

Kant's Transcendental Idealism

Thus far we have encountered two methods in which philosophers try to justify knowledge claims: Rationalism and Empiricism. The former argues that knowledge essentially comes from reason; experience just provides our reasoning ability with its content. The latter claims the opposite: that it is experience that underwrites knowledge of the external world; reason merely arranges the ideas we gain from the external world through experience.

The aim of both schools of thought is to find a secure foundation upon which to build knowledge. As we've seen however, both seem to result in forms of doubt that demolish that possibility. It seems that progress can only be made (either as a rationalist or empiricist) if certain dimensions of their arguments are ignored (recall how – in the latter stages of Meditation 2 – Descartes bypasses the *Cogito* in order to have something to say about the external world). This is not satisfactory. What, after all, can be said about knowledge justification if we cannot get over the conclusions of radical scepticism?

Similarly, Locke and Hume, whilst positing the theory of impressions and ideas, give no real explanation about how the relationship between mind and world is possible. The best argument that Hume developed to negotiate the hurdle of scepticism was that, although it is impossible to refute philosophical scepticism, it doesn't matter, because our intellect is so impoverished that we cannot help but believe those things that scepticism tries to make us doubt (e.g. that there is an external world, that there are necessary causal relations and so on).

One thing that both rationalists and empiricists take for granted is the idea that knowledge is, in some sense, a relation between the mind and reality. In terms of the rationalist, it is reason that gives us understanding of reality (the external world). In terms of the empiricist, the mind plays the role of ordering the concepts (ideas) that we gain through experience; our minds are just programmed to give us an idea of reality. However, neither school of thought stopped to ask how such a relationship between mind and reality was possible. In this respect (in relation to empiricism), it should be noted that experience cannot supply any necessary reasons for the features it has. Enter Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804).

Kant's Argument

Kant's first task was to ask this question: what is the relation between the mind and reality? His attempt at an answer was to begin by thinking about experience. First of all, experience is possible since we have experiences (at this stage that's all we need to know). Secondly, experiences mean something; if they did not, we couldn't call them experiences. Thirdly, we have experiences of objects (that means they are meaningful and they are of objects). Fourthly, experience therefore has a certain content and structure; it has the content of the object and structure determined by that object. These objects necessarily exist in

space and time. Put another way: all our experience is experience displayed in space. It also exists in time, insofar as there is a temporal relation between the external world and our experience of it.

Kant considers space and time to be forms of intuition. He uses the concept of intuition in a special way; not in the way that we might in an everyday sense. Generally, we think of intuition as a kind of instinctive sense about something. Kant uses the term to mean necessary features of our experience. *Sensible Intuitions* (as Kant calls them) are, in a special sense, supplied by the perceiver, but also necessary for us to experience anything at all. There are two things that we sensibly intuit which are necessary for us to experience anything at all: space and time. Kant's point is that, while it may seem that space is a feature of the external world, my perceptions and experiences necessarily have to be ordered in terms of space; thus space *has* to be an intuited aspect of perception. Would it be possible to have non-spatial experience? Something similar can be said for time. It is impossible to conceive of an experience not existing in time. For example, I see that it's clouding over. Such an experience has to have space and time presupposed (built into it, so to speak) before we can make sense of it; this is a necessary condition for any experience. I hope this is clear. Even if we have no concepts (such as causation) under which to consider such experiences, space and time are fundamental to them occurring at all. Space and time can be imagined without objects but we cannot imagine objects without space and time. Thus, Kant argues, space and time are both *a priori* but not analytic. They are *a priori* because they necessarily precede experience but they are not analytic since they are intuited (supplied) by the perceiver.

So far, we can see that experiences possess the fundamental concepts of space and time. Nevertheless, "*Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.*" (Kant. I. CPR. B:75) In other words, we understand space and time to be necessary conditions for experience but that still leaves them content-less. How is it possible for experiences to have content? Empiricists argued that reality is represented to us through our experiences and Kant, to a considerable extent, follows this belief. "*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.*" (Kant. I. CPR. B1)

However, Kant's argument departs from empiricism when it comes to thoughts about, for example, causation. You will doubtless recall that Hume believed that, because a necessary connection between cause and effect could not be observed, we have no good reason to suppose such a connection exists. Indeed, because Hume believed that all knowledge of the external world had to come from experience, it was impossible for us to claim knowledge of any kind of necessary connection between cause and effect, since we cannot experience it. Kant denies this part of Hume's empiricism. In fact, he sees it as fundamentally undermining the possibility of having knowledge at all. Similarly, he believed that the rationalists had got hold of the wrong end of the stick when they claimed that our inner

representations could be a complete fabrication of reality that bore little, if any, resemblance to what was really there.

So, in order for our experience to have conceptual content, there must be something else that is necessary, in addition to the sensible intuitions of space and time. Moreover, the idea that there is no necessary connection between cause and effect seems, at best, counterintuitive.

