

CHAPTER THREE  
DREAMS OF THE CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

This chapter is divided into five sections. In section 3.1, I set my interpretation of Kant's strange book about the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766), against other interpretations in the secondary literature. In contrast to Hans Vaihinger and Stephen Palmquist, I do not see Kant as Swenenborg's disciple. In contrast to Ernst Cassirer and Kuno Fischer, I do not take this text to be a deeply Humean work. Likewise, against the interpretations of Susan Shell and Robert Butts, I do not agree that this work was the result of Kant's enthusiasms with Rousseau or with Leibniz. Nor do I follow the trend of recent interpreters, including Alison Laywine and especially Palmquist, who see this work as the product of Kantian "critical" insights. Finally, I also disagree with those, including Herman de Vleechauwer and Lewis White Beck, who see *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* as a mere continuation of Kant's earlier pre-critical metaphysics.

I argue that the philosophical significance of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* centered on Kant's criticisms of his own earlier understanding of mind/body interaction. This text was not chiefly about Swedenborg, whom I argue was merely a convenient foil for Kant to use to speculate about the grave problems that he recognized had undermined his earliest solution to the mind/body problem. In section 3.2, I discuss Kant's pessimistic appraisal of the prospects for justifying

claims about the real possibility of immaterial substances. In section 3.3, I discuss his related skepticism about attaining a philosophical understanding of the forces of immaterial and material substances. Although we can recognize the forces of matter, Kant argued, we cannot understand their nature or origin. The case was even more bleak for spiritual forces, Kant argued, for there is a sense in which they are unthinkable for us and that we cannot even *recognize* them.

In section 3.4, I discuss the implications of this for Kant's understanding of mind/body interaction. Kant concluded in 1766 that this was an unfathomable mystery and that reason was incapable of understanding how souls could participate in a community of reciprocal action with material things. He admitted that he had no understanding of the real possibility of this interaction, and he despaired of making any progress in an area that he now considered part of the "unthinkable."

### **3.1 Interpreting *Dreams***

In this section, I begin to discuss Kant's responses in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* to the inconsistency in his account of mind/body interaction. I argue that, by the time he published this work in 1766, Kant recognized that a key doctrine of his rational psychology, that at the same time one's soul occupies the same vol-

ume of space as one's body, was inconsistent with his account of immaterial substance's spheres of activity. Kant's complex responses to this were mirrored in the complex rhetorical structure of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*.

In sections 3.1.2 through 3.1.6, I contrast my interpretation of this text to a variety of interpretations that have been offered in the secondary literature. In sections 3.1.7 and 3.1.8, I introduce three questions that I answer in the rest of this chapter. First, what is the role in metaphysics—if any—of the notion of an immaterial spirit? Second, what did Kant now maintain about the real possibility of spirits acting in our world? Third, what methodological conclusions did these questions prompt Kant to form about the status and future of metaphysics?

### 3.1.1 Kant's most poetical work

When he wrote *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766), Kant had devoted great effort to his metaphysical system of physical influx.<sup>107</sup> How dispiriting, then, that the fruit of this labor had seemed to vanish: Kant's rational psychology was inconsistent, for his claim that our souls occupy the same space as our bodies contradicted his account of immaterial substances' spheres of activity. Commentators agree that Kant's philosophical

---

<sup>107</sup> Kant had also published several works on aesthetics and ethics and a wide range of scientific works in the fields of physics, astronomy, geology, meteorology, anthropology, and psychology.

focus changed in the mid-1760s. Irving Polonoff found that Kant began a “search for a scientific method of doing philosophy” which led him to “perplexities, doubts, and self-criticism” about the proper method of metaphysics.<sup>108</sup> Alison Laywine concludes that “Kant cannot hope to explain whether or how bodies and souls act on one another” without directing his attention to a study of “the principles governing sensibility and pure understanding”.<sup>109</sup> Laywine discerns a precursor to the Transcendental Deduction; she argues that Kant's goal becomes showing “what kind of thing the concepts of the understanding apply to, and under what conditions.”<sup>110</sup>

The inconsistency in Kant's early account of physical influx did propel him towards the critical philosophy, but this claim must be qualified. Kant did not develop anything approaching a fully critical methodology. Laywine exaggerates the parallels with the Transcendental Deduction: if there were similarities, the extent to which Kant's project in the mid-1760s was *not* critical was even more striking. However, although *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was by no means a critical work of transcendental idealism, it nonetheless prepared the way for critical philosophy by articulating in a specific way the need for an investigation of the

---

<sup>108</sup> Irving Polonoff, *Force, Cosmos, Monads and Other Themes of Kant's Early Thought* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1973), p. 157.

<sup>109</sup> Alison Laywine, *Kant's Early Metaphysics*, p. 123.

<sup>110</sup> Alison Laywine, *Kant's Early Metaphysics*, p. 123.

limits of metaphysics. In part, this work was a mocking denunciation of Swedenborg's *Arcana coelestia* (1749-56).<sup>111</sup> However, Kant's intense rhetorical flourishes have diverted attention from the way in which the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* critiqued Kant's own earlier views.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that, when he wrote *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant was well aware that his ambitious attempt to provide a metaphysical account of mind/body interaction had failed. To explain the interaction of bodies and souls in this work, he was forced to appeal to unknown spiritual forces that he could not explain.<sup>112</sup>

The philosophical significance of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was concentrated in three themes: understanding what role, if any, the notion of spirit has in metaphysics, understanding how spirits could act in this world, and preliminary reflections on the status and future of metaphysics. Two textual difficulties make understanding Kant's views difficult. Kant sometimes developed a position in detail only later to ridicule it or dismiss it out of hand. Unfortunately, the obverse

---

<sup>111</sup> This work is available in an English translation by John Faulkner Potts (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1949).

<sup>112</sup> See sections 3.24 and 3.3 below.

was also true: Kant soberly employed principles and arguments that he had previously dismissed.<sup>113</sup>

The rhetorical complexities and multiple ambiguities of this most poetical of Kant's texts veiled Kant's response. The task of the present section is to contrast my interpretation of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* to interpretations prominent in the secondary literature.

### 3.1.2 Vaihinger and Palmquist: Kant the Swedenborgian

Hans Vaihinger maintained that Swedenborg exercised a decisive influence over Kant. He argued that Kant adopted many of Swedenborg's doctrines as his own, but he added ironies and ambiguities to draw attention away from this debt.<sup>114</sup> Among modern commentators, Stephen Palmquist argues that Swedenborg is the source of the "critical method" that Kant employed in the

---

<sup>113</sup> Ernest Cassirer trenchantly asked about this *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*:

But in this paradoxical mixture of jest and earnestness, which was the decisive factor? Was the book just a passing by-blow of free humor, or was there concealed behind this satyr play of the mind something resembling a tragedy of metaphysics? None of Kant's friends and critics was ever able to answer this question with certainty. (1981:78-79)

<sup>114</sup> See particularly the second edition of Vaihinger's *Kommentar zu Kants Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1922). Laywine discusses Vaihinger's interpretation (1993:16-18). She counts two of the English translators of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* as members of this camp, namely Goerwitz and Manolesco. See *Kant's Early Metaphysics*, pp. 148-49.

