

# How is Metaphysics Possible without Transcending Experience?

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**Abstract:** The article challenges Kant's view that metaphysical knowledge is purely conceptual and transcends experience, exploring whether metaphysics can be linked to some sort of empirical data. Contrasting Kant's conception of metaphysics with the pragmatist view, particularly Peirce's idea that metaphysics should align with facts, the article examines contemporary research on anomalous phenomena, such as reincarnation and other cases, as potential empirical evidence for metaphysical claims. By applying Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigms and Feyerabend's anarchistic approach to science, the article suggests that grounding metaphysics in empirical facts could bridge the gap between speculative theories and observable reality, enriching our understanding of consciousness and reality.

**Keywords:** Anomalous Phenomena, Deductive Science, Empirical Data, Experience, Inductive Science, Kantian Philosophy, Metaphysics, Philosophy of Science

## Introduction

The Kantian conception of metaphysics remains one of the most important in contemporary philosophy. It cannot be ignored and is often debated by philosophers advocating different approaches to metaphysical inquiries, as well as by representatives of various specialized sciences who engage in philosophical discussions. In Kant's epistemology, the distinction between metaphysical and scientific (empirical) knowledge is based on the criterion of experience – scientific knowledge is immanent or empirical knowledge, a synthesis of concepts and sensibly accessible phenomena. In Kant's philosophy, metaphysical knowledge is understood as being carried out solely through concepts – it is transempirical, or knowledge that transcends the realm of empirical phenom-

ena. Kant grants only the science of mathematics the right to develop knowledge by constructing concepts – operating within the framework of pure reason. However, ultimately, even the results of this knowledge are, in one way or another, connected to empirical objects. Metaphysical knowledge is purely conceptual knowledge that transcends experience.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, metaphysics, not being synthetic, is also not scientific. However, Kant allows metaphysical statements to exist as statements of faith, as certain postulates of practical reason.

Kantian metaphysics distinguishes between two types: transcendent and transcendental. The critique of the first type allows Kant to develop (transcendental) metaphysics as a specific science that examines the cognitive capacities of the human mind. In his theory, Kant discusses a priori concepts (space, time, categories, schemas) and the various theoretical principles derived from them, which are applied, for example, in the sciences of nature and mathematics. One of the most important theses of Kant's critical philosophy is his belief that a priori concepts are meaningful only as conceptual instruments for empirical knowledge. When applied transcendentally – when a priori concepts are used to examine various metaphysical entities (such as the soul, God, and the world as a whole) – the mind becomes entangled in antinomies – insoluble metaphysical paradoxes. Kant completely rejects the possibility of any transempirical knowledge through pure concepts: these concepts are not tools for knowledge that transcends experience. Kant examines the critique of cognition that transcends experience and the illusion of metaphysical cognition through pure concepts in detail in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, specifically in the section on "Transcendental Dialectics."<sup>2</sup>

However, this is just one way to understand metaphysical knowledge and the concept of experience in general. In pragmatism philosophy, represented by key classical figures such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and others, the concept of experience is much broader than in Kantian philosophy. It encompasses not only sensory observation and empirical knowledge – conceptualized theoretically as aspects of external experience – but also phenomena of internal experience, such as emotions and various religious experiences.<sup>3</sup> In pragmatism, the concept of experience is related to the concept of practical action. The jus-

<sup>1</sup> Kant, I., 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, I., 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*, *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> Nekrašas, E., 2010. *Pozityvus protas. Jo raida ir įtaka modernybei ir postmodernybei*. Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, pp. 17, 288–289.

tification of ideas, concepts, and theories in practice, or in practical human activity, is understood as a way to determine their validity. In this theoretical context, we can refer to C. S. Peirce's view that metaphysics must be aligned with facts and that metaphysical statements are merely preliminary hypotheses. Kant, like the positivist philosophers, believes that scientific metaphysics is fundamentally impossible because it does not examine empirical objects. Peirce, unlike Kant, believed that one need not be overly stubborn or dogmatic about any particular metaphysics or metaphysical statements. Metaphysical systems are preliminary and should be aligned with empirical facts. For Peirce, metaphysics is a broad science that encompasses all other sciences as its branches.<sup>4</sup> So, can there be, and how might there be, a metaphysics that does not transcend experience?<sup>5</sup>

