

# Reading and Misreading Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*

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## Abstract

This article surveys the different ways in which Kant scholars have read and interpreted *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. While the anti-metaphysical reading and the self-critical reading have come to dominate interpretations of the text, I contend that both readings misrepresent the context in which *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was written and the structure of Kant's arguments. When these factors are considered, it becomes apparent that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* is closely related to another work Kant was preparing at the time, which he called *The Proper Method of Metaphysics*. Instead of being an attack on metaphysics or a repudiation of Kant's pre-critical philosophy, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* is a cautionary tale about how not to do metaphysics, which was supposed to complement the positive account of the correct approach to metaphysics that he still hoped to publish in the late 1760s.

## 1. Reading: An Admirably Busy Activity

In his 1763 essay, *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*, Immanuel Kant notes that “an admirably busy activity is concealed within the depths of our minds, which goes unnoticed, even while it is being exercised.”<sup>1</sup> He cites reading as a particularly good example of this activity. “One need only consider the actions which take place unnoticed within us while we read,” Kant

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<sup>1</sup> Kant 1992, 229 (Ak. II:191).

writes, “for this phenomenon to fill us with astonishment.”<sup>2</sup>

In the *Negative Magnitudes* essay, Kant refers readers who wish to better understand the activities concealed in our minds when we read to Reimarus’ *Vernunftlehre* (1756).<sup>3</sup> Had he been able to do so, Kant might have suggested that readers look into the “admirably busy activity” at work in readings of his own *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Elucidated by the Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766). While Reimarus’ *Vernunftlehre* provides a theoretical account of the cognitive activities involved in reading, the readings of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* provide practical examples of how to read and how not to read a historical-philosophical text. They show how some readings of historical texts come to dominate the interpretation of a work of philosophy because they support a conventional narrative about its author and their place in the history of philosophy, even when there is strong evidence against both the narrative and the way that text is used to support that narrative.

In what follows, I will provide a brief survey of the different ways *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* has been read by Kant scholars. This survey shows that two kinds of readings have come to dominate interpretations of the text. I will call these readings 1) the anti-metaphysical reading and 2) the self-critical reading. The former holds that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* is an attack on speculative metaphysics, while the latter holds that Kant’s attack on Swedenborg is really a repudiation of his own pre-critical philosophy.<sup>4</sup> While both readings exert considerable influence on the scholarly literature, I will argue that they misrepresent the structure of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* and the context in which it was written. When these factors are

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<sup>2</sup> Kant 1992, 229 (Ak. II:191).

<sup>3</sup> Kant 1992, 229 (Ak. II:191). The editor’s endnote at Kant 1992, 441 indicates that Kant is referring to §35 of Reimarus’ *Vernunftlehre*, but Reimarus does not say anything about reading in §35. It is the discussion (§51-§61) of the relation between sensation and sensible concept formation that Kant must have been referring in the *Negative Magnitudes* essay. See Reimarus 1979, Bd. I, 55-64.

<sup>4</sup> These two readings are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As will become clear in the next section, they sometimes appear in combination with one another.

considered, it becomes apparent that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* is closely related to another work Kant was preparing at the same time, but never published: *The Proper Method of Metaphysics*. If Kant composed *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* at the same time as he was preparing a systematic treatise on the proper method of metaphysics – a treatise he called “the culmination of my whole system” in his correspondence with Lambert – it is highly unlikely that he would attack metaphysics as such or distance himself from his own pre-critical philosophy.<sup>5</sup> I conclude that the anti-metaphysical and self-critical readings of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* are both misreadings, but also that they are examples of the way that conventional narratives about the history of philosophy can be used to attribute meanings to texts that have little to do with them. It is only by paying close attention to the historical context of philosophical texts and the structure of their arguments that we can overcome the anachronisms of these conventional narratives.

## 2. A History of (Mis)Reading

**K**ant published *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* anonymously in three separate editions in 1766. Some of the major readings of the text can already be found among the earliest reviews. Johann Georg Heinrich Feder regarded the book as a warning about the importance of keeping “philosophy in general, and especially psychology, from idle questions, prejudices, surreptitious premises, and precipitate contradictions.”<sup>6</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder went further and endorsed the anti-metaphysical reading in his review for the *Königsbergischen gelehrten und politischen Zeitungen* (1766), claiming “the title of the book announces double dreams... for what can be more attention-getting than dreams of a spirit-seer, dreams of metaphysics, and the overlooking of their difference,

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<sup>5</sup> Kant 1999, 82 (Ak. X:56).

<sup>6</sup> Johnson 2002, 120.

though they should be elucidated through one another.”<sup>7</sup> Moses Mendelssohn was more circumspect in his review for the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* (1767), noting that “the joking profundity with which the work is written leaves the reader in doubt whether Mr. Kant wants to make metaphysics laughable or spirit-seeing plausible.”<sup>8</sup> That Mendelssohn was inclined towards the anti-metaphysical reading is, however, apparent from his correspondence with Kant. Mendelssohn must have written to Kant before his review appeared and complained about its tone, because Kant reassures him in a response dated April 8, 1766 that while he cannot conceal his “repugnance, and even a certain hatred, toward the inflated arrogance of whole volumes full of what are passed off nowadays as insights,” he remains convinced that “the true and lasting welfare of the human race depends on metaphysics.”<sup>9</sup>

During the nineteenth century, many Neo-Kantian readers thought *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* contained a new account of the powers of the soul and its relation to the body.<sup>10</sup> In his *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie* (1869), Kuno Fischer claims that Kant “refers the special questions which the spirit-seer has promoted back to the general question of the knowability of the real ground; for these special questions deal with special cases of causality, namely, the connection between spirit and body, the community of spirits, as well as their powers and influence.”<sup>11</sup> Vaihinger thought Kant had actually derived his account of the powers of the soul from Swedenborg. In his *Kommentar zu Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1881), he

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson 2002, 114.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson 2002, 123.

