



What is Critical Idealism? Critical Idealism: A Brief Introduction by [Douglas R McGaughey](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

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Critical Idealism: A Brief Introduction

Critical Idealism has been out of favor at least since the Vienna Circle imperially proclaimed in the first third of the Twentieth Century that there are no such things as *a priori* synthetic judgments. Because that's what intellectuals in Europe wanted to hear as they turned away both from religious revelation and from Hegel's spiritual meta-narrative toward the physical world, few (if any) bothered to ask just what an *a priori* synthetic judgment was – according to Immanuel Kant. In fact, the Vienna Circle presupposed precisely what it denied. The *critical* moment in reflection shifts the focus from (usually external) *contents* (those things *about which* we claim to have knowledge) to focus on the (internal) *necessary conditions* that make it possible for us to experience any contents in the first place. The silent presupposition of these *necessary conditions* of any and all experience requires the *critical* reflection that Kant called reflecting judgment in addition to determining judgment. A *determining* judgment already „possesses“ the concept that it needs to classify the phenomena to which it refers. A *reflecting* judgment has no pre-established concept for the phenomena and must seek out the appropriate concept in order to classify the phenomena to which it refers (see “IV. On the Power of Judgment as an *a priori* Legislative Faculty” in the Introduction to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*). Reflecting judgments illustrate the activity of consciousness that *adds to* the phenomena of experience the concept that is given in the phenomena only as a concealed relationality (functionality) of the appearances among themselves, which require consciousness to grasp the relationality by means of a symbolic concept.

What makes Kant an “Idealist?”¹ Kant calls himself a Transcendental Idealist and Empirical Realist (*Critique of Pure Reason* A 369-370, 389, B 519). However, he qualifies these labels because Transcendental Idealism is easily, erroneously confused for what Kant calls the dogmatic Transcendental Idealism in the form of hypostatized Platonic ideas (*Critique of Pure Reason* B 371*) and Empirical Realism is easily, erroneously confused for what Kant calls Transcendental Realism (*Critique of Pure Reason* A 369), which takes objects in the senses to be given “in themselves,” rather than as representations experienced in consciousness. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant employs the notion of skeptical Transcendental Idealism (*Critique of Pure Reason* A 377), which he later proposes is best labelled Formal Idealism (*Critique of Pure Reason* B 519*). However, two years later in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, he wrote: “But if it be really an objectionable idealism to convert actual things (not appearances) into mere representations, by what name shall we call that which, conversely, changes mere representations into things? It may, I think, be called *dreaming* idealism, in contradistinction to

¹ I want to thank Marcel Chelba, author of *Introducere critică* (Rumania: Editura Crates, 2004) for pointing out that my original portrayal of Transcendental Idealism was incorrect.

the former, which may be called *visionary* idealism, both of which are to be refuted by my transcendental, or better, *critical* idealism.” (294). Hence, we find the label Critical Idealism in *Metaphysik Mrongovius* (1783) (928) and in *On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy* (1796) (Weischedel ed., 324). This website employs Critical Idealism as the best label following the Neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer (see his *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* and *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*).

What is at stake behind these labels? Kant defends a “third way” between Idealism (only imperceptible ideas are real) and Empiricism (only perceptible things are real). Although he calls his “third way” a form of Idealism in the sense that consciousness necessarily contributes something to the process of perception, he does not deny that we are actually experiencing “real” things in the senses. Hence, he can call himself an Empirical Realist. What he denies is that we merely by means of the senses have access to things as they “really are” (i.e., as they are “to themselves”). My perceptions of you are not the “real” you, nonetheless, there is no doubt that, were I to meet you or to read a text from you, you and your text are “real.” However, the problem is that my perceptions can deceive me. That is the risk taken in every relationship. In order for me to ensure that perceptions are accurate, Kant proposes that we take two steps: 1) that we focus on what is necessary for us to have perceptions in the first place (the transcendental turn to the *necessary conditions of possibility* of perceptible experience); and 2) that we employ concepts and rules/laws to “make sense” of our perceptions/representations. These two steps profile the active role of consciousness in any and all perception. Without the *necessary conditions of possibility*, which cannot themselves be given in perception, that make perception possible in the first place and the synthetic activity of subsuming phenomena under a concept/law in a determining judgment (when I already have grasped the concept/law) and in a reflecting judgment (when I need to search for the concept/law), understanding would be merely a passive experience either of “given” hypostatized ideas or something that occurs simply by opening one’s eyes. Kant’s “third way,” then involves *a priori* synthesis.

