

More Than a Satyr Play: *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer as the Hidden Blueprint of Kant's Critical Philosophy*

Ali Hassanzadeh^{✉ 1}  | Mohammadreza Abdollahnejad² 

1. Corresponding Author, PhD Candidate, Department of Philosophy, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran. E-mail: alihasso1989@gmail.com
2. Associate professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran. E-mail: abdollahnejad@tabrizu.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received 29 September 2026

Received in revised form 04 October 2026

Accepted 14 October 2026

Published online 25 October 2026

Keywords:

Kant, Dreams, Critical philosophy, Critique, Metaphysics, Swedenborg

ABSTRACT

Dreams of a Spirit-Seer (1766) is one of Immanuel Kant's most significant so-called "pre-Critical" writings. In this essay, Kant engages with the Swedish theologian, scientist, and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, critically examining his alleged communications with a supersensible realm. This paper argues that Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* is not merely a satirical curiosity but a decisive step toward the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While often regarded as a transitional work, *Dreams* already anticipates central elements of Kant's later philosophy: a critique of metaphysics, analysis of transcendental illusion, emphasis on experience, and the role of space as a necessary condition of sensibility. It also points toward the practical orientation that becomes characteristic of the Critical system. Drawing on Paul Guyer's distinction between 'critical' and 'constructive' theory, I contend that *Dreams* functions as a *katharticon*, purging dogmatic metaphysics and it already enacts, in embryonic form, Kant's organon of Critical philosophy.

Cite this article: Hassanzadeh, A. & Abdollahnejad, M. (2026). More Than a Satyr Play: *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer as the Hidden Blueprint of Kant's Critical Philosophy*. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 20(56), 459-474. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2025.69417.4236>



© The Author(s).

Publisher: University of Tabriz.

Introduction

Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics was published in 1766, fifteen years before the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Its appearance startled Kant's contemporaries, not only for its sharp critique of the metaphysics of the time but also for its strikingly ironic tone. Kant calls Swedenborg 'the arch-spirit-seer of all spirit-seers,' 'the worst of all enthusiasts,' and dismisses his writings as 'stuffed full of nonsense' and 'wild fragments of the imagination'. The full title itself links spirit-seeing with metaphysics, suggesting that both the visionary and the metaphysician 'see something which no other normal person sees' (Kant, 1992, 330; TG 2:342). This biting irony raised uncomfortable questions. Did Kant regard the great metaphysicians of the past as equally guilty of producing 'wild fragments of the imagination'? Were their systems, like Swedenborg's visions, mere 'hypochondriacal wind,' resulting either in crude bodily effects when it is downwards or in 'heavenly inspiration' when it is upwards (TG 2:348)?

The work's satirical style made it difficult for contemporaries to discern whether Kant meant to make metaphysics laughable or spirit-seeing credible. Mendelssohn, who had earlier praised Kant as a promising metaphysician, found the tone offensive, remarking that 'the joking pensiveness with which this little work is written leaves the reader sometimes in doubt as to whether Herr Kant intends to make metaphysics laughable or spirit-seeing credible'. Cassirer famously described the book's paradoxical mixture of jest and earnestness, asking: 'Which was the author's true face and which the mask he had assumed? 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?' (Cassirer, 1981, 78–79).

Yet Kant himself clarified this ambiguity in his letter to Mendelssohn. He expressed disgust for the 'volumes filled with insights' of traditional metaphysics, accusing its prevailing method of spreading 'stupidity and error' throughout the world, but also affirmed that metaphysics itself — when properly reformed — remains essential for 'the true and lasting well-being of the human race' (Kant, 1999, 90). *Dreams*, therefore, should not be dismissed as a mere satirical diversion but read as a serious philosophical intervention marking a crucial stage in Kant's intellectual development. Its twofold aim is clear: to expose the misguided pretensions of speculative metaphysics and to reorient metaphysics toward its proper critical task.

This twofold aim was recognized early. Ludwig Ernst Borowski, in his *Darstellung des Lebens und Charakters Immanuel Kants* — a work Kant explicitly endorsed in a letter of 24 October 1792 — provides a concise abstract of *Dreams* and concludes: 'Here [in *Dreams*], in those days, the expectation of the future world was combined with moral faith. In general, every alert reader can already find in this work the seeds of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and what Kant will give us in the future' (Borowski, 1804, 68).

Borowski's remark, approved by Kant, sets the tone for a long tradition of reading *Dreams* as a work that anticipates the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edward Caird argued that *Dreams* stages

a critical withdrawal from metaphysical conflicts that exceed the limits of human understanding — a withdrawal that culminates in a turn to moral consciousness as the only secure ground of rational faith. Caird, however, notes that Kant had not yet fully articulated the concept of 'experience' and thus had not yet formulated the critical question with complete clarity (Caird, 1889, 156–7). William Henry Werkmeister likewise traces the central problem of the first *Critique* to two recognitions that begin earlier: one of these developments, that is, the conclusion that dogmatic opinions about meta-empirical matters are the main obstacle to the development of metaphysics, was formulated for the first time in *Dreams*. For Werkmeister, *Dreams* is the first articulation of the problem that will later animate the Transcendental Dialectic (Werkmeister, 1980, 45, 64).