<sup>9</sup> Kant 1999, 90 (Ak. X:70).

<sup>10</sup> This line of interpretation has been revived in recent works like Laywine 1993, Shell 1996, Nuzzo 2008 and Heßbrüggen-Walter 2014. A complete examination of this line or interpretation lies beyond the scope of this paper, but I consider all of these works to be excellent guides to Kant’s thinking on the relationship between the mind and the body in the 1760s. However, for reasons discussed in Part 4 of this paper, I doubt that Kant actually endorses any of the conclusions he draws about that relationship in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*.

<sup>11</sup> Fischer 1869, Bd. IV.I, 291.

writes that “the wildly fermenting cider of Swedenborgian mysticism is distilled by Kant into the noble, mild, yet strong wine of criticism.”<sup>12</sup> Carl du Prel went even further in his *Philosophie der Mystik* (1885), claiming “Kant was highly amazed at the similarity of his own purely rational theory of the transcendental nature of human beings and Swedenborg’s theory.”<sup>13</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, however, Friedrich Paulsen dismissed these more speculative readings and promoted the anti-metaphysical reading. In his *Immanuel Kant* (1899), Paulsen writes “The ironical and skeptical tone toward metaphysicians and their renowned philosophy which breaks out here reaches its height. . . . He had lost all faith in the demonstrations furnished by current metaphysical systems, whether they bore the name of Wolff or Crusius. Even his faith in the possibility of metaphysics, in the sense of an *a priori* science that interprets reality in terms of logical concepts, is badly shattered.”<sup>14</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Cassirer gave voice to the self-critical reading. In *Kants Leben und Lehre* (1918), he writes that “for all the exuberance of the satire, there conversely runs through the book a serious vein, which can be perceived clearly through all its mockery and self-irony. It is concerned with the doubts and reflections connected with the highest spiritual and religious problems of mankind, questions such as immortality and the endurance of the self, in which Kant had a crucial interest at every period of his thinking, whatever form his theoretical answers might take.”<sup>15</sup> De Vleeschauwer seems to endorse both the anti-metaphysical reading and the self-critical reading when he says Kant “bears witness here to his absolute certainty that the Wolffian metaphysics is false, and, at the same time, while professing his love for metaphysics, he confesses a certain hesitation about its

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<sup>12</sup> Vaihinger 1881, Bd. II, 513.

<sup>13</sup> Du Prel 1885, 446.

<sup>14</sup> Paulsen 1902, 84.

<sup>15</sup> Cassirer 1981, 78.

possibility.”<sup>16</sup> Lewis White Beck, however, returns to the anti-metaphysical reading in *Early German Philosophy* (1969), where he writes “Under the guise of reporting, criticizing, and ridiculing the occult claims of Swedenborg, Kant criticizes what he thinks are the equally unfounded and fantastic claims of metaphysical speculators.”<sup>17</sup>

Some contemporary readers have taken up the mystical reading of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* promoted by Vaihinger and Du Prel, but these readings are neither plausible nor influential. A close examination of the ten points upon which Gottlieb Florschütz says Swedenborg and Kant agree shows that the agreement is illusory.<sup>18</sup> Swedenborg and Kant use key terms in very different senses, so that Kant’s arguments about a person being a member of an intelligible world and a sensible world are not equivalent to Swedenborg’s speculations about our existence on a spiritual plane.<sup>19</sup> It is also clear that Florschütz does not grasp the implications of many of Kant’s arguments – especially his reasons for postulating the immortality of the soul in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).<sup>20</sup> More mainstream

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<sup>16</sup> Vleeschauwer 1962, 38.

<sup>17</sup> White Beck 1969, 444

<sup>18</sup> Florschütz derives these ten points from Du Prel. He writes “If we put the preceding together, there emerge for the systematic thinker the following agreements between the metaphysical convictions of Kant and Swedenborg – agreements cited also by Carl du Prel: 1) There is a world other than the one apparent to our senses; 2) there is a transcendent subject; 3) this exists simultaneously with the earthly subject. Logically implicit herein are the following: a) the inadequacy of self-consciousness for comprehending our being, b) the merely partial immersion of this being in the material world, c) the pre-existence of the soul, d) the immortality of the soul; 6) [*sic*] Birth is the incarnation of the transcendent subject; 7) material existence as the exception, transcendent existence as the rule; 8) a rational psychology is needed to prove [the existence of] the soul; 9) The voice of conscience is the voice of the transcendent subject; 10) The other side is simply the other side of a perceptual threshold.” See Florschütz 1993, 20-21.

<sup>19</sup> Similar views are found in Johnson 2002, xvi-xxii. For a more accurate account of Kant’s views on “the dual nature of humankind,” see the discussion of Kant’s “transcendental anthropology” in Frierson 2013, 11-45.

