

# ***Some Pragmatic Themes in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason***

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## **Abstract**

Kant's philosophy is often read in opposition to pragmatist standpoints and there are obviously strong reasons to do so. However, it would be a mistake to propose a rigid division between pragmatism and Kant on the basis of a superficial reading of the latter. Thus, the present paper has two main purposes: 1) to show that widespread criticisms of Kant are wrong and misleading, 2) to highlight some pragmatic aspects in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Concerning point 1), the paper argues that Kant's a priori method in the first Critique is not the rationalistic foundational procedure that it is often supposed to be. Moreover, the paper shows that the concept of a thing in itself can be read in a less problematic way with respect to usual interpretations.

Concerning point 2), I show how Kant's *Refutation of Idealism* is similar to the pragmatists' refutation of cartesianism. This section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* suggests an alternative method for philosophical inquiry that has some points of connection with pragmatism. Then, I point out how Kant's categories are fallible and context-dependent when they are applied to actual experience. Finally, I show how Kant identifies some principles to account for processes of knowledge development in the *Dialectic of Pure Reason* and in the *Doctrine of Method*.

## **1. Introduction**

With his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant reacted to the philosophical debate of his time, introducing what he saw as a completely new perspective in philosophy: a perspective that he called "transcendental idealism" and that he equated to a Copernican revolution in philosophy. Since its publication, this book has been interpreted in a multiplicity of ways: it has alternatively been regarded as proposing a set of incoherent doctrines,<sup>1</sup> or as being a consistent philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Kemp Smith, *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Macmillan, 1918; Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

standpoint ;<sup>2</sup> as endorsing a “Berkeleyan” phenomenalism,<sup>3</sup> or as proposing a viable empirical realism .<sup>4</sup>

Even though pragmatists have very different views on Kant, they all share a common judgment on the distance between their approaches from any kind of transcendental method, including the Kantian one. In this paper I do not want to propose a new and extravagant interpretation to the already vast amount of Kant secondary literature, stressing that Kant was a pragmatist. Kant was a 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and his problems were not the same as those that the fathers of American pragmatism were facing between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, Kant stresses:

As far as *certainty* is concerned, I have myself pronounced the judgment that in this kind of inquiry it is in no way allowed to *hold opinions*, and that anything that even looks like a hypothesis is a forbidden commodity, which should not be put up for sale even at the lowest price but must be confiscated as soon as it is discovered. For every cognition that is supposed to be certain *a priori* proclaims that it wants to be held for absolutely necessary, and even more is this true of a determination of all pure cognitions a priori, which is to be the standard and thus even the example of all apodictic (philosophical) certainty (KrV, A xv).

Thus, in contrast to the fallibilism advocated by many pragmatists, Kant wanted to reach apodictic certainty. We cannot neglect this fact when looking for some pragmatic themes in Kant’s first Critique. However, it would be a mistake to propose a rigid division between pragmatism and Kant on the basis of a superficial reading of the latter. In fact, many criticisms that are often directed against Kant, both from Kantian and pragmatist scholars, are misleading or wrong. Moreover, in Kant’s own writings it is possible to find insights that can be relevant from a pragmatist standpoint.

Thus, the present paper has two main purposes:

- 1) To show that widespread criticisms of Kant are wrong and misleading,
- 2) To highlight some pragmatic aspects in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1983; Graham Bird, *The Revolutionary Kant: A Commentary on the Critique of Pure Reason*, La Salle: Open Court, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Methuen, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> Gerold Prauss, *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*, Bonn: Robinson, 1974.

Concerning point 1), I will focus on Kant's synthetic method and illustrate how it is not the rationalistic procedure that it is often supposed to be. Moreover, I will analyze the concept of a thing in itself, one of the pragmatists' preferred target, and show that it can be coherently read in a pragmatic framework. As to point 2), I will focus on Kant's anticartesianism in the *Refutation of Idealism*. I will show some similarities with the pragmatists' anticartesian stance. I will also point out how Kant's categories are dependent on the context for their applicability to actual experience and how Kant proposes a teleological and dynamical picture of the evolution of thought.

