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# Kant's Argument for Transcendental Idealism in the Transcendental Aesthetic Revisited

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a novel reconstruction of Kant's argument for transcendental idealism in the Transcendental Aesthetic. This reconstruction relies on two main contentions: first, that Kant accepts the then-ubiquitous view that all cognition is either from grounds or consequences, a view he props up by drawing a distinction between logical and real grounds; second, that Kant, like most of his contemporaries, holds that our representations are the most immediate grounds of our cognition. By stressing these elements, the most threatening objection to Kant's argument can be avoided, namely, the claim that Kant ignores the possibility that our representations of space and time are subjective in origin, but objective as regards their applicability. My reconstruction shows that this so-called neglected alternative objection is based on a conceptual confusion about the nature of *a priori* cognition.

## 1 Introduction

In the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant explicitly argues for two claims about our representations of space and time: that they are *a priori* and that they are intuitions. From these two claims about our *representation* of space and time, he immediately draws conclusions about space and time themselves:

Space represents no property at all of any things in themselves nor any relation of them to each other, i. e., no determination of them that attaches to objects themselves and that would remain even if one were to abstract from all subjective conditions of intuition. (A26/B42)

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This inference from the properties of our representations to the properties of the things represented has puzzled many commentators. One especially common line of concern involves the so-called neglected alternative. According to this objection, Kant neglects the possibility that our representations of space and time have a subjective origin, but nevertheless have objective import in the sense that their accuracy depends on how things are in themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Both Lambert and Mendelssohn presented some version of this concern in response to Kant's argument for the ideality of time.<sup>2</sup> But this objection only came to the foreground in Kant scholarship as a result of the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century debate between Trendelenburg and Fischer.<sup>3</sup> Since that debate, many different responses have arisen to this objection. Some commentators have simply said that Kant does not give us a good argument in this section.<sup>4</sup> Some have attempted to bridge the gap between representation and reality by weakening Kant's conclusions.<sup>5</sup> More recently, various authors have instead attempted to bolster Kant's arguments by appealing to other aspects of his philosophy, such as his views about the relationality of intuition, as in Allais 2015. Rosefeldt 2016 appeals to the response-dependent nature of appearances and Hogan 2009 to Kant's commitment to transcendental freedom.

In this paper, I take a different approach. What I aim to do is to identify implicit premises in Kant's argument that were shared by his realist opponents. Revealing these premises should give us a better understanding of why they were omitted from Kant's explicit argumentation: Kant would not have felt the need to argue for claims that were taken for granted by his contemporaries.

There is one claim that I take to be central to Kant's argument. This is the view that all *a priori* cognition is cognition *from grounds* and that all *a posteriori* cog-

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<sup>1</sup> This way of understanding the neglected alternative can be traced back to Pistorius' review of a work by Schultze (see *Schultze Review*). For further discussion of Pistorius' historical role in discussions of the neglected alternative, see Specht 2014a. I find this to be one of the most neutral characterizations of the alternative, as it does not make claims about *what* the objective import of our representations amounts to. I will discuss the various versions of the neglected alternative in Section 4.

<sup>2</sup> Lambert and Mendelssohn's letters can be found in *Correspondence*, 113–19, and 122–25. See Specht 2014a for further discussion.

<sup>3</sup> See Vaihinger 1922 for an extended historical discussion of this debate. For recent discussions of Trendelenburg's own position, see Bird 2005, Kanterian 2013, and Specht 2014b.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Kemp Smith 1918, Strawson 1966, Guyer 1987, and more recently Herisson-Kelly 2007.

<sup>5</sup> This approach comes from proponents of broadly "methodological" readings of Kant, which take Kant not to be committed to any mind-dependence claims about appearances. Cf. Allison 1976; Kitcher 2001; Bird 2005.

dition is cognition *from consequences*. While Kant's commitment to this notion has already been noted in a seminal work by Smit in 2009, I hold that its role in the Transcendental Aesthetic has not been fully understood.<sup>6</sup> This is so because it has not been considered in relation to the fact that the grounds of *a priori* cognition are our own representations (intuitions or concepts). Taking these two positions together leads to an argument with the following general structure:

1. If something is cognized *a priori*, then it is cognized from its explanatory ground.
2. The geometrical properties of space are cognized from the representation of space.<sup>7</sup>
3. The geometrical properties of space are cognized *a priori*.
4. So, the representation of space is the explanatory ground of the geometrical properties of space. (1–3)

In this paper, I will proceed as follows. First, I will show that premise 1 is not only accepted by Kant, but also by the vast majority of his predecessors and contemporaries. Second, I will show, through a more detailed discussion of Kant's distinction between different kinds of grounds, that the conclusion of this argument does establish transcendental idealism about space. Finally, I will show that the reconstruction of the argument provided here, once the details are filled in, rules out the neglected alternative.

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<sup>6</sup> Smit 2009 does not attempt to give a reconstruction of Kant's argument in the Aesthetic. Hogan 2009, who also takes the 'from grounds' notion of *a priori* to be important, arrives at a reconstruction that is radically different from the one I offer, and which cannot claim the kind of textual support that I provide. I discuss Hogan's account in more detail in Section 4.

<sup>7</sup> In discussing the explanatory ground of the *properties* of space, I intentionally remain neutral on whether space is identical to our intuition of it, or whether it is merely grounded in our intuition. Kant's discussion sometimes suggests that appearances in general are identical to our representations of them (A370), and sometimes that they are merely modes of our representations (*Prolegomena*, IV: 341 f.). A similar concern arises for space and time: are they identical to our representations, or merely modes of our representation? Both readings are consistent with my view. What matters for my purposes is that *truths* about space are grounded in our intuition of it. This does not mean that this distinction is unimportant for Kant's philosophy as a whole, but simply that it is unimportant for the argument of the Aesthetic. For further reading on this disagreement, see Stang 2016b.

