

# History of Philosophy

## 54 Kant on Metaphysics

### By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

#### Abstract:

In this lecture, Dr. Arthur Holmes examines Immanuel Kant's critique of **traditional metaphysics**, focusing on why human reason cannot achieve certain knowledge of reality beyond sensory experience. Kant argues that the human mind uses **a priori categories**—such as substance and causality—to organize perceptions, but these concepts only apply to **phenomena** (appearances) rather than **noumena** (things-in-themselves). Through a "transcendental dialectic," Kant identifies logical failures in the standard proofs for the existence of the **soul, the cosmos, and God**, labeling these errors as paralogisms and antinomies. He demonstrates that while these metaphysical ideas are unproven, they remain essential **regulative concepts** that guide human thought and prevent materialistic reductionism. Ultimately, Kant seeks to dismantle the illusion of metaphysical "knowledge" to create a necessary space for **moral and doctrinal belief**. This shift moves the justification for God and immortality from the realm of pure logic to the foundations of **practical ethics** and human action.

#### Briefing Document:

Kantian Metaphysics and the Transcendental Dialectic: A Critique of Speculative Reason

Executive Summary

Immanuel Kant's *Transcendental Dialectic* represents a pivotal shift in Western philosophy, marking the transition from the pursuit of certain metaphysical knowledge to the establishment of justifiable belief. The core objective of Kant's critique is to determine whether rationalistic metaphysics—as proposed by thinkers such as Descartes and Locke—is possible.

The analysis concludes that human knowledge is strictly limited to **phenomena** (appearances) rather than **noumena** (things-in-themselves). By examining the traditional arguments regarding the Mind, the Cosmos, and God, Kant demonstrates that these proofs inevitably fail because they misapply *a priori* categories of understanding to a reality beyond human experience. This failure, however, is not a total rejection of metaphysical themes; instead, Kant "does away with knowledge to make room for belief," reframing metaphysical ideas as "regulative concepts" that are essential for moral and practical life.

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### The Epistemological Framework

To understand Kant's critique of metaphysics, one must distinguish between the three sections of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

- **Transcendental Aesthetic:** Concerns sense perception.
- **Transcendental Analytic:** Concerns the judgments and understandings made through *a priori* categories.
- **Transcendental Dialectic:** Investigates the possibility of rational metaphysics and the arguments put forward by metaphysicians.

Kant's fundamental premise is that while we use categories (such as substance and causality) to interpret experience, we have no proof that these categories apply to reality as it exists independently of our perception.

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### Rational Psychology: The Paralogisms of the Soul

Kant examines "Rational Psychology," the attempt to prove the existence of a soul-substance, primarily stemming from Descartes' *cogito* ("I think, therefore I am"). He identifies the logical fallacy in this field as a **paralogism**—a step that goes beyond what logic allows.

### The Fallacy of Substance

- **The Argument:** Metaphysicians argue that because there is thinking, there must be a "thinking thing" (*res cogitans*) or a soul-substance.

- **The Critique:** Kant argues that "substance" is an *a priori* category we impose on experience. We know the "I" as a subject of thought, but we cannot logically infer that this "I" is an enduring, metaphysical substance. To do so is to "hypostasize" (treat as a substance) something that is not empirically known.
- **The Utility of the Idea:** Despite the lack of proof, Kant suggests the idea of the soul serves as a "regulative concept." It protects against **materialism** and the deterministic "blind causal mechanisms" of Newtonian science, which would otherwise eliminate the possibility of freedom and moral responsibility.

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### Rational Cosmology: The Antinomies of the World

In "Rational Cosmology," Kant explores the conflicting truths regarding the physical universe. He identifies these as **antinomies**—situations where both a thesis (A) and its antithesis (non-A) can be proven through a *reductio ad absurdum*.

#### The Four Conflicts of Reason

Kant structures the antinomies according to his four titles of categories:

Category	Thesis (Finite/Limited)	Antithesis (Infinite/Unlimited)
<b>Quantity</b>	The world has a beginning in time and space.	The world is infinite in time and space.
<b>Quality</b>	Matter consists of simple, indivisible parts.	There is nothing simple; everything is infinitely divisible.
<b>Relation</b>	There is causality through freedom (non-deterministic).	There is no freedom; everything is nature/determinism.
<b>Modality</b>	A necessary being exists as part of the world or its cause.	There is no necessary being; everything is contingent.

