

The Possibility of Metaphysics in the Kantian System

Eugen STAIKU¹

¹PhD student, "Stefan cel Mare"
University of Suceava, Romania;
staicueugen1@gmail.com

Abstract: *Kant seeks to establish metaphysics as a rigorous science grounded in synthetic a priori judgments, those judgments that extend knowledge without relying on experience. He argues that metaphysical knowledge must rest on principles that are both universal and necessary, akin to those in mathematics and natural science. By critically examining the conditions that make experience possible (such as space, time, and the categories of the understanding), Kant aims to demonstrate how metaphysics can yield genuine knowledge. This paper summarizes Kant's critical project to secure metaphysics as a science, explaining his distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, the role of a priori conditions of knowledge, and the way this framework aspires to scientific status. The implications of Kant's model are also considered, including its influence on contemporary philosophy and interdisciplinary thought. (Kant, 1998, 21)*

Keywords: *Kantian system; metaphysics; metaphysics as a science; analytic judgments; synthetic judgments.*

How to cite: Staicu, E. (2025). The possibility of metaphysics in the Kantian system. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Philosophy & Humanistic Sciences*, 12(1), 50-61. <https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenphs/12.1/83>

Introduction: The challenge of metaphysics and Kant's response

Historically, metaphysics held the lofty title of “queen of all sciences,” yet it fell into disrepute due to persistent disputes and lack of progress (Kant, 1998). Dogmatic metaphysicians claimed knowledge beyond experience, while sceptics like Hume cast doubt on principles (e.g. causality) that lacked empirical origin. The result was a crisis: metaphysics languished in uncertainty and contradiction. Immanuel Kant's response was a “critical turn”: before doing metaphysics, reason must examine its own powers and limits. Kant proposed that only by understanding how knowledge is possible a priori (independent of experience) can metaphysics be placed on secure footing. Drawing inspiration from the successes of mathematics and Newtonian physics, Kant sought to transform metaphysics through a new methodology. He insisted on rigorous demarcation of disciplines and a methodological precision comparable to the exact sciences (Kant, 1998). In this critical project, Kant does not simply continue the old metaphysical tradition — he reforms it. Metaphysics, if possible, at all, must become the science that investigates the very conditions and limits of human knowledge. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783) together attempt to answer a fundamental question: How are synthetic a priori judgments possible? The answer to this question, Kant argues, will rescue metaphysics by grounding it in the a priori principles that underlie experience (Kant, 1998).

Kant's project: The critical transformation of metaphysics

Kant's project begins with a Copernican revolution in philosophy. Instead of assuming that knowledge must conform to objects (as prior metaphysicians did), Kant proposes that objects conform to our way of knowing. This critical shift transforms metaphysics from speculative dogma into an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of experience. Previously, metaphysicians tried to grasp things-in-themselves beyond experience and fell into endless controversy. Kant, by contrast, limits metaphysics to examining how any object of experience can be known a priori. He aims to secure metaphysics as a science by giving it a proper foundation and scope. As Kant writes, metaphysics should have “its own and clearly delimited domain” and not encroach on empirical sciences (such as physics or psychology) that rely on experience (Kant, 1987). Metaphysical knowledge, for Kant, “originates from pure intellect and pure reason,” not from outer experience (physical observation) nor from inner experience (introspection)

(Kant, 1987). In other words, metaphysics must consist of pure a priori knowledge – concepts and principles that are inherent in reason itself.

To achieve this, Kant undertakes a critical examination of reason's capacities. He introduces a strict separation of analytic knowledge (clarifying concepts we already have) and synthetic knowledge (extending our knowledge by connecting concepts in new ways). All previous attempts at metaphysics failed, Kant argues, because they did not recognize this distinction and did not investigate how synthetic a priori knowledge is possible. Indeed, Kant credits David Hume with awakening him from "dogmatic slumber" by challenging the rationalist assumption that principles like causality are self-evident. Hume showed that if such principles are derived merely from habit, metaphysics has no firm basis. Kant's project is to find an alternative: a logical foundation within reason itself for principles like causality, so that science and metaphysics can have universally valid laws. This requires showing that reason possesses certain prior principles that nature must conform to. By undertaking this inquiry, Kant sets metaphysics on a new path: no longer a speculative theology or ontology, but a critique of pure reason investigating the preconditions of experience and knowledge. This critical project transforms the metaphysical tradition by restricting it to what can be scientifically known and by discarding pretensions to absolute knowledge of the unknowable. In doing so, Kant aligns metaphysics with the secure progress of science, seeking the same clarity and certainty found in mathematics and physics (Kant, 1998).

