

## Kant on Rationalism and Empiricism: The "Copernican Revolution" in Philosophy

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is sometimes called the "Copernican revolution of philosophy" to emphasize its novelty and huge importance. Kant synthesized (brought together) rationalism and empiricism. After Kant, the old debate between rationalists and empiricists ended, and epistemology went in a new direction. After Kant, no discussion of reality or knowledge could take place without awareness of the role of the human mind in *constructing* reality and knowledge.

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### Summary of Rationalism

The paradigm rationalist philosophers are Plato (ancient); Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz (modern).

1. Don't trust senses, since they sometimes deceive; and since the "knowledge" they provide is inferior (because it changes).
2. Reason alone can provide knowledge. Math is the paradigm of real knowledge.
3. There are innate ideas, e.g., Plato's Forms, or Descartes' concepts of self, substance, and identity.
4. The self is real and discernable through immediate intellectual intuition (*cogito ergo sum*).
5. Moral notions are comfortably grounded in an objective standard external to self — in God, or Forms.

Kant says rationalists are sort of right about (3) and (4) above; wrong about (1) and (2). Kant would like (5) to be true.

### Summary of Empiricism

The paradigm empiricist philosophers are Aristotle (ancient); Locke, Berkeley, Hume (modern).

1. Senses are the primary, or only, source of knowledge of world. Psychological atomism.
2. Mathematics deals only with relations of ideas (tautologies); gives no knowledge of world.
3. No innate ideas (though Berkeley accepts Cartesian self). General or complex ideas are derived by abstraction from simple ones (conceptualism).
4. Hume — there's no immediate intellectual intuition of self. The concept of "Self" is not supported by sensations either.

5. Hume — no sensations support the notion of necessary connections between causes and effects, or the notion that the future will resemble the past.

6. Hume — "is" does not imply "ought". Source of morality is feeling.

Kant thinks empiricism is on the right track re (1), sort of right re (2), wrong re (3), (4), (5), and (6).

## Kant on Rationalism and Empiricism:

### Kant's Answers to his Predecessors

Kant's answer to the problems generated by the rationalist and empiricist traditions changed the face of philosophy. First, Kant argued that that old division between *a priori* truths and *a posteriori* truths employed by both camps was insufficient to describe the sort of metaphysical claims that were under dispute. An analysis of knowledge also requires a distinction between **synthetic** and **analytic** truths. In an analytic claim, the predicate is contained within the subject. In the claim, "Every body occupies space," the property of occupying space is revealed in an analysis of what it means to be a body. The subject of a synthetic claim, however, does not contain the predicate. In, "This tree is 120 feet tall," the concepts are synthesized or brought together to form a new claim that is not contained in any of the individual concepts. The Empiricists had not been able to prove **synthetic a priori** claims like "Every event must have a cause," because they had conflated "synthetic" and "a posteriori" as well as "analytic" and "a priori." Then they had assumed that the two resulting categories were exhaustive. A synthetic a priori claim, Kant argues, is one that must be true without appealing to experience, yet the predicate is not logically contained within the subject, so it is no surprise that the Empiricists failed to produce the sought after justification. The Rationalists had similarly conflated the four terms and mistakenly proceeded as if claims like, "The self is a simple substance," could be proven analytically and a priori.

Synthetic a priori claims, Kant argues, demand an entirely different kind of proof than those required for analytic, a priori claims or synthetic, a posteriori claims. Indications for how to proceed, Kant says, can be found in the examples of synthetic a priori claims in natural science and mathematics, specifically geometry. Claims like Newton's, "the quantity of matter is always preserved," and the geometer's claim, "the angles of a triangle always add up to 180 degrees" are known a priori, but they cannot be known merely from an analysis of the concepts of matter or triangle. We must "go outside and beyond the concept. . . joining to it a priori in thought something which I have not thought in it." (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787) A synthetic a priori claim constructs upon and adds to what is contained analytically in a concept without appealing to experience. So if we are to solve the problems generated by Empiricism and Rationalism, the central question of metaphysics in the *Critique of Pure Reason* reduces to "How are synthetic a priori judgments possible?" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787). If we can answer that question, then we can determine the possibility, legitimacy, and range of all metaphysical claims.

