

# Approximating Essence: On Kant's Successive Definitional Methodology<sup>1</sup>

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DRAFT VERSION / WORK IN PROGRESS

(forthcoming in: *Kant's Project of Enlightenment: Proceedings of the 14th International Kant Congress*, edited by Christoph Horn, Margit Ruffing, and Rainer Schäfer, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter)

## 1. Introduction

Immediate and late post-Kantian idealism has often taken Kant's critical works to rely on a more-or-less fixed conceptual machinery and, against this, proposed either a different conceptual system or a different foundation or grounding for the Kantian system supposedly in place. The idea is that Kant's definitions are at times *commonsensical* (as Hegel (GW 12:26–7) suggests for his concept of truth), and at times *technical and stipulative* (as Hegel (GW 20:79–80) suggests for his categories). In either case, however, Kant purportedly presents them to the reader “up-front” and then works with those fixed meanings going forward.<sup>2</sup>

In recent scholarship an alternative perspective on Kant's definitional methodology has emerged: it takes seriously his insistence that definitions cannot be set in stone at the outset of a metaphysical investigation, but instead must be developed successively over the course of it, and should ideally be finalized only at the end.<sup>3</sup> As Kant puts it:

[...] In philosophy one must not imitate mathematics in putting the definitions first, unless perhaps as a mere experiment. For since they are analyses of given concepts, these concepts, though perhaps only still confused, come first, and the incomplete exposition precedes the complete one, so that we can often infer much from some marks that we have drawn from an as yet uncompleted analysis before we have arrived at a complete exposition, i.e., at a definition; in a word, it follows that in philosophy the definition, as distinctness made precise, must conclude rather than begin the work. (A730–1/B758–9)

This successive definitional methodology is of crucial significance in the first *Critique*.<sup>4</sup> It puts Kant in the position, for some of our most fundamental concepts, to successively advance “closer to [the] essence” (A126) of what they purport to designate. This Kantian idea of approximating essence in definition will be my focus here.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of Kant quotes follow the *Cambridge Edition*, with occasional modifications.

<sup>2</sup> For criticism of Kant along similar lines from late German idealism, see Trendelenburg's (1870, 164–6) discussion of Kant's definition of “subjective” and “objective.”

<sup>3</sup> See Adorno (1962, 26–31); Conant (2017, 93–7); Henrich (1976, 130–42, 178–80); Kern (2023, 99–105); Kreis (2015, 151–4); Longuenesse (1998, 211–27). Adorno and Conant focus on the *general* methodological remarks from the Doctrine of Method that will be at issue in §2. Henrich, Kern, Kreis, and Longuenesse investigate *applications* of that methodology over the course of Kant's critical inquiry, much like §3 below: each of them discusses a different relation, the definition and conceptual grasp of which is transformed throughout the first *Critique*. Henrich's is a discussion of the relation of self-consciousness and objectivity, Kern's of appearances and things in themselves, Kreis's of intuition and judgment, and Longuenesse's of sensibility and understanding.

<sup>4</sup> It is, however, an idea that Kant had been committed to long before the critical philosophy: the “early *Preisschrift*” from 1764 already contains the claim that “In metaphysics I may never begin with a definition. Far from being the first thing I know about the object, the definition is nearly always the last thing I come to know” (UD 2:283).

Two caveats are in order: first, Kant’s concern is not with the *genetic* succession or development of concepts by way of a deduction from a higher principle, as is the case in Fichte. Second, contrary to what has been suggested in recent scholarship (Conant 2017, 93–7), his concern is neither with the *dialectical* development of the basic concepts of metaphysics from their inherently contradictory relations to one another, as is the case in Fichte and Hegel. Rather, Kant’s successive methodology is *didactic*: it develops a definitional procedure by means of which human thinking can clarify and better grasp concepts it is *already* using at the outset of any definitional act. As will become apparent, this approach touches upon, but is mostly orthogonal to, questions about the genesis of the concepts in question.

The essay will proceed as follows: in §2, I develop a general reading of Kant’s methodology of definition specified in the Doctrines of Method of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV) and of the *Jäsche Logic* (Log). In §3, I give an account of what I take to be the most crucial application of that methodology, which nonetheless is a lacuna in recent scholarship: Kant’s successive definition of the concept of the understanding in general, or the overall capacity for thought and cognition. In §4, I close by suggesting how this application might matter for Kant’s project of enlightenment.

