



# FOR THE LOVE OF METAPHYSICS

NIHILISM AND THE CONFLICT OF REASON  
FROM KANT TO ROSENZWEIG

KARIN NISENBAUM

For the Love of Metaphysics



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*To my father and mother, and to Emma*

So, this is how the matter truly stands: first Critical Philosophy undermines metaphysics theoretically, for the love of science; then, since everything now tends to sink into the wide open, bottomless, abyss of an absolute subjectivity, it undermines science practically, for the love of metaphysics.

—F. H. Jacobi

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For the Love of Metaphysics



# Introduction

One of the central aims of Kant's critical philosophy is to diagnose a debilitating illness affecting human reason and human experience, and to provide a form of therapy by means of reason's self-examination. Kant describes one manifestation of this illness in the sentence that opens his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which 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.<sup>1</sup>

The general form of this illness can be described in a few different ways. It is symptomatic of the failure to perform a delicate balancing act between thinking and acting, or knowing and willing.<sup>2</sup> It reveals the tension between desiring to meet reason's unconditioned demands and not knowing whether the conditions that make it sensible to try to meet those demands obtain.<sup>3</sup> As I will soon explain, it stems from a conflict between the principles or rules that govern each power or faculty of the mind and their associated conditions for being applied: what is at issue is whether each faculty of the mind can continue to pursue its own interest, its own distinctive activity, when we cannot

<sup>1</sup> KrV, Aviii.

<sup>2</sup> As I will soon explain, in the introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic of the first *Critique*, Kant holds that a natural and unavoidable transcendental illusion arises because certain subjective principles of reason appear or are taken to be objective. In his *Kant's Dialectic*, Jonathan Bennett argues that, in this context, the subjective/objective distinction is virtually identical with the practical/theoretical distinction. See Bennett (1974), 268: "In this context, the subjective/objective distinction is not concerned with inner/outer. It is in fact virtually the practical/theoretical distinction—the line between something which tells scientists how to behave and something which reports facts about reality."

<sup>3</sup> See Allison (2004), 330; Watkins (2010), 151.



know whether the conditions under which alone it is reasonable to do so are realized.<sup>4</sup> This is the conflict of reason.

In this book I contend that the development of German philosophy from Kant, through post-Kantian German Idealism, to the thought of Franz Rosenzweig, was largely motivated by the perceived promise of Kant's philosophy for solving the conflict of reason, but also by its perceived shortcomings in solving this conflict. As I will argue below, Kant's solution to the conflict of reason hinges on his view that reason's quest for the unconditioned can only be realized practically. My main contention is that the rise and fall of German Idealism should be told as a story about the different interpretations, appropriations, radicalizations, and problematizations of this central Kantian insight.

To start, let me explain how what I am describing as a conflict of reason relates to what Kant calls transcendental illusion. In the introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic of the first *Critique*, Kant explains that a natural and unavoidable transcendental illusion arises because certain subjective principles of reason appear or are taken to be objective.<sup>5</sup> For example, the subjective principle for the logical use of reason is, "Find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed."<sup>6</sup> The objective version of this subjective principle is, "When the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself unconditioned, also given (i.e., contained in the object and its connection)."<sup>7</sup> Following Michelle Grier's account in her *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*, I will refer to these two principles as "P1" and "P2," respectively.<sup>8</sup> As

<sup>4</sup> For the idea that each faculty or power of the mind is governed by a distinct interest, see KpV, 5:120: "To every faculty of the mind one can attribute an interest, that is, a principle that contains the condition under which alone its exercise is promoted."

<sup>5</sup> See KrV, A297/B354: "Transcendental illusion, on the other hand, does not cease even though it is uncovered and its nullity is clearly seen into by transcendental criticism . . . . The cause of this is that in our reason (considered subjectively as a human faculty of cognition) there lie fundamental rules and maxims for its use, which look entirely like objective principles, and through them it comes about that the subjective necessity of a certain connection of our concepts on behalf of the understanding is taken for an objective necessity, the determination of things in themselves." For a helpful discussion of Kant's conception of reason, including why reason searches for the unconditioned, and how reason's search for the unconditioned generates the transcendental ideas, see Allison (2004), 308–322.

<sup>6</sup> KrV, A307/B364.

<sup>7</sup> KrV, A307–308/B364.

<sup>8</sup> See Grier (2001), 119–130. See also Allison (2004), 329–332. Both Grier and Allison call P2 the "supreme principle of reason," based on Kant's following remark: "Such a principle of pure reason, however, is obviously synthetic; for the conditioned is analytically related to some condition, but not to the unconditioned. . . . The principles arising from this supreme principle of pure reason will, however, be transcendent in respect of all appearances, i.e., no adequate empirical use can ever be made of that principle," KrV, A308/B365.

