

# Kantian Reflections on Conceptual Limits

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**Abstract.** This paper reflects on Kantian exchanges between A. W. Moore and Sorin Baiasu. After briefly situating their exchange, I highlight Baiasu's clarification regarding Kant's distinction between knowledge and cognition. Although convincing, I suggest that Baiasu's objections could be strengthened with further discussion of the notion of a thing in itself as a limiting concept, as well as emphasis on Moore's use of 'concern', which might require further clarification. I conclude with broader reflections on what is at stake: not just armchair knowledge, but the coherence and relevance of Kant's practical philosophy under the assumption of its dependence on transcendental idealism.

**Key words:** Kant, limits, metaphilosophy, transcendental illusion, armchair knowledge.

What is it about Kant's philosophical thinking that makes it continually relevant, despite endless attempts at refutation?<sup>1</sup> Numerous answers could be given, but Kant's injunction to remain vigilant in the face of transcendental illusion stands out. For Kant, transcendental illusion

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 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. [This is] an **illusion** that cannot be avoided at all, just as little as we can avoid it that the sea appears higher in the middle than at the shores, since we see the former through higher rays of light [...] (*KrV* A297/B354)<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant urges that we remain indefatigable in shining the critical spotlight, dissipating but never fully extinguishing illusion, illusion that "has portrayed a reality to them when none is present" (*KrV* A501/B530).<sup>3</sup> Yet questions remain: Does Kant succumb to transcendental illusion with his idealism? Whence necessity? Is Kant committed to noumenal *knowledge* in the philosophical enterprise of drawing boundaries between the phenomenal and noumenal? What is

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1] Many commentators retool Kant's philosophy for problems he did not address. For scientific, cultural and political puzzles, see Friedman 2001; Makkreel and Luft 2009; and Baiasu, Pihlström, and Williams 2011. Others challenge his thought (e.g., Lu-Adler 2022).

2] Parenthetical references to the *Critique of Pure Reason* refer to the first prints of the two editions of that work. Other references to Kant's writings refer to the Royal Prussian Academy edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*) using the standard abbreviations. Unless noted, translations are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

3] See Grier 2001 and Pickering 2011 on Kant's account of transcendental illusion.

the epistemic status of knowledge (supposing it obtains) that we have synthetic a priori knowledge?

It indeed remains possible to reflect upon Kant's critical flashlight, illuminating cracks in the edifice that shines them. A. W. Moore (2012) attempts as much, returning with his more refined essay "Armchair Knowledge: Some Kantian Reflections." Moore's strategy is threefold: First, he identifies two central puzzles in philosophy (i.e. the possibility of armchair knowledge and grounds of necessity). Second, he specifies how Kant tries but fails to resolve them. And third, he attempts to move beyond Kant's letter, with his solution reflecting its title in Kantian spirit.

This paper engages with two ideas developed out of Baiasu's reply to Moore, especially as they pertain to limits. After briefly situating their philosophical exchange (§ I), I highlight Baiasu's helpful clarification regarding Kant's distinction between knowledge and cognition. Although largely convincing, I then suggest (§ II) that Baiasu's objections could be strengthened with further discussion of things in themselves, as limiting concepts, and of ambiguity in Moore as to what knowledge 'concerns'. I conclude (§ III) with broader reflections on what is at stake: not just armchair knowledge, but the coherence of Kant's practical philosophy under the assumption of its loose dependence on transcendental idealism, and its relevance for today.

## I. PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS

Kant tries to resolve two important philosophical problems. First, how are we to account for what Moore calls armchair knowledge, i.e. the justification of a priori knowledge?<sup>4</sup> In particular, "the question: 'How is synthetic *a priori* knowledge possible?' thus assumes a much wider significance for Kant. It eventually comes to embrace the question 'How is knowledge of an independent reality possible?' or, more broadly 'How is representation possible?'" (Moore 2012, 119). Second, there is the related but distinct philosophical question of accounting for necessity. There are many reasons to care about justifying necessity and a priori knowledge beyond the subject, such as saving mathematics from the empiricist difficulties. Kant sees strengths in the empiricist position, but he is worried of troublesome implications. Consider, for example, Hume's negative conclusions about the necessity and a priority of geometrical knowledge in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. According to Hume,

Geometry [...] never attains a perfect precision and exactness [...] The reason why I impute any defect to geometry is, because its original and fundamental principles are deriv'd merely from appearances [...] I own that this defect so far attends it, as to keep it from ever aspiring to a full certainty. (Hume 1978, 70-1)

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4] Armchair knowledge for Moore includes both analytic and synthetic varieties so long as the knowledge 'concerns what is beyond the subject'. See Bird 1962 and Strawson 1966 for classic takes. For resources contrary to Moore, see the defense of transcendental idealism in Allison 2004.