#### The Conclusion of Transcendental Idealism

Because logic can "prove" both sides of these contradictions, Kant concludes that space and time are not things-in-themselves but are "representations" within the

mind. This supports his **Transcendental Idealism**: objects of intuition are real as perceived, but they do not exist in this form outside of human sensibility.

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### Rational Theology: The Failure of God-Proofs

Kant deconstructs the three traditional arguments for the existence of God, showing a chain of dependency that eventually collapses.

1. **The Ontological Argument:** Attempts to prove God's existence from the concept of a necessary being. Kant famously argues that **existence is not a predicate** (a property or quality). To say "God exists" adds nothing to the concept of God; it merely posits the subject.
2. **The Cosmological Argument:** Argues that the contingent world requires a necessary cause. Kant claims this depends on the Ontological argument because it relies on the concept of a "necessary being," which he has already shown to be a problematic *a priori* concept.
3. **The Teleological (Physico-Theological) Argument:** Argues from the order of the universe to a Designer. Kant argues this only suggests an "architect," not a creator. To prove a creator, one must fall back on the Cosmological argument, which in turn falls back on the Ontological.

### The Ideal of Pure Reason

Though God's existence cannot be proven, Kant calls the idea of God an "**Ideal**"—a concept that caps off and unifies the whole of human knowledge. It is a "regulative concept" that governs how we think about the unity and order of the cosmos.

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### From Knowledge to Belief

The ultimate result of the *Transcendental Dialectic* is the transition from **Speculative Reason** to **Practical Reason**. Kant distinguishes between different types of certainty:

- **Doctrinal Belief:** A belief in God as a supreme intelligence to explain the order of nature; this remains unstable because it lacks proof.

- **Moral Belief:** A "moral certainty" based on action. If a human is morally bound to obey a "moral law," they must also be committed to the implications of that law—namely, the existence of God and a future world (immortality).

#### Final Outlook: The Future of Metaphysics

Kant's work serves as a *prolegomenon* (introduction) to any future metaphysics. He rejects the old "rationalistic metaphysics" of certainty but proposes an "**Ethico-theology.**" While we cannot have logical knowledge of God, the soul, or the ultimate nature of the world, we are led to affirm them through moral conviction and the needs of practical life.

## Study Guide:

### Study Guide: Kant's Transcendental Dialectic and the Critique of Metaphysics

This study guide examines the "Transcendental Dialectic" section of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, based on the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It explores Kant's systematic critique of rationalistic metaphysics regarding the mind, the cosmos, and the existence of God.

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#### Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. What is the primary objective of Kant's *Transcendental Dialectic*?
2. How does Kant distinguish between "phenomena" and "noumena"?
3. Why does Kant argue that rational metaphysics is not possible as a form of certain knowledge?
4. What is a "paralogism" in the context of rational psychology?
5. What is an "antinomy," and which branch of metaphysics does it affect?

6. Explain the "reductio ad absurdum" method Kant identifies in cosmological proofs.
7. Why does Kant reject the ontological argument for God's existence?
8. According to Kant, how are the teleological, cosmological, and ontological arguments interrelated?
9. What does it mean for a concept like "God" or "the soul" to be "regulative"?
10. What is the difference between "doctrinal belief" and "moral belief"?

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Part II: Answer Key

1. **What is the primary objective of Kant's *Transcendental Dialectic*?** The objective is to examine whether rationalistic metaphysics is possible by analyzing the proofs offered by metaphysicians concerning the mind, the cosmos, and God. Kant seeks to show that these proofs fail to provide knowledge of reality because they rely on the misapplication of a priori concepts.
2. **How does Kant distinguish between "phenomena" and "noumena"?** Phenomena are "appearances" or things as they seem to us through the lens of our senses and a priori categories. Noumena refer to "things in themselves" or reality as it exists independently of our perception, which Kant argues is inaccessible to human knowledge.
3. **Why does Kant argue that rational metaphysics is not possible as a form of certain knowledge?** Metaphysics is impossible as knowledge because human understanding is limited to experience interpreted through a priori categories. When reason attempts to apply these categories—which only apply to phenomena—to reality itself (the noumena), it results in logical fallacies and contradictions rather than certain knowledge.
4. **What is a "paralogism" in the context of rational psychology?** A paralogism is a logical step that goes beyond what can be proven by the premises. In rational psychology, it occurs when one moves from the direct experience "I think" to the metaphysical conclusion that the "I" is a "soul substance,"

thereby improperly applying the category of substance to something not empirically known.