Omri Boehm has noted, these two principles are different formulations of the principle of sufficient reason, which states that for every thing, event, or state of affairs, there is a complete set of reasons that makes the existence and nature of what we are considering fully intelligible.<sup>9</sup> If we are committed to the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), as we have reason to be, we believe that there are no brute facts, that there is nothing that has no reason or explanation.<sup>10</sup> P1 is a subjective formulation of the PSR because of its imperative form: it prescribes a task, namely, that we strive for complete explanations.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, P2 is an objective formulation of the PSR because of its indicative form: it states something about the world, namely, that complete or unconditioned explanations are there to be found. P1 is a regulative formulation of the PSR; P2 is a constitutive formulation of the same.

Kant's doctrine of transcendental illusion is based on his understanding of the relationship between these two principles. He argues that an unavoidable illusion arises because P2 is a condition for the applicability of P1; as Henry Allison rightly notes, this is not because "one must be assured of *finding* all the conditions for a given conditioned" in order for it to be reasonable to search for them, but because we need to assume that they are at least "there to be found."<sup>12</sup> Yet on Kant's view, we can never know that this application condition (P2) is satisfied.<sup>13</sup> This is because, on Kant's view, human knowledge is discursive: it requires both concepts and sensible intuition; yet what is unconditioned can never be given to the mind via sensible intuition; it can never be an object of

<sup>9</sup> See Boehm (2016), 558: "With some interpretation, we can render both principles quite clear. Kant uses 'conditioned' here broadly, referring to anything that could be an object of cognition: any thing, event or state of affairs, which requires a condition other than itself in order to be given as a fact. A 'condition' is the cause or the reason—what would count as an explanation of a conditioned that is given as a fact. . . . An 'unconditioned' is thus an ultimate condition, an ultimate explanatory ground of what is given as conditioned. It is ultimate in the sense that it does not itself require further grounds for being given. . . . In this light, P1 and P2 are nothing but formulations of the PSR." See Leibniz (1991), 217.

<sup>10</sup> In chapter 2, I consider some of the reasons for commitment to the PSR and discuss the extent to which Kant is or is not committed to this principle.

<sup>11</sup> See Boehm (2016), 559.

<sup>12</sup> Allison (2004), 331–332: "The question is not whether one must be assured of finding all the conditions for a given conditioned; it is rather whether it need be assumed that they are there to be found. But it is not at all clear that the latter assumption is dispensable. Indeed, precisely because the search is for conditions, it seems that the assumption (though not the search) cannot be abandoned without denying P1. After all, a 'condition hunt' is not like, say, the hunt for a hidden treasure, which one might reasonably pursue, while acknowledging that it may not exist."

<sup>13</sup> This raises the important question concerning what sort of assent to P2 we *are* entitled to. In an unpublished paper, Eric Watkins contends that our attitude toward the unconditioned best fits what Kant calls belief. This is an interesting suggestion, but it also seems to go against Kant's reserving belief for practical matters.

knowledge.<sup>14</sup> We cannot reasonably act on the demands of reason (P1) without assuming that their associated conditions for being applied (P2) are realized, but we can never know that they are realized.<sup>15</sup>

In light of Kant's doctrine of transcendental illusion, it should be clear why what I am calling the conflict of reason stems from a conflict between the principles or maxims that govern each power or faculty of the mind and their associated conditions for being applied. This is a conflict of reason, because, on Kant's view, reason is the "faculty of principles" that determines the interest of all the powers or faculties of the mind.<sup>16</sup> Yet it is important to note that there is a conflict of reason considered in its speculative use, and also a conflict of reason considered in its practical use. In what follows, I will focus on some of the important differences between these two manifestations of the conflict of reason.