## 2. Kant on Successive Definition

According to Kant, a definition is “a sufficiently distinct and precise concept” (Log §99), and a concept is “a general [...] representation of what is common to several objects” (Log §1).<sup>5</sup> He distinguishes between “given” and “made” concepts. Both labels generally apply only to the *content* of concepts because “the form of a concept, as a discursive representation, is always made” (Log §4). Only mathematical concepts are made in form *and* content (Log §102)—in defining the concept of, e.g., a specific triangle or numerical value, we *thereby* also “exhibit” their “object [...] a priori in intuition” (A730/B758). Given concepts come in two varieties, but I will suppress that internal rift for now and focus on their shared feature: they are given in that we do not arbitrarily craft them. “A concept is given insofar as it does not arise from my faculty of choice.” (V-Lo/Wiener 24:914)

An initial distinction falls out of this: that between *a priori made concepts of mathematics* and *a posteriori given concepts of experience*. The latter differ from the former in that their content is given empirically—and here we depend on our experiential progress. “Thus in the concept of gold one person might think, besides its weight, color, and ductility, its property of not rusting, while another might know nothing about this.” (A728/B756) We can only explicate such concepts further

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<sup>5</sup> Compare the analogous definitions of concepts (A320/B376) and definitions (A727n/B755n) in the *KrV*. For the latter, Kant introduces another feature, *originality*—on that, see note 8 below.

as experience progresses. Kant accordingly calls the definition of mathematical concepts *construction* and that of experiential concepts *explication* (A727–30/B755–8; Log §§100–2).<sup>6</sup>

Both construction and explication are *synthetic* (as opposed to *analytic*) types of definition: defining concepts this way, “I ought not to analyze what lies *in them*, but to become acquainted [...] with what belongs *to them*” (Log §102n, see also A730/B758). Much like in Kant’s more well-known *a priori/a posteriori* and *synthetic/analytic* distinctions regarding judgments (A6–10/B10–18), the former concerns the *source* or *grounding* of definitions, and the latter their *structure* or *procedure* of being carried out. Kant adds to this one more distinction, which concerns the *proper goal* of a definition:

By mere *definitions of names*, or *nominal definitions*, are to be understood those that contain the meaning that one [...] give[s] to a certain name, and which therefore signify only the logical essence of their object, or which serve merely for distinguishing it from other objects. *Definitions of things*, or *real definitions*, on the other hand, are ones that suffice for cognition of the object according to its inner determinations, since they present the possibility of the object from inner marks. (Log §106)<sup>7</sup>

According to the goal of *real* definition, then, only mathematical construction is fully successful, for we construct its object along with it. By contrast, for experiential concepts we can never fully attain a real definition—to capture “the essence of the thing, the first ground of possibility”—for they “allow only nominal definitions” (Log §106n2), for the reasons discussed in the gold example above.<sup>8</sup> Our actual use of experiential concepts, however, makes this nominal goal fully sufficient:

One makes use of certain marks only as long as they are sufficient for making distinctions[...]. When, e.g., water and its properties are under discussion, one will not stop at what is intended by the word ‘water’ but rather advance to experiments [...]; thus the putative definition is nothing other than the determination of the word. (A728/B756)

Kant introduces his notion of successive approximation in definition for exactly such purposes: “one can make given concepts distinct only insofar as one successively makes their marks clear” (Log §104). For experiential concepts, empirical “approximations to [real] definition” (Log §105) in their explication are all we need to clarify them enough for empirical use.

But what about metaphysical concepts? So far I have repressed an internal distinction between concepts *given a posteriori* and concepts *given a priori*. In *Log*, Kant reserves in-depth treatment of the latter for metaphysics (Log §3n1). In the *KrV*, however, he investigates philosophy *as metaphysics*, and this gives critical import to his insistence on successive definition—that “in phi-

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<sup>6</sup> At Log §102, Kant initially uses the term “exposition” for the latter; however, afterwards (Log §105) he uses that expression in keeping with the terminology of the *KrV* discussed in §3, which makes the *KrV*’s term “explication” appropriate here. For the definition of mathematical concepts, Kant also considers the term “declaration” (A729/B757; Log §103n).

<sup>7</sup> See also Log 9:61–4; A241–2n.