## 2 Cognition from Grounds in the Rationalist Tradition

In this section, I will argue that Kant, both in the pre-critical and in the critical period, is committed a model of cognition that was prevalent in his time, namely, the view that all cognition is either from grounds or from consequences. I will do this by showing that Kant's characterization of the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths results from his attempt to salvage this traditional view from Christian Crusius' objections. In the next section, I will explain in more detail how the 'independent of experience' notion arises from Kant's own version of the traditional view.

It is quite common among Kant scholars to think that the critical Kant *defines a priori* cognition as cognition that is independent of experience.<sup>8</sup> But this assumption is quite implausible given the text. Note here Kant's introduction of the terms in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

[S]uch universal cognitions, which at the same time have the character of inner necessity, must be clear and certain for themselves, independently of experience; hence one calls them *a priori* cognitions: whereas that which is merely borrowed from experience is, as it is put, cognized only *a posteriori*, or empirically. (A1)

What is noteworthy about this passage is that it does not have the form of a definition. The wording makes it clear that Kant rather assumes that his reader is familiar with the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* cognition and merely explains why he chooses to use these terms in the way he does.<sup>9</sup>

In order to fully understand what Kant meant by '*a priori*', we must have a better understanding of the way the term was used by his contemporaries and the reasons why he thought that *a priori* cognition is independent of experience. As we will see, this will also shed light on Kant's argument for idealism.

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<sup>8</sup> For examples of scholars explicitly claiming this, see van Cleve 1999, vii; Gardner 2000, 52; Hanna 2001, 2; Rosenberg 2005, 28. It is much more common for this conception of the *a priori* to simply be assumed.

<sup>9</sup> Kemp Smith 1918 and Bird 2000 take Kant to characterize the *a priori* in terms of necessity and universality, and to derive independence of experience from these characteristics. While I agree that necessity and universality are marks of the *a priori*, further discussion will show that this is not the most basic definition of this term. Kitcher 1990 takes Kant to have three distinct uses of the term *a priori*: one with respect to logical form, one with respect to origin, and one to respect to epistemic status. I argue in section 2 that, for Kant, epistemic *a priori* requires *a priority* with respect to origin.

It is by now well known that the notions of *a priori* and *a posteriori* cognition date as far back as William of Ockham.<sup>10</sup> A simple statement of the pre-Kantian notion can be found in Arnauld and Nicole's *Port Royal Logic*:

But as it is profitable for the mind sometimes to be led to feel its own feebleness, through the consideration of those objects which are above it, and which, being above it, abase and humble it, it is certain, also, that we must endeavour to choose, for our ordinary occupation, subjects and matters which may be more adapted to our capacity, and whose truth we may be able to discover and comprehend. This is done, either by proving effects through their causes, which is called proving *a priori*, or by demonstrating, on the contrary, causes through their effects, which is called proving *a posteriori*. (*Port Royal Logic*, 302)

The general idea is that there are only two ways to “discover and comprehend” a given truth: we can either discover and comprehend it from what is causally prior, or we can discover and comprehend it from what is causally posterior. If something is neither a cause nor an effect of what we know, then it cannot be what gives us a cognition of it.<sup>11</sup> For me to cognize something of a given object, that “through” which I have my cognition must be connected (as a cause or effect) with the object of my cognition.

This view replicates itself throughout the rationalist period. As Pickave 2005 emphasizes, Descartes already associated *a priori* with ‘from what is prior’. Similarly, Spinoza famously claims that “[t]he order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (E1P7).<sup>12</sup> As Adams 1994 observes, this notion of the *a priori* and *a posteriori* is quite prevalent in Leibniz's work as well.<sup>13</sup>

In 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, relations of priority and posteriority were expressed in terms of *ground* and *consequence* rather than in terms of *cause* and *effect*. The technical notion of a ground (*Grund*), which Wolff introduced into German phil-

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<sup>10</sup> See Miller 2004 and Pickavé 2005 for further historical background and discussion on Spinoza and Descartes respectively. See also Risse 1964 for a fuller discussion of the history of the term ‘a priori’ in scholastic and modern philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> Views of this kind are also popular in contemporary epistemology, because they avoid certain versions of the Gettier problem. See Goldman 1967 and, more recently, Setiya 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See also Miller 2004. Spinoza seems to further think that only *a priori* cognition can be classified as cognition, as he follows this by saying that “[f]or the idea of everything that is caused depends on a cognition of the cause, whereof it is an effect” (E1P7d). The idea that only *a priori* cognition counts as proper cognition is also one of Crusius' main complaints against the Wolffian definition of a ground. See his *Entwurf*, § 38.