<sup>20</sup> Florschütz does not seem to appreciate that the necessity of *postulating* the immortality of the soul in practical philosophy does not constitute a theoretical proof of the immortality of the soul, a point Kant emphasizes repeatedly in the

readers have embraced the anti-metaphysical and self-critical readings. In his account of Kant's intellectual development, Frederick Beiser endorses the anti-metaphysical reading, saying that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* represents "the height of Kant's growing disaffection with metaphysics."<sup>21</sup> "So profound is Kant's disillusionment," Beiser continues, "that he likens metaphysics to the dreams of the visionary or spirit-seer. Both metaphysicians and spirit-seers are accused of chasing imaginary will-of-the-wisps and living in a private world of their own imagination."<sup>22</sup> Radicalizing the anti-metaphysical reading, Michael Forster has argued that the anti-metaphysical implications of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* suggest that Kant embraced a form of Pyrrhonian skepticism during the 1760s: "For, not only is the zetetic method which underlies the work's rejection of supersensuous metaphysics Pyrrhonian in both character and inspiration... but, in addition, the work's estimation of which types of cognition fall victim to this method and which do not is precisely that of Pyrrhonism as Kant interprets it."<sup>23</sup> Other commentators have embraced the self-critical reading. In *Kant's Early Metaphysics* (1993), Alison Laywine emphasizes the self-critical reading, arguing that "Kant discovered in the *Arcana Coelestia* something like a caricature of his own metaphysics... Kant finds especial fault with the way he had been using the idea of an external force: it was in part the unthinking use of this idea in his rational psychology that led to the sensuous treatment of immaterial things."<sup>24</sup> Martin Schönfeld agrees with Laywine in *The Philosophy of the Young Kant* (2000), saying "it is therefore correct to say that Kant found in the *Arcana Coelestia* a caricature of his own metaphysics. Something horrible had happened to Kant, and the *Dreams* is the reflection of this traumatic event. Just when his

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second *Critique*. See Kant 1996, 145 (Ak. V:511).

<sup>21</sup> Beiser 1992, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Beiser 1992, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Forster 2008, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Laywine 1993, 8.

career as a philosopher was making progress, just when he harvested the first modest fruits of his success, his whole system, the work of more than ten years, had come crashing down. His first book had been ridiculed. His second book had been impounded and burnt to ashes. His third book was misguided. And now, the pre-critical project in its entirety had turned into a bad joke. How else could he react if not with the odd mixture of laughter and bitterness that make up the odd tone of the *Dreams*?<sup>25</sup>

While I think it is a mistake to dismiss them out of hand, I am inclined to regard the mystical readings promoted by Du Prel, Florschütz, and Johnson as mere confusions.<sup>26</sup> The anti-metaphysical and self-critical readings of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* deserve more serious attention, since they appear very early in the reception history of the text and persist throughout more than two hundred years of scholarship. Prominent scholars like Fischer, Paulsen, Cassirer, De Vleeschauwer, White Beck, Beiser, Forster, Laywine, and Schönfeld endorse them in one form or another and sometimes in combination with one another. They also play a central role in accounts of Kant's intellectual development. Indeed, they are most often found in texts reconstructing the evolution of his critical philosophy. Many scholars treat Kant's comparison of metaphysics and spirit-seeing in the first part of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* as evidence of Kant's rejection of the rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolff.<sup>27</sup> They then argue that his disaffection with

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<sup>25</sup> Schönfeld 2000, 244.

<sup>26</sup> Kant warns about the dangers of a prejudice against mysticism in his letter to Charlotte von Knoblauch and in the preamble to *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, insisting that the claims of visionaries be subjected to the test of "sound reason" just like any other claim. I agree with Kant on this point, but I think the mystical interpretations of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* proposed by Du Prel, Florschütz, and Johnson fail the test of sound reason, because they misrepresent the nature of Kant's claims in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and in his lectures. See, for example, note 20 above.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Beiser 1992, 45-46. This example is of particular importance, because the *Cambridge Companion* series, in which Beiser's article appears, is so widely consulted by students and non-specialists.



metaphysics, his rejection of his own pre-critical philosophy, or both, set him on the path that ultimately led to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787).<sup>28</sup> It is possible, however, that these readings are the product of a teleological view of Kant's intellectual development and a misunderstanding of the aims of the first *Critique*. Because many of the scholars who adopt the anti-metaphysical and self-critical readings of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* also regard the *Critique of Pure Reason* as an attack on metaphysics, they look for evidence of the beginning of Kant's critique of metaphysics in his pre-critical works. They find that evidence in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, but closer examination of the context in which the work was written and the structure of Kant's argument in the first, theoretical part of the text suggests that the anti-metaphysical reading and self-critical reading are actually misreadings.

### 3. The Context of the Text

An account of the context of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* must consider at least three factors: 1) The success of Kant's *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* (1764) in the Prussian Royal Academy's 1763 prize-essay competition; 2) Kant's correspondence with Lambert in 1765; and 3) his correspondence with Mendelssohn in 1766. When these three sources have been considered, the shortcomings of the anti-metaphysical and self-critical readings of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* become apparent.