## 2. Some Supposedly Problematic Aspects of Kant's Philosophy

### 2.1. Kant's Synthetic Method

One of the common reasons that lies at the basis of the pragmatists' criticisms of Kant is his endorsement of the a priori method. As is well known, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant undertook an a priori survey of our experience and knowledge. He claimed that this survey was able to identify some a priori conditions of knowledge and experience. Kant carried out this task by means of some "deductions", the most famous of which is the transcendental deduction of the categories. These claims suggest that Kant was proposing a rationalistic procedure in which some propositions concerning the nature of objects are obtained by means of a strictly logical argument based on some supposedly indubitable premises. This is the view shared by many pragmatists in their criticisms of Kant. It is Kant himself who supports this view on his method when he distinguishes between an *analytic* and a *synthetic* method, claiming that he used the latter in the *Critique*. Kant draws this famous distinction in the *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, he stresses:

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* I worked on this question *synthetically*, namely by inquiring within pure reason itself, and seeking to determine within this source both the elements and the laws of its pure use, according to principles. This work is difficult and requires a resolute reader to think himself little by little into a system that takes no foundation as given except reason itself, and that therefore tries to develop cognition out of its original seeds without relying on any fact whatever. *Prolegomena* should by contrast be preparatory exercises; they ought more to indicate what needs to be done in order to bring a science into existence if possible, than to present the science itself. They must therefore rely on something already known

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<sup>5</sup> The distinction between a synthetic and an analytic method is connected with, but independent from, the distinction between synthetic a priori judgments and analytic judgments. I will not address this issue in this paper. I just want to notice that, as the *Prolegomena* show, the analytic method can be used to inquire into some synthetic a priori judgments.

to be dependable, from which we can go forward with confidence and ascend to the sources, which are not yet known, and whose discovery not only will explain what is known already, but will also exhibit an area with many cognitions that all arise from these same sources. The methodological procedure of prolegomena, and especially of those that are to prepare for a future metaphysics, will therefore be *analytic* (Prol. 25-6).

This distinction is paralleled in the *Jäsche Logic*, where Kant states:

*Analytic* is opposed to *synthetic* method. The former begins with the conditioned and grounded and proceeds to principles (*a principiatis ad principia*), while the latter goes from principles to consequences or from the simple to the composite. The former could also be called *regressive*, as the latter could *progressive* (L 639).

Following these statements, it seems that Kant's method in the first Critique should consist in a deduction of synthetic a priori truths concerning the nature of objects from a set of a priori established premises. Kant does not tell what we have to consider as premises here. These a priori premises could be the categories, Kant's table of the forms of judgments or transcendental apperception. Anyway, according to a widespread idea on Kant's project, Kant had to deduce from these premises some truths concerning the existence and nature of objects. In so doing, Kant's first Critique was nothing but a new attempt to resolve a problem that had been affecting modern philosophy since Descartes advanced his absolute doubt on our knowledge. Thus, according to this view, Kant was proposing a rationalistic strategy, based solely on a priori knowledge, in order to provide a foundation for our every-day and scientific knowledge of objects. To accomplish this aim he had to ignore any belief about empirical objects and show that some truths concerning those objects could be obtained from the aforementioned a priori premises.

Even though this is a very common idea concerning Kant's theoretical philosophy, it is surprising that it is not easy to find an argument of this form in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant often takes empirical and mathematical knowledge for granted and identifies which conditions we should recognize in order to account for that knowledge. We might find a similar line of reasoning only in those readings of Kant's first Critique that focus on Kant's *Refutation of Idealism* as the heart of the book. In fact, important Kantian scholars have claimed that this is either the key to the whole Critique or the most successful argument in it. They maintain that the argument, by only accepting self-consciousness, is able to show that no self-consciousness would be possible without the existence of external objects and the recognition of objective time-determinations through the categories. Important disagreements notwithstanding, very different scholars such as Peter Strawson and Paul Guyer have suggested that this form of argument is the only one that can be considered

successful in the first Critique.<sup>6</sup> Even though the argument proceeds from a basic premise to conclusions about external objects, we cannot describe Kant's methodology as an instance of the *synthetic method* just introduced. First of all, the self-consciousness here considered is empirical, and it hardly can be considered a *principle* in the sense claimed for Kant's idea of a synthetic method. Thus, if even the *Refutation of Idealism* can hardly be read in accordance with the widespread picture of Kant's synthetic method, it means that we should seek a different account of Kant's procedure in his first Critique.

When Kant addresses more directly the issue concerning the distinction between a synthetic and an analytic method (see for example the section *The Discipline of Pure Reason in Dogmatic Use* in the first Critique, A 712 B 740 ff.), he usually equates the synthetic method with the ostensive method of mathematics, which, according to Kant, proceeds by constructions of concepts and is synthetic because it can immediately exhibit a concept in pure intuition. In *The Discipline of Pure Reason in Dogmatic Use* Kant is less disposed to acknowledge a synthetic way of proceeding to philosophy. In fact, the latter cannot proceed by constructions of concepts, but only with concepts alone. In this section of the Critique Kant often stresses that philosophy should advance analytically (A 721-2 B 749-50), and when he permits a synthetic characterization of philosophy he adds the proviso:

There is, to be sure, a transcendental synthesis from concepts alone, with which in turn only the philosopher can succeed, but which never concerns more than a thing in general, with regard to the conditions under which its perception could belong to possible experience (A 719 B 747).