### **Kant's Copernican Revolution: Mind Making Nature**

Kant's answer to the question is complicated, but his conclusion is that a number of synthetic a priori claims, like those from geometry and the natural sciences, are true because of the structure of the mind that knows them. "Every event must have a cause" cannot be proven by experience, but experience is impossible without it because it describes the way the mind must necessarily order its representations. We can understand Kant's argument again by considering his predecessors. According to the Rationalist and Empiricist traditions, the mind is passive either because it finds itself possessing innate, well-formed ideas ready for analysis, or because it receives ideas of objects into a kind of empty theater, or blank slate. Kant's crucial insight here is to argue that experience of a world as we have it is only possible if the mind provides a systematic structuring of its representations. This structuring is below the level of, or logically prior to, the mental representations that the Empiricists and Rationalists analyzed. Their epistemological and metaphysical theories could not adequately explain the sort of judgments or experience we have because they only considered the results of the mind's interaction with the world, not the nature of the mind's contribution. Kant's methodological innovation was to employ what he calls a **transcendental argument** to prove synthetic a priori claims. Typically, a transcendental argument attempts to prove a conclusion about the necessary structure of knowledge on the basis of an incontrovertible mental act. Kant argues in the **Refutation of Material Idealism** that "There are objects that exist in space and time outside of me," (Critique of Pure Reason, 1787) which cannot be proven by a priori or a posteriori methods, is a necessary condition of the possibility of being aware of one's own existence. It would not be possible to be aware of myself as existing, he says, without presupposing the existing of something permanent outside of me to distinguish myself from. I am aware of myself as existing. Therefore, there is something permanent outside of me.

This argument is one of many transcendental arguments that Kant gives that focuses on the contribution that the mind itself makes to its experience. These arguments lead Kant to conclude that the Empiricists' assertion that experience is the source of all our ideas. It must be the mind's structuring, Kant argues, that makes experience possible. If there are features of experience that the mind brings to objects rather than given to the mind by objects, that would explain why they are indispensable to experience but unsubstantiated in it. And that would explain why we can give a transcendental argument for the necessity of these features. Kant thought that Berkeley and Hume identified at least part of the mind's a priori contribution to experience with the list of claims that they said were unsubstantiated on empirical grounds: "Every event must have a cause," "There are mind-independent objects that persist over time," and "Identical subjects persist over time." The empiricist project must be incomplete since these claims are necessarily presupposed in our judgments, a point Berkeley and Hume failed to see. So, Kant argues that a philosophical investigation into the nature of the external world must be as much an inquiry into the features and activity of the mind that knows it.

The idea that the mind plays an active role in structuring reality is so familiar to us now that it is difficult for us to see what a pivotal insight this was for Kant. He was well aware of the idea's power to overturn the philosophical worldviews of his contemporaries and predecessors, however. He even somewhat immodestly likens his situation to that of Copernicus in revolutionizing our worldview. On the Lockean view, mental content is given to the mind by the objects in the world. Their properties migrate into the mind, revealing the true nature of objects. Kant says, "Thus far it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to

objects" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787). But that approach cannot explain why some claims like, "every event must have a cause," are a priori true. Similarly, Copernicus recognized that the movement of the stars cannot be explained by making them revolve around the observer; it is the observer that must be revolving. Analogously, Kant argued that we must reformulate the way we think about our relationship to objects. It is the mind itself which gives objects at least some of their characteristics because they must conform to its structure and conceptual capacities. Thus, the mind's active role in helping to create a world that is experientiable must put it at the center of our philosophical investigations. The appropriate starting place for any philosophical inquiry into knowledge, Kant decides, is with the mind that can have that knowledge.

Kant's critical turn toward the mind of the knower is ambitious and challenging. Kant has rejected the dogmatic metaphysics of the Rationalists that promises supersensible knowledge. And he has argued that Empiricism faces serious limitations. His transcendental method will allow him to analyze the metaphysical requirements of the empirical method without venturing into speculative and ungrounded metaphysics. In this context, determining the "transcendental" components of knowledge means determining, "all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*." (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787)

The project of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is also challenging because in the analysis of the mind's transcendental contributions to experience we must employ the mind, the only tool we have, to investigate the mind. We must use the faculties of knowledge to determine the limits of knowledge, so Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is both a critique that takes pure reason as its subject matter, and a critique that is conducted by pure reason.

Kant's argument that the mind makes an a priori contribution to experiences should not be mistaken for an argument like the Rationalists' that the mind possesses innate ideas like, "God is a perfect being." Kant rejects the claim that there are complete propositions like this one etched on the fabric of the mind. He argues that the mind provides a formal structuring that allows for the conjoining of concepts into judgments, but that structuring itself has no content. The mind is devoid of content until interaction with the world actuates these formal constraints. The mind possesses a priori templates for judgments, not a priori judgments.

Source: <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/k/kantmeta.htm>

## Discussion

1. If the image of the *tabula rasa* applies to the empiricists, while that of an already written page applies to the rationalists, what imagery would best describe Kant's position?
2. Kant claimed that 'intuitions [sense data] without concepts are blind'? What do you think Kant meant? Do you agree?
3. What do you think of Kant's distinction between the Noumenal and Phenomenal? Do you agree? To what extent are these categories helpful to our pursuit of knowledge?