1780s.<sup>115</sup> These critics correctly point out that some Swedenborgian doctrines are strikingly "Kantian," but their interpretation is skewed one hundred eighty degrees. It is not that reading Swedenborg provided Kant with new insight, but that Kant read into Swedenborg his own long-established concerns and themes. In this chapter, I argue that the correct view is that Swedenborg was merely a convenient foil for Kant.

### 3.1.3 Cassirer and Fischer: Kant as Humean Skeptic

Ernst Cassirer and Kuno Fischer argued that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was a deeply Humean work.<sup>116</sup> On their view, Kant used Swedenborg as a vicious caricature of traditional metaphysical arguments about the supersensible. When it is compared to Vaihinger's and Palmquist's reading, which sees deception in Kant's refusal to acknowledge Swedenborg's alleged influence, this interpretation has the advantage of upholding Kant's integrity. However, Cassirer's and Fischer's reading overlooked the many passages where Kant makes positive metaphysical claims and misstated the nature of Kant's skepticism, which, as I demonstrate in section 3.2 below, was not Humean. On Cassirer and Fischer's

---

<sup>115</sup> See Palmquist's "Kant's Critique of Mysticism (I)," *Philosophy and Theology* 3 (1989), 355-384.

<sup>116</sup> See Cassirer's *Kant's Life and Thought*, pp. 77-92 and Fischer's *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie*, volume four (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1898).

reading, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was the minor product of a short-lived empiricist enthusiasm. This is incorrect: Kant never forsook the goal of developing a positive metaphysics, and his earliest skepticism was neither short-lived nor Humean.

### 3.1.4 de Vleeschauwer and Beck: A proto-critical Kant

Within the ironical complexities of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, there lurked a unified philosophical project that both critiqued dogmatic metaphysics and struggled to develop a new metaphysical method. My own reading is closest to Herman de Vleeschauwer's and Lewis White Beck's, both of whom argued that Kant began to adopt a critical and not just a skeptical attitude towards metaphysics.<sup>117</sup> However, de Vleeschauwer and Beck understood *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* as a continuation of Kant's earlier metaphysics. They neglected the depth of Kant's criticism of his own earlier doctrines and methods. In this chapter, I argue that one of the chief targets of Kant's critical gaze was his own earlier work. Indeed, it is precisely by criticizing his own earlier metaphysics that Kant was led to ask questions that were crucial for the development of the critical system of philoso-

---

<sup>117</sup> See de Vleeschauwer's *The Development of Kant's Thought* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962) and Beck's *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 444-46.

phy of the 1780s.

### 3.1.5 Shell and Butts: the decisive influence of Rousseau or of Leibniz

Susan Meld Shell also emphasizes the extent to which Kant's target was not just rationalistic metaphysics in general, but was also his own earlier doctrines in particular.<sup>118</sup> She concludes that Kant was so dazzled by the influence of Rousseau's *Emile* that he wrote *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* to “definitively explode [his] old approach:”

The model of interactive community between mind and body—a model that Kant had previously assumed without being able adequately to explain—gives way before a series of burlesque figurative reversals. (1996:6)

Although I disagree with two of Shell's central claims, namely that Rousseau's influence was decisive and that Kant never explained his earliest model of mind/body interaction, I agree that Kant criticized his earlier solution to the mind/body problem.

In his *Kant and the Double Government Methodology*, Robert Butts also maintained that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* put Kant on the path to the critical philosophy. Like Fischer, Butts saw deeply Humean themes in this work, but like de Vleeschauwer and Cassirer he recognized Kant's enduring interest in develop-

---

<sup>118</sup> See Shell's *The Embodiment of Reason* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

ing a traditional system of metaphysics. Butts attributed the work's complex structure to Kant's commitment to Leibnizian double government methodology. Although I disagree, Butts's interpretation shone useful light on Kant's early philosophy of mind.<sup>119</sup>

### 3.1.6 Laywine: Deep reflections on cognitive faculties

Alison Laywine's eclectic approach aims to satisfy two criteria for giving an adequate reading of *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*: “to explain why Kant associates the questions of spirits and spirit-seeing with the status and future of metaphysics” and “to clarify the rhetorical ambiguities of the work.”<sup>120</sup> The account I give below follows Laywine in “read[ing] *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* in light of Kant's earlier work in metaphysics.”<sup>121</sup> Like Palmquist and Shell, Laywine believes that there are significant connections between Kant's criticisms of earlier metaphysics and the development of the critical philosophy. However, I disagree with Laywine's central conclusion that Kant came to reflect on our cognitive faculties in a way that led him to the critical doctrine that “sensibility and understanding

---

<sup>119</sup> See Butts' *Kant and the Double Government Methodology* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1984). Butts' interesting speculations about the double government methodology fall outside the scope of this study.

<sup>120</sup> Laywine, *Kant's Early Metaphysics*, p. 15.

<sup>121</sup> Laywine, *Kant's Early Metaphysics*, p. 24.

are radically different faculties of knowledge governed by different principles.”<sup>122</sup> Although this doctrine may be present in nascent form, Laywine understates both the rationalistic dogmatism and the unsophisticated empiricism of Kant's philosophy in the 1760s.<sup>123</sup> Although her interpretation is much more nuanced and balanced than Palmquist's, she too is overly eager to read critical views into Kant's pre-critical texts.

### 3.1.7 My approach to interpreting the text

If, against Palmquist and Laywine, Kant's doctrines in the mid-1760s were not yet critical, what exactly was the significance of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* for the development of the critical philosophy? If, against Palmquist and Vaihinger, Swedenborg was not the source of Kant's new ideas, why did Kant write a book about the Swedish mystic? If, against Cassirer and Fischer, Kant's newly skeptical approach to metaphysics was not attributable to Hume's influence, how is Kant's skepticism to be understood? My reading centers on Swedenborg's usefulness to Kant as a philosophical stand-in. Writing about Swedenborg allowed Kant to explore speculative solutions to problems that threatened the foundations of Kant's own system of physical influx. Kant explored coincidental corre-

---

<sup>122</sup> Laywine, *Kant's Early Metaphysics*, p. 1.