<sup>8</sup> Kant at times toys with the idea to simply “den[y]” endeavors other than mathematics “the honorary title of ‘definition’” (A730/B758, see also Log §103), as they lack the *unconditionedness* or *originality* he reserves for that exalted title (A727n/B755n). Ultimately, however, he consistently embraces the more pragmatic stance to which I turn now.

losophy definition, as distinctness made precise, must conclude rather than begin the work” (A730–1/B758–9).

### 3. Defining the Understanding in General

Given concepts factor into the *KrV* at key points: the unity of apperception is described as the underlying unity of all “given concepts” (B131), and boundary concepts function “as a boundary for given concepts” (A254/B310). However, Kant only provides an indication of their nature in the *KrV*’s concluding Doctrine of Method: there, he distinguishes mathematical concepts from those “given to me either through the nature of the understanding or through experience” (A729/B757). The second kind, experientially given concepts, is well enough understood by now. But the first kind should give us pause: the notion of the understanding as a *giver* of concepts is thus far unexplained and can appear mysterious.

Due to Kant’s methodological self-constraint in *Log*, the idea of concepts given through the understanding is only mentioned in passing in a note on the abstractive nature of general logic (Log §5n1). Nonetheless, it is definitely crucial to Kant’s thinking about concepts: in a *Reflexion* from his lecture notes, he distinguishes between “empirical” concepts and those that “originate [...] *through the nature* of the understanding” (R2995, 16:607). And in the *Vienna Logic*, he remarks that concepts “can be given [...] either a priori merely in the understanding, or a posteriori through experience” (V-Lo/Wiener 24:914), which in turn maps onto a distinction that *is* included in *Log*—that between conceptual givenness a priori and a posteriori (Log §§4, 101).

Categories, to Kant, are a species of concepts given a priori: they have their “origin solely in the understanding (not in a pure image of sensibility)” (A320/B377). It is *solely* in the understanding because categories “aris[e] from the understanding even *as to content*” (Log §3). As we have seen, a concept is given if it is not up to our deliberation to craft it. By Kant’s own lights, this does not mean that the categories are innate—he vigorously protests against that charge in his debate with Eberhard and instead calls them “original acquisition[s]” (ÜE 8:221). There is a question as to the exact nature of this original acquisition within the *ontogenesis* and *Bildung* of a subject, and Kant develops his thoughts on that elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> The decisive point for metaphysical definition is merely this: it is only in acquiring its original and pure concepts from itself that the understanding *becomes what it is*.

Kant insists that “There must indeed be a ground for [the acquisition] in the subject which makes it possible that these [concepts] can arise in this and no other manner, [...] and this ground at least is *innate*.” (ÜE 8:221) This ground is the nascent potential of the understanding to come into its own and actualize its essential form—for a subject-to-be to become self-conscious.

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<sup>9</sup> See Anth 7:127–31.

It is the acquisition of the categories *by* the understanding and *from* the understanding itself that constitutes a thinker and cognizer. Call this acquisition the understanding's *original self-knowledge*. I want to suggest that the Transcendental Analytic should be seen as a means to help the understanding attain an additional, critical form of self-knowledge—*definitional self-knowledge*.

Kant introduces a special type of definition for the a priori given concepts of metaphysics: *exposition* (A728–9/B756–7). It is an *analytic* type and also proceeds successively: “The *expounding* of a concept consists in the interlinked (successive) representation of its marks, insofar as these are found through analysis.” (Log §105) What is more, it is just as necessarily open-ended as experiential explication—the goal of real definition is constitutively out of reach for it:

[N]o concept given a priori can be defined, e.g., substance, cause, right, equity, etc. For I can never be certain that the distinct representation of a (still confused) given concept has been exhaustively developed unless I know that it is adequate to the object. But since the concept [...], as it is given, can contain many obscure representations, which we pass by in our analysis though we always use them in application, the exhaustiveness of the analysis of my concept is always doubtful, and by many appropriate examples can only be made *probably* but never *apodictically* certain. (A728–9/B756–7)<sup>10</sup>

Thus, even though categories are “*ancestral concepts*” (A81/B107), their definition may be possible only in indefinite approximation. I will return to this in §4. For now, I want to point out that Kant applies exactly this definitional procedure to the understanding itself. At the end of the A Deduction, he writes:

