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Immanuel Kant: Combining Empiricism and Rationalism

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Kant goes down in the history of thought as a giant. Kant declared himself neither empiricist nor rationalist but achieved a synthesis of the two in his greatest work The Critique of Pure Reason (1781), which marked the end of the period of the Enlightenment and began a new period of philosophy, German idealism. Kant claimed that knowledge was impossible without accepting truths from both rationalist and empiricist schools of thought. He based his ethics on reason and said that moral duties could be deduced by all rational beings.

Kant’s Copernican Revolution

Kant noticed a problem with the empiricist manner of coming to knowledge. If all you come to know and collect are particular sensations or particular impressions, as the empiricists said, how can you arrive at necessary and universal knowledge? Put another way, how can you explain the possibility of scientific knowledge, or, more precisely, the relationship between causes and effect, which enables the mind to grasp scientific truths? Kant had an answer to the question that bridges the gap between two schools of thought — rationalism and empiricism.

Kant’s own theory of knowledge reconfigures the way humans know things. Rather than saying that people are all passive perceivers observing the world, Kant believed that humans are active in knowing the world. In agreeing with his empiricist predecessors he says, “There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience.”

Instead of an outside-in approach to knowledge of the empiricists, in which objects cause passive perceivers to have “sensations” (Locke) or “impressions” (Hume), Kant said that the categories of space and time — which he called “forms of intuition” — were imposed on experiences by the human mind in order to make sense of it. This Kant famously called his “Copernican Revolution.” Just as Copernicus rejected the idea that the sun revolved around the earth, Kant had solved the problem of how the mind acquires knowledge from experience by arguing that the mind imposes principles upon experience to generate knowledge.

Kant is saying that in order to have any knowledge, the mind needs to have a set of further organizing principles. These principles are found in the faculty of the understanding. Just as a cookie is the product of a certain content (the dough) being processed by a form (the cookie press), so knowledge is the product of content (what you sense) and understanding (space and time as forms of intuition) working together.
In other words, both a priori and a posteriori elements are essential. Without sensation, no object would be perceptible. Without understanding, no object could be conceived. As Kant said in his Critique of Pure Reason, “Thoughts without contents are empty, perceptions without conceptions are blind…. Understanding can perceive nothing, the senses can think nothing. Knowledge arises only from their united action.”

Kant proposed that the mind has “categories of understanding,” which catalogue, codify, and make sense of the world. The mind cannot experience anything that is not filtered through the mind’s eye. Therefore, you can never know the true nature of reality. In this sense, Kant claims that indeed “perception is reality.”

### Hume vs. Kant on the Possibilities of Knowledge

Despite Kant’s “Copernican Revolution,” the issue between Kant and empiricism comes down to what kinds of things are known. Kant confessed that the skeptical challenge set forth by Hume “awakened me from my dogmatic slumbers.” One way of capturing the issue between them is to ask what kinds of propositions or judgments can be known.

Hume had said that all knowledge fit one of two categories. True propositions were either matters of fact or relations of ideas. The first kind includes contingent statements, such as “Cadillacs are long-lasting cars.” These statements are truths of observation or fact, but are contingently true only. The second kind includes statements such as “Triangles have three angles.” These are necessarily true, but empty, since they tell you nothing about the world. Statements that fall into neither category — like metaphysical statements — are pure “sophistry and illusion,” Hume claimed.

But Kant thought that Hume’s two categories were inadequate. For one, statements like “Every effect had a cause” would be unjustified on Hume’s system, since he reduced causality to the “habit” of expectation that the future will always resemble the past. So Kant’s remedy was to introduce a third class of propositions — what he called synthetic a priori propositions.

Kant spoke succinctly about the limits of knowledge. For Kant, the only world that one can know is the world of objects that appear within experience. He refers to the things in the world as they appear to you as phenomena. What one cannot have knowledge of are things-in-themselves, i.e., noumena.

### Types of Judgments

Hume and Kant agree on the existence of these first three types of statements.

- **Analytic a priori**: In analytic judgments the subject of the sentence implies the predicate. “Squares have four sides” is an example. The subject “square” implies the predicate “four sides.” We also know this a priori — or before experience — not after experience.

- **Analytic a posteriori**: There are none, since any analytic judgment is known prior to any experience.

- **Synthetic a posteriori**: In a sentence like “Japanese cars are more reliable than French cars” the subject “Japanese cars” does not imply the truth of the predicate “more reliable than French cars.” It is called a synthetic proposition, since it brings together two different ideas. It can be established as true, but true empirically.

However, a disagreement would arise over a fourth category, synthetic a priori.

**Synthetic a priori**
Hume, who was skeptical about any claims that go beyond a person’s experience as a perceiver, claims that there are no synthetic statements known a priori. Metaphysical statements about Gods, souls, substance, and causality are included. Kant disagreed, arguing that “Every event has a cause” is one example of a synthetic a priori statement. It is synthetic, since it cannot be established by an analysis of its terms, and it is a priori and necessary because the concept of causality is a pure concept of understanding — like space and time — and is part of the intellectual structure. It is an a priori and necessary condition of the manner in which people experience the world.

**What Appears and What Is: Phenomena and Noumena**

Contrary to Hume, Kant argued that synthetic a priori judgments are possible in mathematics and physics. But are they possible in metaphysics? Kant was pessimistic about the ability of human reason to acquire theoretical knowledge of any reality lying beyond the boundaries of human experience. According to Kant, one cannot know things-in-themselves.

Kant maintained that one could have knowledge of causality in the realm of appearances. In fact, the rationalist and empiricist traditions begun by both René Descartes and John Locke had both assumed there was a dichotomy between ideas about reality and the real world itself. How could one be sure that the ideas in one's mind correspond to the real world? One cannot. Locke adopts the “representative realist” position, since he thinks ideas represent primary qualities.