Some readers might be surprised that I do not list Kant's c. 1763 letter to Charlotte von Knobloch as an essential source for understanding the context of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. While it is true that Kant's letter is the first text in which he describes his interest in Swedenborg, and while it is also true that there are many noteworthy aspects of his letter – particularly Kant's

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<sup>28</sup> Beiser 1992, 46-52.

warning that one should not deny the possibility of even the most improbable events out of prejudice, without first subjecting them to the test of “sound reason” – there is nothing in his letter that explains why he would write a book about Swedenborg in 1766 or what significance that might have for the anti-metaphysical or self-critical readings of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*.<sup>29</sup> Kant’s *Inquiry* is more illuminating, because it provides a clear indication of Kant’s views on metaphysics in the early 1760s. Kant’s *Inquiry* also reveals the extent of his philosophical ambitions at a time when some scholars believe he denied the possibility and even the desirability of metaphysics.<sup>30</sup>

Kant’s *Inquiry* was hastily composed for the Prussian Royal Academy’s prize-essay competition in 1763. While he answers the question posed by the Academy – “One wishes to know whether the metaphysical truths, in general, and the first principles of *Theologiae naturalis* and morality in particular, admit of distinct proofs to the same degree as geometrical truths; and if they are not capable of such proofs, one wishes to know that the genuine nature of their certainty is, to what degree the said certainty can be brought, and whether this degree is sufficient for complete conviction” – Kant also had loftier ambitions. In the ‘First Reflection’ of the *Inquiry*, he acknowledges that metaphysics is “without doubt the most difficult of all the things into which man has insight,” but also claims that “so far no metaphysics has ever been written.”<sup>31</sup> Kant agrees with the Academy that “there is good reason to ask about the path in which one proposes to search for metaphysical understanding in the first place,” but that is because he does not think any of the paths laid out by his predecessors have reached their destination.<sup>32</sup> In order to make real progress in metaphysics, Kant thinks we will have to blaze a new trail.

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<sup>29</sup> Kant 1999, 71 (Ak. X: 44).

<sup>30</sup> Beiser 1992, 43-46.

<sup>31</sup> Kant 1992, 255 (Ak. II:283).

<sup>32</sup> Kant 1992, 255 (Ak. II:283).

It would be worthwhile to explore the course that Kant proposes for metaphysics in his *Inquiry*, especially because they figure prominently in his critical philosophy. The account of the difference between mathematics and metaphysics in ‘The Discipline of Pure Reason in its Dogmatic Use’ in the *Critique of Pure Reason* follows the arguments of the first two reflections of the *Inquiry* very closely.<sup>33</sup> Yet the most important aspect of Kant’s *Inquiry* is not its argument, but its success in the Academy’s prize-essay competition. While Kant ultimately lost the competition, his *Inquiry* was tied with Mendelsson’s *On Evidence in Metaphysics* during the first round of voting. The tie-breaking vote in Mendelsson’s favor was cast by Johann Georg Sulzer, president of the division of the Academy devoted to speculative philosophy, but the Academy agreed that Kant’s entry “should be declared to have come extremely close to winning and that it merited the highest praise.”<sup>34</sup> The value of the Academy’s praise and its effect on Kant’s intellectual development should not be underestimated.

His success in the Academy’s prize-essay competition made Kant a noteworthy figure in German intellectual life. He began corresponding with members of the Academy and the enlightened philosophers in Berlin, especially Formey, Lambert, Mendelsson, and Sulzer. Mendelsson even arranged to have *The False Subtlety of the Four Syllogistic Figures* (1762), *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763), *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy* (1763) reviewed in the *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*. When one of his colleagues criticized Kant for the review of *The Only Possible Argument*, the philosophers and theologians around Mendelsson defended Kant, calling him “the subtlest philosophical brain, who had the gift to present the most abstract truths in the

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<sup>33</sup> Compare Kant 1992, 248-263 (Ak. II:276-290) and Kant 1998, 630-643 (A712/B740-A738/B766).

<sup>34</sup> Kant 1992, lxiii.

simplest way and to make them distinct for everyone.”<sup>35</sup>

Kant’s correspondence with Lambert followed from the success of his *Inquiry*. Lambert was alerted to Kant’s work by Sulzer, who gave him a copy of *The Only Possible Argument*. He decided to write to Kant after he saw that Kant had announced a work called *The Proper Method of Metaphysics (die eigentliche Methode der Metaphysic)* in the catalog of the Leipzig book fair in 1765.<sup>36</sup> In his first letter, Lambert told Kant that the announcement inspired him to write directly and in a way that omitted the “customary circumlocutions” and “artificial mannerisms” of formal correspondence.<sup>37</sup> The sense of urgency in Lambert’s letter can be explained by the title of the work Kant announced as well as its subject matter. Lambert had written a work with a similar title for the Academy’s 1763 prize-essay competition (*Über die Methode die Metaphysik, Theologie, und Moral richtiger zu beweisen*, 1762), though he did not finish the work in time to submit it to the contest.<sup>38</sup> Between 1763 and 1765, he worked to extend his draft into his *Anlage zur Architectonic oder Theorie des Einfachen und des Ersten in der philosophischen und mathematischen Erkenntniss* which he would publish in 1771.<sup>39</sup>

In his first letter, Lambert tells Kant that his new work had been ready for publication for a year when he saw the announcement of *The Proper Method of Metaphysics*.<sup>40</sup> Whether Lambert’s remarks are those of a jealous rival or a potential

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<sup>35</sup> See Kuehn 2001, 142. While Kuehn is right to emphasize the role the controversy over *The Only Possible Argument* played in establishing Kant’s public reputation in his biography, he fails to appreciate the connection between the Resewitz-Mendelssohn review and the success of Kant’s *Inquiry* in the 1763 prize-essay competition. It was the success of the *Inquiry* that brought *The Only Possible Argument* to Mendelssohn’s attention and led to its review in the *Litteraturbriefe*.

