



“An Email to a Friend: A Path to Clarity or On the Clarity Achievable by Means of Methodological Skepticism” von [Douglas R McGaughey](#) ist lizenziert unter einer [Creative Commons Namensnennung-Nicht kommerziell 4.0 International Lizenz](#).

An Email to a Friend:
A Path to Clarity or
On the Clarity Achievable by Means of Methodological Skepticism¹

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: This is an expanded version of the latest in a sequence of emails that Prof. Abdulkader Tayob and I have exchanged since the spring of 2019. Prof [Abdulkader Tayob](#) holds the chair in Islam, African Publics and Religious Values in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. Along with Andrea Brigaglia, he convened a conference in February of 2019 on “Moral and Ethical Frameworks and Performances” at which I presented the paper “Religion and Morality”.

Dear Abdulkader,

It’s great that you have been able to ‘take a break’! There’s never a need to apologize for a delayed response to a missive. Our world confronts us with too many demands for anyone to expect of another immediate attention ... Smile!

Thank you so much for your question with regard to achieving ‘clarity’ and ‘convincing others of the validity of the clarity one has achieved’! It became the focus of my two-hour, ‘power’-walks the last few days, which is the one point in my day devoted entirely to undistracted reflection – except when nature’s beauty intervenes Oh, what a privilege retirement is! Smile!

It is possible to take your question in at least two directions: 1) How have I, personally, reached the kind of ‘clarity’ that I have, and 2) how is it possible for the finite human species to achieve any ‘clarity’, whatsoever, by which s/he can convince the other of its validity?

My response to first question is only valuable to the degree that it illuminates the response to the second. The first question assumes that I’ve actually reached ‘clarity’. Laugh! If ‘clarity’ means ‘truth’, then at best I’ve managed to reach a kind of clarity *κατ’ ἀνθρώπων* (‘according to human understanding’), which is incapable of determining whether the clarity is *κατ’ ἀλήθειαν* (‘according to objective truth’). (See *Critique of Pure Reason* AA III, B767-768). The path on the way to this clarity has been stimulated and nudged by many others, of course! Their work has opened up shortcuts in the grasping and responding to conundrums that, otherwise, would have significantly delayed the clarity.

Nonetheless and because we can only think for ourselves, the clarity has been the consequence of a life-long, self-directed educational process that has had me fighting my way out of what I call ‘wet paper bags’: for example, the correspondence theory of truth, which includes liberal biblical scholarship (as a

¹ Special thanks to Prof. James R. Cochrane, Emeritus Professor from the University of Cape Town, for his careful reading and editorial corrections.

child already, I found conservative literalism indefensible), Utilitarianism and Pragmatism, as well as reductionist materialism, Heidegger, Hermeneutics, Process Theology, Platonism, Aristotelianism, as well as Postmodernism and Deconstructionism – to name a few paper bags. Thanks especially to Ernst Cassirer's corpus, I found a segue into the work of Immanuel Kant about twenty years ago. Along the way, I have maintained computerized notes of my reading, which has now accumulated to thousands of pages that I can easily access with an index software that I have. In short, any personal 'clarity' that I may possess is the product of a growth process that continues. The 'truth' is the 'way', not the goal, one might say ... Smile!

The second question is, obviously, of greater interest to me: Thought begins with ambiguity and strives for clarity. Margit and I now have the incredible joy of three grandsons under 5 years old. This past year they were all in Tübingen because two of our daughters with their families are Tübingen residents and Sarah, our oldest, was on sabbatical from Dickinson College in the USA. Although we raised three children ourselves, being around babies and young children as a grandparent is an incredibly different experience.