Kant has various strategies for alleviating the conflict of reason, including his distinction between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism, and his related distinction between appearances and things in themselves. Yet there is an important difference between his diagnosis of and solution to the conflict of reason in its speculative use, and his diagnosis of and solution to the conflict of reason in its practical use. In the *Antinomy of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that the distinction between appearances and things in themselves alleviates one manifestation of the conflict of reason in its speculative use, because this distinction helps us realize that reason's search for the totality of conditions for any conditioned object applies to things in themselves and appearances in different ways.<sup>17</sup> As Eric Watkins explains the point, Kant holds that "for things in themselves it is the case that the totality of conditions and thus the unconditioned as well

<sup>14</sup> See Allison (2004), 330: "The absolute totality of conditions or, equivalently, the unconditioned posited by P1 can never be given as an object." Kant never provides an argument for his view that human knowledge is discursive (unless we consider the *Antinomy of Pure Reason* as an indirect argument for transcendental idealism, which involves the view that we cannot know things in themselves). See Allison (2004), 13–14. As we will see in chapter 2, the fact that Kant doesn't provide an argument for the discursivity thesis is central to Maimon's critique of Kant.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth mentioning that I am focusing here on the manifestation of the conflict of reason in the *Antinomy of Pure Reason*. In the case of the *Ideal of Pure Reason*, for example, the problem is hypostatizing the ideal of the supremely real being, i.e., giving the ideal a real existence independent of its concept. See KrV, A583/B611n. Yet the underlying thought is still similar: we can have a concept of the unconditioned, but we cannot provide the intuition that would yield knowledge of the unconditioned.

<sup>16</sup> KrV, A299/B356. In the case of the theoretical employment of reason, reason is the faculty of principles of cognition or knowledge; in the case of the practical employment of reason, reason is the faculty of principles of volition or action.

<sup>17</sup> That having to do with reason's search for the "unconditioned unity of objective conditions in appearances." KrV, A406/B433.

must exist if the conditioned exists.”<sup>18</sup> The relevant passage from the first *Critique* appears in section 7 of the Antinomy of Pure Reason:

If the conditioned as well as its condition are things in themselves, then when the first is given not only is the regress to the second given as a problem, but the latter is thereby really already given along with it; and, because this holds for all members of the series, then the complete series of conditions, and hence the unconditioned is thereby simultaneously given.<sup>19</sup>

Yet this is not the case if we are considering the situation for appearances. As Kant explains:

On the contrary, if I am dealing with appearances, which as mere representations are not given at all if I do not achieve acquaintance with them . . . then I cannot say with the same meaning that if the conditioned is given, then all the conditions (as appearances) for it are also given; and hence I can by no means infer the absolute totality of the series of these conditions. . . . But in such a case one can very well say that a regress to the conditions, i.e., a continued empirical synthesis on this side is demanded or given as a problem.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, P2, the objective or constitutive formulation of the PSR would hold for things in themselves, if we could know them; but P1, the subjective or regulative formulation of the PSR holds for appearances. Watkins aptly summarizes how this distinction helps alleviate the conflict of reason:

As soon as one draws the distinction [between appearances and things in themselves], reason can require that its demands be satisfied for things in themselves, though it has no way of knowing how they are, but it cannot require that this very same demand be satisfied for appearances as a result of their essential lack of complete determinacy; instead, reason can demand only that one continue to search for ever further conditions, even if one knows that the totality of conditions . . . can never be given in experience.<sup>21</sup>

What I would like to stress is the Kantian view that the unconditioned can in principle never be an object of theoretical knowledge. In the case of the speculative use of reason, there is a necessary “mismatch between appearances and

<sup>18</sup> Watkins (2010), 150.

<sup>19</sup> KrV, A498/B526.

<sup>20</sup> KrV, A499/B527.

<sup>21</sup> Watkins (2010), 150.

the idea of reason, which only things in themselves are adequate to"; but we can at least attempt to reduce the distance between appearances and the ideas of reason, by continuing to search for the conditions for any given conditioned.<sup>22</sup> The ideas of reason serve to direct or regulate our search for the conditions for any given conditioned, by way of limiting concepts. This is the negative result of Kant's critical philosophy: Kant prohibits the employment of reason in metaphysical speculations outside the bounds of experience and denies us knowledge of the supersensible.<sup>23</sup>

Yet it is important to keep in mind that there is a Dialectic in each of the three *Critiques*, and Kant's understanding of and solution to the conflict of reason is not entirely the same in each case. In what follows, I will highlight what I take to be the most important difference between Kant's solution to the conflict of reason in its speculative use and his solution to the conflict of reason in its practical use. At the start of the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason, Kant explains why there is also a Dialectic of Pure Reason in its practical use:

Pure reason always has its dialectic, whether it is considered in its speculative or in its practical use; for it requires the absolute totality of conditions for a given conditioned, and this can be found only in things in themselves. . . . But reason in its practical use is no better off. As pure practical reason it likewise seeks the unconditioned for the practically conditioned (which rests on inclinations and natural needs), not indeed as the determining ground of the will, but even when this is given (in the moral law), it seeks the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, under the name of the highest good.<sup>24</sup>

That is, there is also a dialectic of practical reason, because practical reason seeks the "unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason," namely, the highest good, the systematic relation between virtue and happiness. Yet in appearances we can never discover a systematic connection between virtue and happiness. Kant's solution to the conflict of reason in its practical use also involves the distinction between appearances and things in themselves, but two other notions are equally important: the notion of a primacy of practical reason,

<sup>22</sup> Watkins (2010), 150.