<sup>123</sup> On this, see section 3.3 below.

spondences between Swedenborg's mysticism and Kant's own doctrines, coincidences that made Swedenborg a valuable foil for these speculations. That Kant did not make this explicit frustrates contemporary reader, but this is understandable given, first, how provisional Kant's answers were to the deep problems in his own work, and, second, how reticent Kant was to admit these problems to others.<sup>124</sup>

The first coincidence was that, like the early Kant, Swedenborg maintained that all spiritual substances are present in space. Second, Swedenborg had no account of the manner in which spiritual substances are in space, and he consequently could not explain how they act in our world. Kant held that metaphysics and mysticism are both vulnerable to an illusion in which "a true spiritual influence" is wrongly thought to "assume the semblance of sensations" (2:340). Kant's speculations on the source of Swedenborg's error allowed him to reflect deeply on what he surely recognized as his own earlier errors.

---

<sup>124</sup> A characteristic feature of Kant's writing at this time was that Kant criticized his own work only *indirectly* in the sense that he did not explicitly apply his newly skeptical attitudes about metaphysics to his earlier views. It is a main thesis of this chapter that Kant wrote about Swedenborg in a way that allowed him to begin to work through the problems with his own metaphysics.

### 3.1.8 A daunting construction

The structure of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was interestingly complex. The book consisted of seven chapters arranged in two parts: the first four chapters comprised a theoretical or dogmatic section, the final three a practical or historical section. The dogmatic section of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* had an antinomical structure. The first chapter discussed the notion of spirits as “a tangled metaphysical knot.” Kant concluded that this knot “can be either untied or cut as one pleases” (2:319). On the one hand, the knot can be untied through positive philosophical arguments which “reveal our community with the spirit-world” (2:329). It was the task of the second chapter to present these arguments. Interestingly, and on the other hand, Kant argued that many or perhaps all of the alleged problems about spirit-beings were pseudo-problems that presupposed an incoherent notion of spiritual community. Cutting the knot in this manner was the task of the third chapter, which was meant to “to cancel community with the spirit world” (2:342). On the surface at least, Kant endorsed both solutions and thus led the reader into an antinomy.

### 3.2 The real possibility of spirit-beings

In this section, I discuss Kant's dour reflections in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* on the inability of reason to understand the real possibility of spirits and other immaterial substances. After discussing Kant's defense of the logical possibility of spirit-beings in sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, in sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.4 I analyze Kant's important thought experiment about souls' spatial locations. Kant here defended the thesis that the immaterial substances in our world cannot be impenetrable, and yet he admitted explicitly that he had no understanding of how substances could exist and act in our world without exerting attractive and repulsive forces. Among his significant conclusions was a skepticism about two things that in *Living Forces* he had claimed to have knowledge about, substances' inner states and the ability of philosophy to acquire insight into the real possibility of spirits or other immaterial substances.

#### 3.2.1 Logical possibility is not enough

In the Preamble to *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant noted that although “the realm of shades is the paradise of fantastical visionaries,” philosophers and theologians have made many claims about spirits (2:317). He remarked caustically that religious authorities claim “exploitation-rights to that spirit-realm:”

Holy *Rome* alone possesses lucrative provinces in that realm: the two tiaras of the invisible realm support the third fragile diadem of its terrestrial power. And the keys which unlock the two gates to the

other world simultaneously and sympathetically unlock the coffers of this world. (2:317)

Kant denounced the “old wives’ tales and monastery miracles” whose authority was so great that making claims about spirits “has become a practice so venerable that it no longer needs to subject itself to the humiliation of cross-examination” (2:317). Fantastic claims have insinuated themselves “even into scholarly theories,” a practice that has led philosophers to “the utmost imaginable foolishness” (2:317). Surprisingly, however, as he began his examination of the “metaphysical knot” surrounding the notion of spirits (2:319), Kant first *defended* the possibility of there existing shades and spirits as the “fantastical visionaries” like Swedenborg alleged.

Kant's position appears inconsistent: after defending spirits’ possibility, he concluded that they are unthinkable. Untying this interpretative knot requires distinguishing between two senses of possibility, namely logical possibility and a narrower notion of real possibility. Spirits would be logically possible just in case the notion of a spirit is not logically contradictory. Merely showing this, however, does nothing to demonstrate “real possibility” or to display the “real grounds” that would explain how it is possible for spirits to exist in our world. Kant defended the logical possibility of spirits but was skeptical about coming to any definitive conclusion about their real possibility.

On the surface, the first chapter of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* began with a question different from any of these: Kant complained that "I do not even know what the word 'spirit' means" (2:320) and then worked to define the term. However, this project was intimately connected with a discussion of logical possibility. A self-contradictory definition would have been unsatisfactory to Kant as an account of the meaning of 'spirit'. Conversely, a satisfactory definition of 'spirit' would show that the notion was logically possible in the sense that it is not self-contradictory.

Thus an attempt to clarify the meaning of 'spirit' led Kant to conclude that spirits are possible in the logical sense. He argued, however, that this result was inadequate for reaching substantive philosophical conclusions about spirits: merely logical possibility is not enough to put any limit on the endlessly unstable opinions about spirits. What philosophy should seek, rather, is insight into whether spirits can exist in our world, which is to say insight into the real possibility or impossibility of spirit beings. As Kant announced in the Introduction to the *Inquiry* of 1763, he hoped to produce a methodology that will do for metaphysics what Newton's methods did for the study of natural science:

If the method for attaining the highest degree of certainty in this type of cognition [i.e., metaphysics] has been established...then the following effect will be produced: the endless instability of opinions and scholarly sects will be replaced by an immutable rule which will govern didactic method and unite reflective minds in a single effort. It was in this way that, in natural science, *Newton's* method transformed the chaos of physical hypotheses into a secure procedure... (2:275)

Establishing logical possibility would do nothing to end the "instability of opinions". In the next paragraphs of *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, Kant discussed how insight into real possibility might constitute the foundation of a well-ordered body of metaphysical knowledge. Knowledge of real possibility, he concluded, would both put an end to pointless academic controversies and end reckless speculation by Swedenborg and other mystical enthusiasts, for it would prevent wild speculation based on claims whose only basis was merely logical possibility.

### 3.2.2 A fire in Stockholm

After his preliminary inquiry into what 'spirit' meant, Kant began his discussion of real possibility by cautioning against dogmatic assertions of spirits' real impossibility. He concluded in the Preamble that "[t]o believe *none* of the many things which are recounted with some semblance of truth, and to do so without any reason, is as much a foolish prejudice as to believe *anything* which is spread by popular rumor" (2:318). Kant considered Swedenborg's alleged communion with spirits to be among the most plausible of the ghost stories. In a famous letter from 1763, Kant cited Swedenborg's knowledge from afar of the

progress of a fire in Stockholm and noted that this was well-documented by reliable witnesses.<sup>125</sup>

Swedenborg had gained prominence as a diplomat and official in the Swedish Board of Mines; he was a man of some stature.<sup>126</sup> Here is Kant's summary of the fire episode:

The third story [about Swedenborg's powers] is such that it must be possible to furnish a complete proof of its truth or falsity. It was, if I am rightly informed, towards the end of the year 1759, when Schwedenborg, returning from England, disembarked one afternoon at Gothenburg. That same evening he joined a company of people at the invitation of a local merchant. After he had spent some while there, he reported to the company, with every sign of consternation, that at that very moment a dreadful conflagration was raging in Stockholm in the Südermalm. After a few hours had passed, in the course of which he periodically withdrew to be on his own, he informed the assembled company that the fire had been brought under control, at the same time describing the extent to which the fire had spread. The same evening, this wondrous news was noised abroad and by the next morning it had spread to every part of the town. But it was only after the lapse of two days that the report of the fire eventually reached Gothenburg from Stockholm—a report which coincided completely, it was said, with Schwedenborg's visions. (2:355-6).