What has been most striking to me is to observe each child's development of the ability to distinguish between 'figure' and 'background'. It is uncanny how the 'exception' in the child's environment immediately attracts attention and focus (obviously, a capability that shapes adults, for good or ill). This capacity is made possible by the child learning, simultaneously, 'object permanence', which in turn is only possible when the child has learned the concept of the object: stated otherwise, object permanence is experienced once the child has learned something imperceptible (the concept) that stands for the perceptible (the object). This allows the child to grasp the notion that, although the object is not in its sight, it is not necessarily, permanently gone because one still has the concept. The child goes looking for the object (in the toy box, hidden under the couch pillow, etc.). I am not trained in early childhood development, but in my humble opinion, perhaps the most important intellectual achievement that we will ever accomplish occurs before the age of five (perhaps, already with two?!).

Of course, the child is oblivious with respect to grasping 'how' it is able to learn what it is learning. The child's entire focus is on its processing of the phenomena of its experience. However, this un-reflected, developmental process is grounded by a difference between a **universal, in-born, yet undeveloped capacity** to employ universal, imperceptible elements to **grasp particular, perceptible elements by means of repetitive processing**. This difference is similar to Noam Chomsky's distinction between a *universal*, linguistic 'deep structure', which is the condition for the child to develop the *particular*, linguistic 'surface structure' of its 'mother'-tongue. Neither the understanding of a set of particular phenomena nor the learning of a mother-tongue is automatic. It takes huge effort by the child eager to process its experience.

The child's 'eagerness' manifests a 'will'. However, there are two meanings to the will: 1) 'free will' in the sense of the 'liberty' (*freie Willkür*), intentional capricious choice within a stimulus-response structure ("I want this toy") and 2) 'autonomous freedom' (*Wille*), intentional initiation of a sequence of events that nature, left on its own, could never accomplish (playful fantasy that later becomes intentional creativity). **Liberty** can be curtailed by one's environment, but it **presupposes 'autonomous**

freedom' as the ability to do things that nature, on its own, cannot do. In other words, one can be imprisoned (have one's liberty curtailed) and, nonetheless, be free (creative).

Human beings, clearly, come into this world incomplete, and a developmental process that includes the need for intentional education is set in motion at birth both physically and by autonomous freedom both to a degree (although not different in kind) not encountered in any other species. Given her/his social world, the child can be empowered (or crippled) by the presence (or lack) of encouragement/opportunities with respect to this intentional, educational process, which involves more than simply understanding and the acquisition of skills (or 'theoretical reason') but concern for what one 'ought' to do (or 'practical reason').

As we get older, though, we come to doubt our capacity to grasp and understand 'object permanence'. We learn that our senses can 'trick' us, that things are not necessarily what we thought they were, and that the difference between the perceptible and the imperceptible makes it possible for us to deceive ourselves and others – as well as to be deceived by others. In short, both our theoretical reason (understanding of experience) and practical reason (determination of what 'ought' to be) are placed in doubt.

One common strategy for addressing this profound skepticism is to put ever more weight on the perceptible (empiricism) and the social (inherited traditions and institutions). With such an emphasis, the objects of my experience are taken to provide the proof-stone for my judgments and the enduring traditions of my community to provide the certainty of their correctness. Yet, for the reflecting person, the placing of weight on the empirical and traditions is problematic. If the empirical alone was the proof-stone for my judgments, what on earth would lead anyone to even question the movement of the sun? Furthermore, if my cultural traditions for themselves were the proof-stone for my judgments, then truth is an accident of birth or a condition of conversion into my tradition(s). Of course, this gets far more complex once empiricism extends beyond the bounds of Newtonian physics to the sub-atomic level and, even further, when one realizes that one's tradition can be used to deceive ourselves and others to further one's own or a group's selfish desires and self-interest.

What a mess!! Can it get even more complicated? Yes! The very language that we must use to make sense of experience is metaphorical, not literal. We learn that the meaning of words not only was never set in stone so that the same metaphor can have radically different meanings at any one point in (not to speak of across) time but also that the possibility of irony allows one not to mean what one says. Who is one's friend, and who is one's enemy? The friend of my friend ..., or the enemy of my friend????

