting the public good.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup>See Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason*, xii–xiii.



Kant stakes the superiority of the critical system on his ability to see a new path beyond the impasses of the age. Thus, the unique skepticism brought forth by modern science opens up the possibility that “reason should take on anew the most difficult of all its tasks, that of self-knowledge [*Selbsterkenntnis*]” (CPR Axi). In the B Preface, Kant claims that such self-knowledge, when publicly presented, will respond to the threats indifferentism makes to morality, religion, and the law: “criticism puts an end for all future time to objections against morality and religion in a *Socratic* way, namely by the clearest proof of the ignorance of the opponents” (CPR Bxxxi). The beginnings of this self-knowledge are found in a proper appraisal and recognition of reason’s peculiar fate and the enduring presence of a metaphysical longing toward which we cannot remain indifferent. In sum, the fashion of the age, as the age of ripened judgment and criticism, obscures the central place of metaphysical concerns in human life, as the ripened judgment of the modern mind tends to subject all things to criticism without being able to build anew. But the modern fashion turns out to be a gift of historical fate. The specter of indifferentism opens up new possibilities and insight into the nature and character of human reason. It raises the question of the limits of human knowledge and provides the conditions for Kant’s project of establishing a court of reason.

### 3. Founding the Court of Reason

We are now at the pivotal point in the history of metaphysics. Kant’s task is to “institute a court of justice [*Gerichtshof*], by which reason may secure its rightful claims [*gerechten Ansprüchen*] while dismissing all its groundless [*grundlose*] pretensions” (CPR Axii). This section summarizes the results of the court of reason and how it claims to address reason’s metaphysical desire by turning to a brief discussion of the transcendental deduction and the transcendental dialectic, which together constitute the decisions handed down by the court of reason with respect to what reason can rightfully claim to know. We will then turn to questions surrounding the legitimacy of Kant’s establishment of such a court and argue that the historical narrative of the A Preface clarifies Kant’s understanding of the source of the court of reason’s legitimacy. Accordingly, such an inquiry sheds further light on the political project of the critical philosophy.

The court of reason is the “*critique of pure reason itself*.” It establishes the lawful process by which one can come into possession of knowledge. It governs not by mere “decrees [*Machtsprüche*] but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws [*ewigen und unwandelbaren Gesetzen*]” (CPR Axii). What comes to rule in the metaphysical realm is not the arbitrary will of a despot but a law of a universal reason before which all are equal. The critique of reason establishes a “state of law” that brings “due process” to these fundamental disputes (CPR A751/B779–A752/B780; cf. *Notes* 18:294). Following Kant’s political narrative to its conclusion, the critical system appears to be something akin

to a republic, governed by equal members through a debate structured by the rule of law.<sup>35</sup>

Kant puts reason and its metaphysical predisposition on the witness stand to test the legitimacy of its claims. He calls the investigation into what human cognition has a right to claim as knowledge deductions, by which Kant means not a logical proof but a kind of legal argument that proves the right of possession.<sup>36</sup>

Jurists, when they speak of entitlements and claims [*Befugnissen und Anmaßungen*], distinguish in legal matters between questions of what is lawful [*Rechters*] (*quid juris*) and that which concerns the fact (*quid facti*), and since they demand proof of both, they call the first, that which is to establish the entitlement [*Befugniß*] or the legal claim [*Rechtsanspruch*], the deduction. (CPR A84/B116)

The court of reason seeks out the question of *quid juris* and, by doing so, settles all future disputes over metaphysical property. Møller shows that deductions were “writings determined for publication and that the publication of deductions also served the purpose of avoiding future disputes.”<sup>37</sup> Kant intends the publication of the *CPR* to resolve all future metaphysical and epistemological disputes over rightful possession.