Conditions of possibility: space, time, and the categories

A centrepiece of Kant's solution is the identification of transcendental conditions that make experience possible. He argues that the mind is not a passive blank slate; rather, it actively structures experience through a priori forms. The most fundamental forms are space and time, which Kant calls the pure forms of sensibility. According to Kant, space and time are not learned from experience, but are the necessary framework within which any sensory experience occurs. "Space is not a discursive concept or a general notion of relations," Kant explains, "but a pure intuition" that underlies all external perceptions (Kant, 1998). Likewise, time is the pure intuition that underlies all internal and sequential experience. These forms are a priori in the sense that they are presupposed in any perception: we cannot experience any object except as in space and in time. Because space and time are built into our sensibility, they allow for synthetic a priori judgments in fields like mathematics. For example, geometry is possible because the structure of space (a priori) governs how we can construct figures, yielding universal truths not derived from observation.

Beyond sensibility, the categories of the understanding are the pure concepts that the mind brings to organize experience. These include concepts such as causality, substance, unity, plurality, etc. They function as innate rules by which the mind connects perceptions into coherent knowledge. Kant famously asserts that “the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience” (Kant, 1998). In other words, the categories (together with space and time) are not only how we experience objects, but they also define what any object is for us – they have objective validity for all phenomena. For instance, we judge events in time under the category of causality; this is a precondition for experiencing events as following laws of nature. Kant shows that without such a priori concepts, our sensations would remain disorganized and no scientific knowledge would be possible.

These transcendental conditions (space, time, categories) thus explain how synthetic a priori knowledge can exist. They are “pure presuppositions” built into reason itself that make experience possible (though they do not by themselves produce any empirical content) (Flonta, 2020). Kant emphasizes that while these a priori forms are necessary conditions for any experience, they are not sufficient to guarantee knowledge of any particular object – experience still requires empirical input. The forms and categories simply outline the framework that any possible experience must fit into (they are necessary for experience), but one must still have actual sensations for knowledge to arise (Flonta, 2020). This insight leads to Kant’s famous statement that thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind – both sensory data and a priori conceptual structure are needed for knowledge. By elucidating the a priori conditions of space, time, and the categories, Kant provides the foundation for synthetic a priori judgments: these judgments add new information (synthetic) that is nevertheless universally and necessarily true a priori, because they ultimately express the conditions that the knowing mind imposes on experience.

Epistemology and judgment: analytic vs. synthetic, a priori vs. a posteriori

Kant’s critical epistemology hinges on a clear distinction between types of judgments. He defines: (1) Analytic judgments – where the predicate concept is already contained in the subject concept, and (2) Synthetic judgments – where the predicate adds something new to the subject concept. For example, “All bodies are extended” is an analytic judgment, since the idea of extension (occupying space) is already implicit in

the concept body. One need only analyse the concept of body to see that extension is part of it; the judgment does not expand our knowledge (Kant, 1998). In contrast, “All bodies are heavy” (or “All bodies have weight”) is a synthetic judgment – the concept of weight is not contained in the concept of body, so asserting it enlarges our knowledge of bodies (Kant, 1998). Analytic judgments are true by virtue of the meanings of concepts and are necessarily true (by the law of non-contradiction), but they are merely explicative; they clarify what is already thought in the concept. Synthetic judgments are expansive; they connect concepts in a new way, providing new information that is not just unpacking a definition.

Equally important is the distinction between a priori and a posteriori (empirical) judgment. Posteriori judgments are derived from experience; they are contingent and only true as far as observed (for instance, “some bodies are heavy” could be known through experience). A priori judgments, however, are known independently of any particular experience; they carry a sense of necessity and strict universality (for example, “ $7 + 5 = 12$ ” or “a straight line is the shortest path between two points”). Kant notes that experience can tell us that things happen a certain way, but only a priori reasoning tells us it cannot be otherwise. Thus, a hallmark of a priori knowledge is that it is necessarily and universally true, whereas empirical generalizations are always tentative (true “so far as known”).