An alternative path to empirical reductionism out of this ambiguity and doubt is called 'methodological skepticism'. It embraces the doubt that confronts us in the ceaseless flow of swirling phenomena (objects, traditions, and language). Yet, rather than insist that we must look more rigorously at the objects, traditions, and language of our experience, methodological skepticism asks: How is it even possible for me to experience objects, traditions, and languages, in the first place?

Such a question could merely set in motion an empirical examination of the conditions of experience as if the empirical data alone could determine what is required for us to experience the world as we do.

Materialistic reductionism in the form of ‘scientism’, sociology, and psychology rush in with empirical data in an attempt to account for our experience. Yet, in their blind commitment to object-permanence, they overlook that far more is involved in (and required for) experience than merely empirical data.

In order to understand that the sun is stationary and we are moving at some 1,000 m/h as the earth rotates, we have to employ imperceptible elements that no amount of empirical data provides: mathematics. This is a controversial claim, but what is not controversial is that one never encounters ‘1’ in phenomena much less a calculus formula that allows one to locate a moving object at a particular point in time (of course, something that the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle demonstrates is impossible at the sub-atomic level).

Yet, even mathematics is only a threshold into the imperceptible dimension of experience that is required to understand the perceptible. The very grasp of a concept that we can then apply to a particular set of perceptible phenomena requires (!) that we **add something imperceptible to the perceptible** in order to understand the perceptible. Furthermore, the question arises: how is it possible for us to add concepts to particular phenomena? The claim that we can suggests that there is a dimension to our experience that is imperceptible and irreducible to materialism, yet necessary, for us to experience, understand, and act responsibly in the world.

Take the example of causal explanation of events: The strategy of Critical Idealism, again, is not to investigate the empirical effects but the conditions that can be grasped only in the intelligible dimension of experience, which make it possible for the effect to occur – within the greatest systematic order possible. A causal system requires coherent, imperceptible lawfulness. Otherwise, life is merely a dream, and there is no possibility of coherent understanding of any kind, much less responsible agency.

With regard to physical events, **theoretical reason** applies imperceptible and universal, **physical lawfulness** (physical laws, statistical significance, and algorithms) to the phenomena in order to understand them. With regard to deciding what ‘ought to be’, **practical reason** applies imperceptible and universal, **moral laws** or ‘wide’, categorical imperatives (not narrow technical and culturally relative, hypothetical imperatives) to itself in order to act responsibly.²

When it comes to identifying the universal lawfulness of a physical event, the lawfulness is not directly given with the data, but must be **added to** the data (but not actually created) by theoretical reason. When it comes to identifying the universal, moral law, the law is, also, not directly given with the capacity of autonomous freedom but must be **added to** the situation (but not actually created) by practical reason. However, when it comes to an explanation of a physical event, we have at least one aspect that is perceptible: physical phenomena. In contrast, when it comes to an explanation of moral agency, we have no anchor in physical phenomena for explaining, much less proving, the causality of autonomous freedom and moral laws because were that the case, it would mean physical determinism.

² See section “VII [Internal] Ethical Duties are of Wide Obligation, whereas [External] Duties of Right are of Narrow Obligation” in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, AA VI: 390-391. Kant distinguished between “narrower” (unrelenting, *unnachlässlichen*) and “wider” (meritorious, *verdienstlichen*) duty already in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV: 424. On the distinction between hypothetical imperatives (technical and pragmatic) and categorical imperatives, see *Groundwork* AA IV: 414-421.

The element of empirical perception by theoretical reason and lack of such physical perception by practical reason appears to suggest that theoretical reason is superior to practical reason. Yet, the strength of practical reason is that, whereas theoretical reason can say 'what is', practical reason is the capacity that governs what even theoretical reason 'ought to do'.

