

## 24.201 Topics in History of Philosophy: KANT

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### Introduction to Kant

1. This course will focus on Kant's account of knowledge and reality. Kant described himself as a 'transcendental idealist', claiming that 'if I remove the thinking being, the whole corporeal world must at once vanish', and denying that we have knowledge of 'things in themselves'. Despite all this, his avowed aim was to *save* knowledge from the sceptic. We'll be studying the *Critique of Pure Reason* with a special focus on questions about idealism, about our ignorance of things in themselves, and about what, if anything, idealism has to do with this kind of ignorance. Along the way we'll consider Kant's distinctive account of space, matter, and force, all of which had a significant role to play in his own philosophy (and, incidentally, in the historical evolution of field theory). The first half of the course provides an introduction to the *Critique*, as it has traditionally been understood; the second half considers some more controversial interpretations, in which the above questions are posed rather vividly.

2. *Biographical details.* Kant (1724-1804) was born and lived in Königsberg, in Prussia. Among the significant intellectual influences on him were the great rationalist philosopher Leibniz (chiefly via his disciple Wolff), and the great empiricist philosopher Hume. Kant's early work was in 'natural philosophy' and metaphysics; the *Critique of Pure Reason* was published towards the end of his career. It initially met a mixed reception, with some critics dismissing it as simple Berkeleyan idealism in a complicated disguise. But Kant's achievement in the *Critique of Pure Reason* has had in the end a monumental impact on philosophy, as indeed have his achievements in moral philosophy (not our topic here). He was a man of orderly habits, who never left Königsberg, took regular walks, and never married.

2. *The battlefield of metaphysics:* in the Prefaces Kant writes of the battlefield metaphysics had become, as a result of the discrepancy between reason's ambition, and its achievement. He contrasts the failure of metaphysics, with the success of mathematics and science, and urges the need for a 'critique of pure reason'.

3. *The 'Copernican Revolution':*

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge... We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus' primary hypothesis. Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved round the spectator, he tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest. A similar experiment can be tried in metaphysics, as regards the intuition of objects. If intuition must conform to the constitution of the objects, I do not see how we could know anything of the latter *a priori*; but if the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, I have no difficulty in conceiving such a possibility. (Bxvi)

To misquote Shakespeare: 'Tis not in the stars that *they* are thus and thus, but in ourselves. The features we ascribe to objects in the world are (at least partly) due to the nature or activity of our minds. This is especially so for the features that we know about *a priori*, independently of experience.

### 3. Some distinctions:

*A priori/ a posteriori.* This is about how we *know* something. Some things we seem to know because of our (or someone else's) experience, e.g. 'There was a hurricane in New Orleans in August'; others we seem to know independently of experience, e.g. '5+7=12'. Kant says:

Knowledge that is ... independent of experience and even of all impressions of the senses... is entitled *a priori*, and distinguished from the empirical, which has its sources *a posteriori*, that is, in experience. (B2)

*Necessary/ contingent.* This is about whether something *has* to be so or not. If p is necessarily true, then it must be true, it could not have been false; it is true 'in every possible world'. Many philosophers, including Kant, have thought that necessary truths are also those truths known *a priori*; and contingent truths are those known *a posteriori*.

*Analytic/ synthetic.* This is about what makes something *true*; roughly, whether it is true in virtue of its meaning or not. Kant puts this in terms of the idea of *containment*:

Either the predicate B belongs to the subject A, as something which is (covertly) contained in this concept A; or B lies outside the concept A, although it does indeed stand in connection with it. In the one case I entitled the judgment analytic, in the other synthetic. (A6/B10).

4. *The Humean problem.* Hume's critique of reason had rested on these divisions: he contrasted 'relations of ideas' with 'matters of fact', the former being analytic, known *a priori*, and necessary; the latter being synthetic, known *a posteriori*, and contingent. Hume argued that all knowable propositions belonged on one or the other prong of this two-pronged fork, and advised that we should 'consign to the flames' whatever does not fit the one or the other. Traditional metaphysics was set to burn.

5. *Kant's solution to the Humean problem:* Kant affirms that some propositions are known *a priori*, but also synthetic, i.e. not simply true in virtue of their meaning. Example: 'Every alteration must have a cause' (B5). This is not known *a posteriori*, from experience (Kant and Hume would agree), so it is not empirical: if it is known, it is known *a priori*. But it is not analytically true (Kant and Hume would agree, A9/B13), so it is, apparently, not on the other prong either: it is a synthetic proposition, one whose subject does not 'contain the predicate', as Kant put it. Hume therefore denies that we know it. Kant rejects Hume's skepticism, and his watertight division. He says that without synthetic *a priori* knowledge there would be no knowledge of the world at all, not even the mathematical (B14). So he poses the question: how are *a priori* synthetic judgments possible? (B19) The *a priori* must, he says, have its roots in reason. If we want to find out how synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible, we need to consider reason itself. And on this revolutionary 'new method of thought',

...we can know *a priori* of things only what we ourselves put into them. (Bxviii)