The next day, Swedenborg was interviewed by the Governor of Gotenborg and he provided an accurate account of the course of the fire in Stockholm.

---

<sup>125</sup> Kant to Charlotte von Knoblauch on 18 August 1763. Laywine discusses this letter in *Kant's Early Metaphysics*, pp. 72-74.

<sup>126</sup> Laywine discusses Swedenborg's respectable and successful career in *Kant's Early Metaphysics*, pp. 57-61.

Swedenborg's claims that spirits kept him apprised of the fire were among those that appeared to Kant to have had some "semblance of truth." Thus when Kant wrote a work to denounce Swedenborg's fantastic visions, he was not simply tearing down a madman whose visionary claims strained all credulity. On the contrary, Kant's philosophical project was to provide reasons to doubt the sort of visions which, in private, he admitted were perfectly credible.<sup>127</sup>

### 3.2.3 The location of souls revisited

Kant's interest in the Stockholm fire incident was connected to his quest to understand how immaterial substances can exist in the world. After affirming the logical possibility of disembodied 'spirit-beings', among which might be included the angels with whom Swedenborg claimed to converse, Kant began his investigation of real possibility. Inevitably, Kant turned to the question of how souls could be present in space. He did this for two reasons. First, as I have shown, he was aware of the contradiction in his metaphysical system, namely that spirits that were present in space through repulsion could not penetrate bodies. Second, and more generally, Kant sought out a criterion for distinguish-

---

<sup>127</sup> His willingness to say this in private is amply clear in the letter to von Knoblauch. There is a certain irony in Kant's confident assertion that this story is special because it "must be possible to furnish a complete proof of its truth or falsity." Alison Laywine has informed me that the fire occurred in 1756, not "toward the end of 1759" (Personal e-mail, "The Date of the Fire in Stockholm," 18 September 1996).

ing matter from spirit and concluded that the only criterion was that matter but not spirit possessed impenetrability.

As it was in the *Physical Monadology* and the *Inquiry* of 1763, Kant's paramount concern in the first pages of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was with whether spiritual substances can be present in space without being impenetrable. Kant raised this problem with a thought experiment:

Take...a cubic foot of space and suppose that there is something which fills this space, that is to say, that there is something which resists the attempt by any other thing to penetrate this space. No one would call the being which existed in space in this fashion a spirit-being. Such a being would obviously be called *material*, for it is extended, impenetrable and, like everything corporeal, capable of division and subject to the laws of impact. Thus far we still find ourselves on the well-trodden path followed by other philosophers. (2:320)

In the first part of his thought experiment, Kant asked his reader to imagine a volume of space filled with material objects, each of which resists penetration by the other. Kant noted that such objects "would obviously be called material, for [they] are extended, impenetrable and, like everything corporeal, capable of division and subject to the laws of impact" (2:320). By contrast, spirits are not "like everything corporeal:" they are not impenetrable, extended, or divisible. What was new here was Kant's unequivocal claim that spiritual substances cannot be impenetrable; despite his protestations that "no one would call the being that existed in space in this fashion a spirit-being," I showed in section 2.4 above that this is the most plausible interpretation of Kant's own earlier position.

Kant only implicitly directed this thought experiment against his own earlier views; his explicit target was unnamed “modern philosophers” who affirmed the Leibnizian definition that “a spirit is a being endowed with reason” (2:319). This definition, Kant complained, is too vague to help us understand what spirits really are, for example whether and how they exist in space. It was no coincidence that Kant’s thought experiment raised precisely the quandary that he had confronted in his own metaphysics: how to explain souls’ presence in space without attributing impenetrability to them. The difficulty, as I argued in section 2.4 above, was that Kant could not consistently hold that souls are subject to physical laws of motion such as “the laws governing impact” and prove that souls do not have the same material natures as physical monads, the simple constituents of material bodies.

As his thought experiment continued, Kant imagined a number of spirits being added into the volume of space filled with material substances:

[S]uppose that I wished to place this simple [spiritual] substance in that same cubic foot of space which is full of matter: would it be necessary for a simple element of that matter to vacate its place so that the spirit could occupy it? (2:321)

If a spiritual substance displaced a material substance, then spirits, like matter, would be impenetrable. If, however, spirits penetrated matter, then adding a spiritual substance would not require the removal of any of the matter already filling the space. Kant argued that the first option was untenable, for at-

tributing impenetrability to spirits would collapse the distinction between material and immaterial substance. He argued:

Do you think that the question must be answered affirmatively? Very well! In that case, the space in question, if it were to admit a second spirit, would have to lose a second elementary particle. And if one were to continue with this process, the cubic foot of space would eventually be filled with spirits. And this cluster of spirits would offer resistance by means of impenetrability in exactly the same fashion as if the cubic foot of space were full of matter. And this cluster of spirits would be subject to the laws of impact just as much as the matter itself. (2:321)

Just as simple physical monads combine to form a material object, so too would a “cluster” of impenetrable spirits. Such souls would be “externally...indistinguishable from the elements of matter” (2:321). Kant found this possibility absurd, without noting that he had earlier argued that all substances in our world possess attractive and repulsive forces.<sup>128</sup>

### 3.2.4 A newfound skepticism

Kant’s thought experiment took an unexpected—and significant—turn. After writing about properties that might be termed external properties because they pertain to a substance’s relations with things outside it, Kant professed a skepticism about our knowledge of substances’ inner states: “as for what may belong to [substances’] inner states—of that one has no knowledge whatever”

---

<sup>128</sup> See sections 2.1.2 and 2.4 above.

(2:321). This skepticism clinched Kant's argument that spirits cannot be impenetrable. He argued:

There cannot, therefore, be any doubt that simple substances, which are such that they could be compounded together to form a cluster, would not be called spirit-beings. You will, therefore, only be able to retain the concept of a spirit if you imagine beings which could be present in space which was already occupied by matter, beings, therefore, which lack the quality of impenetrability, will never constitute a solid whole, no matter of how many of them are united together. (2:321)

As I demonstrated in section 2.4 above, in the 1750s Kant was committed to the existence of spiritual substances that were present in space but that penetrated matter. In the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, in the guise of attacks on mystics and visionaries, Kant argued that this account of spiritual substance was the only tenable answer.