To provide an all-too-brief overview of the results of the court of reason, one could say that the most pivotal moments of the *CPR* deal with two deductions—one dealing with the faculty of the understanding, which succeeds, and one that deals with reason, which fails. Kant finds that we have a right to make claims of knowledge about the realm of appearances because of his proof that the understanding makes a lawful use of the categories. In contrast, reason claims to possess too much and fails to provide proof for any of its theoretical possessions. The result is that Kant secures the validity of our scientific knowledge of nature while humiliating reason by showing the pretenses of its assertions of theoretical knowledge. This humiliation is salutary, however, because it clears the ground for reason’s practical activity.

We turn first to the results of Kant’s deduction of the categories.<sup>38</sup> As discursive and not intuitive, the understanding does not grasp anything directly but unifies the particulars given by perception. This act of synthesis underlies all of our perception and thinking. It is that which most defines

<sup>35</sup>See McQuillan, *The Very Idea*, 69–70; O’Neill *Constructions of Reason*, 17–20.

<sup>36</sup>Henrich, “Kant’s Notion”; see also Shell, “Kant’s Theory of Property,” 80–81.

<sup>37</sup>Sofie Møller, “The Court of Reason in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*,” *Kant-Studien* 104, no. 3 (2013): 320.

<sup>38</sup>Two deductions occur in what is called the Transcendental Analytic, which concerns the faculty of the understanding. The first deduction is the so-called metaphysical deduction and shows how the categories of the understanding are deduced from forms of judgment. The second is the transcendental deduction, discussed here, and it argues that the categories have objective validity.

human cognition, for “among all representations *combination* [*Verbindung*] is the only one that is not given through objects but can be executed only by the subject itself since it is an act of its self-activity [*Selbsttätigkeit*]” (CPR B130). As an act of its self-activity, synthesis reveals the freedom of the subject. This self-activity indicative of the freedom of the subject is, in turn, related to that which stands at the origin of the understanding, namely, self-consciousness (CPR B134). The unity imposed on the objects of the manifold derives, Kant argues in one of the most complex and fraught sections of the *CPR*, from the “I think” that accompanies any representation. With this concept, known as the “transcendental unity of apperception,” Kant argues that the unity of self-consciousness unifies the diversity of the sensible manifold insofar as all of the phenomena encountered belong to the same subject—that is, can accompany the same “I think.”<sup>39</sup> Objective knowledge (knowledge of appearances or nature) is secured and becomes our rightful possession through the spontaneous and self-constituting activity of the subject.

The subject’s activity of self-constitution and legislation entices it toward the assertion of greater power. As self-conscious and self-constituting, the human subject is the part of nature that in some way transcends nature, and yet, despite the radical character of Kant’s account of subjectivity, both reason and the understanding are limited in that they cannot create the matter they investigate (CPR A719/B748). The identity of the subject makes possible the unity of the objective world; yet, the unity of the manifold, in turn, allows the subject to constitute itself and assert its identity. Human cognition is possible only when the passive and active elements are both present (A51/B75–A52/B76). Accordingly, human cognition’s dependence on the manifold presented by sensibility conditions its spontaneous activity. The understanding has as the condition of its activity the givenness of the world; and the faculty of reason depends, in turn, on the categories provided to it by the understanding. At the same time, the spontaneity of human reason seeks a transcendence of the given. Driven by its metaphysical predisposition, reason wants both to create the matter given to it and to impose the form on the manifold. The conflict that motivates the drama of the entire work is once again the tension between reason’s desire for unconditioned knowledge and our existence as limited beings of need.

It is this conflict that explains what Møller calls the failed deduction of the Transcendental Dialectic, which deals with the claims of reason.<sup>40</sup> This deduction takes up the “dialectical illusions” that reason falls into by examining the antinomies of reason.<sup>41</sup> Constituted by two mutually exclusive but logically

<sup>39</sup>The “transcendental unity of apperception” is the key to the Transcendental Deduction (CPR B132–B141). For a helpful interpretation of Kant’s argument, see Yovel, *Kant’s Philosophical Revolution*, 45–51.

<sup>40</sup>Møller, “The Court of Reason,” 314.

