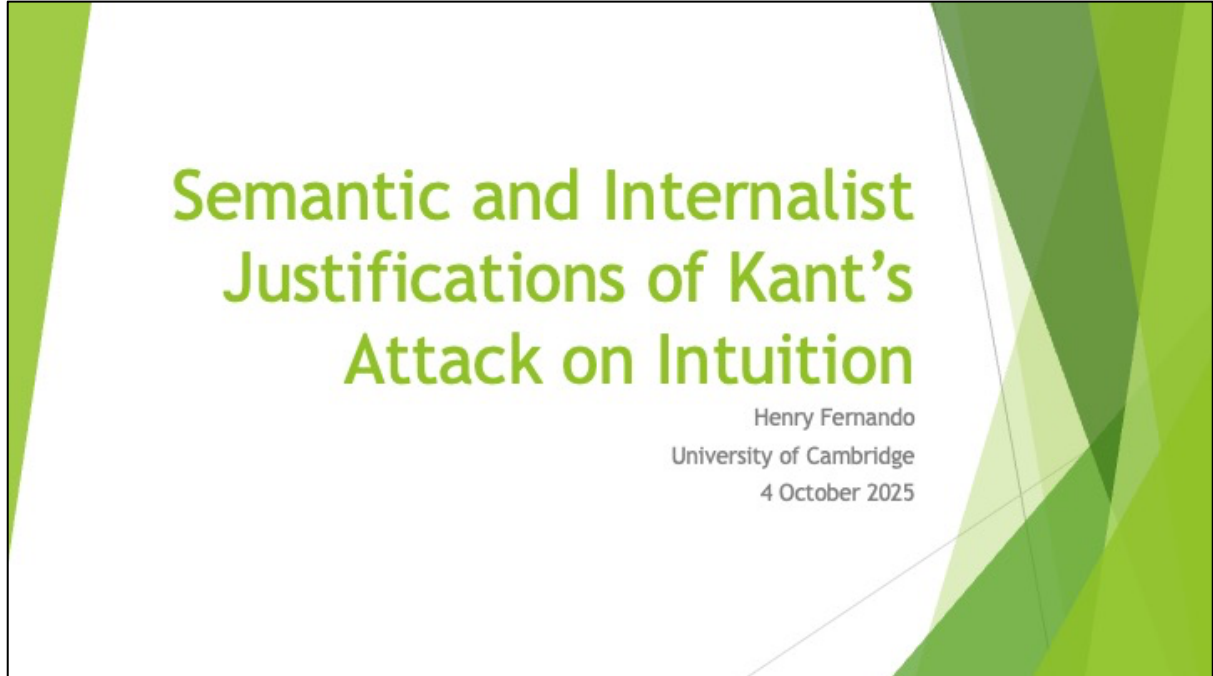


Semantic and Internalist Justifications of Kant's Attack on Intuition

Henry Fernando
University of Cambridge

SLIDE 1



Good afternoon, everyone. I wrote this paper as part of my research for my Postgraduate Certificate in Philosophy at the University of Cambridge just earlier this year, and I am very happy to present it before you today. It is entitled “Semantic and Internalist Justifications of Kant’s Attack on Intuition.” It concerns a rather obscure and relatively unknown debate between Kant and a man named Johann Georg Schlosser, but I do think it has some important implications for the concept of reason and philosophy in general today. I begin with a brief background underlying their debate.

SLIDE 2

Background: Schlosser

- ▶ Johann Georg Schlosser (1739-1799) was a public official, jurist, and amateur scholar who published the first German translation of Plato's letters (1795).
- ▶ Plato's Seventh Letter recounts and justifies his journey to Syracuse to engage with a tyrannical regime in Sicily and to advise his disciple Dion, the tyrant of Syracuse, to bring about a greater good than Athenian democracy.
- ▶ Schlosser sympathized with Plato and warns his readers to be wary of "freedom preachers" who used violence in the name of liberty.
- ▶ Recall: Europe was still reeling from the French Revolution and the Jacobin Reign of Terror.
- ▶ Schlosser's view was that the traditional social and political order is justified by divine right, and that ancient philosophers like Plato were correct to speak of certain individuals having a right to rule due to possessing a special kind of insight.
- ▶ This special insight required intuitive knowledge of being itself.