Other scholars have stressed the continuity between *Dreams* and the later Critical project. Robert E. Butts argues that Kant, while modifying Leibniz's 'double government methodology,' remains faithful to its basic insight that nature is governed by both necessity and reason — with *Dreams* marking the first step in Kant's critique and reconstruction of this framework (Butts, 1984, 82). Frederick Beiser interprets *Dreams* as 'the height of Kant's growing dissatisfaction with metaphysics' and a work of moral scepticism designed to humble speculative reason so that human efforts may be redirected toward what is genuinely useful (Beiser, 1992, 45–6). Susan Shell reads *Dreams* as a 'metaphysical exorcism,' the first text in which Kant assigns demarcation as the central task of philosophy (Shell, 1996, 5–6). And Martin Schönfeld claims that while the Prize Essay cautiously answered the Berlin Academy's question — 'Can the principles of metaphysics be proven with certainty?' — with 'not yet,' *Dreams* answers decisively 'never,' thereby clearing the ground for the *Critiques* (Schönfeld 2000, 1–240).

Taken together, these interpretations converge on a common insight: *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* is neither a mere curiosity nor a purely satirical *jeu d'esprit* but a decisive stage in Kant's transition from pre-Critical metaphysics to the Critical project. What remains debated is how exactly *Dreams* anticipates the *Critique of Pure Reason* and whether it merely negates speculative metaphysics or also offers a positive philosophical contribution.

This paper argues that *Dreams* is best read as more than a transitional polemic: it is the hidden blueprint of Kant's Critical philosophy. Its significance lies not only in its critique of metaphysical illusion but also in its proto-transcendental reflections on space and experience and its strikingly moral conclusion, which anticipates the primacy of practical reason. Paul Guyer has argued that the first *Critique* comprises two distinct but related components: (1) a 'constructive theory,' which includes the Transcendental Aesthetic and Transcendental Analytic, and (2) a 'critical theory,' encompassing the Transcendental Dialectic and significant portions of the Transcendental Doctrine of Method (Guyer 2006, 33). Our claim is that *Dreams* not only anticipates what Guyer terms the 'constructive theory' and 'critical theory' of the first *Critique*, but also announces the priority of practical reason which ultimately safeguards both

knowledge and morality. In other words, *Dreams* provides a ternary root of Kant's Critical philosophy: critical, constructive, and practical.

The argument proceeds in three steps. First, I examine Kant's criticism of metaphysics, delusion, enthusiasm, and spiritualism in *Dreams*, showing how it functions as a proto-Critical attack on transcendent pretensions of reason and anticipates his mature conception of transcendental idealism. Second, I analyse the epistemological reflections of *Dreams*, which prefigure Kant's later doctrine of sensibility. Third, I focus on the Practical Conclusion of *Dreams*, where Kant denies the necessity of metaphysical knowledge of spirits for moral life — a view that foreshadows his claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that he 'had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith' (B XXX). By following these three strands — critical, constructive, and practical — this paper shows that *Dreams* is not merely an intellectual curiosity but a text that fundamentally anticipates the architecture of the first *Critique*.

1. The Critical Theory

1-1 Critique of Metaphysics.

In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant famously describes metaphysics as a 'cloud-cuckoo-land' filled with delusional stories (TG 2:356). In this 'realm of shadows,' the 'paradise of the fantastical visionaries' (TG 2:317), rational reveries are no different from the fairy tales of popular imagination. Whether Wolff, Crusius, or Swedenborg—whom Kant calls 'the arch-spirit-seer of all spirit-seers' (TG 2:354)—all 'build castles in the sky in their various imaginary worlds' (TG 2:342). In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant directs a similar critique toward metaphysicians, beginning with Plato, who 'dared to go beyond [the world of the senses] on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of pure understanding' (B 9). Yet, as Kant warns, these castles in the air have no solid foundation: 'It is, however, a customary fate of human reason in speculation to finish its edifice as early as possible and only then to investigate whether the ground has been adequately prepared for it' (B 9). In *Dreams*, Kant makes the same point more laconically: 'To think sensibly is generally an easy enough matter, but only, unfortunately, after one has allowed oneself to be deceived for a while' (TG 2:367).

The metaphor of 'wings' recurs throughout *Dreams*. In its closing lines, Kant observes: 'Nor has human reason been endowed with the wings which would enable it to fly so high as to cleave the clouds which veil from our eyes the mysteries of the other world' (TG 2:373). Elsewhere, metaphysics is described as an 'airship' (TG 2:360), or as something with 'butterfly-wings' and 'silken wings' that lift us away from the 'humble ground of experience' and cause us to wander in 'empty space' (TG 2:368). This 'humble ground of experience'—from which, Kant warns, 'we may never depart with impunity'—becomes the 'island of truth' in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, surrounded by the 'broad and stormy ocean of illusion'. Kant offers one of his most memorable images of the limits of reason at the close of the Transcendental Analytic:

This land, however, is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end (A 235/B 294–A 236/B 295).