The crucial question that Kant raises is about the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments – judgments that are not merely analytic (they do add new information) yet are known a priori with necessity and universality. Traditional examples of synthetic a priori knowledge, according to Kant, include mathematical truths and fundamental principles of natural science (e.g., “Every event must have a cause”). Before Kant, philosophers often assumed that all a priori knowledge had to be analytic (trivial unpacking of definitions) and that anything synthetic had to come from experience. Kant boldly challenges this by asserting that without synthetic a priori judgments, neither mathematics nor pure science could exist. For example, geometry is synthetic a priori because its truths (like the sum of angles in a triangle equals 180° in Euclidean space) are not derivable by analysing concepts alone, yet they are known independently of experience and hold necessarily for any possible spatial construction. Similarly, the principle of causality (“every alteration has a cause”) is synthetic a priori: it is not true by definition of “alteration” or “event,” but it is assumed as a universal and necessary law for the experience of a sequence of events (Kant, 1998).

Kant’s analysis shows that analytic judgments are governed by the principle of non-contradiction – they are true if the predicate does not contradict the subject concept. This principle is a “universal and entirely

sufficient principle” for all analytic knowledge (Kant, 1985). However, Kant also emphasizes the limits of the principle of non-contradiction: by itself, it cannot produce new knowledge about the world. One can avoid contradictions and still say nothing substantive about reality. Therefore, while analytic judgments and logical consistency are necessary “for the clarity of concepts,” they are “not sufficient” to extend our knowledge of nature (Kant, 1998). Synthetic judgments are needed to actually inform us about the world. But how can such judgments be a priori, not grounded in experience yet legitimately extending knowledge? This is “the real problem of pure reason,” as Kant famously states: How are synthetic a priori judgments possible? (Kant, 1998). Solving this problem is key to establishing metaphysics as a science. Kant’s answer, as outlined in Section 2, is that synthetic a priori judgments are possible only by virtue of the mind’s a priori contribution to experience – the forms of intuition and categories that structure any possible experience. Because these conditions apply universally and necessarily to all objects of experience, any principle derived from them (such as causality, which is grounded in the category of cause-effect applied to time sequences) will hold true of all experienceable objects a priori.

In Kant’s epistemology, analytic/a priori judgments (e.g., “All bachelors are unmarried”) are tautologous but certainly true, analytic/a posteriori is an empty category (since if something is analytic, you don’t need experience to know it), synthetic/a posteriori are ordinary empirical facts (learned from experience), and synthetic/a priori are the keystone that makes universal science possible. Kant demonstrates that the entire edifice of scientific knowledge – including mathematics and fundamental physics – relies on synthetic a priori principles as its foundation. These judgments (like the axioms of geometry or the conservation laws in physics) are justified not by induction from instances (which would only give probable generalizations), but by their rooting in the a priori conditions of human cognition. By firmly distinguishing these categories of judgments, Kant exposes earlier metaphysicians’ errors and prepares the ground for a new, critical metaphysics.

Metaphysics as a science: Kant’s scientific framework

Having established the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge, Kant proceeds to claim that metaphysics – if reconstructed on this basis – can attain the status of a science. What does it mean for metaphysics to be a science? For Kant, a discipline qualifies as a science if it consists of systematic knowledge from first principles that are universal and necessary. Mathematics and theoretical physics exemplify this: they have foundational

axioms or laws from which further knowledge is derived. Kant wants metaphysics to have similar foundations. In the Preface to the Critique of Pure Reason, he observes that metaphysics had once commanded great respect (the “queen of all sciences”) due to the supreme importance of its object – the ultimate nature of reality – but it lost credibility because it lacked a secure method (Kant, 1998). To become scientific, metaphysics must undergo a revolution in method: instead of speculative leaps beyond experience, it must limit itself to what can be established by a priori reasoning about experience itself.