Schlosser was a German politician who lived during the time of Kant and who also fancied himself as a kind of amateur philosopher. In 1795, he published a translation of Plato's seventh letter in German—the first time Plato's writings had ever been translated into German—which scholars believe to be the Platonic text that Kant ever read. Plato's letter served as a memoir of his journey to mentor his disciple Dion, the tyrant of Syracuse. Naturally, it was another expression of Plato's well-known rejection of democracy in favor of some kind of aristocracy.

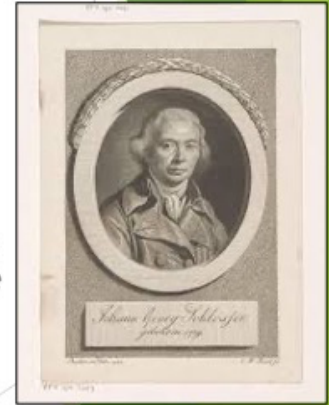
Schlosser empathized with Plato's political views. He also shared Plato's belief that the social order was justified by divine right, and that those who ruled were those who had attained true wisdom in virtue of epistemological access to being itself. The access came in the form of a special kind of **intuition or insight**, a kind of flash that bestowed knowledge of Platonic forms that was accessible only to a select few. In knowing the forms, one could acquire insight into the true nature of things.

Given the sensitive political milieu of Germany and Europe-at-large at that time, which was fresh off the heels of the French Revolution, Kant saw Schlosser's translation and views as dangerous for both democracy and his enlightenment project, which was, broadly speaking, to democratize the use reason in such a way that everyone could exercise that faculty, in opposition to a model where reason was accessible only to rulers who could then impose their will on others.

SLIDE 3

Background: Schlosser

- ▶ In a footnote, Schlosser criticizes Kant's philosophy:
 - ▶ “A criticism that denies reason this [intuitive knowledge] would not purify it, but would emasculate it...It would be at risk of soon degenerating into a mere pattern-factory...In the next generation thinking would introduce the old scholastic peripateticism...Since prejudice and superstition have been stripped of their taming power, the most irregular libertinism would follow, until thinking and acting are lost in barbarism...The kind of morality this system has retained from the shipwreck of reason has become so subtle that it will hardly be able to withstand the struggle with vice (Schlosser 1795, pp. 182-183)



Schlosser also directly criticized Kantian philosophy in a footnote, which he described as “emasculating”:

“A criticism that denies reason this [intuitive knowledge] would not purify it, but would emasculate it...It would be at risk of soon degenerating into a mere pattern-factory...In the next generation thinking would introduce the old scholastic peripateticism...Since prejudice and superstition have been stripped of their taming power, the most irregular libertinism would follow, until thinking and acting are lost in barbarism...The kind of morality this system has retained from the shipwreck of reason has become so subtle that it will hardly be able to withstand the struggle with vice.”

Naturally, Kant found this offensive and unflattering. He thus sought to respond to it quickly and decisively, albeit in unexpected fashion.

SLIDE 4

Background: Kant

- ▶ Kant responds in a pamphlet sarcastically entitled “On a Recently Prominent Superior Tone in Philosophy”.
- ▶ Kant saw Schlosser representing a “new superior tone” of Platonic mysticism which tended to locate reality beyond the world of sense (i.e. Plato’s ideas in the World of Forms vs. Kant’s ideas as products of reason)
- ▶ Kant sarcastically refers to Plato as “the father of all enthusiasm”, and Neo-Platonists like Schlosser as “Men of might” and “Men of genius” who are able to “accomplish by a single piercing glance within them everything that industry can ever hope to achieve, and a good deal more besides.” (“On a Recently Prominent Tone, 8:390)
- ▶ He also refers to them as “naïve enthusiasts” who have access to being itself through intuition (*Schwärmerai*), which he contrasts against philosophers who labor for knowledge through reason and public discourse.