<sup>23</sup> The Antinomy of Pure Reason doesn't exhaust the Dialectic of Pure Reason, and understanding more fully Kant's solution to the conflict of reason in its speculative use would require detailed discussion of the Paralogisms and Ideal of Pure Reason. For a helpful analysis, see Allison (2004), 307–422, and Grier (2001), 143–260.

<sup>24</sup> KpV, 5:107–108.

and the notion that practical reason is not receptive, as is speculative reason, but efficacious, or capable of realizing its objects.<sup>25</sup>

On Kant's view, the thesis of the primacy of practical reason concerns how we should conceive the relationship between the *interest* of reason in its speculative or theoretical use, and the *interest* of reason in its practical use. If the interest of reason in its speculative use "consists in the cognition of the object up to the highest a priori principles," and if the interest of reason in its practical use "consists in the determination of the will with respect to the final and complete end" (the highest good), when these two interests come into conflict (when the demand for knowledge comes into conflict with the determination of the will), we should give primacy to the interest of reason in its practical use, since on Kant's view "all interest is ultimately practical."<sup>26</sup> So when certain theoretical propositions (e.g., "we are free"; "God exists"; "we have an immortal soul") that are "withdrawn from any possible insight of speculative reason" are shown to be inseparably connected with the principles of practical reason, speculative reason must accept such propositions "as something offered to it from another source."<sup>27</sup> Such propositions are postulates of practical reason, which Kant defines as theoretical propositions that are not demonstrable as such—that is, not through any purely theoretical argument—but only "insofar as [they are] attached inseparably to an *a priori* unconditionally valid practical law."<sup>28</sup> As Wayne Martin characterizes Kant's view, "the thesis of the primacy of practical reason means that at least in certain domains, practical judgment is primary with respect to theoretical judgment in that the warrant for judgments that are theoretical in form (e.g., the existential judgment 'There is a God') is provided by a practical judgment ('I ought to bring about the highest good')."<sup>29</sup>

Martin's characterization helps highlight both the structural similarity and the significant difference between Kant's conception of reason's demand for the unconditioned, and the conditions for it being reasonable to pursue that demand, in the theoretical and practical domains. Just as theoretical reason seeks the unconditioned (in the form of the totality of conditions for a given conditioned item of knowledge), practical reason demands the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, namely, the highest good, the systematic connection of virtue (the condition) and happiness (the conditioned).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For a helpful discussion of the role played by the distinction between appearances and things in themselves in Kant's solution to the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason, see Watkins (2010), 151–155, and Wood (1970) chap. 4.

<sup>26</sup> KpV, 5:120–122.

<sup>27</sup> KpV, 5:121.

<sup>28</sup> KpV, 5:122.

<sup>29</sup> Martin (1997), 120.

<sup>30</sup> See KpV, 5:110–114.

Kant highlights this structural similarity in the passage from the beginning of the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason that I cited earlier.<sup>31</sup> Also, just as in the case of theoretical reason, there are certain metaphysical presuppositions necessary for it to be reasonable to pursue the object of pure practical reason (the highest good), namely, the postulates. Yet note an important difference: the form of inference that in the first *Critique* Kant attributes to being deceived by transcendental illusion is precisely the form of inference that he uses in his argument for the postulates in the second *Critique*, namely, making determinate objective (metaphysical) claims based on certain subjective principles. In the first *Critique*, we are not entitled to ascribe objective validity to P2 based on what P1 demands. For example, in the Transcendental Ideal, this form of inference is what Kant calls hypostatization: giving an object a real existence independent of its idea.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, in the second *Critique* we *are* entitled to affirm the postulates once we see that they are conditions of possibility for pursuing the highest good; that is, we are entitled to “assume the existence of God” once we see how that assumption is a condition for “aiming at the highest good.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> KpV, 5:108: “Pure reason always has its dialectic, whether it is considered in its speculative or in its practical use; for it requires the absolute totality of conditions for a given conditioned, and this can be found only in things in themselves. . . . But reason in its practical use is no better off. As pure practical reason it likewise seeks the unconditioned for the practically conditioned . . . not indeed as the determining ground of the will, but even when this is given (in the moral law), it seeks the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, under the name of the highest good.”