Kant identifies the “entire final goal of our speculative a priori knowledge” with synthetic principles that expand our understanding (Kant, 1998). In metaphysics (as in other theoretical sciences of reason), such synthetic a priori principles must serve as the first principles. For example, in Kant’s metaphysics of nature, the principle that “every event has a cause” or that “substance persists” are candidates for such foundational laws. These are not derived from experience (which can only show many instances, not necessity), but from the structure of reason that demands them for coherent experience. Because metaphysics deals with the most general aspects of reality and knowledge (e.g., existence, causality, substance, possibility, necessity, etc.), it seeks principles that are even more fundamental than those of physics – principles that any possible experience must conform to. Kant’s critical philosophy thus provides a framework for metaphysics as science: it must articulate the a priori conditions (forms of intuition and categories) and draw from them the fundamental principles that govern all phenomena. Metaphysics becomes, in effect, the science of the conditions of possible experience – a “meta-science” that undergirds all others.

Crucially, Kant’s metaphysics as a science is limited in scope. It cannot legitimately extend to things beyond possible experience (things-in-themselves). By confining metaphysics to the domain of phenomena (the world as structured by our cognitive faculties), Kant ensures it can make secure knowledge claims, but at the expense of renouncing knowledge of the absolute. This move is what safeguards metaphysics from speculative excess and grounds it in science. In the Prolegomena, Kant explicitly states that metaphysics, “by the nature of human reason,” must contain synthetic a priori knowledge – not to analyse concepts we already have, but to extend a priori knowledge in a systematic way (Kant, 1987). Metaphysics should aspire to systematic unity like Euclidean geometry or Newtonian mechanics, where a few axioms systematically yield many theorems or laws. In his Critique, Kant even provides an “architectonic” outline of metaphysics: divided into the metaphysics of nature (dealing with a priori principles of nature) and the metaphysics of morals (a priori principles of

ethics), each grounded in the appropriate a priori elements (understanding for nature, reason for morality). Thus, Kant establishes a template for doing metaphysics scientifically: start with secure a priori foundations and build a coherent system that yields knowledge claims with the same necessity and universality found in recognized sciences.

It is important to note that Kant's concept of science (*Wissenschaft*) in the 18th-century context is broad – it means any organized body of knowledge that follows logical principles. By this definition, a metaphysics grounded on the critical method can indeed be a science. Kant is “firmly and consistently attached to the conviction that universal and necessary statements – the only ones that constitute a science – cannot be derived from knowledge about particular facts” (Flonta, 2020). In other words, science (including metaphysics) demands principles that are not inductive generalizations from contingent experiences, but certainties rooted in reason. This is why a priori synthetic principles are indispensable: they provide the kind of certainty science requires. Under Kant's framework, metaphysics becomes scientific by finding such principles (for example, the principles of causality, substance, etc., in the Critique's “Analytic of Principles”) and by respecting the boundaries beyond which reason cannot acquire knowledge (as detailed in the Dialectic part of the Critique, which examines and curbs transcendent illusions).

In summary, Kant revives the possibility of metaphysics as a science by giving it a new foundation and method. Metaphysics must emulate the rigor of mathematics and natural science, employ a priori reasoning, and accept self-limitation to possible experience. The outcome is a “critical metaphysics” that is coherent, defensible, and integrated with the rest of human knowledge, rather than a collection of unfounded speculative claims. Kant's success in this endeavour can be seen in how subsequent philosophy took shape: his critical method became the starting point for later thinkers, and any metaphysics after Kant had to grapple with the standards he set.

Contemporary implications: Kant's legacy in philosophy and beyond

Kant's model of critical metaphysics has had profound implications well beyond his immediate context. By establishing that the human mind actively structures knowledge, Kant laid groundwork for later developments in philosophy, from German Idealism to 20th-century epistemology and cognitive science. One notable influence is on how we understand scientific knowledge. Philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn's analysis of scientific revolutions, for example, echoes a Kantian insight: scientific paradigms supply conceptual frameworks (not unlike Kantian categories) that shape how data are interpreted. Under

normal science, a community works with established concepts (analogous to analytic judgments within a framework), and during revolutionary shifts, entirely new synthetic connections are made that change the worldview. In Kantian terms, a scientific revolution might be seen as a change in some of the a priori assumptions scientists use to make sense of phenomena.