In response, Kant wrote a pamphlet entitled “On a Recently Prominent Superior Tone in Philosophy”. The “superior” tone being referred to here is not just Schlosser’s, but of Neo-Platonists in general whose views aligned with those with of Schlosser. Kant viewed them to be extremely condescending due to their claim that only they had access to special flashes of intuition into being itself. Consequently, he gave them the backhanded monicker, “Men of might” and “Men of genius” whilst thinking, of course, they were anything but mighty or genius! He also referred to them as “naïve enthusiasts” or *Schwärmerai*, which he contrasted against philosophers who, in his view, actually toiled, worked, and labored to attain knowledge through reason and public discourse, as opposed to intuition. Kant’s annoyance seemingly extended to Plato, whom he acerbically referred to as “The Father of All Enthusiasm.”

He described the emergence of their views as “the death of philosophy”.

Kant’s pamphlet is an unusual Kantian piece. It departs from his famously rigorous, dry, and serious tone and instead deploys a sarcastic, witty, and sometimes even playful tone that is intended to poke fun at the position of Schlosser and the Neo-Platonists whilst advance his own views of the nature of reason simultaneously.

SLIDE 5

Background: Kant

- ▶ Kant then writes a cryptic passage concerning some “test”:
 - ▶ “The summons of the latest German wisdom, to *philosophize through feeling* (and not, like that of a few years ago, to *employ philosophy to put the moral feeling into force and motion*), is ultimately exposed to a test at which it is **necessarily bound to fail**.”
- ▶ What is this test? What is it for philosophizing to be bound to fail? Why necessary?
- ▶ I offer two interpretations of this test which attempt to answer these questions:
 - ▶ A semantic interpretation based on Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument;
 - ▶ An epistemological interpretation based on an internalist view of justification

In the text, Kant writes a rather archaic passage that is the focus of my presentation:

“The summons of the latest German wisdom, to *philosophize through feeling* (and not, like that of a few years ago, to *employ philosophy to put the moral feeling into force and motion*), is ultimately exposed to a test at which it is **necessarily bound to fail**.”

Unfortunately, Kant does not elaborate on this “test” any further. I am interested in what this test could be, what it is for philosophizing through intuition to be “bound to fail”. I am also curious about his use of the strong modal term “necessarily”.

For the rest of my presentation, I will be offering two interpretations of this test: a semantic and logical one based on Wittgenstein’s private language argument, and an epistemological one based on an internalist view of justification. I begin with the semantic interpretation.

1. The Semantic Interpretation

- ▶ A private language for Wittgenstein is a language that consists of sensation terms which refer to “immediate private sensations that only its speaker can know.”
- ▶ Imagine *A* experiences a certain sensation, ostensibly designates it as “*S*”, and records all subsequent recurrences in a diary, comparing each apparent recurrence S_x with the original designated *S*.
- ▶ Wittgenstein argues that keeping an accurate record is impossible.
- ▶ **Memory Skepticism:** It is difficult to remember what *S* feels like or to compare its qualitative character to every subsequent S_x .
- ▶ **Meaning Skepticism:** It is impossible to validate the correct use of “*S*” by appealing to the same private source whose correctness is being questioned.
- ▶ That is, someone invokes the authority of her memory as the objective arbiter of the meaning of “*S*” when it is the credibility of her memory at issue.
 - ▶ E.g. Imagine the absurdity of trying to remember a train schedule by trying to remember the look of the page on which it is found.
 - ▶ E.g. Imagine asking students to check their own quizzes based on what they feel is right.