<sup>36</sup> Kant 1999, 77 (Ak. X:51).

<sup>37</sup> Kant 1999, 77 (Ak. X:51).

<sup>38</sup> Lambert’s *On the Method of More Correctly Proving Metaphysics, Theology, and Morals* was not published until 1918, when the manuscript was edited by K. Bopp and published as *Kantstudien, Ergänzungshefte*, Nr. 42.

<sup>39</sup> Kant 1999, 77 (Ak. X:51).

<sup>40</sup> Kant 1999, 77 (Ak. X:51).

collaborator is difficult to discern. If Lambert were upset that Kant would publish a treatise on the proper method of metaphysics before he was able to get his own into print, he never says so directly.<sup>41</sup> Instead, he inquires about the kind of method Kant would recommend for metaphysics and asks for his help finding a publisher. In his response, Kant makes it clear that he has also “noticed the fortunate agreement of our methods,” telling Lambert this made him more confident in his approach, because their agreement was “a logical confirmation that shows that our methods satisfy the touchstone of universal human reason.”<sup>42</sup> He also tells Lambert that “finally reached the point where I feel secure about the method that has to be followed if one wants to escape the cognitive fantasy that has us constantly expecting to reach a conclusion, yet just as constantly makes us retrace our steps, a fantasy from which the devastating disunity among supposed philosophers also arises; for we lack a common standard with which to procure agreement from them.”<sup>43</sup>

Kant does not explain the method he thinks metaphysics should follow in any detail in his correspondence with Lambert.<sup>44</sup> But their correspondence does make it clear that

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<sup>41</sup> Kant 1999, 78 (Ak. X:53). See also Kant 1999, 81 (Ak. X:54-55).

<sup>42</sup> Kant 1999, 81 (Ak. X:55).

<sup>43</sup> Kant 1999, 81-82 (Ak. X:55-56).

<sup>44</sup> Eckart Förster thinks Kant includes an outline of *The Proper Method of Metaphysics* in the announcement of his lectures for the winter semester of 1766, which was written and published in October, 1765, only a month before Kant received his first letter from Lambert. See Förster 1989, 286-286. While the *Announcement* does contain a short account of the method Kant’s lectures on metaphysics would follow, I do not think it tells us much about Kant’s plans for the work he describes in his correspondence with Lambert. The reasons Kant gives for organizing the course in this manner emphasize the pedagogical benefits of beginning with a discussion of empirical psychology and corporeal nature, rather than a clear statement of methodological principles. Kant even says that he has placed empirical psychology at the beginning of the course because it is the most beneficial subject for students who will not continue to study philosophy, which hardly implies that empirical psychology and corporeal nature have any methodological priority with respect to traditional metaphysical subjects like ontology, rational psychology, rational cosmology, and rational theology. For these reasons, I doubt that Kant’s *Announcement* tells us very much about his

Kant had set aside his plans for *The Proper Method of Metaphysics* by December 1765. In his next letter to Lambert, Kant still says “all of my endeavors are directed mainly at the proper method of metaphysics and thereby also the proper method for philosophy as a whole” and calls this work “the culmination of my whole project.”<sup>45</sup> However, he also tells Lambert that he “noticed in my work that, though I had plenty of examples of erroneous judgments to illustrate my theses concerning mistaken procedures, I did not have the examples to show *in concreto* what the proper procedure should be.”<sup>46</sup> In order to provide himself with more positive examples of the proper method of metaphysics, Kant says he resolved to “publish a few little essays, the contents of which I have already worked out. The first of these will be the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Philosophy*, and the *Metaphysical Foundations of Practical Philosophy*. With the publication of these essays the main work will not have to be burdened excessively with detailed and yet inadequate examples.”<sup>47</sup> Having these examples before him in his essays, Kant could refer to them, elaborate the method they followed, and explain why that method was correct.

The fact that Kant never published his essays or the work they were intended to promote is indicative of the problems he began to face in his search for the proper method of meta-

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plans for *The Proper Method of Metaphysics*.

<sup>45</sup> Kant 1999, 82 (Ak. X:56).

<sup>46</sup> Kant 1999, 82 (Ak. X:54-57).

<sup>47</sup> Kant 1999, 82 (X:56). Dieter Henrich has suggested that the title Kant mentions in his letter is, in fact, the first part of the work he would publish twenty years later as *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). See Henrich 1963, 404. Arnulf Zweig makes a similar claim in his notes on Kant’s correspondence, suggesting that “Kant’s *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft* did not in fact appear until 20 years later, in 1786.” See Kant 1999, 83. It is certainly possible that the essays Kant mentioned in his letter to Lambert were early drafts or sketches for the works Kant published much later; however, I think Henrich and Zweig have failed to show that there is any material connection the essays Kant proposes in his letter to Lambert and the works he published in the late 1780’s. The similarity of their titles is simply not sufficient evidence that there is any real connection between them.

physics. These problems were nothing new for Kant. They were the same difficulties that led him to continue experimenting with new different approaches to philosophical problems before the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. The only difference is that his work now had a more clearly methodological focus and greater ambition. Like Lambert, Kant intended to give an extensive and systematic account of the proper method of metaphysics, which would build on the remarks of his *Inquiry*. The next work he published, however, would be chastened by the many “erroneous judgments” and “mistaken procedures” he encountered in his struggles with *The Proper Method of Metaphysics*. That work was *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Elucidated by the Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766).