<sup>13</sup> See also Smit 2010, where he argues that David Hume also uses a from-grounds conception of the *a priori*.

osophy as a translation of the French *raison* and the Latin *ratio*, is significantly more general than the notion of a cause, but is intended to include the latter. Following Wolff, it became common to define *ground* in broadly epistemic terms, i. e., as that which allows one to *understand* why something is the case.<sup>14</sup> Yet despite this choice of terminology, the connection between real relations of priority and the possible grounds of cognition was maintained.<sup>15</sup>

While most 18<sup>th</sup>-century German philosophers accepted the ground-based version of the traditional account of cognition, this rationalist line of thought was not without its critics. Thus, Crusius considered the notion of ground to be polysemous:

Since a ground (*ratio*) is that from which it is cognized why something is, Leibniz in fact comprehends under it both grounds of cognition and of things, that is, a ground of cognition *a priori*, including purely ideal grounds, in addition to active causes and the remaining sort of determining grounds [...]. You tell me that some being A has a sufficient ground. I ask: what sort of sufficient ground? [...] An efficient cause or *merely ideal ground of cognizing?* (*De Usu*, § 16, italics added<sup>16</sup>)

For Crusius, grounds can be either real or ideal. The real ground of some entity is whatever it is that brings this entity about (*hervorbringt*) or makes it possible, either causally or through its existence alone (*Entwurf*, § 37). An ‘ideal ground’ (*Idealgrund*), which Crusius takes to be synonymous with ‘ground of cognition’ (*Erkenntnisgrund*) (*Entwurf*, § 35; *Weg*, § 142), is whatever brings our cognition of that entity about (see figure 1 for more detail).

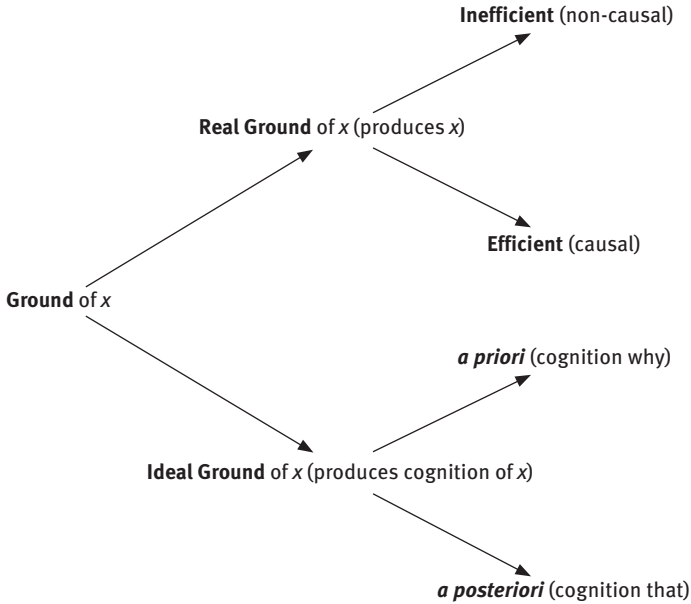
For the followers of the traditional view, what Crusius calls a real ground and an ideal ground were closely tied together. Every ideal ground is either a real ground (when it is *a priori*) or a real consequence (when it is *a posteriori*). For Crusius, by contrast, these two notions come apart in interesting ways. First, and less importantly for our purposes, Crusius holds that some real grounds are not also grounds of cognition. He believes, for instance, that our freedom is a real ground of action that is non-determining and therefore unfit for being a ground

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**14** The key source of this definition is Wolff’s *German Metaphysics*, § 29. This definition, or ones similar to it, were also accepted by many of Wolff’s followers, including Kant.

**15** For example, in Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*, Kant’s lecture textbook for most of his career, we find: “Everything possible is both ground and consequence [*ratio et rationatum*], is in a double nexus, connected and rational, *cognizable both a priori and a posteriori*.” (*Metaphysica*, § 24, italics added).

**16** Dyck translates *ratio* as “reason”. For the sake of consistency with translations of *ratio* in other 18<sup>th</sup>-century works, I translate *ratio* as “ground” here and elsewhere.



**Fig. 1:** Crusius' taxonomy of grounds

of our cognitions of future events.<sup>17</sup> Second, as expressed in the passage above, an ideal ground *a priori* may fail to be a real ground. The definition of a thing, for example, is an *a priori* ground of the cognition of that thing; but it is not a real ground of it, because the definition does not contribute to bringing that thing about or making it possible.<sup>18</sup> Crusius therefore denies that all *a priori* cognition is cognition from things that are prior (in the order of being) to what is cognized.

<sup>17</sup> See *De Usu*, § 142. This text is usually the focus of discussions of Crusius' relation to Kant (cf. Watkins 2005, Hogan 2009). Hogan goes as far as to claim that this is "[t]he key point on which Crusius breaks with Leibniz and Wolff" (Hogan 2009, 362). Yet this claim overlooks Crusius' important second disagreement, expressed in the quoted paragraph from *De Usu*, which is a much more radical break with the rationalist philosophical tradition as a whole.

<sup>18</sup> One might suspect that the definition of something does bring about its possibility, but this is not the sense of 'making something possible' that Crusius has in mind. For Crusius, something makes something else possible just in case the former is capable of causally bringing about the latter (*Entwurf*, § 56; cf. Stang 2016a, Watkins, 2019). On this picture, definitions still do not qualify as real grounds. A similar view of making possible is endorsed by Kant in *OPP* (II: 88).

Rather, he thinks that there are cases where a priori cognition is cognition from something that is merely prior in the order of understanding.<sup>19</sup>

### 3 Kant's Defense of the Traditional View

This leads us to the question as to which side Kant took in this debate. Did Kant agree with the rationalists that all cognition must be either from grounds or from consequences, or does he side with Crusius's acceptance of merely ideal grounds? I will argue that Kant was very much a rationalist on this issue both in his pre-critical writings and in his critical philosophy, since the origin of the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments requires a version of the traditional view.