<sup>32</sup> See KrV, A583/B611n: “This ideal of the supremely real being, even though it is a mere representation, is first realized, i.e., made into an object, then hypostatized, and finally, as we will presently allege, through a natural progress of reason in the completion of unity, it is even personified.” Allison rightly notes that in this context the difference between “realization” and “hypostatization” amounts to the distinction between the unavoidable result of transcendental illusion and the avoidable result of being deceived by it. See Allison (2004), 409: “Although personification can be ignored here, the contrast between the realization and hypostatization is of paramount significance, since it amounts to the distinction between the unavoidable result of the illusion and the avoidable result of being deceived by it. Of particular relevance is the characterization of realization as an act of making an idea into an object. Since to hypostatize is to give an object a real existence independent of its idea, insofar as realization is distinguished from it, the objectification it involves can be understood only as the generation of an intentional object or what Kant terms an ‘object [given] in the idea,’ as opposed to one given ‘absolutely’ (A670/B698).”

<sup>33</sup> KpV, 5:125; KpV, 5:133. Korsgaard argues that this is because of the priority of practical reason. On my view, and as I will soon argue, this has to do with the efficacy of practical reason. See Korsgaard (1996), 119: “I have said that practical reason shares the ‘fate’ of theoretical reason insofar as it, too, is driven to ‘seek the unconditioned.’ In an important sense, however, the fate of practical reason is different from that of theoretical reason; this is one of the most central tenets of Kant’s philosophy. Theoretical reason, in its quest for the unconditioned, produces antinomies; in the end, the kind of unconditional explanation that would fully satisfy reason is unavailable. Practical reason in its quest for justification is subject to no such limitation. This is part of Kant’s doctrine of the primacy of practical reason.”



Why Kant believes that we are entitled to make this form of inference in the case of practical reason, but not in the case of theoretical reason, has to do with a fundamental difference between theoretical and practical reason: namely, that while theoretical reason is receptive, practical reason is efficacious. Let me briefly clarify this crucial difference and then explain how it helps us understand the otherwise puzzling structural similarity between Kant's argument for the postulates and the erroneous form of inference that in the first *Critique* Kant attributes to being deceived by transcendental illusion.

In recent years, Stephen Engstrom has focused his attention on the significance of Kant's distinction between theoretical and practical reason and traced its lineage to what he calls a "practical-cognitivist" tradition in ethics that reaches back to thinkers like Aquinas and Aristotle.<sup>34</sup> As Engstrom notes, when we assume that reason is solely a theoretical capacity, we believe that reason is only "a capacity to acquire knowledge of things that exist independently of that knowledge."<sup>35</sup> If the objects of reason (conceived as a theoretical capacity) are to be known, they must already be given in sensible intuition, and they must be other than myself. On this model, "reason has no power to produce anything outside its representations, but serves merely to achieve a true representation of things that are there anyway. It simply tracks reality."<sup>36</sup> Conceived as a theoretical capacity, reason is receptive. Yet as Engstrom rightly notes, this isn't how Kant conceives knowledge that is practical. When Kant says that what is practical is "to be made real through our will," he conveys the idea that practical knowledge is distinguished by its efficacy: what practical knowledge represents is its *own* effect, its *own* action, something that depends on *it* for its realization.<sup>37</sup> This point becomes even clearer if we keep in mind that willing falls under the broad category of voluntary movements that spring from "the faculty of desire," which Kant defines as the capacity of a being "to be through its representations the cause of the *actuality* of the objects of those representations."<sup>38</sup> Engstrom clarifies the most important implication of the view that practical knowledge is efficacious:

The existential relation in which practical knowledge stands to what it knows is accordingly the reverse of the relation in the theoretical case.

<sup>34</sup> See Engstrom (2009) and (2013). Eric Watkins also emphasizes the efficacy of practical reason in his discussion of Kant's solution to the Antinomy of Practical Reason. See Watkins (2010), 162–163.

<sup>35</sup> Engstrom (2013), 138.

<sup>36</sup> Engstrom (2013), 138. It is worth noting that, on Kant's view, (theoretical) reason is also active in constituting the form of its objects; but the objects of (theoretical) reason are still the cause of its representations, and in this sense (theoretical) reason is not productive.

<sup>37</sup> KpV, 5:113.

<sup>38</sup> KpV, 5:9n.