Kant's idea that certain truths can be known prior to experience also anticipated and influenced later debates in logic and mathematics. The notion of synthetic a priori judgments was challenged by later empiricist thinkers (like logical positivists) and defended or transformed by others (like phenomenologists and neo-Kantians). Even today, discussions in the philosophy of mathematics (for instance, whether mathematical truths are discovered or constructed) trace back to Kant's proposals about the nature of a priori knowledge.

In interdisciplinary contexts, Kant's critical metaphysics has informed fields such as linguistics and cognitive psychology. The idea that the mind has innate structures that shape experience is mirrored in theories of universal grammar (Noam Chomsky's proposal that the human mind has innate linguistic categories) and in cognitive science models that posit hard-wired frameworks for understanding the world (e.g. object permanence, intuitive physics in infants). These can be seen as modern echoes of Kant's thesis that the knowing subject contributes something fundamental to any experience of an ordered world.

Perhaps most intriguingly, Kant's insights resonate in our contemporary technological and scientific practices. In today's era of Big Data and AI, we find something analogous to Kant's synthetic knowledge generation: algorithms can synthesize vast amounts of data to predict or discover patterns that no single human directly experiences. For example, scientists use computer simulations and models (for climate, astrophysics, etc.) that yield knowledge about phenomena (like the existence of black holes or the behaviour of subatomic particles) before direct empirical confirmation. The prediction of black holes through Einstein's theory and their later empirical discovery by Roger Penrose and Stephen Hawking's work can be viewed in a Kantian light: the theory provided a kind of a priori framework (mathematical and conceptual) that anticipated a reality not yet observed. Only decades later did observations (with advanced telescopes) catch up to these theoretical synthetic judgments. This interplay of theory and experiment underscores Kant's point that our understanding often runs ahead of observation, guided by a priori reasoning.

Contemporary physics, especially quantum mechanics, also challenges and enriches Kant's framework. Quantum phenomena introduce scenarios that are deeply counterintuitive – particles that are waves,

influences that seem non-local (entanglement), events without definite causal order under classical description. These developments force philosophers to ask: do Kant's forms of intuition (space and time) and categories (like causality) apply in the same way at quantum scales? Some argue that while Kant's specific Newtonian-based framework has its limits, the general strategy of identifying the conceptual preconditions for scientific knowledge remains valuable. Others suggest that quantum theory requires expanding or modifying the Kantian conditions (for instance, incorporating probabilistic or non-classical logic into our framework of understanding). In any case, Kant's legacy endures in the questions we ask about knowledge: What are we presupposing when we observe or experiment? Are there invariant structures to how any rational being must experience the world?

In the broader philosophical landscape, neo-Kantian movements have explicitly built on Kant's ideas to engage with new domains. Ernst Cassirer, for example, extended Kantian principles to the study of culture and symbolic forms, arguing that disciplines like myth, language, and science each have their own a priori frameworks. This shows the versatility of Kant's notion of synthetic a priori conditions: it can be generalized beyond natural science to understanding how different domains of human culture structure experience in their own ways. Even in contemporary ethics and political philosophy, some echoes of Kant's critical method appear in the insistence on universal principles and the limits of what we can justify.

In summary, Kant's metaphysical model continues to influence contemporary thought by providing a template for understanding how frameworks of knowledge operate. Whether it is the paradigm-bound nature of science, the cognitive structures in the brain, or the assumptions behind AI algorithms, the Kantian perspective reminds us that knowledge is not just "out there" to be found – it is actively forged by the interplay of the mind's organizing activity and the world's input. This legacy ensures that Kant's critical metaphysics remains a relevant reference point in interdisciplinary discussions, demonstrating the enduring power of his vision of metaphysics as the science of human understanding itself.