That is to say, philosophy can proceed synthetically, but not in the way mathematics can. It cannot directly construct an object in pure intuitions, but only identify rules for the schematization of empirical intuitions. Of course empirical intuitions cannot but wait experience to be obtained. I do not want to address the implications and difficulties of this Kantian distinction here. I just want to point out that Kant was tentative in attributing a synthetic method to philosophy and he was clear in distinguishing the synthetic method of philosophy from the synthetic method of mathematics.

If this is true, it means that we should be cautious in describing Kant's method in the first Critique. We should not attribute to this work a pre-established idea on the synthetic method that equates it to a rigidly deductive argument departing from self-evident premises. On the contrary, we should inquire into the Critique itself in order to understand Kant's argumentative procedure. Only

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<sup>6</sup> Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*; Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*. Strawson stresses that the valid argument in Kant's Critique is analytic. However, when he stresses that, he just want to point out that the argument does not involve synthetic a priori judgments. He does not want to argue that the argument goes from consequences to principles.

after having obtained a general idea on Kant's method in the Critique should we seek to account for Kant's distinction in the Prolegomena.

As we already noticed, it is very difficult to find in Kant's first Critique a line of reasoning that ignores completely experience to establish its premises and then deduces some truths about objects from those basic premises. On the contrary, in the Critique Kant often considers our experience in general and seeks to highlight what is necessary to account for that experience. Kant's method cannot thus consist in a total exclusion of experience in the establishment of the premises. In fact, both in the aesthetic and in the analytic Kant starts his arguments by assuming experience in general and by identifying some necessary and a priori content in it.

In regard to appearances in general one cannot remove time, though one can very well take the appearances away from time (KrV, A 31 B 46).

The synthetic unity of consciousness is therefore an objective condition of all cognition, not merely something I myself need in order to cognize an object but rather something under which every intuition must stand *in order to become an object for me*, since in any other way, and without this synthesis, the manifold would *not* be united in one consciousness (B 138).

In these passages, both time and apperception are identified by abstracting what is necessary in experience. We cannot have an experience that is not in time and we cannot have unity in experience without the unity of apperception. Thus, Kant did not avoid to consider experience in general in order to establish the premises of his arguments. This is just to dismiss those readings of Kant's synthetic method that depicts it as a deductive strategy going from indubitable premises about the self to objective truths about experience. Of course, a lot of problems remains concerning the nature of Kant's method in the first Critique and it is difficult to understand what he meant when, in the Prolegomena, he described it as synthetic.

However, this section aimed just to show how Kant did not want to provide an argument based on supposedly indubitable premises in order to answer to a Cartesian sceptic. On the contrary, Kant assumed experience in general as a basic premise from which to start his quest for a priori conditions. In so doing, he was not so far from Peirce's attack to Descartes' "paper doubt". According to Peirce, philosophy should not start from a fake doubt about our knowledge as in Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations*. On the contrary, we should start taking for granted all the beliefs that we regard as unproblematic. In a similar way, Kant stresses that:

No critique of reason in empirical use was needed, since its principles were subjected to a continuous examination on the touchstone of experience; it was likewise unnecessary in mathematics, whose concepts must immediately be exhibited *in concreto* in pure intuition, through which anything unfounded and arbitrary instantly becomes obvious (KrV, A 710-1 B 738-9).

It was not to provide a foundation of our empirical knowledge that Kant wrote his first Critique. That foundation was not needed because we do not face any problem in this field of knowledge. On the contrary, metaphysical speculations about the nature of the world, of God and the self were causing a lot of disputes in philosophy and it was for this reason that a *Critique of Pure Reason* was needed. In order to address these problems Kant could make reference to our empirical knowledge and to experience in general just insofar as we do not face any problem or contradiction in these domains. It is for this reason that we find Kant often taking for granted our experience and knowledge, trying to abstract what is fundamental in them. Having seen that Kant's method is not easily associable to a rationalistic procedure based on supposedly self-evident premises, we should now have a look to Kant's account of things in themselves.

## **2.2. Things in themselves**

The concept of a thing in itself has been one of the main critical targets of Kant's philosophy. Criticisms to this concept date back to Kant's own contemporaries. The thing in itself is also one of the main reasons why pragmatists question Kant's philosophy. The notion of a thing in itself is usually rejected insofar as it makes no sense to stress that there exists an unknowable cause of our representations of things. In fact, when Kant stresses the existence of an unknowable cause, he surpasses exactly the same limits of possible experience that it was the main purpose of his first Critique to set. Moreover, he addresses the relationship between these unknowable things in themselves and their appearances using the category of causality, a category whose use he also confines to the domain of possible experience. If this were true, the notion of a thing in itself would be evidently inconsistent.