Importantly, Kant's view of metaphysics in *Dreams* is not purely destructive. In the third chapter of the Dogmatic Part, he expresses hope for a future metaphysics that would become a science—a 'common world such as the mathematicians have long possessed'—where philosophers would finally 'end their reverie and open their eyes' to a shared intellectual landscape 'which does not exclude agreement with the understanding of other human beings' (TG 2:342). Two decades later, in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant concedes that metaphysics, unlike mathematics or physics, has not yet found 'the secure path of a science' but remains 'a battlefield' (B xiv–xv). Nevertheless, the *Critique* is meant to establish precisely such a path through what Kant famously calls his 'Copernican revolution'. In this sense, the project of *Dreams* and that of the first *Critique* are continuous. In *Dreams*, Kant even describes his personal relation to metaphysics in romantic terms: 'Metaphysics, with which, as fate would have it, I have fallen in love but from which I can boast of only a few favours, offers two kinds of advantage' (TG 2:367). The first *Critique* repeats the sentiment, declaring that we will 'always return to metaphysics as to a beloved from whom we have been estranged' (A 850/B 878). These parallel passages suggest that Kant's conviction about the inevitability of metaphysics, already present in *Dreams*, remains unchanged in the *Critique*.

In *Dreams*, Kant enumerates two 'advantages' of metaphysics. The first is that it 'can solve the problems thrown up by the enquiring mind, when it uses reason to spy after the more hidden properties of things' (TG 2:367). Kant quickly tempers this claim, admitting that 'hope is here all too often disappointed by the outcome' (TG 2:367). He ultimately regards these 'great aspirations' of unaided reason as 'superfluous' (TG 2:369) and argues that philosophy must dispel this 'phantom of knowledge' and convince us that such knowledge 'lies wholly beyond the horizon of man' (TG 2:370). In the 'Critique', however, Kant reformulates this first 'advantage' in a more constructive manner. In the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, he treats the ideas of reason as natural, indispensable, and regulative: they guide understanding in organizing experience coherently, becoming misleading only when taken in a constitutive sense as referring to objects beyond experience (A 643/B 671–A 644/B 672). Indeed, Kant even claims that without reason we would lack 'coherent use of the understanding' and, therefore, any 'sufficient mark of empirical truth' (A 651/B 679). Thus, the first 'advantage' of metaphysics in *Dreams* receives its fullest articulation in the *Critique*. The second and, for Kant, 'most

important advantage' of metaphysics is that it serves as a 'science of the limits of human reason' (TG 2:367–8). This anticipates Kant's own definition of 'critique' in the introduction to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

We can regard a science of the mere estimation of pure reason, of its sources and boundaries, as the propaedeutic to the system of pure reason. Such a thing would not be a doctrine, but must be called only a critique of pure reason, and its utility in regard to speculation would really be only negative, serving not for the amplification but only for the purification of our reason, and for keeping it free of errors, by which a great deal is already won (B 25; emphasis is Kant's own).

For Kant, understanding must never transgress the limits of 'what one can know,' or, in the language of the first *Critique*, the 'boundaries of sensibility' within which objects are given to us. Metaphysics understood as an ontology purporting to deliver synthetic *a priori* knowledge of existence must therefore be abandoned, and it must be redefined as a critique or science of the limits of reason. Hence Kant insists that 'the proud name of an ontology... must give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding' (A 247). Kant acknowledges in *Dreams* that he had not yet defined these limits with sufficient precision, having only shown that it is futile to pursue questions requiring data beyond human capacities. The first *Critique* fulfils this project: determining the limits of human reason becomes the central task of the Transcendental Aesthetic and Transcendental Analytic, where it is worked out systematically and in detail.

1-2 Critique of Delusion and Transcendental Illusion.

In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant argues that any attempt to transcend the realm of experience is necessarily accompanied by a kind of punishment. In the second chapter of the Historical part, he warns that we can never depart from the 'humble ground of experience' without suffering consequences (TG 2:368). What is the nature of this punishment? Kant's answer is unequivocal: 'delusion.' In the Dogmatic part, Kant initially assumes the existence of a spiritual world and asks how its influences would appear to us as embodied beings. His answer is discouraging: spiritual impressions manifest only through images of the imagination, making it impossible to distinguish delusion from reality (TG 2:340). In the third chapter of the Dogmatic part, Kant goes further and abandons the postulate of a spiritual world altogether, interpreting spirit-influences themselves as a species of delusion – the punishment for transgressing the limits of experience. Spiritual perception is not a supplement to sensory perception; rather, such perception, if it is not grounded in experience, is nothing but a delusion that can only be attained 'by forfeiting something of that understanding which one needs for this present world' (TG 2:341).