The only condition under which there can be a moral law is the condition of autonomous freedom – otherwise, we are mere mechanical toys. We experience ourselves and demonstrate down to the minutest of details that we are not mechanical toys: Our experience unequivocally, if only indirectly, confirms autonomous freedom, generally, as the conscious ability to initiate sequences of events that nature on its own could never achieve. Even more, we experience autonomous freedom when we exercise the conscious ability to act contrary to our selfish desires and even self-interest. (See *Critique of Pure Reason* B 830, 831-832) It is not desire and self-interest that are immoral but the ground that we invoke to give ourselves permission to pursue desire and self-interest. Virtue requires that ground to be a moral law.

Furthermore, we need the experience of only one moral law (available exclusively in the intelligible world, not derived from the empirical world) to illuminate the possibility of the condition of autonomous freedom. A moral law is inseparable from desire and repulsion (*Lust/Unlust*) so that it is not itself a *pure*, transcendental concept (*Critique of Pure Reason* B 829). Nonetheless, the moral law can only arise if there is a transcendental reason capable of exercising autonomous freedom. **A moral law itself** (not the phenomena to which it adheres) is experienced exclusively in the intelligible world of transcendental consciousness, but the moral law is, also, inseparable from the sensuous world that stimulates desire or repulsion. Hence, Kant called the moral law the one "fact of reason" (*Critique of Practical Reason* AA V: 31, 43) **In turn, the causality** that is required as the condition for there to be an experience of the moral law, and the moral law as with the causality upon which it depends is experienced exclusively in the intelligible world, not derived from the empirical world.

In short, the Critical Turn required by the moral law is evoked by the empirical experience of desire and repulsion, but its required, condition of possibility is a capacity of transcendental consciousness.³ Kant's succinct summation of practical reason is: "[...] freedom, to be sure, is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, [whereas] the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom" (*Critique of Practical Reason* AA V: 4*). In other words, without the causal system of autonomous freedom there is no condition under which a

³ Kant writes in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV: 400: "[...] the will stands halfway between it's a priori principle, which is formal, and it's a posteriori incentive, which is material, as it were at a crossroads, and since it must [...] be determined by something, it will have to be determined by the formal principle of willing as such when an action is done from duty [...]" (CUP emphasis) (Trans. CUP) Duty is not with respect to external, heteronomous expectations placed upon the self, but is an obligation owed to the self and others grounded in self-imposed, internal, and universal moral laws. See *On the Common Saying: 'That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice'* AA VIII: 279-280 and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV: 399-400. In the "Doctrine of Virtue" of the *Metaphysics of Morals* AA VI: 405, Kant writes: "[...] virtue is the moral strength of the will of a human being to conform to his duty: which is a moral coercion by his own self-legislating reason insofar as reason constitutes itself as a power of agency [in the world] in conformity with the law. – Virtue is neither itself duty nor is it the possession of duty (because then, virtue would be experienced as an obligation to duty), but virtue demands and accompanies the command coming from a moral compulsion (in accordance with possible laws of internal freedom)." (Kant parentheses) (Trans. CUP)

moral law can occur, but, in turn, our 'knowledge'/awareness of the causal system of autonomous freedom is established already by the identification of a single, moral law.⁴

Methodological skepticism, however, proceeds even deeper into the imperceptible realm to identify three entirely non-empirical elements **that are required⁵ but incapable of proof/disproof** in order for us to add concepts to particular phenomena (e.g., physical and moral explanation): 1) the 'givenness' of the universe by an X (God) whom we cannot grasp without placing ourselves in the role of God; 2) an enduring (non-physical) identify to the self; and 3) autonomous freedom as the ability to cause things to happen that physical nature on its own could never cause to happen (if so, then stones would be able to develop mathematics). These are what Kant calls the "**three ideas of pure reason**" that make *a priori* synthetic judgments possible, whatsoever! 'Pure' here does not mean clean, clear, better, and/or perfect but 'independent of any perceptible experience'.