Conclusion: coherence and limits of Kant's critical metaphysics

Kant's critical philosophy achieved a remarkable feat: it synthesized rationalism and empiricism into a coherent framework that explains how scientific knowledge is possible, while redefining the role of metaphysics. By grounding metaphysics in synthetic a priori judgments, Kant provided a clear rationale for metaphysical knowledge claims – they are valid insofar as they

articulate the universal conditions that any experience must satisfy. This gave metaphysics a new coherence: it became a disciplined inquiry with a definite subject matter (the a priori structure of experience) and a rigorous method (critical examination of reason), rather than an open-ended speculative adventure. In Kant's system, metaphysics can indeed lay claim to scientific status: it has foundational principles (rooted in the nature of reason), systematic unity, and it yields necessary, universally valid truths (within its domain).

However, Kant's metaphysics also comes with strict limits, which he himself insists upon. The very strategy that secures metaphysics – limiting it to conditions of possible experience – means that metaphysics can no longer dogmatically pronounce on things beyond any experience. Traditional metaphysical questions about the soul, the cosmos as a whole, or God are shown to transcend the bounds of what our faculties can know. Kant argues that whenever metaphysics strays into discussing “things-in-themselves” (entities as they are independent of our sensible and conceptual apparatus), it falls into irresolvable contradictions (antinomies) or unwarranted assertions. Thus, a critical metaphysics recognizes that it deals only with phenomena, not ultimate reality beyond phenomena. This is the price of having certainty: we attain secure knowledge of how appearances must conform to our cognition, but we must renounce any claim to knowledge of the noumenal realm (the “things-in-themselves”).

The coherence of Kant's metaphysics lies in how each part of his system supports the others. The theory of intuition (space and time) and the theory of categories together explain how experience is possible; the distinction of analytic vs. synthetic and the resolution of how synthetic a priori judgments are possible solve the central epistemological problem; the critique of dialectical illusion explains why metaphysics went astray before (seeking knowledge where it cannot have any); and the delineation of the boundaries of reason prevents future metaphysical mistakes. It is an impressively self-contained system: reason is both the subject and the object of metaphysical investigation, examining itself to understand what it can and cannot do.

At the same time, one might question whether Kant's critical metaphysics leaves us with a “timid” science of metaphysics – one that secures what it can know, but perhaps at the expense of some of the grander aspirations of classical metaphysics. For example, Kant concludes that while we can form regulative ideas of the soul, the world as a whole, and God (which guide inquiry or moral thinking), we cannot have theoretical knowledge of them. This represents a limit that some later thinkers found too restrictive, prompting attempts to go beyond Kant (as in Hegel's philosophy) or conversely to stay within those limits and focus elsewhere (as

in positivism, which dismisses metaphysics altogether). Yet, even in its limits, Kant's system shows a deep intellectual honesty and commitment to clarity: it draws a line between what we can know scientifically and where we must humbly admit ignorance or faith. In doing so, Kant did not destroy metaphysics but rather saved it from itself, redefining it in a way that it could not collapse under the weight of its own contradictions.

In conclusion, Kant demonstrated the possibility of metaphysics by fundamentally reinventing it. His critical system gave metaphysics a new foundation in the a priori structures of human cognition, thereby making it possible for metaphysics to yield genuine knowledge with the certainty of science. At the same time, he delineated the limits of metaphysical inquiry – a move that both secures the validity of metaphysical knowledge and prevents the discipline from making untenable claims. This balanced position – ambitious in scope yet moderate in claim – is the enduring legacy of the Kantian system. It ensures that metaphysics, as the “science of the boundaries of human reason,” remains a vital part of philosophy: always striving for universal knowledge, yet always mindful of the conditions and constraints that give knowledge meaning and validity in the first place.

Statement on the Use of AI Tools | *No AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing, editing, or data analysis for this manuscript. All work is original and completed solely by the listed author.*

References

- Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of pure reason*. IRI Publishing House.
- Kant, I. (1987). *Prolegomena to any future metaphysics that can be presented as a science*. Scientific and Encyclopaedic Publishing House.
- Kant, I. (1985). *General logic*. Scientific and Encyclopaedic Publishing House.
- Flonta, M. (2020). *Kant în lumea lui și în cea de astăzi [Kant in his world and in today's world]*. Humanitas
- Mureșan, V. (2009). *Legea morală la Kant [The Moral Law in Kant]*. University of Bucharest Publishing House.