Wittgenstein defines a private language as a language that consists of sensation terms which refer to ‘immediate private sensations that only its speaker can know’. He asks us to imagine someone, call her *A*, who experiences a certain sensation, ostensibly designates it as “*S*”, and thereafter records all subsequent recurrences in a diary. During each apparent recurrence, *A* decides whether a sensation S_x is identical with *S* based on its “raw feels”. Wittgenstein, however, argues that keeping an accurate record would be impossible, not only because of empirical reasons such as the fact that human memory is fallible, but because of the logical reason that validating whether ‘*S*’ is used correctly will entail appealing to the same private source whose correctness is being questioned. That is, someone would necessarily invoke and assume the authority of her own memory as the objective arbiter of the meaning of ‘*S*’ when it is the credibility of her memory which is at issue in the first place. It would be akin to the pointlessness of keeping a private mental dictionary of sensation-terms; whereas a physical dictionary would qualify as an independent authority that settled what terms like ‘pain’ mean, a mental dictionary would itself require to be remembered even *before* one could validate whether what one merely *thinks* ‘*S*’ means matches its original entry. In this scenario, the absence of an independent third-party checker eliminates the possibility of having an objectively correct use of ‘*S*’. Whatever *seems* to be correct would be *considered* correct, and so it would become a mere trivial truth that whenever S_x feels like *S*, it would, by necessity, *be* an instance of *S*. Wittgenstein makes a semantic point here: *S* cannot possibly mean *anything*.

This point is clarified further by Wittgenstein’s analysis of rule-following. When *A* first ostensibly defines ‘*S*’, she is making a rule to the effect of “Whenever I *feel* this sensation I just experienced, I shall record it as a recurrence of ‘*S*’.” The problem though is that merely feeling that something is the case entails that it actually is the case, in the same way that merely *believing* one is following a rule does not entail that one is *actually* following it. For instance, merely believing that one answered an exam question correctly does not mean that one actually did answer it correctly. In the lack of some common, public correlate or measure like an answer key, it becomes logically impossible to determine through feeling alone whether one answered an exam question correctly.

1. The Semantic Interpretation

- ▶ How does this apply to Kant's test?
- ▶ If some divinely-inspired feeling analogous to "S" leads to true knowledge (e.g. *That F-ness is X*), nobody else would know what exactly she means, just as nobody would understand an utterance "I felt S" unless there were some public correlate.
- ▶ E.g. We understand that someone is feeling the effects of hypertension (dizziness) by taking their blood pressure.
- ▶ Kant's point here is plausibly that even if "philosophizing through feeling" led to knowledge, there is no way through which one can ever understand what that means.
- ▶ It is not just that Neo-Platonists are elitist snobs who are unwilling to share knowledge due to their being above question, but that they could not share it even if they wanted to.
- ▶ Kant calls this the "death of philosophy", which is inherently discursive.

We are now in a better position to understand why philosophizing through feeling is necessarily bound to fail for Kant. On one hand, the test can be given a semantic interpretation: if some divinely-inspired feeling analogous to 'S' leads to true knowledge, which can reasonably be taken to be propositional in nature (e.g. *That F-ness is ϕ*), then there will never be any way to validate what exactly that intuition means if there is no independent source of validation like someone else who experiences that same feeling. Even if a Neo-Platonist tried articulating that "*F-ness is ϕ* ", nobody else would know what *exactly* she means, in the same way that nobody would understand *A* if she utters, "I felt S" unless there were some public correlate. They can infer or surmise what she means, but this falls short of the stringent requirements for someone to properly say that one actually *knows* that F-ness is ϕ . But Kant's point here is more than semantic: if such private feelings are valuable for the knowledge that they contain, and if knowledge is necessarily factive, then there is no way through which one can ever be certain that 'F-ness is ϕ ' is true. That is, it would never qualify as knowledge at all and would remain, at best, speculation that could neither be verified logically nor empirically.

Therefore, it is not just that Neo-Platonists are unwilling to share knowledge through feeling due to their sense of superiority, but that they could not share it even if they wanted to. This is why Kant viewed this new movement as signifying the death of philosophy; he viewed philosophy as some kind of public "tribunal of knowledge" which claims the right to inspect everything, but reducing it to private feelings would make this task impossible to accomplish and thereby render philosophy otiose. In other words, Kant views philosophy as an inherently discursive practice, and anything which relegates it to the realm of private feelings strips it of this public character.