<sup>41</sup>The antinomies take up the finitude or infinite nature of space and time, the existence or nonexistence of simple parts, the conflict between spontaneity and

sound arguments, the antinomies delineate the bounds of reason. One side, the thesis, posits the totalizing claims of the dogmatist; it argues that the basis of our conditioned experience is an unconditioned first principle or cause. The antithesis, on the other hand, reflects the stance of empiricism and claims that no such unconditioned principle is accessible through our experience and thereby rejects it as a concept empty of meaning (CPR A466/B494). Relying on the image of the court, Kant shows that reason makes a legal case for both sides of the argument. Reason is plaintiff, witness, and judge. However, Kant throws both cases out on the grounds of illegitimacy; both thesis and antithesis make claims they had no right to make. Kant resolves each antinomy by appealing to the distinction between a thing-in-itself and an appearance. Things-in-themselves, however, are not objects of knowledge insofar as the lower faculties cannot represent them. They are unconditioned and unknowable. Appearances, on the other hand, are conditioned and knowable. All objective knowledge is knowledge of appearances. The source of reason's conflicting claims is that it has confused appearances with things-in-themselves; it collapses the distinction between conditioned objects of experience and the unconditioned ideas of reason.

The practical result of Kant's resolution of the antinomies is a humbling of reason that provides an education in the limits of our theoretical desires (CPR A795/B823). Such an education—or discipline—is the first step toward instituting a new metaphysical consensus. It clears the ground for practical reason's regulatory function of positing ideas and ideals, which can guide and support moral life, but which cannot constitute knowledge. Indeed, the practical sphere is left as "the only path that still remains to [pure reason]" if it hopes to draw near those interests for which it has an "unquenchable desire" (CPR A796/B824). Reason's drive to move beyond the bounds of experience can only be satisfied in practical reason's pursuit of the ends it sets (see *Groundwork* 4:396). The independent status of the self-constituting subject authorizes reason's practical legislation and postulations. The human being comes to be understood in light of his striving to realize his posited ideals in which he seeks to overcome the limitations of his given nature.

Reason's theoretical concern for God, freedom, and immortality already reveals its practical orientation. Whether or not we can come to know these things, we have the right to assert their existence to meet the needs and interests of practical reason. Citing a maxim of Roman law, *melior est conditio possidentis* ("The condition of the possessor is better"), Kant states that reason can presume in its practical use, "as it were in an emergency," what surpasses the bounds of theoretical reason. There is legitimacy in the asserting as a "practically necessary presupposition" those concepts that support morality,

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determinism, and the existence or nonexistence of a being that is absolute and necessary as a cause of the universe.

especially against those who would seek to undermine practical reason through specious arguments. Such hypotheses are allowed “only as weapons of war, not for grounding a right but only for defending it” (CPR A777/B805). This points to one sense of the meaning of Kant’s famous claim that he “denied knowledge in order to make room for faith” (CPR Bxxx).

One could say that the court of reason allows the human being to respond to his thwarted desires in a spirited manner by granting him the right to reshape nature in light of regulative ideas of reason and claim satisfactions denied him in his natural state. In some sense, the establishment of a new kind of philosophical legislation arises from Kant’s recognition of the abiding fact of human neediness and nature’s silence with respect to our needs. However, this summary of the process and result of the court of reason does not make clear where Kant finds the authority to establish this legal procedure. In light of the narrative presented in the A Preface, and in light of Kant’s later appeal to a state of emergency, one suggestion presents itself: the court of reason depends on an extralegal act warranted by the historical exhaustion of reason and the emergency that the threat of indifferentism poses to the moral prospects of scientific civilization.