Kant proposed that, rather than take the mind as something that just receives information about the world through the senses, there are certain "categories" that are required in order to make sense of it. In other words, there are certain "categories" that are a condition of understanding experience. Remember that space and time are necessary for experience and, as such, also a condition for understanding experience – but they cannot, on their own, provide that understanding. *Categories* are concepts that are necessary for us to understand our experiences. According to Kant they are *a priori* insofar as they are necessary for experience and, as such, need to exist prior to experience. Experience itself cannot provide something that is necessary for experience. Put another way: the categories are a condition of the very possibility of knowledge, experience and judgment therefore they must be *a priori*. But what is a category and what are the categories that are necessary to bring our perceptions under the concepts of experience? By category Kant means a general concept (such as causation) that is a necessary condition for judgement and knowledge; categories are an aspect of reason that is immediately applied to our perceptions. They structure our experience. Kant believed that there were 12 categories: Unity, Plurality, Totality, Reality, Negation, Limitation, Substance, Cause, Interaction, Possibility, Existence and Necessity. For our purposes it is only necessary to worry about Cause (causation)!¹

Although the categories exist *a priori* they are, nonetheless (according to Kant) contributed by the subject of experience. In other words, they are imposed by the subject and are not real features of the external world. The mind has certain formal apparatus that makes sense of experience under the categories; we have, within ourselves, the organizing principles that make the external world intelligible to us. Our minds structure and make lucid the observations of our senses.

Finally, let's think about why causation is a necessary condition of experience. Kant makes an argument through which he tries to support his case for the categories. Firstly, the order in which we perceive things does not change the objects we experience. For example, consider looking around the room: we see the objects in the room in the order in which our gaze moves over them. The objects in the room don't change but the order in which we see them means that one experience follows another. However, sometimes changes in our perception reflect changes in the objects.

How is it possible to make a clear distinction between when there are changes in my perception (when my gaze moves over objects in the room) and when there are changes in the object itself? What makes the distinction so clear? For now, it suffices to say that when we gaze around the room, the order of our perceptions could be different (or changed); we can look around the room starting from a different point. However, when objects change, we cannot change the order of our perceptions. Kant believes that without the concept of causation we would not be able to make sense of this distinction. In other words, we have the idea of things ordered in time. If we did not have such an idea of things being ordered in time we would be unable to understand the difference between being able to change the order of our perceptions (through choosing to start looking around the room from a different area) and when changes in objects dictate the order of our perceptions. Kant's persuasive argument is that this distinction is necessary to experience objects at all and that, as such, the concept of causation is a necessary condition for experience.

Kant's Transcendental Deduction

Let us suppose you look from one side of your house to another. In this case the order in which you perceive your house, the objects in it and so on, is dependent upon where you begin and end your observations. In other words, while my experiences change in time (first I see the table, then the chairs, then the window, then the plates then the books and so on), the objects themselves do not change. The objects themselves have remained the same over time. Obviously, in such a case, it is possible to change the order of my experiences. I could, for example, start with the plates, then the window, then the books etc.. However, there are occasions when we have no control upon the order of our experiences. Kant uses the example of a ship sailing down a river. In this case, the ship changes its position in relation to other features that remain the same (e.g. the river bank, trees nearby and so on). We have no control over the order of our experiences. Thus we have occasions when we can determine the order of our experiences and occasions when they are determined for us (we have no power of determination). What does this mean in terms of Kant's argument?

Firstly (as shown above), we have a fundamental distinction – namely, between when we determine the order of our experiences and when we are unable to determine such an order. This means that we have an understanding of things ordered in time. Moreover, because we are able to make such a distinction, we must also understand that there is a necessary connection between cause and effect – i.e. we have our experiences under the concept of causality. How so?

– We are able to show that our experiences occur in particular temporal orders (i.e. they happen in a certain order). We are also able to draw the distinction between when we determine the order in which they happen and when the order is determined for us. Thus we can say that there must be something external to our perceptions causing them to change in ways not determined by us (the subjects).

¹ I just added the other categories so you knew what they were!

There needs to be a necessary connection here, as otherwise we would be unable to draw such a distinction. – The external world changes *causing* changes in our experience. If we did not experience such changes under the concept of causality then it would be impossible to make the distinction between when we determine the order of our perceptions, from when they were determined for us. We would be unable to do this because we would have no idea how our looking around the room changes our perceptions in a way that is determined by us. - We would have no idea that our looking around the room in a particular order caused us to experience the room and its contents in a particular order. Thus, we would be unable to distinguish between this, and when our experiences were not determined by us.

Kant's argument has wide ranging implications. Firstly, it acts as a justification for his assertion that causality is a necessary condition for experience; we need to understand our experiences under the concept of causality in order to make the distinction between when we determine the order of our perceptions and when we do not. Secondly, it demonstrates that, through such a distinction, we can say with certainty that the external world exists; when our experiences are not determined by us, then we can say that they are determined by something external. This represents a strong argument against Descartes. Thirdly, it dissolves Hume's assertion that there is no necessary connection between cause and effect, insofar as a connection is required between the temporal order of experiences and how they are determined (either by us or the external world).