However, if we take synthesis to mean the outcome of Hegel’s dialectic (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), then, *obviously*, the notion of *a priori* synthetic judgment can only be metaphysical mumble jumbo. Where would such syntheses come from except from mental/spiritual speculations? Yet, clearly, what is *real* are not mental constructions but the perceptible, material, divisible, and, hence, measurable world of physical phenomena. Because the mind is imperceptible, immaterial, indivisible, and, hence, immeasurable, its speculations are fantasies in contrast to the empirical world. When we add Nominalism to the mix, which claims that universals are mere abstractions arrived at through our repetitive experience of sets of sense phenomena (i.e., universals are *mere names*), then what is mental life but a confusing mix of perceptions and abstractions that need sorting out? How do we sort them out? The answer commonly given today is that we sort them out by means of Critical Realism or Logical Positivism and Analytic Philosophy!

At the risk of over simplification, the anti-metaphysical epistemological assumption of Critical Realism, Logical Positivism, and Analytic Philosophy is that whatever structure we can ever experience/know is provided through the data of sense phenomena – however invisible that structure is. Statistics replace the precision of Platonic metaphysics. The more precise our statistical models, though always speculative, the closer we are to grasping the real world.

Hence, “realism” no longer means Platonic Realism (for which the real consists of unchanging universals and physical objects are mere copies and shadows of them). Rather, since the 12th century initiated a profound paradigm revolution with the introduction of Aristotle’s writings into the Latin world, realism has come to mean empirical (sense) experience that serves as the standard for the adjudicating of the veracity of human judgments. The mind has a role to play in Critical Realism because it is a tool for applying a set of rigorous strategies (methods) to aid in our appropriately and adequately grasping abstractly the empirical reality and invisible structures of experience. Not the least is the value of logic, which is the critical strategy for helping us to achieve rigorous precision with our constructed (Nominalist) abstractions/universals. According to Critical Realism, the anchor of our judgments, then, is no longer Platonic Realism’s eternal essences but the *givenness of the order* of physical phenomena. Humanity’s capacity for abstraction, which is possessed to varying degree by individuals (the degree from idiocy to genius), is an intellectual tool that *must necessarily* be applied to the task of adequately grasping empirical reality – hence, “Critical” Realism. Critical, here, means the rigorous application of the mental tool to the data. As an instrument for adjudicating with respect to what is known and what is potentially knowable, Critical Realism elevates humanity’s (or at least the genius’) mental tool above any and all metaphysical speculations (either philosophical or theological) because this tool alone is the exclusive pathway to arriving at adequate judgments with respect to reality. If we substitute metaphysics (e.g., Platonic Idealism or Hegelian Spirit) or revelation (e.g., Revealed Theology in addition to Natural Theology) for this instrument, we sell our birthright and sacrifice the only tool we have for grasping whatever truth that is possible for us to grasp. “Enlightenment” means in this context cultivating humanity’s capacities for *critically thinking about phenomena*. Some of us are more enlightened than others, but that is why we should listen to the experts.