We have above explained the *understanding* in various ways—through a spontaneity of cognition (in contrast to the receptivity of the sensibility), through a faculty for thinking, or a faculty of concepts, or also of judgments—which explanations, if one looks at them properly, come down to the same thing. Now we can characterize it as the *faculty of rules*. This designation is more fruitful, and comes closer to its essence. (A126)<sup>11</sup>

Note Kant's insistence that, as different as all these partial expositions of the concept of the understanding may appear, if we look at them properly, they come down to the same thing: they form an underlying unity. Right afterwards, Kant goes so far as to assert that his concern, when fully made explicit, should be seen as with the understanding *in general*—the capacity for thought overall, which encompasses the understanding more narrowly construed, the power of judgment, and reason (A130–3/B169–72). In later works, Kant sees the understanding in general as *the* “faculty of cognition” and as the *KrV*'s chief focus—although reason remains the highest grade of unity and fulfillment of this general capacity.<sup>12</sup> Thus Kant himself positions his *KrV*, especially in the Transcendental Analytic, as a successive definitional advancement towards the “essence” of the understanding, to be analytically expounded in the same way as the categories.

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<sup>10</sup> See also A240–1; Log §§104n, 105n2.

<sup>11</sup> For the earlier “designations,” see A19/B33, A50–2/B74–6, and A68–9/B93–4.

<sup>12</sup> See KU 5:168, 5:177–8; Anth 7:227.

#### 4. Self-Exposition as Enlightenment

In one regard, Kant's definitional concern with the understanding may appear unsurprising: he identifies it with self-consciousness (A117n, B133–4n); and thus its concept, “the concept [...] *I think*” (A341/B399), implicitly “accompanies all categories as their vehicle” (A348/B406). This concept is indeed “always comprehended among [the categories], and hence is likewise transcendental, but [...] can have no special title” (A341/B399–400), and so it makes sense that it should be included in an analysis of the fundamental concepts of metaphysics.

Yet in another regard, because the concept of the understanding is even more elusive than the categories—it does not have its own place among them, but simultaneously *encompasses* and *permeates* them—, analyzing it is a task that is easily overlooked. To bring the understanding under its proper concept, to definitionally approximate its essence, is also to delineate its inherent bounds. This definitional self-knowledge of the understanding does not “come for free” to us as thinkers and cognizers as such. It requires an exposition, as far as it is available to us as “finite thinking beings” (B72). And we can see that its successive exposition is a focal point of Kant's “critical investigation” (A237/B296). Looking back over the Deductions, the Schematism, and the Principles, Kant summarizes their point as follows:

[T]he understanding occupied merely with its empirical use, which does not reflect on the sources of its own cognition, may get along very well, but cannot accomplish one thing, namely, determining for itself the boundaries of its use and knowing what may lie within and what without its whole sphere; for to this end the deep inquiries that we have undertaken are requisite. (A238/B297)

Original self-knowledge is enough for the ordinary, empirical use of the understanding. Kant takes the achievement of his *KrV* to be *definitional* self-knowledge—cognition of what the understanding is entitled to, within its boundaries, via a successive exposition of its proper concept. That is why he characterizes the Transcendental Analytic as “the hitherto rarely-attempted *analysis of the faculty of understanding itself*” (A65/B90). It is the self-exposition of the understanding.

This suggests that the post-Kantian picture of Kant's definitional work, influential to this day, is misguided: he does not establish a fixed conceptual apparatus, but seeks to didactically equip human thought for “the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge” (Axi). This self-knowledge is a successive and arduous definitional task because we do not possess it in our ordinary ways of thinking: the understanding in general, in its ordinary use, does not have a concept of itself that truly exhibits “distinctness made precise” (A731/B759). Kant even argues that the task of arriving at such distinctness could be constitutively imperfectible—there might be no real definition of the understanding's essence in the offing. To still take up this arduous task of infinite approximation towards self-knowledge, then, becomes a matter of resolve. And this, finally, indicates that Kant's concern with definition is anything but a mere methodo-

logical technicality. His peculiar rendering of *Sapere aude!*—“Have courage to make use of your own understanding!” (WA 8:35)—as the motto of *Aufklärung* reveals the quest for definitional self-knowledge of the understanding as part of the very heart of enlightenment.

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