

Handout 7

Kant's Reconciliation of Rationalism and Empiricism

[The aim of this handout is to sketch Kant's fundamental idea in the Critique of Pure Reason (CPR), with minimal use of Kantian jargon; once that idea has been understood, it is relatively easy to acquire "kantspeak."]

Step 1: THE TYPE OF KNOWLEDGE WE'RE REALLY INTERESTED IN. Recognize along with the Rationalist the possibility of a priori knowledge (=knowledge of necessary, universal, and experience-independent truths). Then distinguish between logical/ definitional ("analytic") and non-logical/non-definitional ("synthetic") a priori truths. The main task of the CPR is to answer this question: how are synthetic a priori truths possible?

Step 2: THE FIRST SOURCE OF OUR KNOWLEDGE. Recognize along with the Empiricist that all our knowledge begins in direct sensory experience.

Step 3: THE LIMITS AND MEANINGFULNESS OF OUR KNOWLEDGE. Recognize along with the Empiricist the limits of intelligibility of our concepts are the limits of actual and possible experiences (sensory impressions): no meaningful concepts without corresponding percepts! In particular, recognize that many Rationalist assertions (themselves taking the form of synthetic a priori judgments) are shown to be unintelligible by this criterion.

Step 4: THE SECOND SOURCE OF OUR KNOWLEDGE. Recognize against the Empiricist that although all knowledge **BEGINS** in experience and cannot go **BEYOND** possible experience, nevertheless not all knowledge **DERIVES FROM** experience. In particular, recognize that some fundamental concepts are undervivable from experience but are **PRESUPPOSED** by experience itself: for example, the concepts of space and time, of an enduring external world, and of causality.

Step 5: THE STRUCTURE OF OUR KNOWLEDGE. Recognize on the basis of Steps 3 and 4 that while the **CONTENT** of experiential knowledge is given a posteriori or through experience, its **FORM** or **STRUCTURE** is given a priori or independently of experience.

Step 6: THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE-ACQUISITION. Hypothesize that while the content of experiential knowledge has its source outside the mind, the form or structure is contributed by the **MIND ITSELF**. This is Kant's "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy: Our minds do not conform to the objects of our knowledge; rather the objects of our knowledge conform to forms or structures innate to the mind!

Step 7: THE POSSIBILITY OF SYNTHETIC A PRIORI KNOWLEDGE. Recognize that meaningful synthetic (=non-logical, non-definitional) a priori (=necessary, universal, and experience-independent) knowledge **IS** possible, because it is nothing other than knowledge of, or through, the very forms or structures that the mind itself contributes to the experience of objects.

Handout 8

A Kant Glossary

You will probably have noticed already that Kant's Critique of Pure Reason is not an "easy read." One of the main reasons for this is Kant's constant use of technical terminology to express crucial philosophical notions and distinctions. Without a grasp of these notions and distinctions, Kant's doctrines remain largely incomprehensible; but with such a grasp, his views are surprisingly easy to understand. So in what follows I will try to define Kant's core terms and distinctions as clearly as possible. But by all means, don't be afraid to ask me for further clarification!

(1) Sensibility vs. Understanding vs. Judgment vs. Reason.

There are four fundamental, innate cognitive faculties according to Kant:

Sensibility is the faculty of sensory awareness (=sense-perception); the understanding is the faculty of intellectual awareness (=conceptualization); judgment is the faculty of forming beliefs or judgments (=framing propositions); and reason is the faculty of self-reflection and of making inferences.

(2) Intuitions vs. concepts.

This is an epistemological or psychological distinction between two radically distinct sorts of ideas or mental contents.

An empirical intuition is a direct sensory grasp of something that affects (=causally interacts with) the mind, a perception of a particular physical object (e.g., that thing over there now).

An empirical concept is a general idea, abstracted from particular empirical intuitions (e.g., redness, as characterizing various perceived objects).

A pure intuition is a direct mental grasp of a form shared by all empirical intuitions: for Kant, space is the pure form of all outer empirical intuitions ("outer sense"), and time is the pure form of all inner empirical intuitions ("inner sense").