Critical Realism is by no means a naïve Positivism, but Logical Positivism. It does not claim that all we have to do is “open our eyes” to see reality. The critical moment of Critical Realism reminds us that logic (and statistics) have to be employed if we are to adequately understand phenomena. Nonetheless, it must also be emphasized that Critical Realism involves speculation, which it does not deny, precisely because understanding requires abstraction and the rigor of logic in order to appropriately sort out the phenomena. However, Critical Realism maintains that, in light of our inability to escape speculations, the only ground for reining in unrestrained and misleading speculations is our ability to test out our judgments in empirical phenomena. Anything that is not verifiable in empirical experience or falsifiable in logic is not worthy of our time, and the very survival of our species is dependent upon our learning this lesson. As a consequence, frivolous activities like doctrinal religion are as threatening to enlightenment as are political ideologies and economic bubbles: religion because it requires shutting down reason in blind faith, political ideologies because they don’t allow for self-correction, and economic bubbles because they threaten the material basis for satisfying the basic needs of life. Nonetheless, if it should happen that the geniuses should get rich that benefits everyone.

Cynicism aside, Critical Realism is not entirely unlike what Critical Idealism calls *theoretical reason* that makes it possible for us to understand the world. However, to the extent that it is a strategy for understanding phenomena, it eclipses and/or assumes (in an uncharacteristically unexamined fashion) a) elements of theoretical reason itself as well as other aspects of the human condition that either make theoretical reason possible in the first place or b) elements of

the human condition that constitute additional, extraordinary capacities of humanity. Under the latter capacities in addition to *theoretical reason*, Critical Idealism includes *practical reason*.

Just what is Critical Idealism, then? It shares with Critical Realism that phenomena alone are not sufficient for us to understand our experience. However, rather than make the assumption that everything that one needs to understand experience (including universals and logic) are capable of being derived from the phenomena, Critical Idealism emphasizes the creative activity of consciousness with respect to profound conditions that are necessary for us to experience the world. In other words, Critical Idealism observes that a) in order to understand whatsoever, consciousness must *add things to the phenomena that are not derivable from the phenomena themselves* and b) points out that not everything that we are capable of doing as conscious beings is reducible to physical causal explanation. Nevertheless, Critical Idealism is just as suspicious of the unbridled speculation of dogmatic Transcendental Idealism (Platonism) and/or Theological Revelation as it is of Critical Realism!

A priori Synthetic Judgment

Theoretical Reason is by no means a mere mirroring of the physical world. However, it is also more than a mental activity of constructing abstractions on the basis of repetitive experience of phenomena and the identification of similarities among phenomena that allow memory to make a leap to *identity* (a universal concept). In 1777, Johann Nicolas Tetens pointed out in his *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung (Philosophical Insights with Respect to Human Nature and Its Development)* that one cannot get from an aggregate of particulars to a universal concept. Ernst Cassirer, a Neo-Kantian of the Marburg School from the first half of the Twentieth Century, discussed thoroughly the problems with respect to eliminating what is merely accidental from what is essential in a set of phenomena to claim that “more” must occur in the identification of a concept than the mere application of memory. Cassirer invoked Leonhard Euler’s functionalist theory of mathematics [$f(x)$] to propose that concepts are the result not merely of our experience of particulars but of our ability to focus on the *relationships* or *functions* operative in the particulars that are phenomena. In other words, concepts are not what Max Brod and Felix Weltsch called (A + x) or the adding up of particulars to arrive at a common element in memory (see volume three of Cassirer’s *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 13 of Cassirer’s works in Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001: 358 and 375). Rather, concepts consist in the human capacity to identify the functional relationships that govern a set of phenomena. Concepts neither precede phenomena (Platonic, dogmatic Transcendental Idealism) nor succeed phenomena as a process of abstraction that identifies identity in the phenomena (Nominalism/Critical Realism). Rather, there is no experience of concepts without first having encountered phenomena, but the concept is a functional relationship *of the phenomena* that is not (!) abstracted *out of the phenomena*. In short, in order for us to experience concepts, we must add a grasp of the functional relationship *to the phenomena*, and we *must add our grasp of functional relationality* to the phenomena. As far as we can know, we are the only species that can add such a grasp of functional relationships to the phenomena.