5. **What is an "antinomy," and which branch of metaphysics does it affect?** An antinomy is a contradiction where arguments for both a thesis (A) and its antithesis (non-A) can be equally proven, violating the law of the excluded middle. This problem specifically affects rational cosmology when dealing with questions about the limits of time, space, and causality in the world.
6. **Explain the "reductio ad absurdum" method Kant identifies in cosmological proofs.** This logical procedure proves a thesis by first assuming its opposite is true and then showing that this assumption leads to a false or impossible conclusion. Kant demonstrates that metaphysicians use this method to "prove" both sides of a cosmological conflict, such as the world being both finite and infinite.
7. **Why does Kant reject the ontological argument for God's existence?** Kant argues that existence is not a property or a logical predicate that can be added to a subject. Furthermore, the ontological argument relies on the a priori category of "necessity," which is a category of understanding rather than a proven attribute of reality.
8. **According to Kant, how are the teleological, cosmological, and ontological arguments interrelated?** Kant posits that the teleological (orderer) argument depends on the cosmological (necessary cause) argument, which in turn depends on the ontological (necessary being) argument. Because the ontological argument fails at its foundation, the subsequent arguments that rely upon it also fail to provide proof.
9. **What does it mean for a concept like "God" or "the soul" to be "regulative"?** A regulative concept is an "ideal" that does not represent a known reality but instead serves to organize and synthesize our thinking. For example, the idea of the soul "regulates" thought by preventing a descent into materialism, while the idea of God crowns and unifies human knowledge.
10. **What is the difference between "doctrinal belief" and "moral belief"?** Doctrinal belief is an unstable intellectual assent to an ideal, such

as God as a supreme intelligence, which cannot be proven. Moral belief is a "moral certainty" based on the necessity of obeying moral law; it is a subjective but unshakable conviction that arises from practical action rather than logical proof.

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### Part III: Essay Questions

1. **The Boundaries of Reason:** Discuss Kant's statement that he "found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith." How does this transition from "knowledge" to "belief" redefine the purpose of metaphysics?
  2. **The Critique of Substance:** Analyze Kant's critique of the Cartesian *cogito*. Why does Kant believe that "I think, therefore I exist" does not justify the claim that the soul is an enduring substance?
  3. **The Logic of Antinomies:** Evaluate the four cosmological antinomies (quantity, quality, relation, and modality). Why does Kant believe that the ability to prove both a thesis and its antithesis necessitates a move toward "Transcendental Idealism"?
  4. **The Failure of Traditional Theology:** Explain the chain of dependency Kant establishes between the teleological, cosmological, and ontological proofs. Why is the rejection of "existence as a predicate" fatal to this entire chain?
  5. **Metaphysics as an Ideal:** Explore the role of the "Transcendental Ideal" in Kant's philosophy. Even if the existence of God and the soul cannot be proven, why does Kant argue they remain indispensable for human reason and morality?
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### Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Antinomy</b>	A logical contradiction where two opposing conclusions (thesis and antithesis) can both be proven true, violating the laws of logic.

<b>A Priori Categories</b>	Inherent concepts of the understanding (e.g., substance, causality, necessity) that the mind uses to interpret experience.
<b>Cosmology</b>	The branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature, origin, and structure of the physical universe.
<b>Hypostasize</b>	To treat a conceptual entity or quality as if it were a real, enduring physical substance or substratum.
<b>Noumena</b>	"Things in themselves"; reality as it exists independently of human perception and the categories of understanding.
<b>Paralogism</b>	A formal fallacy in which a conclusion exceeds what is logically required or permitted by the premises; specifically applied by Kant to rational psychology.
<b>Phenomena</b>	Things as they appear to us; the objects of our experience as processed by our senses and mental categories.
<b>Rational Psychology</b>	The study of the soul or mind as a substance using reason alone, beginning with the Cartesian <i>cogito</i> .
<b>Reductio ad Absurdum</b>	A mode of argumentation that seeks to establish a contention by deriving an absurdity from its denial.
<b>Regulative Concept</b>	A concept or "ideal" that does not provide knowledge of reality but directs and unifies the synthesis of experience.
<b>Transcendental Idealism</b>	The philosophical view that space, time, and categories are not things in themselves but are the mind's way of representing appearances.
<b>Transcendental Theology</b>	The attempt to use pure reason to prove the existence of a supreme being (God).