### **What is beyond the Kantian paradigm of metaphysics?**

The main theoretical elements of the Kantian conception of metaphysics – the distinction between the types of transcendental and transcendent metaphysics, and the understanding of traditional or speculative metaphysics as a form of purely conceptual knowledge that transcends experience – can be described as essential components of the Kantian metaphysical paradigm. It is a specifically Kantian understanding of metaphysics, to which other conceptions of metaphysics or methods of justifying metaphysical claims can be opposed. For example, if there were real facts that could serve as empirical data for some form of metaphysics, we could argue that metaphysics does not necessarily have to exist only as purely conceptual constructions – as is asserted in the Kantian conception of metaphysics. In such a case, certain metaphysical statements could appeal to empirical facts and would not transcend experience. We could align metaphysical theories with facts, similarly to how theories in the natural sciences are aligned with facts.

<sup>4</sup> Feibleman, J., 1945. Peirce's Use of Kant. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 42(14), p. 371. Peirce's ideas in relation to Kant's theoretical philosophy were examined in more detail in my dissertation, specifically in section 4.3.3, "The Rejection of Kantian Distinctions Between the Thing-in-Itself and Phenomenon, Sensibility and Thought: C. S. Peirce" – see: Rimkus, E., 2014. *The Kantian Conception of Experience and Its Reception*. Doctoral dissertation. Vilnius: Vilnius University Press, pp. 122–128.

<sup>5</sup> This article is based on the presentation 'How is metaphysics possible without transcending experience?' The presentation was delivered at the scientific conference 'Scientia et Historia' on April 4, 2024, at the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute. The conference was held to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Immanuel Kant's birth.

In examining the question of how there might be a metaphysics that does not transcend experience, the studies of reincarnation by J. B. Tucker and his mentor I. P. Stevenson may be relevant. Ian Stevenson, head of the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Virginia, began studying children's memories of past lives in 1960.<sup>6</sup> After his death in 2007, his student, psychiatrist Jim Tucker, along with others, has continued this research to this day. Both academics became well-known for their publications, conference presentations, and various appearances on television programs and internet platforms, discussing children (approximately 2 to 7 years old) who claim to remember their past lives. As Tucker states, over a period of more than 60 years, the University of Virginia database has accumulated more than 2,500 such accounts from various countries around the world. Interestingly, some of these accounts are referred to as 'strong cases' because they have been verified in the sense that real individuals have been found whose life facts match the children's stories. These authors also discuss birthmarks – some children who begin talking about their past lives have various unusual physical anomalies, such as being born without fingers, and these anomalies correspond to different traumas experienced by individuals from their past lives, as described by the children.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it is important to note that children who talk about their past lives are found not only in countries where the doctrine of reincarnation is religiously practiced but also in various Western countries, including Catholic families.

What to do with such facts? Do they prove that the phenomenon of reincarnation itself exists? As the researchers themselves state, reincarnation is one of the best hypotheses available that theoretically explains these facts. One could also speculate differently – that the fact that children somehow obtain information about people who lived in the past and identify with them only demonstrates that human consciousness is capable of acquiring information about others who have already died in ways that we do not understand. Thus, such phenomena may not necessarily prove the transmigration of the soul into other bodies. Maybe such stories do not necessarily prove that the child and the character in their stories are the same person. Just as a single computer can connect to the internet, so too might human consciousness connect to some sort of

<sup>6</sup> Tucker, J. B., 2008. Ian Stevenson and Cases of the Reincarnation Type. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 22(1), pp. 36–43.

<sup>7</sup> Stevenson, I., 1997a. *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects* (2 Vols.). Westport, CT: Praeger; Stevenson, I., 1997b. *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

informational cloud, where, like a divine server or mind, all experiential information about people is stored. Perhaps we all have access to such a super-transcendent library, where the lives of all people are recorded. This is, of course, pure speculative transcendent metaphysics, which, as a science, is blocked by Kantian critique of pure reason.