A pure concept is a second-order concept, or a concept that classifies or categorizes empirical concepts. For example, the empirical concept of a chair falls under the pure concept of enduring things (the category of substance),

(3) Judgments.

A judgment is a logically-organized unity of mental contents (=concepts and/or intuitions) that is affirmed by the mind. Every judgment--for example, "Bodies have weight"--thus expresses a proposition, or belief-content, that is either true or false.

(3) Transcendental vs. empirical.

A judgment, concept, or intuition is transcendental when it is derived from one of the innate cognitive faculties; a belief or idea is empirical when its content begins in, refers to, and is derived from sensory experiences.

(4) A posteriori vs. A priori.

'A posteriori' and 'a priori' are adjectives which apply to judgments and other mental contents (including concepts and intuitions).

A judgment is a posteriori when it is contingently true or false, and it is justified only by appeal to sensory experiences. Examples: "Socrates is a philosopher." "Roses are red."

A judgment is a priori when it is necessarily and universally true, and although it may actually apply to particular experiences of empirical objects, its truth is not derived from those experiences. Examples: "Bodies are extended." "2+2=4." "Every event has a cause."

A mental content other than a judgment is a posteriori when it is derived solely from sensory experiences; and a mental content is a priori when even if it is occasioned by, and even applies to, sensory experiences, it is irreducible to them. Thus empirical intuitions and empirical concepts are a posteriori, and pure intuitions and pure concepts are a priori.

(6) (A) Analysis vs. synthesis. (B) Analytic vs. synthetic.

(6A) According to Kant, the mind has the capacity to carry out two fundamental operations with respect to concepts, intuitions, and judgments: synthesis and analysis.

To synthesize is to combine intuitions, concepts, or judgments into a unity. For example, a simple empirical concept is a synthesis of empirical intuitions, complex empirical concepts are syntheses of simple empirical concepts, empirical judgments are syntheses of simple or complex empirical concepts (sometimes together also with intuitions), and inferences are syntheses of judgments.

To analyze is to decompose a concept, intuition, or judgment into its simpler constituents (so the concept of "body" = "extended" + "voluminous" + "shaped" + "colored" + etc.) .

(6B) 'Analytic, and 'synthetic' are adjectives applying primarily to judgments.

A judgment is analytic when its truth or falsity results either from the decomposition of concepts alone (e.g., "Bodies are extended") or from the fact that its denial entails a formal contradiction (e.g., "If Socrates is mortal, then Socrates is mortal"; and a judgment is synthetic when its truth or falsity results from putting together several distinct concepts by reference to an empirical or pure intuition (e.g., "Bodies have weight," "Space has three dimensions only").

Kant also sometimes points out that while synthetic judgments are "informative" (since they describe the actual empirical world), analytic judgments are merely tautologous or uninformative (since they merely decompose pre-made concepts or express simple logical truths).

(7) Analytic/synthetic + a posteriori/a priori.

The two sets of distinctions given in (5) and (6B) can be interwoven.

An analytic judgment is necessarily and universally true because it consists either in merely extracting from a concept what is already contained in its content or in being logically true. And it is also a priori because even if the concept is empirical its justification is derived from the act of analysis or from logic alone, not from sensory experiences. Example: "Bodies are extended."

Synthetic a posteriori judgments are empirical judgments that combine several empirical distinct concepts together with some empirical intuitions, and thus derive their (contingent) truth or falsity from particular sensory experiences of empirical objects. Example: "Roses are red."

Synthetic a priori judgments combine several distinct concepts together with pure intuitions, and are necessarily and universally true independently of sense experiences, despite the fact that they are not definitionally or logically true (so the denial of a synthetic a priori truth is not logically contradictory). Synthetic a priori judgments express truths that hold for all possible sets of circumstances in which we (=any creatures cognitively like us) can have sensory experiences; and they are derived directly from our reflective awareness of the contributions made to our judgments by pure intuitions or pure concepts. Examples: Truths of arithmetic. Truths of geometry. "Every event has a cause."