Kant explains how such delusion arises by distinguishing between images of imagination and images of sensation using the concept of *focus imaginarius*, a term borrowed from optics: the *focus imaginarius* is ‘the point of convergence of the lines indicating the direction in which the sensation is transmitted when it makes an impression’ (TG 2:344). In sensation, this point is located outside the perceiving subject, whereas in imagination it is located within. This distinction allows Kant to differentiate between the ‘waking-dreamer’ (or dreamer of reason) and the ‘spirit-seer’ (or dreamer of sense). The waking-dreamer, although absorbed in imagination, does not confuse images with reality because he recognizes them as his own. The spirit-seer, by contrast, projects the products of imagination outward, taking them for sensory impressions and thus mistaking them for real objects (TG 2:346).

This account of delusion in *Dreams* anticipates Kant’s later concept of ‘transcendental illusion’ in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: the mistaken projection of subjective conditions of thought as if they were objective determinations of things themselves (A 294, A 297). Just as the spirit-seer places the *focus imaginarius* outside himself, reason applies transcendental ideas in their transcendent use ‘straightway to a supposed object corresponding to them’ (A 643/B 671). Kant even reuses the metaphor of the *focus imaginarius* in the first *Critique*, distinguishing the regulative use of transcendental ideas, which merely guides understanding towards greater unity, from their constitutive misuse, which generates the illusion of objects beyond possible experience (A 644/B 672). As Alenka Zupančič (2000, 66) observes, both the apparitions of the spirit-seer and the transcendental ideas deceive ‘at the level of being’: they do not misrepresent real objects but generate the illusion that there is something where there is, in fact, nothing.

Despite these parallels, Kant in *Dreams* attributes delusion to a ‘deception of the senses’ (TG 2:347, 2:361), whereas in the *Critique* transcendental illusion is described as a ‘defect of judgement’ (A 643/B 671). Kant mentions the ‘so-called sense-deceptions’ only once in the *Critique* (A 376) and even there subsumes them under faulty judgement. This shift from the senses to judgement marks a crucial development: delusion is no longer a merely sensory phenomenon but an inescapable feature of reason’s operation. As Kant notes in *Dreams*, sensory impressions, whether veridical or illusory, ‘possess an immediate certainty, which is far stronger than all other persuasion’ (TG 2:347). This observation recalls Kant’s later distinction between logical illusion, which disappears once logical rules are correctly applied, and transcendental illusion, which persists even after it is recognized as an illusion (A 297/B 353). Thus, the difference between the two works lies less in their recognition of illusion than in the growing sophistication of Kant’s account of its source.

Moreover, what *Dreams* treats as delusions are reduced in the first *Critique* to three formal, transcendental ideas: the soul, the world as a whole, and God. These are no longer understood as mere phantasms but as ‘natural predispositions’ of human reason (B 22), ineradicable tendencies of thought (A 298). This development might tempt Swedenborgian interpreters to

claim that Kant ultimately regards spirit-seeing as a necessary condition for transcendental idealism. Such a reading would be premature, for Kant reaffirms his critique of Swedenborg in the section on the Ideal of Pure Reason, rejecting what he calls 'enormous and gigantic fantasy' in *Dreams*: the greatest man, which includes 'all spirit-societies together, and the whole world of all these invisible beings' (TG 2:365). Kant's argument is that we can never, as Swedenborg does,

hypostatize this idea of the sum total of all reality, . . . dialectically transform the distributive unity of the use of the understanding in experience, into the collective unity of a whole of experience; and from this whole of appearance . . . think up an individual thing containing in itself all empirical reality (A 582 /B 610).

Therefore, we are here back to the same delusion that Kant recognized in Swedenborg.

1-3 Critique of Spiritualism.

One of Kant's primary aims in *Dreams* was to refute Swedenborg's claims to spiritual knowledge. The first chapter of the Dogmatic part begins with the question: 'What exactly is this thing which, under the name of spirit, people claim to understand so well?' (TG 2:319). Kant calls the concept of spirit a 'metaphysical knot' and argues that its assumptions – that spirit is a simple, immaterial, rational substance that occupies space through its activity – lie so far beyond experience that neither their possibility nor impossibility can be demonstrated (TG 2:323). For the sake of argument, Kant grants these assumptions and then asks whether the soul, so conceived, occupies a determinate place in the body distinct from its physical parts. After exploring a series of speculative hypotheses, he concedes that such questions 'far transcend my powers of understanding' (TG 2:328).