In his early work, Kant attempts to respond to Crusius' concerns by accommodating the case of definitions within the general Wolffian framework. To achieve this aim, Kant introduces the notion of an *antecedently determining ground* in his *New Elucidation*. He defines this type of ground as that "in the absence of which that which is determined would not be intelligible" (I: 392). This way of defining ground, though Wolffian in nature, leaves room for what Kant calls an "identical ground":

It is legitimate to include in this the *identical* ground where the concept of the subject determines the predicate by means of its own complete identity with the predicate. Take for example: a triangle has three sides. Here, the concept of that which is determined neither follows nor precedes the determining concept. (*NE*, I: 392n)

By thus including "identical grounds" among the antecedently determining grounds, Kant can affirm an explanatory notion of ground which allows cognition from concepts and definitions to count as cognition from grounds. On this account, the concept of a triangle can be taken to be an identical ground of its determinations. Hence, what Crusius would call a cognition from a "purely ideal ground" can still be counted as cognition from what is prior in the order of being.<sup>20</sup>

As Kant's philosophical views matured, so did his terminology and conceptual framework. During the 1760s, the distinction among antecedently determin-

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<sup>19</sup> An interesting consequence of this investigation is that it is Crusius, and not Kant, who is responsible for explicitly detaching the notion of the *a priori* from its metaphysical connotations.

<sup>20</sup> Thus, Kant calls the antecedently determining ground "the reason *why*, or the ground of being or becoming.' (*NE*, I: 392)



ing grounds between identical and non-identical grounds gave way to the distinction between “logical grounds” and “real grounds” (*OPP*, II: 82), a distinction that Kant retained for the remainder of his career. But the new distinction still tracks the old idea: some *a priori* cognitions are simply from the concept of a thing, in which case the cognitions have a logical ground, as when my concept <body> is the logical ground of the analytic judgment that all bodies are extended. Other *a priori* cognitions are cognitions from what brings the thing about (or makes it possible), in which case the cognitions have a real ground, such as when our cognition of the foundations of a house (the ground) allows us to cognize that the house will collapse when they are removed (the consequence) (*CPR*, B2).<sup>21</sup>

It is important to emphasize, however, that Kant understands real and logical grounds not merely as epistemic grounds, but primarily as different kinds of ground of *truth*.<sup>22</sup> That is to say, real and logical grounds do not merely explain why we cognize something as true, but also why it is, in fact, true. Without treating logical grounds as grounds of truth, Kant would be unable to offer the response to Crusius that we have been considering, and would therefore be unable to maintain the traditional view of the *a priori* / *a posteriori* distinction.

Kant most explicitly states that both logical and real grounds are grounds of truth when discussing Crusius' distinction between real and ideal grounds in the *Herder Lectures*:

Crusius divides ground into ideal and real ground. This division is wholly different [from mine]. For example, the world is an ideal ground of God. For the ideal ground is just the

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<sup>21</sup> As Kant emphasizes, this is not an example of an absolutely *a priori* synthetic cognition, since experience is involved in giving us cognition of the foundations in the first place. This distinction between absolute and relative *a priori* cognition, and the role that experience plays in this distinction, is addressed in Section 2.

<sup>22</sup> Kant, from quite early in his career, distinguishes between grounds of truth and grounds of existence (*New Elucidation*, I: 396). This is quite important to Kant's pre-critical metaphysics, as it allows Kant to construct his proof for the existence of God, as well as to give an account of contingency within his deterministic metaphysics. Since the propositions we are interested in here – the propositions of geometry – are *necessarily* true, this distinction is not relevant to our discussion. It is the grounds of truths about space, not the ground of the existence of space, that is ultimately at issue in the Transcendental Aesthetic. This will be discussed further in Section 4. This distinction is yet again to be separated from the distinction between a *ratio essendi vel fiendi* – which Kant in the *New Elucidation* refers to as an antecedently determining ground, and which I have been treating as an “explanatory ground” – and *ratio cognoscendi* – which Kant in the *New Elucidation* refers to as consequentially determining ground, and which best corresponds with the Crusian notion of an *Erkenntnisgrund*. Despite Kant's phrasing in the opening of his discussion of ground, it is clear that he considers antecedently determining grounds to also be grounds of cognition.

ground of cognition (*Erkenntnißgrund*). They are therefore subordinated in such a way that a real ground can simultaneously be an ideal ground. But no real ground can be a logical ground, and *vice versa*. They are precisely opposites (*MH*, XXVIII: 12, my translation).<sup>23</sup>

Here Kant claims that the distinction between logical and real grounds should not be confused with Crusius' distinction between grounds of being and grounds of cognition. For Kant, logical and real grounds are not merely grounds of cognition, but can also be grounds of truth. I follow Stang 2016a in using the umbrella term 'explanatory grounds' to encompass all and only those grounds that explain not only our knowledge of some truth, but also the truth itself. I will also use the term 'epistemic ground' as a synonym of 'ground of cognition' (*Erkenntnisgrund*).

Now, Kant's inclusion of logical grounds among explanatory grounds of being may be somewhat surprising, as one might have been tempted to see logical grounds the way Crusius does, namely, as merely epistemic grounds. Yet there are two reasons why this characterization makes perfect sense from Kant's perspective.

First, while Crusius defines ground in productive terms, i. e., as something that brings about (*hervorbringt*) something else, Kant follows Wolff in defining ground in terms of intelligibility.<sup>24</sup> If we conceive of a ground as that which allows

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**23** To what degree Kant is successful in distancing himself from Crusius is an open question, as this may look like a merely verbal dispute, where Kant chooses the phrase "logical ground" to mean the same as Crusius' phrase "purely ideal ground." But the fact that Kant takes logical grounds to be grounds of being is a genuine dispute between the two, a dispute that can be traced back to their disagreement between epistemic and productive characterizations of ground. See my discussion in what follows.