Hume, who argues that fundamental geometric principles are derived from appearances alone, thinks mathematicians commit conceptual errors by reasoning a priori. Conceptual errors are similarly made, he thinks, by metaphysicians who attempt to reason beyond experience in defending necessary knowledge about reality. Kant, by contrast, is concerned to defend the necessity and synthetic character of mathematical knowledge:

I cannot, however refrain from noting the damage that neglect of this otherwise seemingly insignificant and unimportant observation [i.e. mathematics' synthetic a priority] has brought upon philosophy. *Hume*, when he felt the call, worthy of a philosopher, cast his gaze over the entire field of pure *a priori* cognition [...] inadvertently lopped off a whole (and indeed most considerable) province of the same, namely pure mathematics. (*Prolegomena* 4: 272)

Not only should mathematical knowledge be necessary and precise, but the defense of such knowledge – as Kant suggests in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* – sets the stage for his defense of justified metaphysical knowledge.

Now Kant's specific way to resolve these interconnected philosophical problems hinges, as Moore argues, on his transcendental idealism,<sup>5</sup> and resolving them has for Kant both theoretical and practical import. Yet, for Moore, the panacea of transcendental idealism is also a poison: it entails a contradiction in Kant's own system. In other words, Kant's idealism saves armchair knowledge but only at the cost of a transcendental illusion it was supposed to guard against, namely being committed to knowledge about things in themselves exceeding the human standpoint. Related problems surrounding transcendental idealism have been extensively discussed elsewhere, so I will not touch on them here.<sup>6</sup> Salient aspects of these discussions, however, include questions as to whether noumena constitute real entities about which we can have knowledge, as well as more fundamental questions about drawing limits. Baiasu aims to disclose the roots of Kant's apparent error. In doing so, he reconsiders the contradiction that

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5] Kantian a priori knowledge is thought justified by appealing to the contribution of fundamental features of human mentality, i.e. that objects of knowledge appear constrained within space, time, and the categories. Necessity is justified by its grounding in the relative contingency of the human standpoint. Both are basic features of Kant's idealism. If Kant is correct that there is only one set of pure concepts and they happen to be Eurocentric ones, would human cultures that make use of different, possibly non-individualist concepts (e.g. not making use of 'substance', but instead a more collective or processual concept) be denigrated as cognitively deficient? This is worrisome, for 'conceptual imperialism' could be used to justify subordination (see Lu-Adler 2023). Consider Kant's rejection of the "monstrous [*Ungeheuer*] system" of Daoist philosopher Lao Tzu (whom he calls "Lao-Kiun") in *EAD* 8: 335. Kant rejects Lao Tzu's apparently substance-less mysticism, while Lao Tzu rejects reified concepts that Kant views essential to experience. I highlight this because it reveals an implication that falls out of Baiasu's discussion of Moore's "Relativised Concept Thesis" (Baiasu 20), but I cannot discuss this further.

6] See Baiasu (2016a), Kanterian (2016), and Moore (2016). Their exchange touches on concerns of the present paper, as well as specific contributions to this special issue. The engagements there, just like the present issue's, are not unlike the objections/replies to Descartes's *Meditations* (which keep in spirit with Moore's historically informed approach to philosophical puzzles).

Moore claims follows from Kant's commitment to transcendental idealism, as well as his general project of drawing limits. Even if Kant has some internal problems, Baiasu submits that Kant has resources for recovery.

## II. DEFENDING KANT

To address Moore's puzzles with armchair knowledge, Baiasu unpacks several important distinctions. This allows him to push back against Moore without having to draw from resources external to Kant's works. As Baiasu notes, "Moore defines armchair knowledge as 'knowledge that is independent of experience, in the sense that it is not warranted by experience' [...] The term 'armchair knowledge' is used by Moore to refer to a particular type of a priori knowledge, namely knowledge that *is* [as distinct from *could have been*] independent of experience" (Baiasu 2). Yet for Kant, we can first distinguish knowledge (*Wissen*) from cognition (*Erkenntnis*). The latter "is defined here [*KrV* A320/B376-7] as objective presentation with consciousness," where objective "seems to mean reference (whether direct or indirect) to an object, distinct from the subject" (Baiasu 7). Further, cognition is used by Kant in at least two separate ways, one requiring concepts *and* intuitions (cognition in the classic, narrow sense, e.g. *KrV* A77-8/B103), and the other in the wider sense where Kant admits that "intuitions and concepts *on their own* count as cognitions" (Baiasu 7; cf. to *RGV* 6:181 and "practical cognition [...] resting solely on reason [...]"). Baiasu notes that Moore seems to use the wider-sense variant for his purposes (the question of making sense of things), but often refers to this wider-sense cognition as 'knowledge'.