My short answer to the questions of 'how do we achieve clarity?' and 'convince others of clarity?' is this: We achieve clarity by means of methodological skepticism that shifts the focus away from phenomena themselves (object permanence; of course, acknowledging that without phenomena there is no experience!) to identify the imperceptible elements that are required in order for us to experience the particular phenomena (this is called **the 'Critical' or 'Copernican' Turn of Critical Idealism**). This brings clarity with respect to universal elements required by all transcendental consciousness. It also establishes, unequivocally, the significance of the individual, enduring self and brings clarity by profiling the importance of the ability to cause things to happen that nature cannot cause to happen on its own (autonomous freedom possessed by all transcendental consciousness, which grounds universal, human dignity). All of these bring clarity by calling to awareness that only such a species with such clarity is capable of intentionally understanding its experience and hold itself responsible for its agency -- **although the conditions in themselves do not require it to do so.**

The convincing power of methodological skepticism is that its focus is on **the required conditions for us to experience, understand, and exercise or agency responsibly** rather than on 'objective' or 'empirical'

⁴ To be sure there is more than just one moral law. A lawful system is a coherent whole of laws, physical or moral. Kant gives examples of the 'wider', universal moral laws, which are a litmus test to prevent acting merely out of particular, desires and self-interest: not allowing ourselves or treating the other as merely a means rather than an end, acknowledging the autonomous freedom (hence, dignity) of all other rational beings; not lying, not taking one's own life out of social embarrassment, developing one's talents, responding to the suffering of others; not intentionally testifying falsely against another; keeping promises; not taking advantage of the inexperience of others; proper care of animals; ecological concern for nature (the material basis for all theoretical and practical reason); etc.

In the "Doctrine of Virtue" of the *Metaphysics of Morals* AA VI: 467-468, Kant explicitly rejects not only racism, ageism, sexism, power or weakness, status and prestige (e.g., aristocracy) as criteria for judging others, but also implicitly rejects homophobia, nationalism, populism, and any other criteria for judging others, which are all based on merely empirical criteria of "theoretical reason" to the entire neglect of the capacities and moral significance of "practical reason." See "Was Kant a Racist? With an Addendum: On South Sea Islanders in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*" at <https://criticalidealism.org>.

⁵ The term 'required' is used here rather than 'necessary' because the latter carries with it the weight of determinism expressed by the Principle of Sufficient Reason. That determinism is more clearly expressed by the German expression: *Satz vom zureichenden Grund*..

claims, which are capable of being doubted. Were we to remove the conditions of possibility for us to experience, understand, and exercise our agency, there is no experience, understanding and agency – not to speak of **responsible** agency. There is no greater certitude available to us than this kind of certitude! In other words, what Critical Idealism does is an expansion of Descartes’s logic of doubt for establishing certitude with respect to my consciousness: Doubting consciousness ‘proves’ the presence of consciousness. I can doubt everything, but, in the case of my own consciousness, doubting it clearly establishes the reality of my consciousness because consciousness is required in order to doubt. Critical Idealism extends this method of skepticism across transcendental consciousness’ capacities of theoretical and practical reason without succumbing to Descartes two-substance or dualist claims for distinguishing between thought and the world.

Given the extraordinariness of the insights of methodological skepticism, why would we insist that we be less than what we are capable of be(com)ing? I find it staggering that the very conditions and capacities that are required for us to experience, gain clarity of understanding, and exercise agency in the world are the conditions and capacities that make it possible for there to be anything like morality. That blows me away, personally! Seeking clarity about the required conditions for experience provides us with the clarity we need to understand and to act responsibly in the world – even though we experience the world as ambiguous. That’s quite extraordinary!

Of course, there is much, much more that can (must) be said, but this is an indication of a pathway to clarity capable of convincing others; to be sure, a pathway on which one is always underway. The ‘more’ that is needed to be said would involve the methodology of the “discipline” (theoretical reason), the “canon” (practical reason), and the “architectonic” of transcendental reason (NOT instrumental reason alone) ... that together illuminate the hope (core religion) at the heart of all persons and traditions.

Wishing you continued good health in our COVID-19 reality, I remain

Sincerely yours,

Doug