The basic assumption that lies at the basis of these criticisms is that when Kant is addressing the distinction between appearances and things in themselves he is introducing an ontological distinction between two sets of objects: the phenomenal objects that are the products of our sensations and the external objects that cause those sensations. Kant's notion of appearance is thus equated to a mental idea, while things in themselves are considered to be real, but unknowable, existing things. It is Kant himself that sometimes suggests this picture of the relationship between appearances and things in themselves. Of course, if this were actually his position, Kant's *Critique*

*of Pure Reason* would be vitiated by profound inconsistencies. In this respect, the pragmatists' criticisms of the notion of an unknowable thing in itself is an ulterior evidence of the problems caused by this concept. In fact Kant's notion of a thing in itself, if understood in the sense just introduced, would not surpass the pragmatic test of meaningfulness, insofar as we could not identify any practical consequence in our lives that this notion would entail.

In contrast to this view, there are passages in Kant's first Critique that suggest a different story. Kant warns us that his distinction between appearances and things in themselves should not be interpreted in accordance with the usual meaning of the terms. His distinction is a *transcendental* distinction and is thus part of his critical inquiry into our knowledge and experience.

We ordinarily distinguish quite well between that which is essentially attached to the intuition of appearances, and is valid for every human sense in general, and that which pertains to them only contingently because it is not valid for the relation to sensibility in general but only for a particular situation or organization of this or that sense. And thus one calls the first cognition one that represents the object in itself, but the second one only its appearance. This distinction, however, is only empirical. If one stands by it (as commonly happens) and does not regard that empirical intuition as in turn mere appearance (as ought to happen), so that there is nothing to be encountered in it that pertains to anything in itself, then our transcendental distinction is lost, and we believe ourselves to cognize things in themselves, although we have nothing to do with anything except appearances anywhere (in the world of sense), even in the deepest research into its objects. Thus, we would certainly call a rainbow a mere appearance in a sun-shower, but would call this rain the thing in itself, and this is correct, as long as we understand the latter concept in a merely physical sense, as that which in universal experience and all different positions relative to the senses is always determined thus and not otherwise in intuition. But if we consider this empirical object in general and, without turning to its agreement with every human sense, ask whether it (not the raindrops, since these, as appearances, are already empirical objects) represents an object in itself, then the question of the relation of the representation to the object is transcendental, and not only these drops are mere appearances, but even their round form, indeed even the space through which they fall are nothing in themselves, but only mere modifications or foundations of our sensible intuition; the transcendental object, however, remains unknown to us (A 45-6 B 62-3).

In this long passage Kant points out that one should be careful in using the words appearances and things in themselves. In fact, in the empirical and common sense of the terms, the concept of appearance refers to mental illusions, while the concept of a thing in itself refers to real physical objects. Kant stresses that, even if this use of the terms is totally legitimate in empirical discussions, this is not the sense in which the concepts should be used in transcendental philosophy. In fact, things in themselves in the empirical sense must be considered as appearances when subject



to transcendental reflection. What Kant is here proposing is a distinction quite different from the ontological distinction introduced above. He is not proposing a distinction between two different sets of objects: real but unknowable things and mental ideas. On the contrary he is drawing an epistemological distinction between two ways of considering empirical objects. Empirical object can be considered either as appearances, when we take into account the subjective sensible conditions of their representation, or as things in themselves, if we do not consider these conditions.

Thus, the concept of a thing in itself is not introduced as an explanatory cause of perception. It is rather a product of philosophical reflection and a natural “twin” of the transcendental concept of appearance. That is to say, when we outline the concept of appearance as the concept of a thing represented through the conditions of our sensibility, we naturally form the concept of a thing not subject to those conditions. Kant stresses that this concept is legitimate, but that we cannot stress its existence or any determinate knowledge about it. This is quite different from stressing that we have mental ideas and there are unknowable real things that cause those ideas. I think this second account of the concept of a thing in itself can be accepted within a pragmatist framework, since it does not stress the existence of unknowable but real things. On the contrary, this concept is only the counterpart of the transcendental concept of appearance. In other words: it is the counterpart of the recognition of a subjective contribution to the formation of our concepts of objects and this recognition has strong pragmatic consequences in philosophy.