Other commentators have aptly brought out the problematic nature of Kant’s establishment of the critical law. Møller, for example, discusses this problem of the law’s legitimacy in her discussion of what she calls “Herder’s dilemma,” which raises the question of how reason can be judge and defendant in its own case. She argues that Kant secures the legitimate foundations for the court of reason in the process of its juridical decisions. This solution, however, relies on too great a distinction between the political and the legal and does not adequately explain, in my view, the transition from the precritical state of nature to the authoritative court of reason.<sup>42</sup> Raoni Padui, on the other hand, reads the “sovereignty” of the Kantian subject in light of twentieth-century theories of the state of exception. He states that Kant’s attempt to “secure the legality of reason’s self-critique is only arrived at through a detour into a careful articulation of the paradoxes of the limits of law and the state of exception.”<sup>43</sup> Padui reads the Kantian system as resting on an aporetic awareness of the “problematic nature of law,” and he credits the depth of the Kantian system, in part, to its awareness of such fundamental philosophical problems.<sup>44</sup> However, without a clear source of legitimate grounds for an authoritative law one might be led from Padui’s reading to Stanley Rosen’s reading of the Kantian project as ushering in a new form of

<sup>42</sup>Møller, *Kant’s Tribunal of Reason*, 2–3, 145–51.

<sup>43</sup>Raoni Padui, “Homo Kantius: Sovereign Subject and Bare Thing,” *Philosophy Today* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 121. Padui even suggests that the awareness of this problem by Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt may be traced back to this Kantian formulation of the problem insofar as both thinkers were responding to the Neo-Kantian tradition.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

postmodern nihilism that replaces genuine philosophical inquiry with a rhetorical project that rests on an act of the will.<sup>45</sup> Rosen's argument, however, largely abstracts from Kant's account of reason's desire and thereby fails to consider the full argument for the priority of the practical.

The narrative of the A Preface as an apology for the system offers a significant clue into Kant's understanding of the problem of providing for the critical law's foundations. It is important to recall that the work begins with an appeal to fate, that is, a recognition of the historical contingency of reason's discovery of self-knowledge. The emergence of the crisis of indifferentism gives rise to the possible conditions of reason's self-critique. This given experience provides Kant not only with the proof that all other attempts to secure metaphysical knowledge have failed, but with an insight into the nature of reason. Kant becomes aware, unlike others before him, that the metaphysical drive is bound up with our concern for the practical, which allows him to posit, in the language of the B Preface, the Copernican hypothesis of reorienting our investigation of human cognition. Considering the question of legitimacy in light of the political history of the A Preface points to Kant's articulation of the peculiar fate of human reason and its relation to this historical account. Kant's self-examination of reason begins with the awareness of a given fact. Just as the ethical writings undertake the project of examining the conditions of the possibility of human freedom, the *CPR* takes up the conditions of the possibility of reason's desire.

In one sense, it is correct that, as O'Neill writes, Kant grounds his tribunal in the claim that "practical uses of reason are more fundamental than theoretical uses."<sup>46</sup> But such a claim must be considered in light of the more fundamental account of human neediness entailed in Kant's analysis of reason's peculiar fate. The transcendental analysis of the dialectic between human neediness and human longing brings out the characteristic features of human reason. Reason's destructive desire to surpass the limits of its own capacities brings to light the necessity of the law. One might suppose that Kant's own reliance on historical fate is a testament to the limitations of theoretical reason.

In sum, the legitimacy of Kant's lawful rule of reason can be found partly in its ability to resolve the problems arising from reason's metaphysical predisposition. Indeed, Kant claims to have resolved these questions to "reason's full satisfaction" (*CPR* Axiii). It is by taking the "peculiar fate" of reason as the experiential starting point in the investigation of metaphysics that Kant is able to provide a reasonable solution to these questions. That is, Kant can address and discipline reason's desires by first understanding their source and the causes of reason's impotence. At the same time, the establishment of the court of reason is an investigation into the structure of reason for the sake

<sup>45</sup>Stanley Rosen, "Transcendental Ambiguity: The Rhetoric of the Enlightenment," in *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 19–49.

<sup>46</sup>O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 29.



of chastening the “dogmatically enthusiastic lust for knowledge” that otherwise causes rampant confusion, dissension, and error (ibid.). Expressed in another idiom, Kant’s self-examination of reason is an exercise in the study of the human soul for the sake of moderating its theoretical longings. The past failures in metaphysics have failed to grasp that the end of reason is practical legislation and the highest aim of philosophy is the defense of morality. The philosopher, in other words, is the legislator of the human soul who receives the authority for this legislation from the neediness of reason (see *CPR* A839/B867).

