

Kant – Transcendental Idealism

In the wake of Hume, it seemed that philosophy was over (“commit it to the flames”) and science was ultimately unjustified (there is no rational justification for believing that facts about observed spaces and times entails anything about *unobserved* spaces/times).

Further, it seems that Reid missed the point of Hume’s arguments. OF COURSE we have to ASSUME that there ARE external objects, and that there IS regularity in the world, etc., before we may proceed with our inquiries. Hume’s point was only that these starting assumptions (these “first principles” of “common sense”) are ultimately unjustified. But,

“common sense must be shown practically, by well-considered and reasonable thoughts and words, not by appealing to it as an oracle, when no rational justification can be advanced.” (*Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*)

Kant is going to try to rescue both philosophy and science.

1. Step One: Synthetic A Priori Knowledge: Consider two distinctions:

- (a) **A priori knowledge** – Knowledge gained independent of sensory experience; or “from the armchair”, so to speak, based on “pure reason”.
- (b) **Empirical (a posteriori) knowledge** – knowledge gained by sensory experience.
- (i) **Analytic truths** – Truths where the predicate is contained in the subject; i.e., truths that are true *by definition*.
- (ii) **Synthetic truths** – Truths that are NOT true by definition. (The predicate adds something NEW to the subject.)

Hume mistakenly believed that (a)/(i) and (b)/(ii) were really just the same categories:

- *analytic/a priori*. You can know that an analytic truth such as <All triangles have three sides> is true without needing to go out into the world and verify by checking every triangle to make sure that it is three-sided. Simply put, knowledge of analytic truths does not seem to require empirical observation. (*Kant used: All bodies are extended.*)

- *empirical/synthetic*. When you come to know synthetic truths such as <Vance is a professor> by going out into the world and perceiving things. This fact is not true by definition, and it required an empirical observation. (*Kant used: All bodies have weight.*) So, there does seem to be significant overlap. If there is TOTAL overlap, then we have a **problem for philosophy**: Hume said, if it’s not a priori or empirical, then “commit it to

the flames”—for there is no other kind of knowledge. But, if a priori truths are just boring “relations between ideas” and empirical knowledge refers to mere contingent “matters of fact”, then there doesn’t seem to be any place for “interesting” metaphysical knowledge; i.e., exactly the sort of knowledge philosophers seek. ALL of the claims that philosophers make—about free will, identity, God, morality, the nature of the mind, of composite objects, etc.—are supposed to be **knowable a priori**, but also **interesting**. Philosophy isn’t supposed to be just the study of definitions or a bunch of uninteresting tautologies, like “It is what it is”!

If philosophers are to do any interesting work from the armchair, then there would need to be **synthetic a priori knowledge**. But apparently that’s just not possible... ☹

Psych! Kant argued that it IS possible! ☺

Consider: $\langle 7+5=12 \rangle$ This also seems knowable a priori. Right? Yet, it’s not merely analytic. The concept of the sum of 7 and 5 isn’t just contained in the concept of 12. So, it seems that **arithmetic** is knowable as synthetic, a priori. (*though, e.g., $7=7$ is analytic*)

Or this one: *\langle The interior angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees. \rangle* The concept of a triangle doesn’t just contain the concept of 180 degrees. Another example: *\langle The shortest distance between any two points is a straight line. \rangle* So, **geometry** too.

Even some claims in **physics** seem to be synthetic a priori; e.g., \langle For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction \rangle ; \langle Every event has a cause \rangle ; \langle The mass of a closed system must remain constant \rangle ; etc. Kant thinks that all of these are synthetic (*obviously*) and knowable a priori (*do you agree?*).

In **metaphysics**: It seems that, e.g., *\langle In any alteration, there is a substance that persists through that alteration \rangle* is true (*Recall Descartes and the wax: Through any change, there must be something that remains the same—otherwise there is just annihilation and creation!*). In **ethics**: *\langle It is morally wrong to act according to any maxim which one cannot simultaneously will that it become a universal law. \rangle* Again, Kant thinks that both of these philosophical claims are synthetic a priori. (*Again, do you agree?*)

Conclusion: In short, Kant has at least re-opened the door for philosophy. Perhaps there IS some interesting knowledge to be had from the armchair. Yay!

For more, watch a video on Kant’s view of synthetic a priori knowledge [here](#).

2. Step Two: Transcendental Idealism/Empirical Realism: Now, Kant does actually buy into the veil of perception, strictly speaking, diving the world into two categories:

- (1) **Phenomena:** Sensory perception is merely of representations, or appearances. (*He calls the realm of perception the realm of 'intuition', or 'sensitivity'.*) The OBJECTS of perception (or intuition, or sense) are called 'phenomena.' (*These are similar to what Locke and Berkeley mean by 'ideas'*) Like Berkeley, Kant says that phenomena are dependent on the mind. If we ceased to exist, the phenomena would ALSO cease to exist. He writes, "they cannot exist in themselves, but only in us."
- (2) **Noumena:** These are the 'things-in-themselves' (*or, elsewhere, the 'transcendental objects'*). They are the objects of the external world. But, they are not sensible things (i.e., they cannot be perceived). He writes, "we do not apprehend them in any fashion whatsoever." Of them, we know "nothing whatsoever." If we COULD know the noumena, we would know things "as they ARE"—whereas, to know the phenomena is merely to know things "as they APPEAR."