It might be argued that the concept of a thing in itself has not only this negative sense in Kant’s critical project. In fact, the concept of a thing in itself gains a positive role in the resolution of the contradictions generated by the ideas of reason. For example, in the third antinomy the concept of a thing in itself has a positive role for explaining the possibility of referring to teleological causation in practical domains while denying this possibility in physical domains. It is true that in the *Dialectic of Pure Reason* the concept of a thing in itself gains a more positive role with respect to the *Analytic*. However, it is important to notice the *practical* reasons that justified this Kantian move. That is to say, in the *Dialectic* the concept of a thing in itself gains strong practical consequences, insofar as it is used to resolve the conflicts of reason with itself. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that no positive use of the concept of a thing in itself is never allowed as a content of knowledge. This is not to stress that Kant’s solution of the dispute between bold naturalism and teleologism is satisfactory. I don’t want either to stress that his strong division between theory and practice can be endorsed from a pragmatist standpoint. I just want to point out the practical reasons that motivated Kant’s attempt.

### 3. Some Pragmatic Aspects of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason

#### 3.1. *The Refutation of Idealism*

From the very beginning, pragmatism has been characterized by an anti-Cartesian stance with respect to the method to use in philosophical inquiry. Accordingly, in the so called "cognition series", published in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 1868-9, Peirce repeatedly attacked Descartes for his use of introspection as a secure philosophical methodology. Peirce attacked Descartes' basic assumption that beliefs about our internal mental states are more immediate and securer than our beliefs about external objects. This basic assumption is the landmark of Descartes' problematic idealism, that is of his attempt to vindicate the existence of external objects starting from basic assumptions concerning our mental ideas.

Those projects that attribute to Kant a line of reasoning that goes from the recognition of self-consciousness to truths concerning external objects ascribe to Kant's first Critique a similar assumption. Kant is thus supposed to concede a higher security to references to the self and its inner mental states with respect to references to outer objects. Accordingly, the *Refutation of Idealism* begins by only assuming self-consciousness and is able to prove the existence of external objects just on the basis of that assumption. Kant's criticism of Descartes would thus be equivalent to the proposal of a stronger argument to refute the sceptic. However, in the *Refutation of Idealism* Kant is not only providing a better argument against the sceptic, but he is also undermining the basic assumption that generated the sceptical concern from the very beginning. In fact, he challenges the assumption that regards references to the self and its inner mental states as the proper point of departure of philosophical inquiry. If this is true, Kant is proposing a new way of approaching philosophical argumentation: one that treats references to inner mental states and to outer empirical objects as equally trustworthy. In this attempt he can be considered a precursor and inspirer of a similar argument proposed by pragmatists. Let us have a look to Kant's argument.

I am conscious of my existence as determined in time. All time-determination presupposes something *persistent* in perception. This persistent thing, however, cannot be something in me, since my own existence in time can first be determined only through this persistent thing. Thus the perception of this persistent thing is possible only through a *thing* outside me and not through the mere *representation* of a thing outside me. Consequently, the determination of my existence in time is possible only by means of the existence of actual things that I perceive outside myself (B 275-6).

Kant here argues that to possess self-consciousness is equivalent to place the self in time-determination. However, for this time-determination to be possible there should be something

persistent in perception outside the self. Kant stresses that the self could not find this persistent thing within its inner consciousness, insofar as inner consciousness itself can be recognized as permanent in time only by referring to this permanent thing. Kant so concludes that there should be things outside the self in order to have self-consciousness.

As I have already noted, this argument is often interpreted as an argument against the sceptic, and it obviously is one. However, we should keep in mind that this section is entitled *Refutation of Idealism*, and not *Refutation of Scepticism*. That is to say: Kant is here attacking the sceptic by challenging the idealistic assumption that lies at the basis of the sceptical perspective. He is thus challenging the priority given to inner states and representations by idealistic standpoints. In so doing he is also suggesting a new way to face philosophical argumentation: one that can take into consideration data from empirical knowledge.

This new way of facing philosophical argumentation has a lot in common with the pragmatist standpoint in philosophy. In fact, when Charles Peirce, in his paper “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man”, asked: “whether we have any power of introspection, or whether our whole knowledge of the internal world is derived from observation of external facts” (EP 1:22) and answered “there is no reason for supposing a power of introspection; and consequently, the only way of investigating a psychological question is by inference from external facts” (EP 1:23), he was using a similar strategy with respect to Kant’s *Refutation of Idealism*. He was attacking Descartes’ method in philosophy for considering references to the subject’s inner states as more reliable and fundamental. Peirce thus argued that referring to these inner states actually presupposes outer experience. He goes even further than Kant by stressing that every inquiry into psychological facts should be inferred from external facts. What is important to note here, though, is the similarity between Kant’s and Peirce’s rejections of Descartes’ strategy.

To sum up, there are two possible ways of interpreting Kant’s *Refutation of Idealism*. One can read this section as a key to unveil the anti-sceptical strategy of the overall Critique. Alternatively, one can interpret it as refuting a philosophical standpoint which has nothing to do with Kant’s method. It is this second interpretation which displays deep similarities with the pragmatists’ anticartesianism.