Before we examine the structure of Kant’s arguments in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, one further source must be considered. Kant’s 1766 correspondence with Mendelssohn is essential to understanding *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, because in that correspondence Kant provides an explicit account of his reasons and the goals of the work. He provided this account because Mendelssohn had published a critical review of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, in which he not only identifies Kant as the author of the anonymous work, but also writes that “the joking profundity with which this work is written leaves the reader in doubt whether Mr. Kant wants to make metaphysics laughable or spirit-seeing plausible.”<sup>48</sup> In response, Kant wrote Mendelssohn a letter in which he admits to feeling “a certain hatred... toward the inflated arrogance of whole volumes full of what are passed off nowadays as insights” but also insists that he has never thought “metaphysics itself, objectively considered” was something “trivial or dispensable.”<sup>49</sup> Kant even tells Mendelssohn

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<sup>48</sup> Two earlier reviews – by Herder and Feder – did not identify Kant as the author of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, though Herder was probably aware that Kant had written the book. See Johnson 2002, 114-118, 120-121.

<sup>49</sup> Kant 1999, 90 (Ak. X:70). For similar claims about the value of metaphysics, see Kant 1998, 100-101, 118-119 (Ax-Axi, Bxxxii-Bxxxiii).

that he thinks “the true and lasting welfare of the human race depends on metaphysics,” because he thinks Mendelssohn is one of the few philosophers who might share this view.<sup>50</sup> Together they would be able to “create a new epoch” in metaphysics, if only they could “begin completely afresh” and “draw up the plans for this heretofore haphazardly constructed discipline with a master’s hand.”<sup>51</sup> Kant thinks he will have something to contribute to these plans, because he has “reached some important insights in this discipline since I last published anything on questions of this sort, insights that will establish the proper procedure of metaphysics.”<sup>52</sup> “To the extent that my other distractions permit,” Kant writes, “I am gradually preparing to submit these ideas to public scrutiny, but principally to yours; for I flatter myself that if you could be persuaded to collaborate with me (and I include in this your noticing my errors) the development of the science might be significantly advanced.”<sup>53</sup>

Some scholars suspect that Kant was being disingenuous in his 1766 correspondence with Mendelssohn.<sup>54</sup> But these suspicions are often based on the assumption that Kant denied the possibility or desirability of metaphysics during the 1760s. As we have seen, there is very little reason to assume that Kant denied the possibility or desirability of metaphysics during that period. His correspondence with Lambert and Mendelssohn shows that, in the period following the success of his *Inquiry* in the Academy’s prize-essay competition in 1763, Kant used his newfound fame to pursue an even more expansive and ambitious work called *The Proper Method of Metaphysics*. Although he never published *The Proper Method of Metaphysics*, or the essays in which he planned to provide himself with the examples he needed for that work, Kant did

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<sup>50</sup> Kant 1999, 90 (Ak. X:70).

<sup>51</sup> Kant 1999, 90 (Ak. X:70).

<sup>52</sup> Kant 1999, 91 (Ak. X:71).

<sup>53</sup> Kant 1999, 91 (Ak. X:71).

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Zammito 2002, 211, 215.



not turn against metaphysics or against his own pre-critical philosophy. Indeed, his inaugural dissertation *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World* (1770), his correspondence with Marcus Herz in the 1770's, and the publication of the first *Critique* in 1781 show that Kant's interest in and ambitions for metaphysics extended well beyond the 1760s. This makes anti-metaphysical and self-critical interpretations of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* implausible, though not entirely impossible.

#### 4. The Structure of Kant's Argument

The context in which *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was written and published is significant, but it is not sufficient to prove that the anti-metaphysical and self-critical readings are actually misreadings. To demonstrate that these readings are misreadings, it is necessary to consider the text itself. My approach to the text emphasizes the structure of Kant's argument in the first, "dogmatic" part of the work, because it is in this part of the text that Kant addresses the "tangled knot" that ties together the metaphysical speculations of philosophers and the visions of spirit-seers like Swedenborg. When the structure of Kant's argument in this part of the text is properly understood, it becomes apparent that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* is not an expression of Kant's growing hostility to metaphysics or a repudiation of his own pre-critical philosophy. It is a cautionary tale about how not to do metaphysics, which will help philosophers distinguish metaphysics from spirit-seeing.

In the first chapter of the first part of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* – "A Tangled Metaphysical Knot, Which Can Be Either Untied or Cut as One Pleases" – Kant states the basic, metaphysical problem raised by Swedenborg's visions: the nature of "spirit" (*Geist*). He then explains how we have arrived at the philosophical concept of spirit with which we are familiar. It is methodologically important that Kant begins his account by

acknowledging that he does not know what spirit is. There is no evidence in experience that might tell us what spirit is, so Kant is forced to consider the way the term is used in ordinary language. He says he has “frequently used the word or heard others use it,” so he assumes “that something or other must be understood by the term, irrespective of whether this something be a figment of the imagination or something real.”<sup>55</sup> Kant then proceeds to “unfold the concealed sense of the concept,” though he adds a footnote explaining why the method he is employing is fundamentally flawed.<sup>56</sup> The footnote explains that a term is not necessarily meaningful, simply because it is used in a particular way, so the analysis of such terms does not necessarily lead to truth concerning the concept. If we are not careful, analysis of these terms might allow surreptitious concepts like spirit to pass from ordinary language into metaphysics, paving the way for fantastical visionaries like Swedenborg, who appropriate terms found in popular tales and scholarly theories for their own purposes.<sup>57</sup>

Because there is no evidence in experience for surreptitious concepts like spirit, Kant thinks they can only be established by obscure inferences.<sup>58</sup> Obscure inferences may be derived from “delusions of the imagination” or the confusions of “linguistic usage,” but they always take something from experience and transform it into a different kind of concept, without realizing that this transformation has taken place. They also fail to test the validity of the inference, to make sure the concept it has produced really follows from the experience upon which it is based.<sup>59</sup> Such inferences are dangerous, because they “propagate themselves by attaching themselves to other concepts, without there being any awareness of the experience itself on which they were originally based or on the inference which

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<sup>55</sup> Kant 1992, 307-308 (Ak. II:320).