If we accept Kant's argument (and I'm not suggesting that you *should*) then we can see a solution to the problem of scepticism as formed by both rationalists and empiricists. We can also see a justification for Kant's belief that the various categories, in addition to space and time, are necessary conditions for experience.

If you understand this argument then congratulations! You have just understood Kant's ***Transcendental Deduction!*** There are a couple of further points that you need to be aware of. The name ***Transcendental Argument*** means starting with various aspects of our experience and logically moving from there to what necessarily needs to be the case in order for those aspects of experience to be possible. If we talk about something that is "transcendent" we generally mean something that is beyond direct experience.

The Phenomenal & Noumenal World

I now want to say something about the difference that Kant draws between the ***Phenomenal*** and ***Noumenal World***. Kant argues that, like space and time, causality (like all the categories) is something that is contributed by any subject of experience. They are not real features of the actual material world; Kant calls the actual material world the ***Noumenal World***. The ***Phenomenal World*** is that which we are able to experience; what we actually perceive. The Noumenal World is beyond our reach. It is the world of the things as they actually are, unmediated by our perceptions. We can never know this world. Does this undermine Kant's

argument about the objective world? – Well, whilst we cannot know the thing-in-itself, we are not forced to return to either Hume's or Descartes' position. Provided we can make a distinction between when we determine the order of our perceptions and when they are determined for us, we can say with confidence that there is an external world and that there are things we can definitely know about it.

Finally, it is time to return to the difference between *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge. Does Kant's argument have an effect on what we conceive of as *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge? To answer that, we need to go back to thinking about analytic and synthetic propositions. Analytic propositions you will recall are those which are true by definition; synthetic propositions are those that need to be verified through experience. Hume believed that *a priori* knowledge was possible, but only once we already had the ideas derived from experience; Descartes, on the other hand, believed all knowledge to come from reason – independent of experience – or from innate ideas that we're born with (also known independent of experience). The only role for experience is to give our reason content to work on. In this limited respect, it is possible to have synthetic *a priori* knowledge; the synthetic part has no epistemological role to play.

How does Kant's account influence all this? Let us sum up what we've now covered. Kant began by arguing that whilst knowledge begins with experience, we nonetheless require the sensible intuitions of space and time to have experience at all. Such sensible intuitions are given prior to (and independent of) experience. Similarly, as we've seen, the twelve categories (such as causation) are necessary for understanding objective reality. Kant therefore puts forward the coherent possibility of *synthetic a priori* knowledge. The synthetic part is derived from experience from which we grasp the external world and what goes on in it; the *a priori* aspect is that part which makes our experiences possible (the sensible intuitions of space and time) and that which orders such experiences (the categories). Kant's enterprise was to synchronize rationalism and empiricism in a way that provides a coherent picture of how we ground our knowledge. It is up to you to assess whether he was successful.

Kant's Philosophy of Maths

So, how are we to describe Kant's new class of synthetic *a priori* propositions? How are they possible? For our purposes it is useful to consider four classes of proposition: 1. Analytic *a priori*. 2. Analytic *a posteriori*. 3. Synthetic *a posteriori*. 4. Synthetic *a priori*.

Of the first three, one can see (quite clearly) that number 2 is not possible; it is not possible because in an analytic proposition the predicate is contained within the subject and is, therefore, something that does not describe experience. Numbers 1, 3 & 4 are possible. You know about 1 and 3. Let's now deal with 4.

Kant believes that many of our propositions can be considered synthetic *a priori*. Our knowledge begins with experience (the synthetic part) but any experience we have is mediated by the sensible intuitions of space and time and structured by the categories; sensible intuitions and the structure provided by the categories for experience itself, exists independently of experiences themselves. Since they exist independently of experience, they can be said to be *a priori*. Thus, we can say that knowledge claims that refer to experience for their justification can be considered as synthetic *a priori* because the sense (or intelligibility) of the experience has been, in part, determined by the sensible intuitions of space and time and the structure imposed on it by the categories.

This is not quite the end of the story. Most mathematicians believe that mathematics is a branch of *a priori* knowledge. Kant disagreed, saying it is synthetic *a priori*. His argument was that (for example) $7 + 5$ have to be put together to provide the answer 12. The number 12 is not contained within the subjects (or ideas) of 7 and/or 5. It is the aspect of addition that provides the answer (number) 12. Kant therefore believes that $7 + 5 = 12$ is a synthetic proposition because 12 is not contained in either 7 or 5 or both unless the function of addition is used. However, although not necessarily true insofar as the predicate is contained within the subject, the proposition $7 + 5 = 12$ can still be considered as a necessary proposition because mathematics is grounded in our sensible intuitions of space and time; it is necessary that we see the world that way.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Palgrave. Basingstoke. 1929.