### **3.2. The Applicability of Kant’s Categories as Context-Dependent**

Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* identifies a system of a priori categories and forms of intuition that determine our knowledge and representation of nature. Kant thus seeks to explain the universality and necessity that some elements of our knowledge display. He argues that they derive that universality and necessity not from experience, but from their resting on some a priori

conditions of knowledge. From a pragmatist standpoint, this general claim is often interpreted as an attempt to provide certainty for some features of our knowledge starting from very basic self-evident premises identifiable independently from experience. The Critique is thus equated to the attempt of vindicating the use of the categories in empirical knowledge. This way of interpreting Kant can thus suggest that the Critique intended to show that the categories can be used with certainty and constitute the infallible bedrock of our knowledge. However, Kant was clear in stressing that his categories and forms of intuition amounted only to a general structure of our experience and knowledge which was not at all sufficient for forming actual representations in empirical knowledge. They are so necessary, but not sufficient, conditions of empirical knowledge. This is evident from the following passage:

That the sunlight that illuminates the wax also melts it, though it hardens clay, understanding could not discover let alone lawfully infer from the concepts that we antecedently have of these things, and only experience could teach us such a law. In the transcendental logic, on the contrary, we have seen that although of course we can never *immediately* go beyond the content of the concept which is given to us, nevertheless we can still cognize the law of the connection with other things completely *a priori*, although in relation to a third thing, namely *possible* experience, but still *a priori*. Thus if wax that was previously firm melts, I can cognize *a priori* that something must have preceded (e.g., the warmth of the sun) on which this has followed in accordance with a constant law, though without experience, to be sure, I could determinately cognize neither the cause from the effect nor the effect from the cause *a priori* and without instruction from experience (A 765-6 B 793-4).

This passage makes clear that no certainty in the determinate use of the categories can be warranted by a one-way deduction from the categories themselves. The categories are constitutive concepts framing the field of our possible experience, thus providing a set of basic rules for developing our representation of nature. However, this framework is not sufficient for framing representations in actual experience. Thus, if I actually experience the melting of wax, I can say *a priori* that there is a cause for this event and this accords to the rules that constitute the framework of possible experience. However, this does not say much concerning where to look for an actual cause of that melting. I can regard, correctly, the sun as the cause of the melting of wax, or otherwise I could hypothesize that this melting was caused by a substance with which the wax was in contact. Both these hypothesis are allowed by my *a priori* concept of cause for Kant. This means that the application of the categories to actual experience is *fallible* and also *context-dependent*.

This is confirmed if we consider the section *On the Transcendental Power of Judgment in General*. In this section of the first Critique Kant argues that the rules provided by the

understanding need the power of judgment (*Urteilkraft*) to be applied to particular cases. This obviously applies also to the categories as a special set of rules of the understanding. Kant seems thus to be arguing that the categories cannot by themselves warrant their application in judgments.

If the understanding in general is explained as the faculty of rules, then the power of judgment is the faculty of *subsuming* under rules, i.e., of determining whether something stands under a given rule (*casus datae legis*) or not. General logic contains no precepts at all for the power of judgment, and moreover cannot contain them. For *since it abstracts from all content of cognition*, nothing remains to it but the business of analytically dividing the mere form of cognition into concepts, judgments, and inferences, and thereby achieving formal rules for all use of the understanding. Now if it wanted to show generally how one ought to subsume under these rules, i.e., distinguish whether something stands under them or not, this could not happen except once again through a rule. But just because this is a rule, it would demand another instruction for the power of judgment, and so it becomes clear that although the understanding is certainly capable of being instructed and equipped through rules, the power of judgment is a special talent that cannot be taught but only practiced (A 132-3 B171-2).

In order to apply the rules provided by the understanding (including the categories) in judgements we thus need to be guided by the power of judgment which is here described as a “special talent”. This quotation shows that Kant did not regard the relationship of the categories with their instantiations as certain and unproblematic. However, if taken too literally, this statement could cause serious misunderstanding. Since also the categories need the power of judgment to be applied in judgments, this could suggest that the objective validity of the categories is made dependent upon a mysterious “special talent”, thus affecting any claim of necessity associated with them. Of course, this would render the whole Critique inconsistent. The previous quotation needs thus to be explained further. In order to do so, a quotation coming from Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement* could help.