Skepticism? This appears to entail a radical skepticism, where the things in the external world are completely unknowable. We might try to INFER that there are external objects by supposing that our ideas of them (our phenomena) must have a CAUSE. But, the cause MIGHT just be a mind (e.g., God, or even our own minds!). Kant writes,

"For if we regard outer appearances [i.e., phenomena, or ideas, of external objects] as representations produced in us by their objects, and if these objects be things existing in themselves outside us, it is indeed impossible to see how we can come to know the existence of the objects otherwise than by inference from the effect to the cause; and this being so, it must always remain doubtful whether the cause in question be in us or outside us." (Critique of the Fourth Paralogism)

The Copernican Shift: Kant does not view himself as an external world skeptic, however. Now, Locke gave us a system where external objects were inferred from experience, but remained doubtful. Berkeley denied their existence altogether. Kant thought he could do better—by **proving the existence of external objects *a priori*, with certainty!**

Here's how: Before Kant, the assumption had been that we KNOW things only when the appearances or impressions in our mind accurately represented the things out in the external world; i.e., we gain knowledge **when our minds conform to reality**. A "Copernican shift" occurred when Kant suggested that we gain knowledge **when reality conforms to our minds**. (*Note that this is also believed by the Berkeleyan idealist.*) It is only once we approach from THIS direction that we can do (a priori) metaphysics.

"If our intuition has to conform to the constitution of the objects, I don't see how we can know anything about them *a priori*; but I can easily conceive of having *a priori* knowledge of objects if they (as objects of the senses) have to conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition." (Preface to the second edition)

Eh... What? We can have a priori knowledge of objects if they conform to what now?

Well, for starters, Kant thought that **space** and **time** were innate, hard-wired necessary pre-conditions of experience. Simply put, we CANNOT experience the world as anything other than being "out there" in space and time. So, these are synthetic a priori concepts. *(You might think that you acquire the concepts a posteriori; e.g., by observing one thing here and another over there, and then inferring that there is space between them. But, note that you've already inserted the concept of space into your perception the moment you observed one thing as being THERE and another as being HERE.)*

Descartes showed us that we can know (a priori, with certainty) that WE exist (via what Kant calls our 'inner sense'). But, we also learned that we know with certainty facts about our sensations and experiences. Yet, **our experiences NECESSARILY represent material objects as being "out there" in space and time** (via what Kant calls our 'outer sense'). So, there REALLY ARE external objects, in space and time.

This was the whole Copernican shift: Our mind shapes reality. Reality conforms to our minds, not vice versa. It conforms to our stamps of space and time, for instance. This is **transcendental idealism**.¹ From here, Kant is able to adopt an **empirical realism** (i.e., a realism about the perception of external objects). He writes,

"The transcendental idealist ...may be an empirical realist ...; that is, he may admit the existence of matter without going outside his mere self-consciousness, or assuming anything more than the certainty of his representations, that is, the *cogito, ergo sum*. For he considers this matter and even its inner possibility to be appearance merely; and appearance, if separated from our sensibility, is nothing. Matter is ... therefore, only a species of representations (intuition), which are called external, not as standing in relation to objects in themselves external, but because they relate perceptions to the space in which all things are external to one another, while yet the space itself is in us. ... [O]ur doctrine thus removes all difficulty in the way of accepting the existence of matter on the unaided testimony of our mere self-consciousness, or of declaring it to be thereby proved in the same manner as the existence of myself as a thinking being is proved. ...

¹ As Ellis notes: "Kant uses the term 'transcendental' to refer to innate cognitive structures (or the norms of thought) that make our knowledge possible. Thus, Kant's idealism is a *transcendental* idealism, since the world-to-mind conformity relation is due to these transcendental structures."

Thus external things exist as well as I myself, and both indeed, upon the immediate witness of my self-consciousness. The only difference is that the representation of myself, as the thinking subject, belongs to inner sense only, while the representations which mark extended beings belong also to outer sense. . . . [But] in both cases alike the objects are nothing but representations, the immediate perception (consciousness) of which is at the same time a sufficient proof of their reality. The transcendental idealist is, therefore, an empirical realist, and allows to matter, as appearance, a reality which does not permit of being inferred, but is immediately perceived." (Critique of the Fourth Paralogism)

So, rather than the existence of external objects needing to be INFERRED, Kant's view is that external objects are immediately PERCEIVED, and so are known with **certainty** to **really exist externally**. Yay! Now we can do science!

...Sort of... This only follows because Kant is using 'real' and 'external' as follows:

- *The "real" world* – Kant clarifies that "The reality of outer appearances is therefore real in perception only, and can be real in no other way." So, these so-called external objects are REAL... as in, really in our minds...

- *The "external" world* – Kant clarifies:

"The expression 'outside us' is thus unavoidably ambiguous in meaning, sometimes signifying what as thing in itself exists apart from us, and sometimes what belongs solely to outer appearance." He then clarifies that 'empirically external' refers only to the latter meaning. For, "If we treat outer objects as things in themselves, it is quite impossible to understand how we could arrive at a knowledge of their reality outside us, since we have to rely merely on the representation which is in us."

Simply put, 'external' objects are really OUTSIDE of us... or, at least, they APPEAR to us in that way; appearances are unavoidably REPRESENTED to us in that way.

Keep in mind, however, that Kant does not think that we can know anything about the NOUMENAL external objects, if there even are such things. *[But, isn't that what we mean when we say 'external objects'? Is Kant achieving certainty about "external" objects merely by endorsing idealism and then CALLING the ideas 'external objects'? What do you think?]*

[A further worry: If empirical reality is entirely INSIDE of my head (in the phenomenal realm), and reality conforms to each person's mind, then how do we know that each person's reality is the same? Worse still, isn't the reality that I am living in, BY DEFINITION DIFFERENT than the reality YOU are living in? This worry would in fact lead to many later philosophers admitting that, yes, we DO each have different ways of carving up the world. Reality is entirely subjective, and each and every person's reality is entirely different.]