Children's memories of their past lives are not the only type of anomalous facts that can be used as a basis for some form of speculative or transcendent metaphysics. In addition, there are phenomena such as 'near-death experiences' and 'out-of-body experiences' that are extensively described.<sup>8</sup> According to researchers, between 10 and 20% of patients who have experienced clinical death – whose brains showed no signs of life for a period of time – report having such strange memories upon being resuscitated or awakening. This likely does not mean that the remaining 80% of people do not have a soul. Therefore, if all such and similar facts are true, they could serve as empirical data for a metaphysics that does not transcend experience. These are anomalous facts, or fact-anomalies, that are inconsistent with materialistic metaphysics, the conception of consciousness as an epiphenomenon of the brain, and so on. As Kant observed, a person cannot be without some type of metaphysics. Thus, we either have a materialistic-positivist empirically oriented metaphysics or other types of metaphysics. Kantian metaphysics is close to positivist-empiricist metaphysics. In Kant's system, where the doors to metaphysics are closed, it enters through the window. Although speculative metaphysics as a science is not possible, Kant defends it in another sense as beliefs that, while they transcend experience, are important for human practical activity.<sup>9</sup> Metaphysical beliefs can justify or give meaning to human actions and can influence the relationships of individuals who adhere to such metaphysical ideas with others, and so on. This means that metaphysics has a practical impact. However, the Kantian argumentation here is rationalistic; it does not refer to any significant empirical facts that could serve as empirical data to support any metaphysical claims. For example, people who have had out-of-body experiences, as researchers claim based on their surveys, radically changed their views on life and death – after their transcendent or mystical experience, they no longer fear death, are less attached to material things and material success, and are able to create more open and respectful relationships with others

<sup>8</sup> See for example – Moore, L. E., Greyson, B., 2017. 'Characteristics of memories for near-death experiences'. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 51, pp. 116–124.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, I., 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*, *ibid.*, pp. 116–117.

(e.g., see: Bruce Greyson and others 2024).<sup>10</sup> Thus, a person's metaphysics, changed by certain experiences, has also led to practical changes in their actions and life.

### **Significant facts for metaphysics: from the perspective of the philosophy of science**

If we do not rely on any facts, discussing the journey of the soul, its transfer to other bodies (whether human, plant, or animal), and analyzing other qualities of the soul in the context of Kant's critical philosophy can be viewed as a narrative of traditional speculative metaphysics. Such and similar philosophical discourses are characteristic of the old European tradition of transcendent metaphysics, including various medieval speculative systems. In these theories, it was common to analyze not only the qualities of the soul but also the attributes of the world's creator, God, and to contemplate the world as a whole or the very nature of reality in one way or another – for example, we can also recall here the Leibniz-Heidegger question: Why is there being, rather than nothing? Such and similar accounts, in the context of Kant's theory of knowledge, can be viewed as speculative metaphysical claims that transcend experience. Kant constrains the human mind within very strict limits in his critical philosophy. Concepts, as certain mental images, must be synthesized or combined with sensory images. This actually happens in the study of nature, for example, in physics. Taking the concept or theory of inertia as an example, we can explain what will happen to a person if a car moving quickly suddenly stops and the person is not wearing a seatbelt. Similarly, pure mathematical concepts are also applied to the analysis of various empirical phenomena. Metaphysics, which claims to generate knowledge solely from concepts, is doomed to failure – this is not true knowledge of the object. The result of such a process is various concepts, claims, and theories that cannot be clearly confirmed or refuted. Such metaphysical concepts are not linked to empirical objects. These may only be certain metaphysical illusions, or at best, statements of belief (religion) that can guide or influence our lives and practical actions in certain situations, but in terms of cognitive value, they do not represent true or reliable knowledge. According to Kant, knowledge that transcends experience and re-