Since what theoretical knowledge knows does not depend for its actuality on the actuality of that knowledge, the actuality of the knowledge must depend on the actuality of what it knows; what practical knowledge knows, in contrast, depends for its actuality on the actuality of the knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of theoretical knowledge, the actuality of the knowledge depends on the actuality of what is known: in order for me to know that there is a glass of water on my desk, the glass and the desk must already be there in order for me to perceive them. By contrast, in the case of practical knowledge, the actuality or reality of what is known depends on the actuality or reality of the knowledge. By “the actuality of the knowledge,” Engstrom means the actual determination of the will; this is because, like Kant, he believes that willing can be understood as a form of practical judgment and hence as a form of knowledge.<sup>40</sup> So in the case of practical knowledge, the actuality of what is known depends on the actual determination of the will. This implies that in the case of practical knowledge, being, reality, or actuality is *transferred* from the will to the objects of the will; moreover, it is by this transference of being from the will to the objects of the will that the latter can potentially be known.

Focusing on the efficacy of practical reason helps explain why Kant believes that we are entitled to make objective (metaphysical) claims based on practical reason’s demand for the unconditioned, but not based on theoretical reason’s demand for the unconditioned. In order for us to know something (theoretically), it must be presented in sensible intuition. In order for us know something (practically), it must be brought about. But we know that we cannot know the unconditioned object of theoretical reason (because we can never find in appearances the complete series of conditions for a given conditioned), but we do not know that we cannot know the unconditioned object of practical reason (because the highest good is something to be made actual through our will; it is something we must bring about). Thus, there is an important difference between the cognitive status of the unconditioned when we are considering the speculative use of reason and the cognitive status of the unconditioned when we are considering the practical use of reason. Although the unconditioned functions as an ideal or regulative principle both in the theoretical case and in the practical case, in the practical case it is also an ideal that could potentially be realized by our will.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Engstrom (2013), 145.

<sup>40</sup> See Engstrom (2009), 23–65.

<sup>41</sup> Watkins also draws attention to this idea, and rightly adds that the highest good is “something more than a merely regulative principle insofar as Kant does want to establish its real possibility, a status that is not necessary for merely regulative principles.” See Watkins (2010), 163.

In my opening remarks, I mentioned that Kant's solution to the conflict of reason hinges on his view that reason's quest for the unconditioned can only be realized practically. In the case of theoretical reason, Kant shows that we can avoid being deceived by transcendental illusion by giving the ideas of reason the status of regulative principles. Yet in the case of practical reason, we should aim to realize the highest good, and the requirement to do so entitles us to affirm the postulates: we must think of the highest good as realizable, and that grants reality to the conditions for this realizability (i.e., the postulates). In the chapters that follow, my aim is to show that the development of post-Kantian German Idealism is propelled by the different interpretations, appropriations, and radicalizations of the Kantian view that the representation of the unconditioned (or absolute) by finite beings is a topic of practical, not theoretical, philosophy.

The early philosophical writings of Kant's successors, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, clearly testify to their concern with this aspect of Kant's critical philosophy. This fact evidences the importance of this problem for understanding the issues that shaped German Idealism. Some of the early works that stand out as testifying to the post-Kantian German Idealists' interest in the promise of Kant's critical philosophy for solving the conflict of reason include, in chronological order, Fichte's *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792) and his *Review of Aenesidemus* (1792); Schelling's "Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism" (1795), the "Oldest System-Program of German Idealism" (1796), and the *Treatise Explicatory of the Idealism in the Science of Knowledge* (1797); Fichte's "On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World" (1798) and *The Vocation of Man* (1800); and Hegel's *Faith and Knowledge* (1802). These writings all deal with many of the ideas directly related to Kant's understanding of and solution to the conflict of reason, including Kant's moral theology, the prioritizing of the practical, and the postulates of practical reason. I do not propose to cover, in this book, all this material. My aim is to offer a new take on the legacy of Kant's critical philosophy that I hope will help students and scholars of this period find new meaning in this philosophical tradition.<sup>42</sup>

## Chapter Outline

In this book, I propose that we view the conflict of reason as the central problem shaping the contours of post-Kantian German Idealism. Yet one might ask: Isn't

<sup>42</sup> In what follows I provide further details of the works I will cover in the book, and I explain why Hegel does not play a central role in the narrative I tell.