**24** Kant also defines ground throughout his career in terms of "positing." In the *Nova Dilucidatio*, he defines a ground as "that which determines a subject in respect of any of its predicates", and notes that "to determine is to *posit* a predicate while excluding its opposite" (*NE*, I: 391, italics added). Similarly, in the Volckmann lectures he writes that "the ground is that through which something different from it is *posited*" (*Metapysik Volckmann*, XXVIII: 401, italics added). This might sound like Kant is invoking productive idioms, as one might read the positing of a consequence as the producing of it. But since Kant continues to endorse the existence of logical grounds throughout his career, it is implausible to read Kant's use of the term 'positing' (*Position*) as distinctively productive.

Hogan 2005 argues that the critical Kant rejects explanatory accounts of ground and embraces the Crusian productive account. His main piece of evidence is the following quote from one of Kant's mid-1770s lectures:

"The conditions under which reason can have insight into something are absent here [in the case of free actions]; these [conditions] are the determining grounds (*bestimmenden Grunde*). Our free actions have, however, no determining grounds, and so we can have no insight into these actions either. This is a reason to acknowledge the limitations of the understanding, but not to deny the thing itself. The subjective difficulty seems to us to be an objective one, although the subjective

us to understand something, then logical grounds also fit the bill: the concept of a triangle can be considered a logical ground in that it allows us to understand why a triangle has three sides. The reason it is true that a triangle has three sides is that this is just what it is for something to fall under the concept *<triangle>*.

Second, we can see Kant's motivation for introducing the category of logical grounds when we consider his position in relation to the traditional view of cognition. As shown, Kant defends a version of this view against Crusius's objections by drawing the distinction between logical and real grounds.<sup>25</sup> Hence, Kant's distinction between logical and real grounds relies on his acceptance of the traditional view that all cognition is either from grounds or from consequences.

At this point, a reader might suspect that this discussion is irrelevant to the critical Kant, whose conception of metaphysics is entirely different. Yet Kant's distinction between logical and real grounds not only remains in place during the critical period, but is essentially tied to the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant makes this connection quite clear in his metaphysics lectures of 1784/5:

Every ground is either logical, through which something is posited or cancelled according to the principle of contradiction; or real, through which something is posited or cancelled without the principle of contradiction. The first is analytic, the second is synthetic. For example: I think to myself something composite, so the connection (*Verknüpfung*) here is analytic, hence the *nexus* between the body and the composition is logical. The connection of the *nexus* is the relationship of ground to consequence [...]. (*MV*, XXVIII: 402)<sup>26</sup>  
In the concept of the real ground there is a synthetic *nexus*, in the logical ground only an analytic one [...]. (*MV*, XXVIII: 403)

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constraints of incomprehensibility (*Unbegreiflichkeit*) are essentially different from the objective constraints of impossibility." (*MP*, 210)

Hogan reads Kant as asserting Crusius' view that our free actions have productive but not explanatory grounds. But given Kant's Wolffian background, this is far from obvious. Rather, it is much more likely that Kant held that our free actions have no grounds *at all*, rather than accepting Crusius' view that our actions have grounds that are not explanatory.

**25** This should be obvious because his notion of an identical ground is originally introduced to help respond to Crusius' concerns about the notion of a ground (*NE*, I: 393). Since the philosophical tradition to which Kant belongs almost universally accepted this tight connection between epistemic and metaphysical grounds, and Kant's own view is introduced to solve certain problems for this conception, I take it to be quite plausible that Kant was in agreement with the *Port Royal Logic* tradition: A ground of cognition must be either an explanatory ground (if it is *a priori*) or a consequence (if it is *a posteriori*) of the object of cognition.

**26** The notion of a *nexus*, often translated into German as *Zusammenhang* and sometimes as *Verknüpfung* is used in the Wolffian philosophical tradition to signify the connection between a ground and a consequence. See Wolff, *German Metaphysics* § 368, 381; *Metaphysica* § 14.

According to these passages, a given judgment has a merely logical ground if it is analytic, i. e., when the ground of its truth is contained in the concept of the subject. A given truth has a real ground, by contrast, if it is synthetic, i. e., if the ground of its truth is not contained in the concept of the subject, but in something else (cf. *MP* 31; *MvS* XXVIII: 486 f.).

My central argument in this section, then, can be summarized as follows. Kant's distinction between logical and real grounds is motivated, at least in part, by a desire to preserve, in the face of Crusius' objections, the view that all cognition is either from grounds or consequences. The fact that this distinction underpins one of the most important philosophical distinctions of Kant's critical philosophy – the analytic-synthetic distinction – is evidence that Kant continued to accept this traditional view even in the critical period.<sup>27</sup>

## 4 Synthetic *A Priori* Cognition

In Sections 1 and 2, I argued that, for Kant, cognition *a priori* is cognition from explanatory grounds, while cognition *a posteriori* is cognition from consequences. I emphasized that Kant admits of two different kinds of explanatory grounds, namely, logical and real grounds. Whereas the ground of a judgment is logical if it contains the concept of the grounded, the ground of a judgment is real if it non-logically explains the relevant state of affairs.

Given Kant's broadly rationalist notion of an explanatory ground, it makes sense that he considered *concepts* to be the explanatory grounds of certain judgments. The explanatory ground of the analytic judgment that all bodies are extended is a logical ground, namely, the concept <body>. This concept is the representation from which my cognition that all bodies are extended arises. Hence, in the case of analytic judgments, the source of our cognition is a concept that functions as a logical explanatory ground.