Concepts require consciousness to add something to the phenomena that the phenomena alone could never contribute were we not to experience phenomena. The activity of *adding to*

appearances is what Immanuel Kant calls *a priori* synthetic judgment. Such synthetic judgments are not the identification of something in common to a thesis and an antithesis or an *a posteriori* establishment of cause and effect (*Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 807-808), which is what Kant calls *nexus*, but, rather, *a priori* synthetic judgments consist in an *adding to*, which Kant calls *compositio* (*Critique of Pure Reason* B 201*). Kant distinguishes synthetic judgment from analytic judgment by pointing out that some judgments (synthetic) involve “supplementation” (*Erweiterung*) where as others (analytic) involve “illustration”/“elucidating” (*Erläuterung*) (*Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 968). For example, the analytic judgment “All unmarried men are bachelors” involves synonyms; however, the analytic judgments “All bodies have extension” and “All rivers have beds” provide more information than is obviously contained in their subjects, but this new information is actually no additional information than is contained in the respective subjects. In contrast, the synthetic judgment “This table is six feet by three feet” gives us more information than what is contained or presumed by the subject. We must add a system of measurement that is not given by either the concept of the subject itself or the phenomena to which the subject refers. Anyone unfamiliar with the measurement system would not be able to understand the judgment without first having to convert the measurements into the system with which s/he was familiar.

If the information of a synthetic judgment is not contained either in the subject or in the phenomena to which it refers, how is it possible that we are able to make such *a priori* synthetic judgments? This is the fundamental question that drives Kant’s notions of *theoretical and pure reason*. We are able to make such *a priori* synthetic judgments because there are things that we must be capable of adding to our sense perceptions (empirical intuitions) that are not contained in empirical intuition directly. This is the significance of the “Copernican Turn” for Critical Idealism. The Copernican model of the solar system not only illustrates our ability to add a mental model to our empirical intuition in order to properly understand the phenomena, but also it illustrates how what we “see” and add to what is not there is the phenomena” actually contradicts (!) our empirical perception (*Anschauung*, often misleadingly translated as “intuition”). There is nothing in the phenomena that can determine the truth of our *a priori* synthetic judgment because it is patently absurd on the basis of the phenomena to claim that the sun is standing still and the observer on earth is travelling some 1,000 miles/hour. Our model (our *a priori* synthetic judgment) forces us to deny our senses. It is not the phenomena that establish the validity of our judgment but the internal coherence of the mental model along with all other *necessary* and *a priori* synthetic judgments that fit together into an open-ended, ever expanding totality of judgments.

However, it would never occur to us to formulate the *a priori* synthetic judgment of the Copernican model were we not first to have the empirical perception of the movement of the sun – as misleading as the perception is. However, already with empirical intuition we encounter the capacity of *a priori* synthetic judgment. The unequivocal condition of empirical intuition is our ability to experience three-dimensional space and sequential time. There may be other *a priori* notions of space as in string theory and other *a priori* notions of time as in Heidegger’s analysis of time in terms of the concealed horizon of possibilities. However, for the proper (i.e., adequate) understanding of our empirical intuition, it is *necessary* that we grasp it in light of three-dimensional space and sequential time. These notions of space and time are the *necessary*

conditions of possibility for us to experience phenomena as we do, and we nowhere experience such pure space and pure time. Rather, we only experience objects *in space* and events *in time*.

What is *a priori* and synthetic, then, about our empirical intuition is that we never, in fact, experience either “space” or “time.” We experience phenomena “in” space as events “in” time, but the space and time “in” which the phenomena and events occur are incapable of perception. They constitute what Kant calls *pure* intuition in contrast to *empirical* intuition. In other words, the very notions of space and time that are *necessary* for us to experience phenomena as we do are notions that we must *add* to the phenomena of empirical intuition.

In addition to the addition of *pure* space and time as well as the symbolic grasp of relationality in phenomena that are added to appearances by consciousness in *theoretical reason*, Kant asked just what makes it possible for us to engage in *theoretical* reason? His answer is what he calls the “regulative” (i.e., incapable of being proved or disproved) ideas of *pure reason*. In very short form: these three ideas (a creator God, a coherent cosmos that sustains our creative freedom, and an enduring self-identity) are *necessary ideas* that are required by our experience of appearances if we are able to experience appearances whatsoever. In short, at the core of reason are a set of assumptions that anchor Kant’s entire project in philosophical theology.