These reflections prefigure the treatment of the soul in the first *Critique*, where Kant argues that rational psychology is based on a transcendental illusion that produces four paralogisms: substantiality, simplicity, personality, and ideality. The proposition 'the soul is substance', for example, is valid only as a logical subject and cannot yield knowledge of a real entity (A 350). Similarly, the claim 'I am simple' expresses merely the logical unity of consciousness, not the ontological simplicity of a thinking substance (A 355). Kant makes the same point in *Dreams*, noting that if the soul were a simple element occupying space, it would be indistinguishable from matter (TG 2:326). The paralogism of personality, which infers a real, persisting subject from the unity of consciousness, is likewise rejected: 'the identity of the consciousness of Myself in different times is therefore only a formal condition of my thoughts' (A 363). The fourth paralogism, concerning the distinction of mental and physical substances, leads to transcendental realism and empirical idealism by treating appearances as things existing independently of us (A 371). Kant's ultimate target in all four paralogisms is Descartes' passage from *cogito* to *res cogitans*. As Kant observes, Descartes 'takes the unity in the synthesis of

thoughts' as if it were 'a perceived unity in the subject of these thoughts' (A 402). For Kant, the 'I think' is not a concept but a mere formal condition accompanying all representations (B 404/A 346). This point is already anticipated in *Dreams*, where Kant rejects the notion of the self as localized in the brain:

But no one is immediately conscious of a particular place in his body; one is only immediately conscious of the space which one occupies relatively to the world around. . . . Where I feel, it is there that I am. I am as immediately in my finger-tip as I am in my head. It is I myself whose heel hurts, and whose heart beats with emotion. . . . Nor does any experience teach me to imprison my indivisible 'I' in a microscopically tiny region of the brain. (TG 2:324-5)

For Kant, such speculations about the soul are not only groundless but necessarily unknowable. Hence, if we persist in thinking of spirit in these terms, 'the pneumatology of man' becomes nothing more than 'his necessary ignorance in respect of a type of being which is supposed to exist' (TG 2:352). The first *Critique* expresses the same insight by insisting that no analytic proposition about the soul (such as 'I think') can be converted into a synthetic claim about its real nature (B 408). This is precisely the error committed by Swedenborg, who not only hypostatizes the thinking subject but populates an imagined spiritual world with entities of the same kind.

1-4 Critique of the Soul–Body Relationship.

The soul–body problem is a recurring theme in traditional metaphysics. It is unsurprising, then, that Kant—metaphysics' great critic—addresses it both in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* and in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, challenging its common formulations. As Kant's summary of Swedenborg's view reveals, Swedenborg posits two distinct worlds—spiritual and corporeal—and adopts a version of Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony to explain their relation. According to this view, there is a perfect correspondence between the various powers of the soul and the members of the body: a spiritual influence affecting one power of the soul produces a corresponding effect on a bodily organ (TG 2:365). In this framework, physical sensations have no intrinsic meaning but gain significance only by reference to the spiritual world. In *Dreams*, Kant opposes this view unambiguously. Even if we assume that thought moves the body, he argues, we cannot *a priori* and through mere analysis reduce bodily movement entirely to thinking; we can recognize the phenomenon but can never have knowledge of it (TG 2:370). Similarly, although we think of ourselves as incorporeal beings by reflecting on the determinations of thought—distinct from those of the body—we cannot determine, on the basis of experience, whether this incorporeal self is capable of existing or thinking independently of the body (before birth, after death, or during life apart from bodily conditions). Such speculations, Kant concludes, are mere fictions born of unrestrained imagination (TG 2:371).

Kant's treatment of the soul-body problem in the *Critique of Pure Reason* remains fundamentally consistent but becomes more rigorous under the framework of transcendental idealism. He attributes all theories of soul-body interaction to what he calls the 'subreption of hypostatized representations': we treat representations as if they were self-standing things, entirely separate from us (A 389). This dogmatic stance inevitably gives rise to three competing theories—physical influence, pre-established harmony, and supernatural assistance (A 390). Kant regards the first as grounded in a 'crude dualism' and the other two as dogmatic objections to it (A 392). In short, all three are speculative and baseless. The first assumes it knows the essence of objects, while the other two claim, by dogmatic protest, to know better. Against all three, Kant proposes a critical objection that does not claim superior knowledge of the object but merely exposes the illegitimacy of such claims (A 388). Once subjected to this critique, the soul-body problem is reframed as the question: 'How is outer intuition possible in a thinking subject?' Kant's answer is radical:

It is not possible for any human being to find an answer to this question, and no one will ever fill this gap in our knowledge, but rather only indicate it, by ascribing outer appearances to a transcendental object that is the cause of this species of representations, with which cause, however, we have no acquaintance at all, nor will we ever get a concept of it (A 393)

This is precisely the position Kant had already hinted at in *Dreams*, when he confessed his ignorance of how the soul enters the world, how it is present in the body, and how it affects the body, and took this ignorance as a reason for silence on these matters (TG 2:351). The first *Critique*, however, strengthens and systematizes this position through the doctrine of transcendental idealism: we must posit an 'unknown ground'—the transcendental object—underlying both outer appearances and inner intuition, thereby avoiding both crude dualism and ungrounded spiritualism or materialism (A 379–80).

1-5 Critique of Enthusiasm.