2. The Epistemological Interpretation

- ▶ Epistemology is concerned with justification: some account or explanation that gives good reasons to believe that p.
- ▶ **Externalists** claim that someone is justified in believing that p based on factors outside of her control, provided they are reliable.
 - ▶ E.g. Someone is justified in believing that it will rain today if a very lucky coin with 100% predictive accuracy says so.
- ▶ **Internalists** claim that someone is justified in believing that p iff she can discern and articulate her reasons for belief, and if she has reflective access to her own conscious states.
- ▶ Pritchard's example:
 - ▶ Chicken-sexers believe that they subconsciously discriminate between chicks based on their sense of sight or touch.
 - ▶ But research shows, unbeknownst to them, they discriminate based on smell.
 - ▶ For externalists, their chicken-sexing beliefs are justified, but not for internalists.



The second interpretation is an epistemological one which concerns the nature of justification. The debate between internalism and externalism turns on the question of what criteria an epistemic agent must fulfill in order for her to properly be said to be cognitively responsible and credible for the truth of her beliefs. Internalists accept egocentric accounts of justification in that they require the epistemic agent to discern and articulate what exactly provides her good reasons for her beliefs. On this view, someone knows that p iff one can explain *why exactly* that p. Conversely, externalists apply looser standards in that they allow for someone to know that p even if she depends on factors outside of her control, provided that they are generally reliable. By 'reliable' I mean that a method of acquiring beliefs is one that is more likely to get to the truth.

Pritchard clarifies the internalist-externalist distinction with an example. Chicken-sexers are tasked with identifying whether a chick is male or female based on what they see or touch. But studies have shown that they actually subconsciously discriminate based on their sense of smell. Nevertheless, they are able to segregate males from female with a very high degree of accuracy whilst thinking that it is their sight and touch that are operative. Externalists argue that chicken-sexers do, in fact, know how to tell a male chick apart from a female one because it is not a strict requirement for someone to know that p that she be able to reflect upon it, just as dog owners can reasonably be said to know when their dog wants to eat by its barking, even if they do not understand exactly what its barks mean. Internalists, however, consider this a case of epistemic luck and deny that chicken-sexers know how to discriminate between sexes, because it is insufficient that they have a reliable method for doing so. It would not be different, in principle, from having a lucky coin which, when tossed, allowed one to make an accurate prediction of the weather almost one hundred percent of the time. Even if the coin-tosser would often have true beliefs about the weather, they would not normally be considered as justified because coin-tosses are not rational sources of knowledge that have any direct causal relation with the weather. Nor would the coin-tosser be considered an epistemically rational agent who gathers beliefs using the right epistemic norms.

2. The Epistemological Interpretation

- ▶ Similarly, for internalists, even if Neo-Platonists' flashes of intuition lead to true beliefs, it is impossible for them to know where they came from, and thus it would not be justified to place real trust in them.
- ▶ This would be akin to saying that it is justified to believe it will rain today because a very lucky coin landed tails.
- ▶ The problem is worse for Neo-Platonists because statements about the super-sensible are impossible to verify.
- ▶ Therefore, they are necessarily bound to fail a test because:
 - ▶ They cannot produce adequate reasons for belief;
 - ▶ As philosophers, they are not responsibly acting in accordance with the appropriate epistemic norms.

Neo-Platonists' flashes of intuition can be criticized for the same reasons. Even if they lead to true beliefs, it is impossible for them to know where they came from and consequently place any real trust in them. Stating, for instance, that "F-ness is ϕ " would be as dubious as stating that "It will rain today because the coin landed tails", even if it turned out to be true. It would actually be worse in the case of Neo-Platonists, however, because unlike statements about the weather, statements about the super-sensible are impossible to verify, and yet they somehow still had the audacity to claim credit for possessing special access to metaphysical truths that they were unwilling to share with others. Therefore, the epistemological test that they are necessarily bound to fail is not only the test of whether they can produce adequate justifications for their beliefs, but also the test of whether, as philosophers, they are responsibly acting in accordance with the appropriate epistemic norms.