After concluding that genuine spirits would have to be penetrable, Kant closed his thought experiment with this remark:

Simple beings of this kind are called immaterial beings, and if they are possessed of reason they are called spirits. But simple substances, which yield an impenetrable and extended whole when they are compounded together, are called material entities, while the totality of such simple substances is called matter. Either the word 'spirit' is empty of all sense, or its meaning is the meaning which we have specified. (2:321)

In order to draw a distinction between matter and spirit, if spirits are in space at all they cannot occupy space through impenetrability. If this were not so, then spirits would be physical monads. Once again Kant's "Swedenborgian" task of

explaining the meaning of 'spirit' led to Kant's own central metaphysical project, namely providing an account of how penetrable souls can be present in space. Kant's skeptical challenge to Swedenborg was thus a challenge to himself as well: if he could not explain how souls are present in space without possessing a repulsive force and thus impenetrability, then Kant's notion of soul would be equally empty of all sense.

In a footnote, Kant pointed out the connections between his thought experiment and theories of physical influx. He noted that his argument applies only to "spirits which belong to the universe as constituents of it" and therefore not to God, who, as "the Infinite Spirit who is Creator and Sustainer," is not present in our world in this manner (2:321). That the thought experiment applies to our souls, he argued, brings up precisely the problem that I have shown endangered Kant's own account of physical influx:

...[I]n the case of a spirit-substance, such as the human soul, which is supposed to exist in union with matter, the following difficulty arises: on the one hand, I am supposed to think such substances as existing in a reciprocal relation with the physical beings so that they constitute wholes, while on the other hand I am supposed to think of the only kind of combination we know—that which occurs among material beings—as being canceled. (2:321)

Human beings, according to Kant, are body-soul composites, consisting of two types of substance occupying exactly the same space at the same time. This is possible only if the spiritual substance of the soul can penetrate our bodies completely. Unfortunately, as I argued in section 2.4 above, according to Kant's

theory of physical influx, this would make it impossible for souls and bodies to interact. The conclusion is plain: the metaphysical system that Kant developed in the 1750s was inconsistent.

Kant concluded that the common notion of spirit can be given a philosophical definition: it is an immaterial being that does not possess a repulsive force. He had answered his earlier complaint that “I do not even know what the word ‘spirit’ means” (2:320). Although his notion of an immaterial being which does not possess a repulsive force could be used to support his doctrine that the soul penetrates the body, Kant was unwilling to assert that souls are spirits. He wrote:

The writings of philosophers contain some very sound and reliable proofs, establishing, for example, that everything which thinks must be simple...and that the indivisible ‘I’ cannot be distributed throughout a whole constituted by many things which are combined together. My soul will, therefore, be a simple substance. But this proof still leaves the question unresolved whether the soul is one of those substances which, when they are united together in space, form an extended and impenetrable whole, and is thus material, or whether it is immaterial and therefore a spirit, or indeed whether a being of the type which is called a *spirit-being* is even possible. (2:322)

Kant remained unsure whether souls are material simple substances (physical monads), or immaterial simple substances (spirit-beings). His proof of the possibility of spirits offered no assistance: Kant had given a logically consistent definition of the concept of spirits, but had not yet shown that any of these beings either do or could exist in our world.

One might expect the ambitious author of *Living Forces* and *New Elucidation* to have quickly dispatched these questions. The newly skeptical author of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, however, doubted that philosophy could find satisfactory answers to them. Kant argued that there was an important sense in which spirits are unthinkable and thus cannot be the objects of philosophical knowledge. In the next section, I examine Kant's skepticism. I am particularly concerned with showing how, despite superficial similarities, Kant's skepticism was different from a Humean skepticism of which Kant may have had knowledge in the mid-1760s.<sup>129</sup> I also explore the significance of his skepticism for the development of critical themes.

### **3.3 The unthinkability of spirit-beings**

In this section, I investigate Kant's skepticism about the power of philosophy to understand the real possibility of either immaterial substances or of mind/body interaction. In sections 3.3.1 through 3.3.3, I focus on Kant's discussion of fundamental forces, and I discuss Kant's conclusions about reason's in-

---

<sup>129</sup> I am grateful to Hannah Ginsborg, who emphasized this point in her comments on an earlier draft of this dissertation.

ability to understand the fundamental forces of matter and of souls. Kant held that experience allows us to identify the primary forces of matter—attraction and repulsion—but that reason cannot understand the ultimate ground, nature, or real possibility of these forces. In section 3.3.4, I demonstrate that his conclusions about the fundamental forces of souls and other immaterial substance were even more pessimistic. Kant maintained not only that we can have no deep understanding of these forces, but also that we have no direct experience of them and thus, in contrast to the case of matter's forces, we cannot even identify souls' forces. This led him to conclude that there is a sense in which souls are "unthinkable" by us, although he was adamant that this unthinkability did not entail that souls and other spirit-beings were impossible.

I criticize Kant's arguments about this unthinkability thesis for relying on an unsophisticated empiricism, which I believe lay beneath his emphatic discussion of the distinction between things that can and that cannot present themselves to our senses. This, in addition to fragments of dogmatic rationalism that remained in the text, explains why it is wrong to view *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* as a fully critical or even a pseudo-critical work. Kant had not yet realized that transcendental argumentation was sufficiently powerful to create a useful contrast between the transcendental and the merely empirical limits of possible experience.

### 3.3.1 We have no understanding of primary forces

Kant believed that we have experiential knowledge of things that we are unable to understand philosophically. We experience causal powers and fundamental forces, but we are incapable of understanding their possibility, their grounds, or why we are presented with these particular powers and forces instead of others. This skepticism was not total: in contrast to Hume, Kant did not maintain that we have no reason to employ concepts like 'causal power' or that we do not experience causal connection. Understanding Kant's skepticism is the main task of this section.

Kant applied the distinction between experiential knowledge and philosophical understanding to the actions of immaterial substances, to our "moral feeling," and to "primary forces" including attraction and repulsion. In each case, Kant affirmed our experience that something exists, but he denied that we possess a deeper philosophical understanding of it. To understand this, it will be useful to quote some passages representative of Kant's skeptical attitude. In some passages, Kant was explicitly skeptical about reaching a philosophical understanding:

But as for the influence of incorporeal beings: it can at best be acknowledged to exist; the nature of its operations and the extent of its effects, however, will never be explained. (2:331)

In other passages Kant noted that we do not have a philosophical understanding, although he did not explicitly say that one is beyond our reach. In no case did he assert that our lack of a deeper understand called into doubt our putative experiential knowledge. For example, after noting that we have no deep understanding of the causes of our "moral feeling," Kant did not complain that we have no right to use this concept:

We sense within ourselves a constraining of our will to harmonize with the general will. To call this sensed constraining "moral feeling," is to speak of it merely as a manifestation of that which takes place within us, without establishing its causes. (2:335)

Kant also adopted this attitude towards fundamental forces. As early as *Living Forces*, Kant had criticized Newton and other "mathematical philosophers" for their silence on metaphysical issues. In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, however, Kant praised Newton's modesty. In the passage about moral feeling, Kant made this comparison with Newton:

Thus it was that Newton called the certain law governing the tendencies inherent in all particles of matter to draw closer to each other the gravitation of matter, not wishing to entangle his mathematical demonstrations in possible philosophical disputes concerning the cause of those tendencies. Nonetheless, he did not hesitate to treat gravitation as a genuine effect produced by the universal activity of matter operating on itself. (2:335).