<sup>56</sup> Kant 1992, 308 (Ak. II 320).

<sup>57</sup> Kant 1992, 305 (Ak. II:317).

<sup>58</sup> Kant 1992, 308 (Ak. II:320).

<sup>59</sup> Kant 1992, 308 (Ak. II:320).

formed the concept of the basis of that experience,” and this leads to greater and greater confusion.<sup>60</sup> This claim is the key to understanding *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, because it explains the mistaken procedure that gives rise to erroneous judgments, which are subsequently transformed into entire systems of “occult philosophy.”

The first two chapters of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* imitate the way surreptitious concepts lead to the erroneous judgments and tangle themselves into the metaphysical knots of occult philosophy. When he defines spirit as unextended, immaterial, rational being, Kant does so as an example of the way some philosophers make obscure inferences from surreptitious concepts.<sup>61</sup> He then draws conclusions from that definition, even though the only evidence for its truth comes from way the word is used in ordinary language. This confirms that there is something wrong with the procedure Kant is employing. He admits as much when he says that he cannot prove that spirit exists or that its concept has been understood through his analysis. The definition of spirit that Kant presents is, consequently, impossible either to prove or disprove. He says there is “no hope either of our ever being able to establish their possibility by means of rational argument.”<sup>62</sup>

Given the hatred Kant says he feels for the “path which has been selected” in metaphysics in his letter to Mendelssohn, it is not surprising that he would extend his criticism of the surreptitious concepts and obscure inferences of occult philosophy to

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<sup>60</sup> Kant 1992, 308 (Ak. II:320).

<sup>61</sup> Because the concept of spirit that Kant employs in Chapters 1-2 of Part I of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* is a surreptitious concept, I do not think Kant really endorses the positions on external force discussed in Laywine 1993, 72-100 or localism as discussed in Heßbrüggen-Walter 2013, 35-36. However, it should be noted that Laywine and Heßbrüggen-Walter are both sensitive to the difficulties involved in taking statements in Part I of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* as representative of Kant’s positions. Laywine acknowledges that much of what Kant says should be attributed to an “assumed voice” (85) and Heßbrüggen-Walter describes Kant’s solution to the place of the soul in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* as “tentative” (36).

<sup>62</sup> Kant 1992, 311 (Ak. II:323).

contemporary metaphysics. Kant satirically characterizes metaphysicians like Wolff and Crusius as “waking dreamers” who “build castles in the sky in their various imaginary worlds, each happily inhabiting his own world to the exclusion of others” at the beginning of the third chapter of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*.<sup>63</sup> And while it is almost certainly this passage that led Mendelssohn to call Kant’s motives and his attitude toward metaphysics into question in his review, Kant actually distinguishes the “waking dreams” of metaphysics from the “fantastical visions” of the spirit-seers in the third and fourth chapters.

Even if there are certain affinities between metaphysics and spirit-seeing, Kant argues that they “differ not merely in degree but in kind.”<sup>64</sup> He calls metaphysicians waking dreamers because they speculate about matters like spirit, leading to folly and error of the kind described in the second chapter of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. When metaphysicians draw conclusions on the basis of concepts derived from nothing more than ordinary language, they present theories which are no clearer than the obscure inferences from which they derive their surreptitious concepts. These theories fail to provide a specific criterion that could be used to judge the validity of metaphysical claims. Still, metaphysicians could “awaken completely... if they should eventually open their eyes to a view which does not exclude agreement with the understanding of other human beings.”<sup>65</sup> This distinguishes them from spirit-seers, who are indifferent to the illusions and parallaxes that result from their visions. They do not care that their visions are nothing more than figments of their imagination or extrapolations from ordinary language. Kant attributes this attitude to a disturbance in the balance of spirit-seer’s nerves, but his prescription is probably more important than his diagnosis. At the end of the third chapter, he dismisses spirit-seers as nothing more than “candidates for the

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<sup>63</sup> Kant 1992, 330-331 (Ak. II:343).

<sup>64</sup> Kant 1992, 330-331 (Ak. II:343).