### Conclusion

This article has argued that the A Preface serves as a justification for Kant’s introduction of a new philosophical method and provides remarkable insight into the aims and motives of the critical philosophy. It is no accident that such an apology takes the form of a political history. As O’Neill writes, Kant “sees the problems of cognitive and political order as arising in one and the same context.”<sup>47</sup> The justification of the establishment of the court of reason relies on a historical metaphysical crisis that surfaces in the civic realm. From this reading of the A Preface, one can begin to construct an interpretation that understands the *First Critique* as a central text of Kant’s political philosophy and as an act of philosophical legislation that intervenes in a moment of crisis to establish the foundations for a new moral and political culture.

While other commentators have argued that the *CPR* is foundational to Kant’s political thought or have teased out the political implications within it, I have argued that the *CPR* is an act of philosophical legislation in response to a civilizational crisis. It is in a very broad sense a political act insofar as it is Kant’s attempt to come to the defense of commonsense morality through an intervention in philosophical culture. By securing a metaphysical regime structured around established methods of inquiry and the due process of a lawful reason, Kant seeks to tame the destructive tendencies of reason’s desire and, by moderating its hopes, offer support for commonsense morality in light of the various cultural and theoretical challenges posed by the advancement of modern science and the propagation of materialist philosophies. At the very least, such an interpretation gives us even greater clarity regarding the significance of the political and legal metaphors of the *First Critique* insofar as they bring out Kant’s understanding of the public task of the critical philosophy.

My interpretation cannot be completely established without a more complete reading of the *CPR*, and the Doctrine of Method in particular. But this reading of the A Preface offers a way of approaching the arguments of the

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 16.

*CPR* that gives due attention to the dramatic and historical context as Kant presents it. Even this relatively narrow focus on the A Preface allows us to come to Kant's explicitly political writings, those that concern the doctrine of rights and the idea of progress, with new insights regarding their immediate rhetorical and political purposes. His political theory falls prey to the charge of naive moralism, but such objections often overlook the possibility that grasping the full significance of his political teaching requires some awareness of his account of the destructive tendencies of reason's desire. Kant's account shows that a comprehensive account of political life and the conditions for civil order requires that one take into account the moral demands and practical needs natural to reason. The argument for such an account first emerges in the political history of metaphysics, which points the way to the role of the critical philosophy in responding to the compulsions of reason, defending the moral viewpoint, and bringing "perpetual peace" to the battlefield of metaphysics (*CPR* A752/B780).

That Kant thinks he achieves a decisive victory on the battlefield of metaphysics is made clear by his later references in the *CPR* and beyond to this framing history.<sup>48</sup> In one particularly revealing example late in the Doctrine of Method, he recalls the A Preface by alluding to the fallen queen of Troy for a second time. He quotes Virgil's Hecuba to address those who have doubts about the critical system after the resolution of the antinomies: *non defensoribus istis tempus eget* (The time does not need these defenses) (*CPR* A794/B822).<sup>49</sup> Hecuba speaks this line to Priam as the Greeks are sacking their city; her suggestion is that it is now futile for Priam to act. Kant subverts the meaning of the quote, making the phrase not one of defeat but one of triumph. It is futile to attack the new citadel of reason, the critical system. Hecuba, the once-forsaken queen, now serves as a herald for the coming peace. If we recall the broader context of Hecuba's admonishment, we are reminded not just of the fall of Troy, but of the escaped hero who established the foundations for a republican empire with universal ambitions. Only after the collapse of the old city can a new empire be erected on new grounds that overshadows its predecessor in strength and endurance. The *Critique of Pure Reason* tells the story of a warring world and the heroic legislator who brings peace.

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<sup>48</sup>See *CPR* A707/B735, A752/B780, A832/B860, A840/B868; see also *Proclamation* 8:415–17.

<sup>49</sup>Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.5.