the explicit aim of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to set metaphysics on the "secure course of a science," not only to reconcile thinking and acting, knowing and willing?<sup>43</sup> The first part of the book addresses this question. I begin by explaining why, during the first two decades after the publication of the first *Critique*, Kant's critics and followers came to understand the aim of Kant's critical philosophy in what might initially seem to be this narrower sense. I argue that F. H. Jacobi and Salomon Maimon set the stage for the reception of Kant's critical philosophy by conceiving its aim in terms of meeting reason's demand for unconditioned explanation, and by identifying this aim with the goal of setting metaphysics on the secure course of a science. Jacobi also set the stage for the reception of Kant's critical philosophy by claiming, on the one hand, that only a monistic metaphysics could satisfy reason's demand for unconditioned explanation, and on the other hand, that nobody could uphold this metaphysical outlook since it would lead to fatalism and a form of nihilism. Early on, then, the conflict of reason came to be understood as a conflict between the interest of reason in its speculative use and the interest of reason in its practical use, and this came to be perceived as the central problem that Kant's philosophy was concerned with addressing.

This first part of the book also clarifies why the post-Kantian German Idealists believed that, in order to solve reason's conflict with itself, philosophy would need to obtain the form of a systematic derivation of the transcendental conditions of human experience from a single first principle. If Jacobi supplied the impulse for going forward from Kant, I argue, Salomon Maimon supplied the direction to be taken. Although many scholars have noted the important role that Jacobi and Maimon played in the reception of Kant's critical philosophy, a distinctive feature of this book is that it highlights largely overlooked parallels between Jacobi's so-called philosophy of faith, Maimon's demand that a philosophical system be actualized, and Kant's prioritizing of the practical. As I hope to show, for each of these three thinkers, philosophy is based on freedom: it is based on the philosopher's freedom to construct a comprehensive explanation of human experience by employing his or her imaginative capacity and on the reader's freedom to accept or reject that explanation. Jacobi and Maimon enabled the post-Kantian German Idealists to see that only by radicalizing Kant's doctrine of the primacy of practical reason could philosophy hope to meet reason's demand for unconditioned explanation, without falling prey to a form of nihilism.

The manner in which the post-Kantian German Idealists radicalized Kant's prioritizing of the practical is the central topic of the second part of

<sup>43</sup> KrV, Bxix.

the book, which focuses on early works by J. G. Fichte and F. W. J. Schelling. As I mentioned earlier, on Kant's view, the thesis of the "primacy of the practical" concerns how we should conceive the relationship between the interest of reason in its speculative use, and the interest of reason in its practical use. (If the interest of reason in its speculative use consists in the cognition of objects, and if the interest of reason in its practical use consists in the determination of the will, then we should give primacy to the interest of reason in its practical use when these two interests come into conflict, and this entitles us to affirm the postulates of practical reason.) Yet Fichte and Schelling transform this thesis into the more radical claim that reason as a whole is in some sense grounded in the practical.

To clarify this view, the second part of the book starts by providing a Fichtean interpretation of Kant's Deduction of Freedom in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. On Fichte's view, the manner in which the Deduction of Freedom explains moral obligation can be used, more generally, to explain what grounds all constraint or necessitation, both in the theoretical and practical domains. In the effort to elucidate this Fichtean idea, I engage in the contemporary debate on the nature of transcendental arguments and make three central claims concerning the aim and method of such arguments: first, that transcendental arguments are concerned with a form of skepticism that questions our grounds for holding onto our beliefs; second, that such arguments function by revealing the relations of presupposition between our *commitments*, or between the concepts and beliefs that we *ascribe to ourselves*; third, that such arguments cannot provide a refutation of skepticism, but only an invitation to adopt a philosophical system or standpoint, a standpoint whose value can only be determined by inhabiting it. To support these three claims, I discuss the purpose of a thought experiment that Kant introduces in §6 of the *Analytic* in the second *Critique*. I argue that the purpose of this thought experiment is to elicit from us respect for the moral law. If the example does elicit such respect, that fact demonstrates we have determined our freedom by accepting Kant's invitation to uphold for ourselves the idea or ideal of autonomy or pure self-determination as the highest norm for our conduct. Thus, the Deduction of Freedom affords a form of self-knowledge: it brings to consciousness a pre-reflective act of self-determination that grounds moral obligation. Or, employing Fichte's terms, the Deduction of Freedom shows that self-positing is the ground of moral obligation.