That is, we first find in the grounds of the possibility of an experience something necessary, namely the universal laws without which nature in general (as object of the senses) could not be conceived; and these rest on the categories, applied to the formal conditions of all intuition that is possible for us, insofar as it is likewise given to us *a priori*. Now under these laws the power of judgment is determining, for it has nothing to do but subsume under given laws. E.g., the understanding says: All alteration has its cause (universal law of nature); now the transcendental power of judgment has nothing further to do than to provide the condition of subsumption under the *a priori* concept of the understanding that has been laid down for it: and that is the succession of the determinations of one and the same thing. Now for nature in general (as the object of possible experience) that law is cognized as absolutely necessary. – Now, however, the objects of empirical

cognition are still determined or, as far as one can judge *a priori*, determinable in so many ways apart from that formal time-condition that specifically distinct natures, besides what they have in common as belonging to nature in general, can still be causes in infinitely many ways; and each of these ways must (in accordance with the concept of a cause in general) have its rule, which is a law, and hence brings necessity with it, although given the constitution and the limits of our faculties of cognition we have no insight at all into this necessity (KU 70).

From this quotation it is clear that when experience is considered in general under the heading of “possible experience” no particular “talent” is needed to connect the categories to their possible instantiations through judgments. If experience in general is concerned as an object, we can thus form judgments applying the categories to it without particular problems and this application can be performed totally *a priori* and necessarily. However, the categories gain their peculiar cognitive role when they are not only used to form our basic framework of possible experience, but when they are instantiated in particular empirical laws concerning our actual experience. Thus, when we do not only say that in possible experience every event has a cause, but stress that the wax melts because it is warmed by the sun, the categories themselves cannot warrant that we are using the concept of cause in the correct way. It is thus when the categories are applied to actual experiences and to particular laws of nature that we can speak of fallibilism and context-dependency. With respect to actual experience and particular laws of nature Kant’s categories are thus necessary, because they form the basic framework in which particular laws of nature can be found. Nonetheless, they are not sufficient to vindicate their use in particular cases.

### **3.3. A Developmental Picture of Knowledge in the First Critique**

With his tables of judgments and categories and with his *a priori* forms of space and time Kant proposes a static account of knowledge and inquiry. That is to say, science, just as philosophy, must seek stable and necessary truths. Moreover, the essential structure of human knowledge displays permanent and unalterable characteristics. This is confirmed by our quotation in the introduction of this paper where Kant claimed that his Critique aimed to reach *apodictic certainty*. Accordingly, Kant presented as models for philosophical knowledge logic, mathematics and physics (B VIII-XIV): three domains of knowledge that, differently from us, he regarded as stable and unproblematic. Of course this fixed representation of knowledge is not something that pragmatists can endorse. With their emphasis on fallibilism and development pragmatists cannot but challenge this quest for stable certainty in Kant’s work. It would be impossible to argue that Kant, with his categories and forms of intuition, did not want to find the necessary and stable

framework of our knowledge. The categories and the forms of intuitions are for Kant necessary and certain components of our knowledge and experience. However, it must be noted that for Kant himself this was not in contrast to a developmental account of knowledge as a whole. Accordingly, if we have a look to the *Dialectic of Pure Reason* and to some section of the *Doctrine of Method* Kant actually seems to propose a developmental picture of knowledge. This is just to emphasize how, even though Kant insisted on the a priori and necessary status of some elements of our knowledge, he was equally willing to emphasize those principles that guide the development of that knowledge. Thus, in the *Architectonic of Pure Reason* he stresses:

Under the government of reason our cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody but must constitute a system, in which alone they can support and advance its essential ends. I understand by a system, however, the unity of the manifold cognitions under one idea. This is the rational concept of the form of a whole, insofar as through this the domain of the manifold as well as the position of the parts with respect to each other is determined *a priori*. [...] The whole is therefore articulated (*articulatio*) and not heaped together (*coaceruatio*); it can, to be sure, grow internally (*per intus susceptionem*) but not externally (*per appositionem*), like an animal body, whose growth does not add a limb but rather makes each limb stronger and fitter for its end without any alteration of proportion (A 832-3, B 861-2).

Here Kant compares the development of knowledge to the development of an animal body, thus proposing an organic and biological image of knowledge development. In so doing, he is seeking to emphasize the teleological and non-mechanical character of processes of knowledge development. The fact that Kant stresses that “the position of the parts with respect to each other is determined *a priori*” has not to be taken too strongly. Of course Kant is here pointing at the growth of an animal body in which the development and relationships of the parts can be anticipated according to a biological pattern. It is likely that Kant considered biological patterns as unchanged in history. However, as far as our knowledge is concerned, the idea that anticipates the development of our knowledge offers only a regulative systematic form to pursue in our inquiry. This means that the idea can be determined in a multiplicity of different ways, thus not necessitating a particular way of developing our knowledge apart from requiring a systematic attitude. This way of representing the development of human knowledge according to a systematic guiding principle is immediately connected to the regulative use of the ideas of reason described in the second Appendix of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This section can display some other aspects concerning Kant’s treatment of the principles guiding the development of our knowledge.