<sup>65</sup> Kant 1992, 329 (Ak. II:342).

asylum.”<sup>66</sup>

In order to spare themselves this fate, Kant thinks metaphysicians must avoid the methods described in the first two chapters of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. He begins to lay out an alternative procedure for them to follow in chapter four. The first step is to purify their judgment and “eradicate every blind attachment which may have insinuated itself into my soul in a surreptitious manner.”<sup>67</sup> *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* can be seen as an experiment in just this kind of purification. By considering the visions of spirit-seers and the possibility that “there is some truth to their validity,” Kant makes sure he does not dismiss them out of prejudice.<sup>68</sup> Having established that his suspicions are legitimate, he suggests that philosophers compare their judgments with the judgments of others. Kant emphasizes this step when he says he “formerly used to regard human understanding in general merely from the point of view of my own understanding. Now I put myself in the position of someone else’s reason, which is independent of myself and external to me, and regard my judgments, along with their most secret causes, from the point of view of other people. The comparison of the two observations yields, it is true, pronounced parallaxes, but it is also the only method for preventing optical deception, and the only means of placing concepts in the true positions which they occupy relatively to the cognitive faculty of human nature.”<sup>69</sup> By taking account of different perspectives and acknowledging their significance, Kant thinks philosophers will be able to establish a standard measure for their judgment. This will make it possible for them “to arrive at a unanimous result by comparing different weighings.”<sup>70</sup> Such a “unanimous result” would finally allow metaphysics to “assume a determinate form,” setting aside “the endless insta-

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<sup>66</sup> Kant 1992, 335 (Ak. II:348).

<sup>67</sup> Kant 1992, 336 (Ak. II:349).

<sup>68</sup> Kant 1999, 66 (Ak. X:70).

<sup>69</sup> Kant 1992, 336 (Ak. II:349).

<sup>70</sup> Kant 1992, 336 (Ak. II:349).

bility of opinions and scholarly sects” and uniting “reflective minds” in the “single effort” that Kant described in his *Inquiry*.<sup>71</sup>

All of this should make it very clear that Kant is trying to distinguish the proper method of metaphysics from the delusions of visionaries like Swedenborg in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. The way he does that is largely negative. He reveals the mistaken procedures that make metaphysics seem like spirit-seeing; he rejects the erroneous judgments metaphysicians make about things they do not understand; and he ridicules metaphysicians who build castles in the sky. Yet he also offers constructive criticism, which Kant would not have done, if he thought metaphysics was neither possible nor desirable. The fact that he thinks metaphysics can wake up from its dreams, approach its work in a more balanced way, and finally become the “companion of wisdom” that it should be proves that Kant was, in the end, not as disaffected with metaphysics as most scholars believe.<sup>72</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that anti-metaphysical and self-critical readings of Kant’s *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* are actually misreadings. While they have a long history and exert a profound influence on contemporary Kant scholarship, especially in accounts of Kant’s intellectual biography and the development of his critical philosophy, close attention to the context in which Kant wrote *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* and the structure of his argument in the first, “dogmatic” part of the text shows that the anti-metaphysical reading and the self-critical reading are both implausible. Kant did not deny the possibility or desirability of metaphysics when he wrote *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. On the contrary, he had started work on a new,

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<sup>71</sup> Kant 1992, 247 (Ak. II:275).

<sup>72</sup> Kant 1992, 354-359 (Ak. II:368-373).

systematic treatise called the *Proper Method of Metaphysics*, in which he planned to capitalize on the success of his *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* in the Prussian Royal Academy's prize-essay competition in 1763. In a letter to Lambert dated December 31, 1765, Kant called *The Proper Method of Metaphysics* "the culmination of my whole project."<sup>73</sup> The printed text of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was presented to the university censor on January 31, 1766, which means it was being written and sent to the publisher at the same time as Kant's correspondence with Lambert.<sup>74</sup> This makes it highly unlikely that the work was meant to repudiate Kant's pre-critical philosophy, which he continued to develop throughout the 1760s and 1770s. It is far more likely that Kant intended *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* as a cautionary tale about how *not* to do metaphysics, which was meant to complement his work on *The Proper Method of Metaphysics*, which would explain the right way to do metaphysics. This view is also supported by the structure of Kant's argument in Part I of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, which shows how the "tangled metaphysical knot" that ties metaphysics to mystical visionaries like Swedenborg got so tangled in the first place and what philosophers can do to extricate themselves from their relationship to the spirit-seers, which reflects so poorly on metaphysics. This task is especially important, because Kant told Mendelssohn he thinks "the true and lasting welfare of the human race depends on metaphysics."<sup>75</sup>

It remains to be determined why the anti-metaphysical and self-critical readings of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* remain so influential, but I suspect it is because they support conventional narratives about the history of modern European philosophy and Kant's place within those narratives. Many of the narratives

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<sup>73</sup> Kant 1999, 82 (Ak. X:56).

<sup>74</sup> Dietzsch 2003, 91.

<sup>75</sup> Kant 1999, 90 (Ak. X:70).

promoted by analytic and continental philosophers in the twentieth century credit Kant with “eliminating” or “overcoming” metaphysics.<sup>76</sup> Yet we must admit that these narratives are not accurate accounts of the history of philosophy as it really happened. Nor is the praise these narratives bestow upon their heroes to be regarded as an accurate description of real historical philosophers and their works. In fact, these narratives reflect the interests of the historians and the philosophers who promote them in their teaching and writing. It would also be a mistake to think that they are constructed from the bottom up, through close examination of all the relevant historical evidence. In many cases, they are imposed on the history of philosophy from the top down, excluding arguments, texts, figures, and movements that do not fit with the narrative, or redescribing them in ways that preserve the coherence of the narrative and help it achieve the end for which it was constructed. I have not proven that this is why the anti-metaphysical and self-critical readings of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* have been so influential, but the difference between what is suggested by the structure of Kant’s argument and the context in which the work was written, on the one hand, and the way it has been interpreted over the last two hundred and fifty years, on the other, makes this explanation at least plausible, if not probable.

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<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Ayer 1952, 34-35 and Heidegger 2003, 88-89.



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