In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), published two years before *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant defines *Schwärmerei* (enthusiasm) as 'a pious brazenness... occasioned by a certain pride and an altogether too great confidence in oneself to come closer to the heavenly natures and to elevate itself by an astonishing flight above the usual and prescribed order' (Kant, 2011, 57). In a footnote, Kant adds that the enthusiast 'believes itself to feel an immediate and extraordinary communion with a higher nature'. This framework makes clear why, in the second chapter of the Historical part of *Dreams*—entitled Ecstatic Journey of an Enthusiast through the Spirit-World—Kant portrays Swedenborg as the paradigm of enthusiasm: someone who claims to enjoy precisely such an 'immediate and extraordinary communion with a higher nature'. Kant interprets Swedenborg's ghost stories, allegedly derived

from occult visions, as products of 'fanatical intuition' (TG 2:360) and describes Swedenborg himself as 'the worst of all enthusiasts' (TG 2:366).

This critique continues into the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant explicitly defines Critical philosophy as a safeguard against enthusiasm (B xxxiv). He even charges 'the famous Locke' with encouraging a form of enthusiasm, since—despite grounding the concepts of understanding in experience—Locke still attempted to acquire knowledge beyond the limits of experience (B 128). Strikingly, as Guyer and Wood note, Kant annotated his own copy of the first edition of the first *Critique* by adding the phrase 'against enthusiasm' to a key programmatic sentence:

That the understanding can therefore make only empirical use of all its a priori principles, indeed of all its concepts, but never transcendental use, is a proposition that, if it can be recognized with conviction, points to important consequences [against enthusiasm] (Kant, 1998, 340n).

This marginal note confirms that the critique of enthusiasm continued to occupy Kant's mind well after *Dreams*. In the final analysis—and to paraphrase Žižek (1993, 89)—enthusiasm remained for Kant a model of the transcendental idea in its constitutive use: both aim at the same thing, namely, to transcend the given bounds of experience.

2. The Constructive Theory

2-1 Space as the Necessary Condition of Sensibility

In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant treats space as the conceptual key for diagnosing the spirit-seer's delusion. In the Anti-Cabbalah chapter, Kant anticipates the central insight of the Transcendental Aesthetic in *Critique of Pure Reason*: that space (and time) are not properties of things in themselves but 'pure forms of sensible intuition' (A 20–22). In *Dreams*, Kant observes that the spirit-seer's error does not lie in the clarity of his imagination, but in the misplacement of its representations: 'How does the soul transpose such an image [of imagination] ... into quite a different relation, locating it ... in a place external to itself among the objects which present themselves to the sensation which the soul has?' (TG 2:344). This transposition presupposes that 'space' functions as a condition for the possibility of appearances: 'in using our outer senses ... we include the place of these objects in our sensations' (TG 2:344). For Kant, this spatial 'inclusion' is a 'necessary condition' of sensibility—without it, externality could not be represented at all. In the first *Critique*, this insight reaches full maturity: 'Space is nothing other than merely the form of all appearances of outer sense, i.e., the subjective condition of sensibility, under which alone outer intuition is possible for us' (A 26/B 42).

2-2 The Primacy of Experience.

Dreams repeatedly stress the indispensability of experience (TG 2:324, 2:347, 2:368–69). Well before the first *Critique*, Kant warns that reason alone cannot generate knowledge, since it is 'half-engaged in creating fictions and half-engaged in drawing inferences' (TG 2:348). Reason's

principles, at best, 'only govern the drawing of comparisons in respect of identity and contradiction' (TG 2:370). Thus, it is 'more consonant with a rational mode of thought to draw the grounds of one's explanation from the material with which experience furnishes us rather than to lose oneself in the dizzy concepts of reason' (TG 2:347–48). Already in *Dreams* we find what Henry Allison (2004, 13) famously calls the 'discursivity thesis': human knowledge is irreducibly discursive, consisting of concepts applied to data given in sensibility. As Kant later puts it, 'without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind' (A 51/B 75).

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between *Dreams* and the *Critique* on the nature of experience itself. In *Dreams*, Kant assumes experience as self-evident and offers no detailed account of its conditions. In the *Critique*, however, as Ernst Cassirer (1981, 92) notes, Kant discovers that experience is not grounded merely in sensation but depends on *a priori* forms and concepts—mathematical and categorical structures that make experience possible. This development is crucial for Kant's treatment of causality. In *Dreams*, Kant insists that even causation must be derived from experience:

For in the relations of cause and effect, substance and action, philosophy ... serves to unravel the complex phenomena and reduce them to simpler representations. But if one eventually arrives at relations which are fundamental, then the business of philosophy is at an end. It is impossible for reason ever to understand how something can be a cause, or have a force; such relations can only be derived from experience (TG 2:370).

In the *Critique*, by contrast, Kant argues that causality, as a category of the understanding, cannot be 'intuited through the senses and ... contained in the appearance' (B 177/A 138). Instead, it expresses the necessary connection that *makes* experience possible in the first place (B 234). This shift reflects the maturation of Kant's transcendental philosophy. As *Dreams* already hints:

If this philosophy should subject its own procedure to judgement, and if it should have knowledge not only of the objects themselves but also of their relation to the human understanding, its frontiers will contract in size and its boundary-stones will never again permit enquiry to leave the realm which is its home, and cross the boundary to range abroad (TG 2:369).