Kant believed that we will never have a deep understanding of fundamental forces:

Although the resistance which something exercises in the space which it occupies is thus *recognized*, to be sure, it is not for that reason *understood*....It is experience alone which enables us to

perceive that those things which exist in the world, and which we call material, possess such a force [of repulsion]; but experience does not ever enable us to understand the possibility of such a force. (2:322)

He concluded that this force "will, in respect of its possibility...remain incomprehensible, even though its actuality presents itself to the senses" (2:323).

Kant was also skeptical about understanding the mind/body connection.

After lamenting "how mysterious is the community which exists between a spirit and a body" (2:327), he concluded that:

...which necessity it is which causes a spirit and body together to form a single being, and what grounds they are which, in the case of certain forms of destruction, then cancel this unity again—these questions, along with various others, far transcend my powers of understanding. (2:328)

In every case, after discussing our lack of philosophical understanding, Kant did not express hope that philosophy would make progress on this in the future. Instead, he appealed to "the limits of our understanding" to explain his affirmation that "every rational being will readily admit that human understanding has reached its limit" in, for example, merely recognizing that forces exist or that the body and soul form a unity (2:322). This explains why Cassirer, Fischer, and Butts were wrong to see Kant's skepticism as Humean: Kant's skepticism was not as deep as Hume's because Kant affirmed that we do experience causal connection and that we are entitled to use causal concepts.

### 3.3.2 A distinction: knowing something is real/knowing something's real possibility

Kant distinguished between our everyday use of “ordinary empirical concepts,” which he thought was unproblematical because it was based on what is presented to our senses, and our understanding their possibility. Although we can have experience of certain forces, of causal relations, of the unity of body and soul, and of moral feeling, Kant considered it impossible to understand the real possibility of these things. Kant chastened those who “as is commonly the case” assert that “that which belongs to ordinary empirical concepts is usually regarded as if its possibility were also understood” (2:322). He argued that the nature of our experience sets boundaries that make it impossible for philosophical argumentation to display the possibility or ground of forces, and he concluded that “the inevitable result must, therefore, be a kind of unthinkability” (2:323). Philosophy may raise, but it can never settle, the “deepest and darkest questions” about the possibility of concepts, including the concepts central to physical influx and the mind/body problem (2:322).

Although we cannot understand the fundamental basis of *any* force, Kant argued, we possess even less knowledge of the forces of souls than we do of those of bodies. First, the science of bodies had progressed much farther than the science of souls: there had been no Newton to describe the laws of souls’ forces. Second, there are special obstacles for understanding those laws, for while we can discover the laws of bodies by observing their motions and doing

physics, this is not true of souls.<sup>130</sup> The reason why there had been no Newton of the soul, Kant may have believed, was that finding laws for souls would require possessing the sort of metaphysical knowledge that Kant now considered unattainable.

One way to understand the shift in Kant's estimation of the power of philosophical reasoning is to consider how his use of the limits of experience to set boundaries for philosophical inquiry foreshadowed themes that were extremely important to his critical system of philosophy. For example, as I examine in the next chapter, Kant's appeal to the limits of experience anticipated, at least faintly, his critical concern with the limits of experience and judgment.

When discussing early anticipations of critical themes, however, it is important to notice ways that Kant's views were not critical.<sup>131</sup> Kant had not yet shed dogmatic rationalism in its entirety. For example, in the Second Antinomy section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant rejected an element of his pre-critical monadism, namely the claim that matter is a composite of a finite number of simple substances that exert forces on each other.<sup>132</sup> Kant's emphasis, in

---

<sup>130</sup> I am grateful to Daniel Warren for raising this point in discussion.

<sup>131</sup> Doing this advances our understanding of Kant's accomplishments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and helps refute less sophisticated theories of the development of the critical philosophy such as Palmquist's claim that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* was a fully critical work. This is a point that Hannah Ginsborg emphasized in discussion.

<sup>132</sup> I owe this example to Daniel Warren.

*Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, on things that present themselves to experience suggest that he was also too quick to embrace an unsophisticated empiricism.<sup>133</sup>

Kant had not yet grasped the power of transcendental argumentation, a form of argumentation that he would later use to reject both dogmatic rationalism and uncritical empiricism. Kant's critical breakthrough involved not just taking seriously the limits of experience, but also regaining confidence that philosophy can go beyond the narrow limits set by merely empirical epistemic criteria.

### 3.3.3 Recognizing a force without understanding it

Kant took it for granted that the constituents of material objects in space possess a "true force" which is "a force of *repulsion*" (2:322). Likewise, he affirmed without additional argumentation that these forces explain why "[a]ll matter offers a resistance in the space which it occupies" and therefore is impenetrable (2:322). Here he tempered his transcendental realism with a theme that anticipated a crucial part of his critical transcendental idealism, the unknowability of things in themselves. It was a central thesis of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* that being able to posit the existence of a phenomenon or object in no way guarantees that what is posited can be the subject of philosophical analysis. For example, Kant remarked about matter's impenetrability, "although the resistance

---

<sup>133</sup> On this see section 3.3.3. below.

which something exercises in the space which it occupies is thus *recognized*...it is not for that reason *understood*' (2:322).

As I discussed in section 3.2.2 above, Kant made an even stronger claim about mind/body interaction, namely that the difficulty of understanding how souls could be in space makes mind/body interaction *unthinkable*. Although this claim went beyond the claim that mind/body interaction was not understood by reason, Kant was careful to point out that it did not entail the impossibility of this interaction.<sup>134</sup> He argued:

Now suppose that I posited the existence of substances which were of a different kind [from material substances]: they are present in space but they possess forces which differ from the *motive force* of which the effect is impenetrability. If I supposed that such substances existed, it would be altogether impossible for me to think of them *in concreto* as displaying activity, unless it bore analogy with my empirical representations. And, in so far as I have denied them the property of *filling* the space in which they operate, I would have deprived myself of a concept by means of which the things which present themselves to my senses are otherwise unthinkable for me; and the inevitable result must, therefore, be a kind of unthinkability. But this cannot be regarded as a known impossibility... (2:323)

In contrast to his earlier account of embodied souls, Kant found it problematical to suppose that souls are present in space and act on bodies by exerting physical force on them.<sup>135</sup> To deny, as Kant did, that souls possess a re-

---

<sup>134</sup> Daniel Warren emphasized this point in discussion.