What is Critical Idealism?

The epistemological hierarchy is crucial here: We would not have any occasion to *add* the *a priori* synthetic judgment of pure intuition to phenomena if we did not *first* (!) experience empirical intuition. In other words, *a priori* synthetic judgments do not (!) tell us *in advance of any and all experience* how the world must be – as is the case with dogmatic Transcendental Idealism. Rather, *we come to know how the world must necessarily be* because we experience phenomena that force us to *examine critically* just what the *a priori* synthetic *conditions of possibility* must *necessarily* be in order for us to experience the phenomena as we do. *Critique* here is not the mere analysis of the given phenomena, as is the case with Critical Realism. Rather, *critique* means precisely identifying the *necessary elements not (!) given in the phenomena in order for us to experience the phenomena as we do*. On the one hand, then, as with Critical Realism, Critical Idealism insists that we don’t grasp reality simply by “opening our eyes.” On the other hand, Critical Idealism does not claim that there is a transcendental realm of eternal Ideas (some kind of Platonic universals) independent of the world that could be grasped in advance of experience, which, in turn, tell us how phenomena must be. Critical Idealism is “critical” because it involves rigorous examination of *both* phenomena *and* the identification of the *a priori* synthetic elements that consciousness must *add to* the phenomena in order for us to experience the phenomena as we do. In short, the critique of Critical Idealism is concerned with careful reflection over those things that we must necessarily “see” *and add to the phenomena* that are not there in the phenomena in order for us to experience the phenomena. Unlike Critical Realism, then, that denies *a priori* synthetic judgment and is satisfied with statistical approximations for grasping “reality” with their pragmatic consequences, Critical Idealism requires that we invoke a whole “metaphysical” or “supersensible” dimension of experience of an extraordinary (if not unique) kind available to us as human beings that, in turn, makes it possible for us to experience phenomena. However, this is the point where the term “critical” of Critical Idealism shifts its attention to “idealism.” Critical Idealism is as skeptical with respect to

dogmatic Transcendental Idealism as it is certain that we require more than empirical intuition of phenomena in order to understand our experience.

Critical Idealism, Creative Freedom, and Practical Reason

Where Critical Idealism entirely distances itself from the theoretical reason of Critical Realism, Logical Positivism, and Analytic Philosophy is with the focus on practical reason. What our experience of empirical intuition (sense perception) suggests along with our dependence upon pure intuition of space and time and the *a priori* conceptual structure of the *pure* reason's presuppositions that makes understanding of empirical intuition possible is that we not only process empirical intuitions (passively), but *we also can initiate actions in the world intentionally (not just be instinct) that can actually change the world in ways the physical world on its own could never accomplish*. In short, we exercise a causal efficacy that is inseparable from but by no means reducible to the blind, mechanical causal system of the physical world. This causal efficacy constitutes our autonomous creative freedom.

In other words, when Critical Idealism speaks of “autonomy,” it is by no means talking about rugged individualism independent of institutions, society at large, and cultural tradition. Rather, autonomy has to do with our ability to initiate a sequence of events that nature could never accomplish on its own. Freedom, then, is not (!) *freedom-from any and all external restraints either physical or social*, but *freedom-for* individual creativity.

Our experience in the world, then, once again forces a supersensible dimension into the center of our self-understanding. Consciousness is *transcendental* not because it is anchored in some realm of Platonic, dogmatic Transcendental Idealism but because it consists of a system of *a priori* synthetic judgments that make theoretical reason (understanding of the world) possible and because it is the supersensible (i.e., imperceptible) dimension that is the location of our autonomous, creative freedom.

Our experience requires us to distinguish, then, between free choice (i.e., liberty) and creativity (i.e., freedom). Whereas it is not incorrect to label the capacity of creative freedom “free will,” practical reason insists that we must, nonetheless, carefully distinguish the “free will” of creative freedom from the “free will” of mere choice. Choice is concerned with existing options; creative freedom creates its own options by establishing its own ends toward which it strives. Other animals exercise choice but not the kind of creative freedom to anywhere near the degree that humanity does. Our ability to choose in the market place is entirely different, then, from our ability to create. Liberty is not autonomous freedom!