<sup>10</sup> Weiler, M., Acunzo, D. J., Cozzolino, P. J., Greyson, B., 2024. Exploring the transformative potential of out-of-body experiences: A pathway to enhanced empathy. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 163. [Accessed: 2025-08-30]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2024.105764>

lies solely on concepts is not genuine scientific knowledge. This is the Kantian view of traditional or speculative metaphysics in his critical philosophy or in his project of transcendental metaphysics. If there can be a metaphysics that does not transcend experience, then we would need to discuss facts that could support any metaphysical claims. If metaphysical theories are particularly complex, such as those about the soul's post-mortem journeys, the facts should be impressive – at least paranormal – since, as is generally acknowledged, we cannot observe the soul in the same way we can physical phenomena like atoms, cells, microorganisms, or galaxies. We cannot easily conduct experiments that would prove any properties of the soul or its interactions with other phenomena.

Metaphysically significant facts can be evaluated from the perspective of contemporary philosophy of science, such as the theoretical positions of T. Kuhn, P. Feyerabend, and others. T. Kuhn's theory of paradigms presents a universal schema for the historical development of science: pre-science – normal science (paradigm) – crisis – revolution – new normal science (new paradigm) – new crisis, and so on.<sup>11</sup> In the pre-scientific state, fundamental scientific concepts are not yet established within the scientific community, there is no agreement on research methods or standards, and the research object itself is not clear. All of this becomes clarified when science becomes 'normal' as the scientific community reaches a consensus on these matters. A crisis in science arises when researchers encounter facts or observed phenomena that cannot be explained by existing theories, theoretical tools (concepts), and research methods. These are anomalies. To resolve a crisis in science, a new theory is developed, new research methods are proposed, and even the understanding of the research object may change. Once these issues are resolved, science resumes functioning normally, entering a new paradigm stage... Eventually, a new crisis in science arises... and so on. If various mentioned anomalous facts are true, which we could appeal to when developing metaphysical theories or hypotheses, it seems that our current understanding of consciousness and the phenomenon of the soul is still in a pre-scientific state.

P. Feyerabend, the proponent of anarchistic science theory,<sup>12</sup> did not entirely dismiss the possibility of teaching students not only convention-

<sup>11</sup> Kuhn, T. S., 1970. *The structure of scientific revolutions*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>12</sup> Feyerabend, P., 1975. *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*. London: NLB; Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press.

al, traditional sciences such as chemistry, physics, or mathematics, but also considered the idea that, for the realization of democratic ideals in education, it might be beneficial to teach children about magic or occult sciences, or to let them acquire practical skills through activities like rain dance practices. According to Feyerabend, modern science is an ideology just like religion once was. The state is separated from the church, but it is still not separated from science. Certainly, Feyerabend's idea that there is no difference between astrology, voodoo, magic, and any Western science is highly controversial and questionable. However, his principle that 'anything goes' in science – that any methods are acceptable if they lead to discoveries and inventions (in technological or in technique-oriented sciences) – is compatible with the idea that the aforementioned anomalous facts might serve as a basis for some form of metaphysics.

### **Final remarks and conclusions**

Not transcending experience metaphysics would be one that can support its claims with empirical facts. In this way, it would resemble standard science, which relies on, for example, inductivist or deductivist methodologies. From the perspective of inductive science, identifying a set of empirically significant facts for metaphysics means supporting metaphysical claims that could be generalizations of observed phenomena. In other words, if metaphysical theories can be derived from a broad array of empirical observations, they align with an inductive approach. From the perspective of deductive science, it would be necessary to derive specific empirical statements from a general metaphysical theory. This approach involves formulating metaphysical theories that generate testable hypotheses, which can then be empirically verified. In both cases, the aim is to bridge the gap between metaphysical concepts and empirical evidence, ensuring that metaphysical theories are not merely speculative but grounded in observable reality.

Anomalous facts invite a reconsideration of the traditional boundaries between empirical science and speculative metaphysics. Ultimately, the continued investigation of these phenomena may either weaken existing scientific paradigms or even lead to the emergence of new frameworks. Metaphysics that is compatible with empirical facts would either go beyond the Kantian conception of metaphysics or fall outside the Kantian metaphysical paradigm.



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