<sup>135</sup> On his earlier account see sections 1.5 and 1.6 above.

pulsive force was to reject the only account he had of how souls could be present in space and therefore could be possible objects of sensation. As things that do not present themselves to the senses, spiritual substances would be unthinkable by human reason. Kant cautioned that this conclusion did not imply the impossibility of souls' presence in space, and one can infer from this that he did not think it entailed metaphysical materialism. What this argument did show was that there was a special reason for thinking that the forces of souls are harder to *recognize* than bodies. If we are denied the "concept by means of which the things present themselves" to our senses, then there may even be a sense in which we cannot fully recognize mind/body interaction.<sup>136</sup>

### 3.3.4 Skeptical conclusions

Kant argued that, although there is no contradiction in claiming that simple immaterial substances can be present in space, there was no prospect of understanding how they could possess a sphere of activity. He commented that

---

<sup>136</sup> It remains unclear to me how far Kant was willing to take this point. His point about this concept, which we lack, raised questions about how we could recognize mind/body interaction, but Kant did not unequivocally state that we could not recognize this and he did not address cases where we apparently can experience it, for example one's own voluntary motion. In section 3.3.1 above, I discussed a passage where Kant held that "the influence of incorporeal beings...can at best be acknowledged to exist" (2:321). The textual evidence makes it extremely hard to know how far Kant's unthinkability thesis really went.

possibilities like this “can never be rendered distinct” since “that is never possible with the fundamental relations of causes and effects” (2:323). In 1747, Kant was confident that he had understood the real possibility of mind/body interaction, for “the soul must have outward effects simply because it is in space” (1:102). Two decades later, Kant was poised to admit that souls’ manner of existence in space is “unthinkable”—though not impossible—and thus that spiritual forces are even farther beyond the reach of reason than the forces of matter.<sup>137</sup>

To be sure, Kant’s conception of what spirits *might be* was familiar from his earlier writings. Kant agreed that there might exist simple immaterial substances that “occupy a space...without filling it.” However, spirits cannot possess the repulsive force which provided physical monads with impenetrability (2:323).

Kant summarized:

You will, therefore, only be able to retain the concept of a spirit if you imagine beings which could be present in a space which has already been occupied by matter; beings, therefore, which lack the quality of impenetrability, will never constitute a solid whole, no matter how many of them are united together. (2:321)

As completely penetrable beings, immaterial spirits would be present in space without filling space. However, such beings could offer no resistance to physical

---

<sup>137</sup> This line of thought departs significantly from Kant’s early criticism of the *vis motrix* view. Here Kant emphasized how experience is central to our knowledge of body/body interactions. As I demonstrated in section 1.2. above, in *Living Forces* Kant was harshly critical of a similar empiricism held by Leibniz’s successors.

bodies, which made it a mystery how they could affect or be affected by matter. Kant retained the idea that spirits are present in space only if they are active in that space; how this could be true of penetrable spirits was something that Kant found unthinkable. He concluded only that "there is no demonstrable contradiction confronting me, even though the thing itself remains unintelligible" (2:323). Matter acts in space through the joint action of two forces, an omnipresent gravitational force and a repulsive force, but spirit cannot act in this way because it is penetrable and thus cannot possess a repulsive force.<sup>138</sup> If spirit acts in space, it does so in virtue of forces whose real possibility is not merely unknowable in virtue of a force that it itself unthinkable.

### 3.4 Speculations on materialism

In this section, I discuss how Kant's original project of explaining how something material acts on matter was undermined by his inability to prove that souls were not physical monads. In section 3.4.1, I discuss Kant's criticism on these grounds of what he took to be a standard view, namely that the soul exists in some tiny empty space within the body. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Kant

---

<sup>138</sup> Recall my discussion, in section 2.1.2 above, of Kant's argument that that substances cannot act in our world by exercising an attractive force alone.

opposed this view on the grounds that it conflicted with our experience of sensation.<sup>139</sup> Specifically, Kant complained that there is no way to prove that souls do not possess the same material nature as physical monads, the simple constituents of matter. Since Kant had already argued that souls do not possess at least one property of physical monads (viz., a repulsive force), this was a serious flaw that, in his estimation, meant that the standard account of the location of the soul entailed a form of materialism. I discuss this in section 3.4.2.

Kant surely did not overlook that the same complaint could be lodged against the account of metaphysical dualism he gave in the 1750s, an account that maintained that, in accordance with the divine schema of our world, souls and physical monads exist space in virtue of spheres of activity generated by the conjoint action of attractive and repulsive forces. In section 3.4.3, I evaluate Kant's admission that there was no hope of repairing his metaphysical system. Among my conclusions are that Kant's attitude was not influenced by Hume, that Kant endorsed certain metaphysical positions—including metaphysical dualism—for which he believed no decisive proof was possible, and that the textual evidence in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* provided no clear picture of whether Kant still endorsed an account of embodied cognition.

---

<sup>139</sup> See section 2.4.4 above.

### 3.4.1 The soul is not material

In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant asked his reader to “suppose that it has been proved that the human soul was a spirit” (2:324). He then argued that nothing in experience teaches us to locate the soul in a vacant part of the body. He criticized this idea, “which is commonly entertained,” on the grounds that it undermined the project of explaining how something immaterial acts on matter because it provided no way of distinguishing what is supposedly immaterial from matter. Specifically, Kant complained that the common view of the soul’s location entailed that there would be no criterion for distinguishing simple souls from the simple constituents of matter, physical monads: “one would no longer be able to recognize with certainty any distinctive mark of the soul, which distinguished it from the raw elementary matter of corporeal natures” (2:327). Moreover, he concluded, the common view explained neither why we locate sensations in parts of the body away from our brains nor why we represent objects as existing outside of the brain (2:324).

As I argued in the last chapter, Kant’s early metaphysics resolved both of these problems. It took as a fundamental tenet that the soul fully penetrates the body and thus that soul and body interact precisely at the places where we locate our sensations.<sup>140</sup> Kant retained this view in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, com-

---

<sup>140</sup> See section 2.4 above.

menting that “I would insist on its strict refutation before I could be persuaded to dismiss as absurd what used to be said in the schools: My soul is wholly in my whole body, and wholly in each of its parts” (3:325). However, as I have shown in this chapter and in section 2.4 above, Kant’s could not prove that souls did not have the same material nature as physical monads.