On this interpretation, Kant can be considered an internalist. He gives his own complex account of the kind of attitude that makes metaphysical knowledge possible. For instance, he explains that reason must "brood" over itself and its pure concepts without resort to experience. The point of this comparison is not to state the merits of Kant's epistemology *per se*, but to explain why Kant's "test" is plausibly an internalist one. On this interpretation of his test, it is easy to see why philosophizing through feeling is necessarily bound to fail: like coin-tossing, it does not require any internal reflection or labor through which principles can be established. It dives straight into metaphysics and takes its justification for granted, casting doubt on their status as knowledge.

Kant's View of Reason

- ▶ Kant associates philosophical reasoning with strenuous “labor” (435) because it involves breaking down concepts and putting them back together through a kind of “craftsmanship”.
- ▶ The craftsmanship includes concepts found “in the objects themselves” as opposed to some transcendent Platonic reality.
- ▶ These concepts are “speak clearly to everyone and is capable of being scientifically known”, unlike Platonic intuitions that avoid scrutiny and rational inquiry.
- ▶ Reason must “brood” over itself and its pure concepts without resort to experience (*Prolegomena* 1977, 64).
- ▶ This entails a rigorous examination of the nature, scope, and limits of reason.



Whereas Schlosser claimed that reason had degenerated into a “mere pattern factory” and had been “emasculated” by its lack of intuition, Kant associated it with strenuous “labor” in virtue of needing to be broken down and put back together again through a kind of “craftsmanship”. This craftsmanship includes, among other things, non-mysterious concepts which can be found “in” the objects themselves” as opposed to some transcendent Platonic reality. In not being super-sensible, these concepts are within the scope of reason and thus, in Kant’s view, “speak clearly to everyone and is capable of being scientifically known”, unlike Platonic flashes of intuition that are not available for further scrutiny or rational inquiry. Crucially, Kant does not deny that metaphysical knowledge is attainable. In fact, he concedes that intuitions may lead to such knowledge, but only if they are based on the *a priori* categories of cognition. But these categories must be studied, tested, and purified through careful examination for us to know what is true. Hence, it is reason—not intuition—which is primarily operative in attaining true knowledge.

Application 1: Ethical Intuitionism

- ▶ Ethical intuitionists claim that basic moral propositions are “self-evident” and that moral properties are non-natural properties (i.e. not known through sense experience).
 - ▶ Ross (1930): A self-evident proposition is “evident without any need of proof”
 - ▶ Shafer-Landau (2005, 247): “It seems to me self-evident that, other things equal, it is wrong to take pleasure in another’s pain, to taunt and threaten the vulnerable, to prosecute and punish those known to be innocent, and to sell another’s secrets solely for personal gain...One doesn’t need to infer them from one’s other beliefs in order to be justified in thinking them true.”
 - ▶ Audi (2008, 478): A self-evident proposition is true “such that (a) adequately understanding them is sufficient justification for believing them...and (b) believing them on the basis of adequately understanding them entails knowing them.”
- ▶ If Kant’s argument is true, then moral beliefs attained via intuition are not justified on internalist grounds, nor can we be certain about what our intuitions mean.
- ▶ That is, someone cannot be justified in claiming that it is wrong to kill just because it self-evidently appears to be true.
- ▶ Cf. Kant’s system of morality which applies a test of universalizability to determine which maxims are sufficient reasons for action.

Why is the debate between Kant and Schlosser relevant to us today? If my interpretations are correct, then Neo-Platonic intuitions cannot lead to true or genuine knowledge. These have applications in at least two fields which I would like to briefly discuss today.