But the case of synthetic *a priori* cognition is more puzzling. Synthetic judgments are judgments in which the predicate is not contained in the concept of the subject (A6 f./B10; A154 f./B193 f.). So, if there is a synthetic judgment that is cognizable *a priori*, then we must be able to cognize its truth from its *real* ground.

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<sup>27</sup> There is also direct textual evidence from Kant's lectures that he continued to accept the *Port Royal* view. In his metaphysics lectures of the late 1780s, he is reported to have said: "We can represent all series of cognitions subordinated to each other in two ways: *a priori* and *a posteriori*. With the first we go forward from ground to consequence; with the second we go back from the consequence to the ground" (*MvS*, XXVIII: 463). I return to this point in the next section.

That is to say, whatever it is that (epistemically) grounds our synthetic *a priori* cognitions must also be what non-logically grounds their truth.

But for Kant, it is only “empirical” cognitions that have their epistemic ground (*Erkenntnisgrund*) in something external to the cognizer's representations:

There are only two possible cases in which synthetic representations and their objects can come together, necessarily relate to each other, and, as it were, meet each other: either if the object alone makes the representation possible, or if the representation alone makes the object possible. If it is the first, then the relation is only empirical, and the representation is never possible *a priori*. (CPR, A92/B124 f.)

By contraposition, it follows that *a priori* cognitions must be those whose epistemic ground is not external to the cognizer's representations.<sup>28</sup> Rather, what can be cognized purely *a priori* must be so cognized from something internal to the cognizer's representations. But recall that, for something to be an *a priori* ground of a cognition, it must also be its explanatory ground. So, for something to be an *a priori* ground of a *synthetic* cognition, it must also be its explanatory *real* ground. This leads to the conclusion that something internal to the cognizer's representation must be the real ground of the truth of our synthetic *a priori* judgments.

## 5 Kant's Argument for Idealism Reconstructed

We are now in a position to understand Kant's argument for transcendental idealism in the Transcendental Aesthetic. As we will see in the following section, Kant's version of the traditional view of cognition, together with the discussion from Section 3, is sufficient to reconstruct Kant's argument for transcendental idealism.

Recall the first-pass reconstruction of the argument we began with:

1. If something is cognized *a priori*, then it is cognized from its explanatory ground.
2. The geometrical properties of space are cognized from the representation of space.
3. The geometrical properties of space are cognized *a priori*.

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<sup>28</sup> The quotation above is the best evidence that Kant takes all and only *a posteriori* judgments to be those whose epistemic ground is external to the cognizer's representations. This is, however, a natural position to accept if one takes experience to involve *affection* by an external object, as Kant emphasizes from the beginning of the *Critique* (A19/B33).

4. So, the representation of space is the explanatory ground of the geometrical properties of space. (1–3)

Kant's commitment to the traditional view of cognition commits him – and most of his contemporaries – to premise 1. Kant's argues directly for premise 2 in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* (*CPR*, A25/B39; B40 f.), and he does the same for premise 3 (*CPR*, A24 f./B38–40). The conclusion follows from these premises.

Yet this conclusion, on its own, is not sufficient for establishing anything like transcendental idealism. After all, positing that our representation of space is a *logical* ground of truths about space does not entail that space is dependent on our form of representation. To see why, we can return to our earlier case of logical grounding. According to Kant, the concept <body> is a logical ground of the truth that all bodies are extended. This in no way shows that the extension of bodies is dependent on me or my representational capacities, at least not for any philosophically interesting notion of dependence. Logical grounds explain their consequences but do not bring them about.

Only if Kant can establish that my representations of space and time are *real* grounds of truths about space can he claim a victory for transcendental idealism.<sup>29</sup> Kant has already gone part of the way in supporting this claim if he can establish that our cognition of space is *a priori*. By showing this, he has shown that our representations are either logical or real grounds of truths about space. In order to further support his transcendental idealist conclusion, he must show that our *a priori* representations of space are real grounds of the truths of geometry.

This is exactly what Kant does in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*. I submit that he does this by arguing that our representations of space and time are not concepts, but intuitions. Hence, they are not the kind of representation that can be a logical ground of anything:

Space is not a discursive or, as is said, general concept of relations of things in general, but a pure intuition [...]. From this it follows that in respect to it an *a priori* intuition (which is not empirical) grounds all concepts of it. *Thus also all geometrical principles, e. g., that in a triangle two sides together are always greater than the third, are never derived from general concepts of line and triangle, but rather are derived from intuition and indeed derived a priori with apodictic certainty.* (*CPR*, A24 f./B39, italics added)

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<sup>29</sup> Clearly, these real grounds must be non-causal, as Kant himself explicitly denies that our representations *produce* their objects (A92/B124 f.). For compelling evidence that Kant accepted non-causal real grounds, see Stang 2019.

Kant's point in this passage is precisely that our cognition of space and its properties cannot stem from logical grounds. We do not cognize the truths of geometry by reflecting on the definition of space. We cognize them by relying on an intuition of space.