Things are further complicated with knowledge since it is not the same as Kantian cognition. It requires not only a presentation with objective reference, but also *assent* (*KrV* A820-2/B848-51; *Log* 9: 70), which is to say, "the need for some subjective and objective support, which respectively, are sufficient to convince me of the truth of the presentation and to provide certainty for everybody" (Baiasu 8-9). Since cognition and knowledge are not reducible concepts, as Moore apparently entertains, Baiasu concludes that he ought to rethink his notion of armchair knowledge at the basis of his critique.<sup>7</sup> Further, as Moore thinks that some armchair knowledge "appears to concern what is beyond the subject" (Moore 1), it is helpful that Baiasu problematizes Moore's notion of armchair knowledge. Following this cue, it may also be helpful to

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7] Even if Moore admits that his definition would require some fine-tuning, this will not obviously address his underlying Wittgensteinian questions: How can Kant draw limits between the phenomenal and the noumenal, one of which is apparently unknowable? Second, where to draw that line without any epistemic (theoretical) acquaintance with the other side? "Kant's project seems to involve drawing a limit to what we can make sense of. But that in turn can seem an incoherent enterprise" (Moore 2012, 135); cf. *Prol* 4: 360-2 where Kant discusses his "[...] use of the metaphor [*Sinnbildes*] of a *boundary* in order to fix limits of reason [...]"). Moore's question originates from the Preface of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)."

problematize Moore's sense of what it means for knowledge to *concern* something in the first place.

This is one aspect of Moore's argument that rightly puzzles Baiasu, namely the former's claim that we can coherently be said to have knowledge concerning things in themselves. (This is a problem for Moore in that it suggests to him that Kant's idealism is self-stultifying, but I do not consider that here.) Baiasu's conceptual clarification is helpful not only for suggesting potential pitfalls with Moore's initial definition of armchair knowledge,<sup>8</sup> but also because it helps to show why Moore's puzzle about analytic armchair knowledge of things in themselves is not what it seems. There are at least two additional modes of attack that Baiasu could have taken at this juncture to strengthen his critique. First, he could have pressed more explicitly on the ambiguities surrounding the use of 'concerning' language in Moore's argumentation.<sup>9</sup> Second, since his approach aims to remain immanent to Kant's critical system, he could have utilized textual remarks on the nature of things in themselves understood as "boundary concepts."<sup>10</sup> The first would be an external objection (namely that perhaps Moore is potentially equivocating, remaining imprecise in his language as Wittgenstein might say), while the second would be internal. Before concluding, I would like to reflect on

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8] Since cognition in the wide sense can obtain with mere concepts and their objective reference, it seems that the cognition of our concept for 'thing' would concern things in themselves. Baiasu cites Moore's example of analytic armchair knowledge we have of things in themselves "knowledge that things in themselves are things irrespective of how they are given to us, knowledge which concerns things in themselves" (Baiasu 6). But, as Baiasu shows, to say that we have *knowledge* of things in themselves goes too far, since that would require both a presentation and (subjective and objective) grounds for assent, neither of which we have for things in themselves. Baiasu identifies the problem to lie with Moore's conflation of knowledge and the different senses Kant makes for cognition. Additional problems arise from this move (see footnote 10 below).

9] What, for example, does it mean for knowledge to 'concern' things in themselves? Baiasu does highlight how Moore's particular use of this language raises questions, but a more direct discussion is needed. It is unclear that Moore's example of vixens (see Baiasu 9) concerns objects rather than ways that we make use of concepts and language. Extra attention to the question as to whether (and in what way it could be justified that) cognition in the wide sense could concern objects *metaphysically* and not merely reflexively (so as to charitably avoid equivocating 'concern') would deepen the critique, and Kant does have resources for this (recall Kant's discussion on transcendental illusion).

10] Moore finds it reasonable that we have bare knowledge of things in themselves as (existing, or possibly existing *things*), but even this inference is too hasty, for the category 'existence' is itself a mere piece of our mental machinery. To apply that concept beyond possible experience would be unjustified, though we can think the existence of things in themselves by analogy to our phenomenal experience. To avoid inferences of this sort and thereby evade problems concerning analytic armchair knowledge, Baiasu could have distinguished the ways that Kant discusses things in themselves, pointing to Kant's emphasis on their use as 'boundary concepts' (e.g. *KrV* A255/B311; cf. *KpV* 5: 54 and *Prol* 4: 355). It can be illuminating to compare what Kant has to say on this with the incomplete *Opus Postumum*. Kant's admittedly unsystematic final reflections show him ever interested in dealing with problems relating to Moore's puzzle. There, the thing in itself is "only a thought-entity without actuality (*ens rationis*), in order to designate a place for the representation of the object" (*OP* 22: 31); as "merely a principle" (22: 34); and a "thought-object" that "stands only like a cipher [*Ziffer*]" (22: 37).

the implications of Baiasu's defense for Kant by exploring what is at stake should the defense be unsuccessful.