This early insight is the germ of the full-fledged doctrine of transcendental idealism in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. *Dreams* provides the first sketch; the *Critique* elaborates the entire system.

3. Practical Conclusion

Dreams of a Spirit-Seer is best understood as a bird with two wings: one representing knowledge, the other morality. Indeed, Kant's moral motivation arguably holds together the entire work like a rosary thread. Yet morality and knowledge are not two separate elements but rather two aspects of one and the same thing—more akin to a Möbius strip than two distinct wings. In *Dreams*, the limitation of knowledge is simultaneously the affirmation of morality and faith. But what kind of knowledge does Kant limit, and what kind of faith does he preserve? Several passages from the second chapter of the Dogmatic part (TG 2:334–37) sketch the framework of this dual movement. Kant here suggests that the systematic constitution of the spiritual world might be inferred not merely from speculative metaphysical concepts—too hypothetical to carry conviction—but from a 'real generally accepted observation' (TG 2:333): the experience that, in addition to selfish inclinations, we also feel a kind of altruistic force, as if 'an alien will is operative within ourselves' (TG 2:333). Kant calls this 'moral feeling,' a feeling that constrains the selfish will 'to harmonize with the general will' (TG 2:335). Nevertheless, he warns that we must speak of this feeling only 'as a manifestation of that which takes place within us, without establishing its causes' (TG 2:335)—a caution reminiscent of the 'critical objection' later articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 388). In effect, Kant suspends metaphysical speculation about the teleology of the spiritual world in favour of morality in this world. This could be described as an 'ethical suspension of the teleological': rather than subordinating morality to a transcendent *telos*, Kant privileges morality as the basis for any meaningful teleology.

This perspective is most fully articulated in the third chapter of the Historical part, entitled Practical Conclusion Drawn from the Treatise as a Whole. Kant draws a 'practical conclusion' from the entire inquiry:

Science in its vanity, readily excuses its activity on the grounds of its importance. And here too the claim is likewise commonly made that a rational understanding of the spirit-nature of the soul is very necessary to the conviction that there is life after death, and that this conviction, in its turn, is necessary if one is to have a motive for leading virtuous life. But idle curiosity adds that the genuineness of the apparitions of the souls of the dead can furnish a proof of all this from experience. But true wisdom is the companion of simplicity, and since, in the case of the latter, the heart commands the understanding, it normally makes the elaborate apparatus of learning superfluous, its purpose needing only the means which lie within the reach of everyone (TG 2:372).

Pre-Critical metaphysics, which 'pursue[s] every curiosity and [allows] no limit to the thirst for knowledge apart from that of impotence' (TG 2:369), ties morality to speculative proofs of

immortality. By contrast, Kant's 'reason matured by experience' (TG 2:369) asserts its independence, serenely affirming with Socrates: 'How many are the things of which I have no need' (TG 2:369). In *Dreams* we thus encounter the early expression of the principle that Kant would later state in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: 'I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith' (B XXX). Before declaring this sentence Kant establishes a distinction, in the previous paragraphs, between 'cognizing' and 'thinking': based on the principles of sensibility, understanding and reason, we can cognize only 'mere objects of experience' (B XXVI) or 'mere appearances' (B XXIX), but the objects in themselves we can only have thoughts, not cognitions. On the other hand, pre-Kantian learning claims that we gain a limited knowledge of objects through the principles of sensibility, but we cognize objects in themselves or the truth of objects through the speculative reason alone. The knowledge that Kant is trying to deny is exactly the same knowledge that claims to be able to cognize things in themselves through this speculative reason alone. Kant's 'denial of knowledge,' in fact, does not mean the denial of knowledge in general, but simply the denial of transcendental knowledge. In other words, 'denying knowledge' means limiting knowledge in general: eliminating transcendent knowledge (which dares to go beyond the boundaries of experience) and preserving transcendental knowledge (all possible speculative cognitions are limited to the pure objects of experience). This negative limitation contains a positive benefit: it safeguards 'pure (practical) reason' (B XXIV–XXV) and its immanent use.

Kant concludes *Dreams* by insisting that moral life neither requires nor benefits from metaphysical knowledge of spirits:

What, is it only good to be virtuous because there is another world? Or is it not rather the case that actions will one day be rewarded because they are good and virtuous in themselves? Does not the heart of man contain within itself immediate moral prescriptions? Is it really necessary, in order to induce man to act in accordance with his destiny here on earth, to set the machinery moving in another world? . . . It seems more consonant with human nature and moral purity to base the expectation of a future world on the sentiments of a nobly constituted soul than, conversely, to base its noble conduct on the hope of another world (TG 2:372–73).