If our representation of space is the explanatory ground of the geometrical properties of space, and it is not a logical ground, then it must be a real ground. And this is what the transcendental idealist asserts. A complete reconstruction of the argument can now be given:

- P1. If something is cognized *a priori*, then it is cognized from its explanatory ground.
- P2. The geometrical properties of space are cognized from the representation of space.
- P3. The geometrical properties of space are cognized *a priori*.
- P4. So, the representation of space is the explanatory ground of the geometrical properties of space. (P1–P3)
- P5. If the representation of space is the explanatory ground of the geometrical properties of space, then either (i) it is a logical ground, or (ii) it is a real ground of these properties.
- P6. If the representation of space is the logical ground of the geometrical properties of space, then the representation of space is a general concept.
- P7. The representation of space is not a general concept.<sup>30</sup>
- P8. So, the representation of space is the real ground of the geometrical properties of space. (P4–P7)<sup>31</sup>

As I have argued in the first two sections of this paper, Kant accepts P1. The remaining premises of our argument are quite uncontroversial. P2, P3 and P7 are explicitly argued for by Kant, and P5 follows if we assume that the distinction

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<sup>30</sup> I note here that my reconstruction focuses on our formal intuition of space, rather than on space as the form of our outer intuitions. The connection between these two is not obvious. For a recent discussion, see Onof and Schulting 2015.

<sup>31</sup> My reconstruction bears similarity to a response to the neglected alternative proposed by Kiesewetter in a 1790 letter to Kant, where he asks of Selle (a detractor of Kant, and a realist about space and time): “if he admits that space and time are forms of sensibility, how he wants to prove that they *depend* on things in themselves” (XI: 158). However, I see no evidence in Selle's writings that he admitted that space and time are forms of sensibility, though he does accept that “a thing is present, not because it is experienced, but because the thing with which it is connected is present” (*Grundsätze*, 48). At any rate, it is not clear to me that Kiesewetter's response on Kant's behalf is successful, but it is illustrative of the line of thought that I am attributing to Kant. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this letter to my attention.

between logical and real grounds is exhaustive.<sup>32</sup> Finally, P6 falls right out of what it is for something to be a logical ground of something else. So, if my exegetical support for P1 holds, we now have a deductively valid argument for the claim that the geometrical properties of space have representations as their real ground. A structurally identical argument can be reconstructed for the ideality of time; in this case, taking the dynamical properties of time as what we can cognize *a priori*.

I would like to highlight what I take to be a very important feature of this reconstruction: every premise in the argument is either explicitly argued for by Kant or was commonly accepted in Kant's time. To my knowledge, there is no extant reconstruction of Kant's argument for transcendental idealism that can claim this.

Take, for example, the reconstruction provided by Allais 2015. Allais takes Kant's argument to involve Kant's view that intuitions must be directly referential, which would be impossible if they were neither the ground nor the consequence of their referent. While I agree with Allais that Kant holds such a view about intuitions, I do not think this was Kant's argument for transcendental idealism, as this view of reference was neither commonly accepted nor is argued for anywhere in Kant's works.

Hogan 2009 faces a similar problem. While I agree with Hogan that the "from grounds" notion of "*a priori*" is relevant to Kant's argument, this is where our agreement ends. Hogan takes Kant's argument to include an implicit commitment to the *a priori* unknowability of certain things in themselves, which, in turn, depends on an implicit commitment to the thesis of transcendental freedom. But this account also fails to give us an implicit premise that is shared by Kant's interlocutors.<sup>33</sup> My argument, on the other hand, does not rely on any substantive claims about freedom.

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<sup>32</sup> Kant never argued for the claim that the distinction between logical and real grounds is exhaustive, though one can understand why he did not feel the need to. Kant distinguished between grounds that explain by means of their concepts and grounds that explain by producing something. Granted, the latter class of grounds is much larger than the first, since there can be different kinds of production (causation and composition, for instance) which do not have that much in common with one another. But what they have in common, and what sets them apart from logical grounds, is that what is produced depends on the producer. Perhaps other types of explanatory grounds can be identified, but I see no evidence for this in 18<sup>th</sup>-century discussions. I thank an anonymous referee for helping me clarify this issue.

<sup>33</sup> Hogan's view about *a priori* grounds can also be found in Watkins's 2009 translation of § 38 of Crusius' *Entwurf*, which gives the impression that Crusius takes *real* (rather than *ideal*) grounds to be the kind of ground that can be *a priori* or *a posteriori*: "[...] when we pay attention to what we think with the word *why*, it is clear in the case that both senses of real grounds [i. e. *a priori* and *a posteriori*] along with ideal grounds *a priori* are to be counted as falling under the



In fact, my reconstruction is better associated with more traditional reconstructions of Kant's "argument from geometry", which rely on the claim that synthetic *a priori* cognitions cannot be cognitions of mind-independent facts, but rather must be cognition of what we have "put into" objects (Bxviii).<sup>34</sup> But where these reconstructions tend to consider this a claim that Kant's readers are simply supposed to accept, my reconstruction shows that this claim actually *follows* from claims that Kant's interlocutors were committed to. On my reading, the claim that we can have synthetic *a priori* cognitions of mind-independent facts would amount to the straightforwardly incoherent claim that we can have mind-independently true cognitions whose truth is a real consequence of our own representations.<sup>35</sup> With this in mind, we can finally turn to what motivated this project in the first place: the task of giving a reconstruction of Kant's argument that rules out the neglected alternative.

## 6 The Neglected Alternative

At the beginning of this paper, I gave a rough formulation of the claim that Kant failed to consider the possibility that our representation of space has a subjective origin, but objective import. But this is not the only way to understand the neglected alternative objection. In this section, I will begin by considering the various versions of the neglected alternative that have been proposed.

Most versions of the neglected alternative fit my rough characterization claim that the *a priority* of our representation of space concerns only the *origin* of the representation, but not its applicability. Vaihinger 1922, for example, posits two

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concept of ground." But the parenthetical addition is unwarranted, for although Crusius does not use "*a priori*" as predicable of real grounds anywhere in his writings, he does draw a distinction between two kinds of real grounds (real causes and existential grounds). It is much more plausible, then, that his use of *beiderlei Realgünde* refers to the latter distinction.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Strawson 1966 and van Cleve 1999. Warren 1998 objects that these accounts conflate questions of the origin of our representations with questions of their validity. As should be clear by now, proponents of the traditional view of cognition took the origin of our representations to be that which (at least partially) explains why they are justified, and Kant is not departing from this tradition here.