Yet, as I just mentioned, self-positing is, on Fichte's view, not only the explanatory ground of moral obligation but also the explanatory ground of all constraint or necessitation, in both the theoretical and practical domains. In chapter 4, I shed light on Fichte's complex view by building on the Fichtean interpretation of the Deduction of Freedom that I developed in chapter 3. In

addition to clarifying on its own terms the philosophical significance of Fichte's notion of the self-positing subject, a central aim of the chapter is to demonstrate that Fichte develops that notion in order to meet reason's demand for unconditioned explanation, without falling prey to the nihilistic consequences of philosophical reflection that Jacobi had diagnosed. To this end, the chapter starts by phrasing Jacobi's nihilism complaint in a manner that is conversant with current debates in metaphysics. In doing so, it shows that Jacobi and Fichte can still help us understand the place of freedom and the role of commitment within philosophical reflection. To bring the relationship between freedom and reason into focus, I clarify the idea that criticism and dogmatism represent two distinct, irrefutable, and theoretically indemonstrable philosophical systems, and offer two different interpretations of the idea that the German Idealist system is a "philosophy of practical postulates." The chapter ends with my argument that Fichte's notion of the self-positing subject fails to adequately explain the relation between subject and object that characterizes all states of human consciousness. For that reason, Schelling's hope of explaining the basic relational structure of human consciousness is the starting point for the third part of the book.

The third and final part of the book picks up where the second part left off: Fichte's notion of the self-positing subject issues in the view that there is a single fundamental entity, the "absolute I," which is constituted by two principles, a real and an ideal principle, or by two forms of activity, real and ideal activity. Moreover, on Fichte's view, the relation between real and ideal activity is simply another name for the relation between subject and object that characterizes all states of human consciousness. Yet, in the Jena period, Fichte does not seem to provide an adequate explanation for the basic relational structure of human consciousness. If so, then it appears as if Fichte gives up on the project of German Idealism, which I have been characterizing as the attempt to meet the demand for a comprehensive, rational explanation of all aspects of human experience without falling prey to nihilism. My aim in chapter 5 is to show that Schelling's 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* and his *Ages of the World* fragments of 1810–15 are works motivated by the attempt to provide an explanation for the distinction and relation of dependence between real and ideal activity, or for the relation between subject and object that characterizes all states of human consciousness. In his attempt to explain the basic relational structure of human consciousness, Schelling develops the view that human experience is grounded in three irreducible elements—God, the natural world, and human beings—which relate to one another in three temporal relations: Creation, Revelation, and Redemption.

In the final chapter and conclusion, I turn to what, I argue, is fundamentally at stake in reason's conflict with itself: namely, our ability to affirm the value of the world and human action in the world. By examining certain aspects of Franz Rosenzweig's inheritance and critique of post-Kantian German Idealism, both in the *Star of Redemption* and in some of his early philosophical and theological writings, I show that Rosenzweig's engagement with this tradition was motivated by his attempt to overcome a form of world-denial resulting from an inability to solve the conflict of reason. By developing Schelling's peculiar pantheism into a philosophical system capable of being pictorially represented in the shape of a star, whose upward-facing triangle is formed by the relations between God, human beings, and the natural world, and whose downward-facing triangle is formed by the relations between Creation, Revelation, and Redemption, Rosenzweig arrived at a form of faith that enabled him to affirm the value of the world and of human action in the world, and to reconcile thinking and acting, knowing and willing. Thus, the trajectory of Rosenzweig's life and thought, which moves from a form of faith that denies the world to a form of faith that affirms it, mirrors the trajectory of thought that the book as a whole traverses. In doing so, it brings into focus what is philosophically and existentially at issue in the development of German philosophy from Kant, through post-Kantian German Idealism, to the thought of Franz Rosenzweig.

Before discussing some of the distinctive features of this book, I would like to say a few words about why there isn't a Hegel chapter. I have argued that the conflict of reason is the central problem shaping the contours of post-Kantian German Idealism, and I have pledged to tell the story of the rise and fall of this philosophical tradition as a story about the different interpretations, appropriations, and radicalizations of Kant's view that reason's quest for the unconditioned can only be realized practically. Arguably, Kant's strategy is captured in his famous claim that he had to "deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."<sup>44</sup> This book is an extended commentary on the fate of this Kantian view; it is also a *defense* of it. Yet, as early as *Faith and Knowledge* (1802), Hegel firmly declares his opposition to this Kantian strategy and defines philosophy as rational cognition of God or the Absolute. Hegel rightly notes that, for Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte, "the supersensuous is incapable of being known by [theoretical] Reason . . . all of them agree that . . . the Absolute is no more against Reason than it is for it; it is beyond Reason."<sup>45</sup> Yet, for Hegel, the view that God or the Absolute is an object of faith, not knowledge, amounts to the renunciation of philosophy; it amounts to "nothing but the absolute restriction of Reason to the form of finitude"; it is

<sup>44</sup> KrV, Bxxx.

<sup>45</sup> HGW, 4:316; FK, 56.