This conclusion anticipates almost verbatim the account of moral theology in the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

So far as practical reason has the right to lead us, we will not hold actions to be obligatory because they are God's commands, but will rather regard them as divine commands because we are internally obligated to them. ... Moral theology is therefore only of immanent use, namely for fulfilling our vocation here in the world ... (A 819/B 847).

Kant's moral and epistemological projects converge: he rejects transcendent speculation, not to undermine faith, but to ground it on practical reason. The essay ends with a Voltairean exhortation: 'Let us attend to our happiness, and go into the garden and work!' (TG 2:373)

Conclusion

Long before writing the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant characterized the relationship between *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* and what would later become the first *Critique* in terms of a *katharticon* and an *organon*. In his letter to Mendelssohn (8 April 1766), he explicitly describes *Dreams* as a cathartic work that purges the mind of pseudo-concepts, exorcises illusory spectres, and thereby prepares the ground for the emergence of an *organon*—a systematic instrument of knowledge (Kant, 1999, 91). In this light, *Dreams* should not be read as an oddity of Kant's pre-Critical period but as a necessary moment in the path to Critical philosophy. The 'negative' work of exposing the delusions of a 'spoiled' metaphysics is not accidental but constitutive: only through this therapeutic moment could Kant arrive at the positive project of determining the limits and conditions of pure reason.

For Kant, traditional metaphysics had become a landscape of ruins—structures that once aspired to systematic completeness but now lie in disarray, resembling Kafka's 'Castle': majestic from a distance yet, on closer inspection, marked by disorder and inaccessibility. The full title of *Dreams* (*Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics*) makes clear that Swedenborg's visionary delusions are not dismissed as mere curiosities; they are treated as symptomatic of a deeper metaphysical pathology. Swedenborg's spirit-seeing represents, for Kant, the endpoint of an entire tradition of metaphysical 'dreaming': the attempt to construct a comprehensive system concerning objects beyond the limits of possible experience. The rationalists sought this system through dialectical reasoning and sophistry; Swedenborg, by contrast, is overtaken by sensory delusion. Yet Kant's irony suggests that the rationalists' speculative excesses themselves made Swedenborg's delusions plausible. Metaphysics thus appears at once as the cause and the mirror of Swedenborg's spirit-seeing. Significantly, Kant's title can also be read in the opposite direction: Swedenborg's visions serve as an interpretative lens for metaphysics itself. By studying *Arcana Cœlestia*, Kant seems to have concluded that a form of spirit-seeing pervades the entire history of metaphysical speculation. Lacking any grounding in experience, this 'spiritualism' yields dogmatic, mutually contradictory claims that can neither be proven nor refuted. The Transcendental Dialectic of the first *Critique*—and, indeed, the entire Critical project—may thus be viewed as a systematic reconstruction and elaboration of this early insight, providing a principled diagnosis of why reason is prone to such illusions and how it may discipline itself.

In this paper, I have argued that *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* is not merely a sceptical exercise but a text with a constructive and anticipatory dimension. In uniting what Guyer calls the 'critical theory' and 'constructive theory' with a practical conclusion that affirms morality's

independence from transcendent metaphysics, *Dreams* marks the indispensable prelude to the first *Critique*. The work's satirical tone thus conceals a profound philosophical seriousness. Far from being a satyr play or a mere literary provocation, *Dreams* is a deeply serious text that performs the necessary catharsis of metaphysics and opens the space for Critical philosophy. To attend carefully to *Dreams* is to witness the moment at which Kant learns to transform scepticism into a method, irony into critique, and moral faith into the guiding thread of philosophy. In the final analysis, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* does more than prepare the way for the *Critique of Pure Reason*—it already enacts, in embryonic form, the critical turn it announces. *Dreams* is thus not only the threshold to the first *Critique* but also its concealed blueprint.

References

- Allison, H. E. (2004). *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Beiser, F. C. (1992). 'Kant's Intellectual Development: 1746-1781,' in Guyer, Paul (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Borowski, L. E. (1804). *Darstellung des Lebens und Charakters Immanuel Kants*. (Königsberg: Nicolovius.
- Butts, R. E. (1984). *Kant and the Double Government Methodology: Supersensibility and Method in Kant's Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Caird, E. (1889). *The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* (1st vol). Glasgo: James Maclehose.
- Carlisle, C. (2010). *Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling'*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Cassirer, E. (1981). *Kant's Life and Thought*. Trans. James Haden. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Guyer, P. (2006). *Kant*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kant, I. (1992). *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*. Trans. & ed. David Walford, in collaboration with Ralf Meerbote. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. & eds. Paul Guyer & Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (1999). *Correspondence*. trans. & eds. Arnulf Zweig. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (2011). *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*. Eds. Patrick Frierson & Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schönfeld, M. (2000). *The Philosophy of Young Kant*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shell, S. M. (1996). *The Embodiment of Reason: Kant on Spirit, Generation, and Community*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Werkmeister, W. H. (1980), *Kant: The Architectonic and Development of his Philosophy*. Chicago: Open court Publishing Company.
- Žižek, S. (1993). *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Zupančič, A. (2000). *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*. London: Verso.