I call subjective principles that are taken not from the constitution of the object but from the interest of reason in regard to a certain possible perfection of the cognition of this object, *maxims* of reason. Thus there are maxims of speculative reason, which rest solely on reason's speculative interest, even though it may seem as if they were objective principles (A 666 B 694).

The maxims to which Kant is here referring are those requiring the maximum possible unity and specification in our knowledge. For Kant, when we are engaged in a process of inquiry our reason requires us to follow three essential principles: the principles of *homogeneity*, *specification* and *continuity* of forms (A 657-8 B 685-6). Accordingly, we must organize our knowledge under the smallest possible amount of fundamental principles, but we must also seek the broader possible amount of particulars. For Kant this is possible only by recognizing “the affinity of all concepts, which offers a continuous transition from every species to every other through a graduated increase of varieties” ( A 657-8 B 685-6). We all know that Peirce was sympathetic to the principle of continuity here described by Kant even though he was critical on Kant’s only-subjective characterization of continuity . However I do not want to focus on the maxims themselves and their relations to Peirce’s doctrine of continuity. Rather, I wish to point out the purposeful account of reason that Kant is here proposing. The maxims are expression of the *interests* of reason and it is these interests that guide the systematic development of knowledge. The principles guiding the development of our knowledge are thus purposeful in nature and this suggests some affinities with the purposeful account of human reason and knowledge often proposed by pragmatists.

In making this comparison though, there is one problem that cannot be neglected. When pragmatists propose their purposeful characterization of reason they have in mind an *embodied* reason, that is a reason bound up with our practical interaction with the world we live. This does not seem the case with Kant’s speculative and pure account of reason. However, I think that Kant can be interpreted in two different ways here. One can understand Kant’s reason as totally separated from our every-day interaction with the world and from the purposes that guide that interaction. Of course this account of reason, even if it is characterized in a purposeful way, cannot be related to the pragmatist account of reason. On the other hand, if we understand Kant’s account of reason not as totally in contrast to our ordinary experience and purposeful interaction with the world, but as trying to abstract some fundamental principles that are essential to account for our way of developing and forming concepts in this interaction, I think that we can propose a less strict representation of the differences between the pragmatists and Kant. If this were true, Kant’s account of reason would not be totally in contrast to an embodied reason, but would only focus on what he saw as the essential principles that allow us as embodied agents to share a common knowledge and develop it according to the same rules.



## 4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to show that Kant's position in the *Critique of Pure Reason* has some points of interests for pragmatist scholars. In order to satisfy this purpose, the paper pursued two main tasks: the former aimed to show that widespread criticisms of Kant are wrong and misleading and the latter intended to highlight some pragmatic aspects in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Concerning the first task, I argued that Kant's method in the first Critique cannot be compared to a rationalistic strategy aiming at deducing some beliefs concerning external objects departing from supposedly self-evident premises about the self. Even though Kant's description of what he called the *synthetic* method could suggest this rationalistic methodology, we have been able to see that Kant in fact did take empirical knowledge for granted, abstracting from that knowledge its fundamental conditions. Even if we consider the most criticized concept of Kant, that is the concept of a thing in itself, we can see that it is interpretable in a less problematic way than usual. Typically, the thing in itself is understood as a real but unknowable thing that causes phenomenal appearances. This is a metaphysical way of considering the distinction between appearances and things in themselves. I have argued that this distinction can be understood in an epistemological way. The distinction would thus refer to two possible ways of considering empirical objects. We can consider these objects in their relation to the knower, or abstracting from this relation. According to this latter account of the thing in itself, there is no need to postulate an unknowable real cause of perception. I have suggested that this latter view on the thing in itself can be accepted from a pragmatist standpoint.

To satisfy the second tasks, I focused on Kant's *Refutation of Idealism* and showed that it should be interpreted as a strong anti-cartesian stance in philosophy. Influential readings of Kant have suggested that this section should be understood as the key to the whole Critique, thus rendering Kant's main purpose that of proposing a new and stronger argument against the sceptic. On the contrary, I have suggested that the *Refutation of Idealism* constitutes a refutation of a philosophical methodology which Kant did not want to endorse in his Critique. The methodology in question implied an idealistic privilege reserved to representations about the self and its inner states.

Moreover, I have shown that despite the certainty and necessity that Kant claims for the categories and the forms of intuition, the application of the categories to actual empirical knowledge is fallible and context-dependent. Kant also proposes a regulative account of knowledge development, highlighting the purposeful nature of reason in its task of gaining an always more systematic and comprehensive knowledge.

Even though these elements are not sufficient to stress that Kant was a pragmatist, they are at least worth considering, in order to form a more accurate and correct account of the conceptual relationships between Kant and pragmatism.