### 3.4.2 Reflections on metaphysical dualism

Kant had maintained that souls are in space in precisely the same manner as physical monads, namely in virtue of spheres of activity generated by the conjoint action of attractive and repulsive forces. In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, he acknowledged that this account undermined the distinction between physical and spiritual substance. He pointed out that we might as well drop the notion of spiritual substance altogether and attribute “the power of understanding” to the “confluence of nerves” in a body:

[I]t follows that [on this view] no valid reason can be adduced for supposing that my soul is not one of the substances which constitute matter, or for supposing that its particular manifestations should not originate exclusively from the place which it occupies in such an ingenious machine as the body as an animal. (2:326)

This view of the soul’s location collapsed the traditional distinction between body and soul, which entailed that the soul is mortal; “in such a case,” he asked, “would not this thinking ‘I’ be subject to the common fate of material natures?” (2:327). This is an instance of a pattern that repeats throughout the first

part of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*: although Kant explicitly criticized either Swedenborg or other unnamed philosophers, his criticisms focused on problems in his own earlier account of mind/body interaction.

### 3.4.3 An unfathomable mystery

I have demonstrated that, in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant confronted the major crisis facing his early metaphysics: his claim that souls fully penetrate their bodies was inconsistent with his claim that souls act in space through the exertion of attractive and repulsive forces. Kant concluded that metaphysics cannot explain how souls could participate in a community of reciprocal action with material things:

[H]ow mysterious is the community which exists between a spirit and a body: and yet at the same time, how natural is that incomprehensibility, granted that the concepts we have of external actions are derived from the concepts we have of matter, and granted also that they are always ways of being connected with the conditions of exerting pressure or striking a blow—conditions which are not fulfilled here? For how, after all, should an immaterial substance obstruct matter, so that matter in its motion should collide with a spirit? And how could corporeal things produce effects on another being, which differed from them, and which offered no opposition to them by means of impenetrability, or in any way prevented them from also occupying the space in which it was present? (2:327-8)

In *Living Forces*, Kant argued that there was a straightforward response to these objections: the moving forces of objects in space are merely phenomena

of the successive exertion of substances' *vis activa*.<sup>141</sup> He argued there that the successive exertion of *vis activa* served as the metaphysical ground of mechanical interaction and explained the possibility of interaction between spirits and spirits and spirits and matter.

In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant concluded that the very questions that Kant had answered with confidence before now “far transcend our powers of understanding” (2:328). Kant affected a newfound modesty, affirming that “I am not normally particularly bold in measuring the capacity of my understanding against the mysteries of nature” (*ibid.*). Palmquist, Butts, Cassirer, and Fischer have all noted Kant's new attitude. Palmquist implausibly argues that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* employs a fully critical methodology. Cassirer, Butts, and Fischer each argued wrongly that Kant was influenced by Humean skepticism. Although less egregious than Palmquist's, the Humean interpretation ignores Kant's affirmation that we experience causal connection. Kant's skeptical doubt was that philosophy can never understand causal powers, not that we are not entitled to use causal concepts.<sup>142</sup> Even if Kant had read some of Hume's skeptical arguments, Kant's early skepticism was not Hume's.

---

<sup>141</sup> See section 1.4 above.

<sup>142</sup> The case of those concepts as applied to body/body interaction is clearer than the case of mind/body or spirit/spirit interaction. If the unthinkability thesis is given a relatively strong interpretation, Kant may have been committed to the view that we aren't entitled to use causal concepts in those contexts. See section 3.3 above.

Kant pessimistically predicted that metaphysics will ever be powerless to understand causality, force, and the relation of the soul to the body:

...[I]f the fundamental concepts of things as causes, of powers and of actions are not derived from experience, then they are wholly arbitrary, and they admit of neither proof nor refutation. I know, of course, that thinking and willing move my body, but I can never reduce this phenomenon, as a simple experience, to another phenomenon by means of analysis; hence, I can recognize the phenomenon but I cannot understand it. That my will moves my arm is no more intelligible to me than someone's claiming that my will could halt the moon in its orbit. The only difference between the two cases is this: I experience the former, whereas my senses have never encountered the latter. (2:370)

The textual evidence is unclear about whether Kant had given up on the embodied cognition he presented in the *Universal Natural History*. In this passage, he seems to mix his older account of the role of the body in cognition with a new notion of intellectual representation:

...[T]he representation which the human soul, using an immaterial intuition, has of itself as a spirit, in so far as it regards itself as standing in relation to beings of a similar nature, is quite different from the representations it has when the soul's consciousness represents itself as a *human being* by means of an image drawn from the impression made by the organs of the body and which can only be represented in relation to material things. Accordingly, while it is true that there is one single subject which is simultaneously a member of the visible and the invisible world, it is nonetheless not one and the same person, for the representations of one world are not, on account of their different constitution, the accompanying ideas of the representation belonging to the other world. And hence what I think as spirit is not remembered by me as human being; and, conversely, my state as a human being does not enter at all in the representation of myself as a spirit. (2:337-8)

When he appealed to “one single subject,” Kant suggested that the substance that is our soul can be understood in two different ways, each of which supported a different type of knowledge about the soul.

Kant’s skepticism made the prospects for this line of inquiry look bleak. Indeed, again and again Kant concluded that an account of how body and soul act on each other lies beyond the boundaries of all argumentation. As I showed in the previous section, there were two reasons for this: we cannot understand the fundamental nature of any force, physical or mental, and there is a sense in which mental force is unthinkable to us and thus that we cannot even *recognize* it. This dour passage is representative:

All judgments, such as those concerning the way in which my soul moves my body, or the way in which it is now or may be in the future related to other beings like myself, can never be anything more than fictions – fictions which are, indeed, far from even having the value of those which feature in natural science and which are called hypotheses. In the case of such hypotheses, one does not invent fundamental forces; one rather connects the forces, which one already knows through experience, in a manner which is appropriate to the phenomena; their possibility must, therefore, at all times be capable of proof. By contrast, in the former case, one actually assumes the existence of new fundamental relations of cause and effect, where it is impossible ever to have the least concept of their possibility, and where one is therefore inventing these relations in a creative or chimaeric fashion, call it what you will.  
(2:371)

In 1766, Kant had given up the task of giving a philosophical account of the manner in which souls can be present and act in space. He also admitted that there are no philosophical proofs that souls are not physical monads:

The writings of philosophers contain some very sound and reliable proofs, establishing, for example, that everything which thinks must be simple...My soul will, therefore, be a simple substance. But this proof still leaves the question unresolved whether the soul is one of those substances which, when they are united together in space, form an extended and impenetrable whole, and is thus material, or whether it is immaterial and therefore a spirit... (2:322)

Even though in 1766 Kant had abandoned the metaphysical ambitions of the first two decades of his philosophic career, his skepticism about the powers of philosophical argumentation would eventually give way to the more nuanced views of the critical period. In the next chapter, I examine a text written late in the pre-critical period where Kant gave a new solution to the mind/body problem.