<sup>35</sup> This also allows us to solve a problem for Kant raised in Bonjour 1997: that Kant's claim that we can only cognize *a priori* what we have put into objects is neither empirical nor analytic. This would make it synthetic *a priori*, which would make the claim itself mind-dependent. But on my reading, the claim that we can only have a synthetic *a priori* cognition of what we have put into objects is *analytic*: it follows from the very definitions of 'synthetic' and '*a priori*'.

spaces: a represented space, in which appearances exist, and a real space, structurally identical with the represented space, in which physical objects exist. According to Kemp Smith 1918, there is only physical space, and although our representations have some spatial content, they do not include a represented entity that is space. A third version claims that mind-independent reality contains *spatial features* which somehow make true our spatial representations.<sup>36</sup>

It is quite clear that each of these alternatives rejects P1, namely, the premise that if something is cognized *a priori*, it is cognized from its explanatory ground. But if my account in Section 1 is correct, P1 is not something that Kant *neglects*. Not only is P1 a point of *agreement* between Kant and his contemporaries, Kant's distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments is a consequence of Kant's defense of P1 against Crusius. P1 is a claim that both Kant and the majority of his contemporaries take to be essential to cognition as such. As a result, the most classic versions of the neglected alternative are no threat to my reconstruction.

One of the features that these alternatives have in common is that they take the *explanatory* grounds of the geometrical properties of space to be mind-independent, and consider only the *epistemic* grounds of our geometrical cognitions to be mind-dependent. Hence, they cannot accept P8, which takes the explanatory ground of truths in geometry to be our intuition of space, and are forced to reject P1.<sup>37</sup>

However, there is a version of the neglected alternative that claims to be compatible with P8.<sup>38</sup> This alternative, involves granting Kant that the geometrical properties of space are grounded in our representations, but that things in them-

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**36** This is the line that Hogan 2009 takes as most problematic, and I agree. Specht 2014a attributes this position to Pistorius. Specht 2014b does not believe that this is Trendelenburg's view, on the basis of the following passage:

“the same motion belongs to thought, though not in the same manner where a point in the motion of thought covers (*deckt*) the corresponding point of motion in nature externally. Nevertheless, there must be a counter-image (*Gegenbild*) of the same motion, because how would motion otherwise come up to consciousness?” (Specht 2014b, 21 n1). Specht holds that for Trendelenburg, space has a dual origin in both the mind and the mind-independent world. I find this kind of overdetermination hard to understand.

**37** There is another version of the neglected alternative, proposed by Specht 2014a, according to which the truths of geometry are fully grounded in our representation and are also fully grounded in mind-independent reality:

Space is an *a priori* representation that originates in the human mind and applies to mind-dependent entities (and is thus, subjective), but it also has an origin outside of the human mind and applies to things in themselves (and is thus, objective). (Specht, 2014b)

I must confess that I find this view quite hard to render coherent, as it is hard to see how facts about geometry could be fully grounded in two mutually independent sources.

**38** This version of the neglected alternative is most extensively discussed in Falkenstein 1989.

selves exist in their own version of space, which we may call space\*. Space\* is structurally analogous to space and obeys the laws of geometry\*, which are structurally analogous to the laws of geometry. This, in principle, is consistent with P8, as long as space\* and geometry\* do not in any way make true our judgments about geometry.

Yet once we admit that space\* is not the explanatory ground of geometry, it is hard to see why this alternative should be a problem for Kant at all. As Falkenstein 1989 observes, it is provable that anything that has a cardinality equal to or greater than the reals can be arranged in a structure analogous to that of geometry.<sup>39</sup> At least in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant says nothing about whether things in themselves could have such a cardinality. Hence, it is no threat to Kant that there can be things in themselves that can be arranged in a Euclidean structure. The problem for Kant's argument would arise only if facts about this Euclidean arrangement of things in themselves were what made our judgments about space true. And this version of the neglected alternative, insofar as it accepts P8, cannot claim this. It merely posits that things in themselves can be arranged in a structure that, though isomorphic to that of Euclidean geometry, *has nothing to do with* geometry. As I see it, there is no reason given in the *Aesthetic* for why the transcendental idealist could not accept this as a possibility. Hence, this version of the neglected alternative is not, in fact, an *alternative* to transcendental idealism.

## 6 Conclusion

Kant's argument for idealism is infamous for containing a 'gap' between representation and reality. According to detractors from this argument, Kant fails to consider the possibility that our cognition of space and time are subjective in origin, but objective in import. As I have shown, this is not an option that Kant neglects. Rather, Kant's rejection of this option is justified by a commitment he shared with his immediate predecessors: that all cognition is either from grounds or consequences. I do not doubt that there can be other versions of this problem. But I take the account on offer to be a sufficient response to those versions of the neglected alternative that have dominated the literature.

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<sup>39</sup> This point was originally made with great precision by Newman 1928. Especially perceptive is Newman's remark that, for two systems A and B, and two relations R and S, "it is not at all necessary for the objects composing A and B, nor the relations R and S, to be qualitatively similar. In fact to discuss the structure of the system A it is only necessary to know the incidence of R; its intrinsic qualities are quite irrelevant" (Newman 1928, 139).

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