Another way to articulate this distinction between liberty and freedom is to point out that we can lose our liberty through incarceration, but we can never be robbed of our creativity as long as we are alive. It is precisely this difference that has made it possible for persons to survive the most horrible torture and years of solitary confinement.

The creative spirit is not defined by its situation. It takes us above and beyond the immediacy of our circumstances and makes it possible for us to “see things that aren’t there” and, in turn, to

structure our situation in imperceptible ways. Of course, then, everything depends upon just what it is that we “see that is not there.”

Practical reason claims that every causal system is grounded in and constitutes an order. What dreams teach us, at the very least perhaps, is that it is possible for us to have clear and distinct perception that is *not governed by order*. What distinguishes being awake from dreaming is that the former is and the latter is not governed by a system of law (physical laws). The chaos of dreams is precisely because there is no nexus of cause and effect and because there is no possibility of lawful *compositio* of *a priori* synthetic judgment that orders the intuitions. There is only a chaotic confusion of scenes and emotional response to those scenes that shift capriciously with only temporary islands of coherence. In contrast, the physical world, we have come to understand, is governed by a predictable, even blindly functioning, order of laws that only humanity appears to be able to grasp abstractly. The laws of nature are not written on the phenomena which conform to them.

The conclusions of theoretical reason, then, is that there is a system of laws governing physical events and that we are best served by exhausting our attempts at discerning a law in physical events before invoking any other form of causal explanation for physical events. For this reason, theoretical reason rejects miracles *not* (!) because it can prove or disprove whether miracles happen. To speak of a miracle is to offer a causal explanation for an event, and causes are incapable of proof or disproof because we can only experience their effects – not the causes themselves. However, theoretical reason dismisses miracles as a form of causal explanation for physical events because the conclusion that the event was caused by a miracle shuts down our search for a physical law that could (probably is) governing the event and *must* govern the event if we are to have understanding.

Practical reason, though, takes another tack with respect to order and cause. It claims that all causal systems conform to a system. However, the system of laws that govern creative freedom are not reducible to, nor are they entirely independent from, the blind, mechanical system of physical laws. Creative freedom could not be autonomous were it entirely governed by physical laws. Hence, the system of laws that govern creative freedom are not blind, mechanical laws of nature but self-legislated moral principles. In other words, the lawful order that governs the causal system of creative freedom is a moral kingdom of ends governed by moral principles and the dignity of every human being because all human beings regardless of mental or physical limitations possess a creative spark that elevates her/him *above nature*. Just as ignoring the laws of nature will get us into serious if not deadly trouble, so, too, ignoring the moral law will get us into serious if not deadly trouble. However, in the case of the moral law, it is left up to the individual whether or not s/he is going to act on the basis of a moral principle, and only the individual can know if there was a moral principle and just what the principle was that s/he applied to her/his decision and actions.

Practical reason, then, is concerned with creative freedom and the self-legislation of moral principles. It recognizes that we have no control over the consequences of our actions, but we do have control over the legislation of the principle that governs our actions. This is a remarkable strategy for approaching morality. What makes practical reason a constitutive moment of Critical Idealism is that it reverses the relationship between acting and knowing. It is not

because we know that we can act; rather, we know because we act. In other words, we know that we are moral beings because we are creative beings. Our very creativity is anchored in a moral order because there is no causal system without an order. Nonetheless, this moral order is no heteronomous external system of moral injunctions that can be imposed upon us or anyone else. The moral order is an autonomous system of moral principles that we must legislate for ourselves as individuals, and *no one can know but the self whether or not s/he has acted on the basis of a moral principle.*

In another post, we will engage the three criteria for the selection of moral maxims that are the Categorical Imperative as well as examine the three maxims of the understanding that provide us with an orientation in the immediacy of our having to act. We can end this initial run at Critical Idealism with the observation that *we are moral beings because we can be, not because we must be.*