### III. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

At first glance, it is not obvious that the question regarding the possibility or coherence of Kantian armchair knowledge has any bearing on Kant's ethics or political thought. Yet we need not look far to see implications for Kant's practical philosophy. We might consider, for instance, Baiasu's own defense of Kantian metaphysics in his chapter "Metaphysics and Moral Judgement" (2011). There, Baiasu argues that Kant's transcendental approach to metaphysics is needed to make his ethical theory more persuasive. More specifically, commentators of Kant's ethics who bracket his metaphysics, Baiasu shows, have a problem explaining the nature of contradiction in the application of the categorical imperative. Baiasu, not without good reason then, believes we must "retrieve some of the Kantian metaphysics which is usually left behind", if "Kant's ethics is to have any chance of being a guiding theory" (Baiasu 2011, 174). Non-metaphysical practical philosophies represent, for Baiasu, a potential ethical dead-end.

If this is all true, then much is at stake with Baiasu's defense of Kantian armchair knowledge, and so it is worth highlighting. In other words, if Kant's theoretical philosophy hinges on his idealism, then one of two things is likely to follow. If Moore's critique of the contradictions of transcendental idealism is successful, it is even more devastating than he sees (and so another lesson from Strawson 1966 is in order, but this time via a practical angle).<sup>11</sup> Supposing Moore is right could have long-reaching implications for the coherence of Kantian moral philosophy; unless we can think of things in themselves, we cannot make sense of freedom, nor could we make sense of Kant's juridical and legal ideas: that is, how we follow political laws not just as a matter of sensible incentives, but because they are right. Thinking of laws from the perspective of freedom is necessary to know how to change positive laws. On the other hand (and Baiasu is probably keen on this, given Baiasu 2011 and 2016b), the success of Baiasu's defense would underscore that the status of Kantian metaphysics – often thought a mere artifact for philosophers of history – therefore has potential consequences for making sense of freedom and of law relevant for today.

As seen, the question of Kantian armchair knowledge has important implications beyond metaphilosophy. It might motivate us to rethink the internal unity of Kant's system if transcendental idealism, which he took to be a heart to his system, is compromised. Clearly, then, Kantian reflections have import for rethinking *applied* problems today, as a reminder of the importance for thinking about limits and the sustainability of conceptual

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11] Similar debates are ongoing – not on the dependence of Kant's practical on the theoretical philosophy, but within the practical, i.e. with questions as to the (in)dependence of the categorical imperative on the universal principle of right. Baiasu 2016b takes a stand in this debate as well, so certainly he is concerned with practical implications from Moore's critique.

systems. Let us circle back to the question posed at the outset. What is it about Kant's thought that invites revisitation? Do commentators not merely beat a dead horse? Moore's response is keen:

The importance of Kant's doctrines does not depend on their detailed truth. It does not even depend on their broad truth. Kant may be fundamentally wrong. But if he is, his errors are of that deep sort that can still instruct us, prompt us, stimulate us, and guide us, opening up significant new possibilities for us to explore. (Moore 2012, 116)

Just as James Joyce once wryly remarked that scholars will continue to puzzle over his gestures toward the limit of language,<sup>12</sup> so also does Kant's thought continue to challenge us. Even if Kant's philosophical foundations waver, it is nonetheless profitable to reflect on the way he thinks. For Kant's way of thinking in the *Critique of Pure Reason* presses us to think about limits – not only in metaphilosophy, but the limits of nature, language, metaphysics, and even religion – just as it has challenged thinkers of the past.<sup>13</sup> As for the dead horse, let us not forget that Kant's father was a horse-harness maker. Kant's architectonic, when we think about it *philosophically*, should never be viewed in stasis, despite his armchair reflections. A proper design is resilient and flexible, so it should not surprise us that a return to Kant, in his armchair-drawing carriage, would make for a journey worth taking. Indeed, like a reliable horse-harness, it promises to take us somewhere new, even as we encounter novel limits in a changing world.

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[12] Since contributions in this special issue deal with Kant and Wittgenstein, the image of a philosophically scholastic-trained James Joyce, rebelling against the limits of language, is not, I think, unfitting. And as Moore is wont to engage both analytic and continental traditions insofar as they reflect on limits, we should also not be surprised to recall that Derrida would find Joyce's reflections illuminating for his own philosophical investigations that are not necessarily dissimilar in spirit from Moore.

[13] Philosophical minds as diverse as Hans Christian Ørsted, Charles Sanders Peirce, Martin Heidegger, and Mōu Zōngsān have expressed kindred influence from Kant, even in moving beyond him.

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