The first is in the field of ethics, where moral philosophers known as ethical intuitionists claim that some moral truths are “self-evident” insofar as they are immediately knowable and apprehensible. They cannot be inferred from the senses, derived from some more fundamental truths, and are not in need of any supporting reasons. Oftentimes, they are derived from a faculty known as a moral sense or intuition. Among the early intuitionists in the twentieth century was W.D. Ross who claimed that moral propositions are “evident without need of any proof.” More recently, Russ Shafer-Landau has claimed that moral truths like the fact that it is wrong to kill are not in need of further justification, while Robert Audi claims that to simply understand certain moral truths is to believe them, and to believe them entails knowing them. They are truths that just intuitively seem right, and that is all there is to it.

If Kant’s argument is true, however, then moral beliefs attained via intuition cannot count as moral knowledge just yet for their lack of justification. That is, someone cannot be justified in claiming it is wrong to kill just because it self-evidently appears to be true. This can be contrasted against Kant’s views of morality, which involves identifying categorical imperatives through a test of universalizability. For Kant, our moral maxims *are* in need of rational justification in the form of imagining whether others who are rational could will one’s own maxim to the status of a universal law. Kant, then, was remarkably consistent, for even in his system of morality, one had to labor, test, and examine propositions before concluding whether they could count as knowledge.

Application 2: Blackboxes in AI

- ▶ Blackboxes are artificial intelligence models that run deep-learning algorithms and are unintelligible to humans.
- ▶ E.g. Google CEO Sundar Pichai admitted that its AI models performed tasks it was not programmed to do.
 - ▶ Interviewer: "You don't fully understand how it works, and yet you've made it available to society?"
 - ▶ Pichai: "It's not a big deal, I don't think we fully understand how the human mind works either."
- ▶ There is an ongoing debate about the extent to which we can trust blackbox models, even though they deliver the intended results.
- ▶ Kant would say it is *not* justified if we cannot rationally explain our reasons for belief.
- ▶ Hence there is a growing field called xAI which tries to convert blackboxes into glassboxes.

The second application involves blackboxes in AI, which are models that run deep-learning algorithms that are opaque to humans. In these cases, even their creators do not understand how exactly AI arrives at predictions or conclusions in the fields of law, medicine, science, or education. An example of this was when Google CEO Sundar Pichai admitted that Google's AI models often perform tasks they are not programmed to do. He justifies this, however, by claiming that we do not understand fully how the human mind works either, and more importantly, that blackboxes achieve the desired results anyway.

This reflects a kind of externalist justification where it is justified to believe in *p* even if one does not have conscious access to reasons for belief. It is like claiming that it is justified to believe that it will rain just because a very lucky coin said so. It is also like claiming that it is justified to believe in anything that comes from some divinely inspired flash of intuition. Kant would likely say that it is *not* justified to trust in blackbox AI models even if they are reliable. I do not wish to comment on this debate further, but it might interest you to know that there is an ongoing debate now in epistemology about the extent to which we can trust blackbox AI models.

The Aftermath

- ▶ Schlosser responded to Kant with a monograph entitled *Writing to a Young Man who Wanted to Study Kantian Philosophy*.
 - ▶ Schlosser claims to be the sole voice of common sense (but also admits that he had never fully read or understood Kant's philosophy prior).
- ▶ Kant replies yet again with his 1796 essay *Proclamation of the Immigrant Conclusion of a Treatise of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy*, where he wrote:

*Henceforth forever wars shall cease
By acting as the sage avers;
And then will all men live in peace
Except for the philosophers.*

As I close my presentation, allow me to share a little bit about the aftermath of the Kant-Schlosser debate. Schlosser actually responded to Kant with another monograph this time directed at him entitled *Writing to a Young Man who Wanted to Study Kantian Philosophy*. Ironically, Schlosser admitted in that book that he had never fully read or understood Kantian philosophy.

Let's just say it did not end well for Schlosser as Kant replied yet again, this time with an essay that did become somewhat famous. It was entitled "Proclamation of the Immigrant Conclusion of a Treatise of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy", which discussed his larger project of formulating a framework that would create a lasting peace in society. I end with one of my favorite passages from that essay:

"Henceforth forever wars shall cease
By acting as the sage avers;
And then will all men live in peace
Except for the philosophers."

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Henry Fernando
University of Cambridge
4 October 2025

Thank you for your time.