

24.201 Topics in History of Philosophy: KANT

Prof. Rae Langton

Kant's Introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason

1. *Reminder: some distinctions.* (i) *A priori/ a posteriori*, about how we *know* something, whether independent of experience or not; (ii) *Necessary/ contingent*, about whether something *has* to be so or not. (iii) *Analytic/ synthetic*, about what makes something *true*; roughly, whether it is true in virtue of its meaning or not.

2. *Reminder: the Humean problem.* Hume distinguished 'relations of ideas', which are *a priori*, necessary and analytic, from matters of fact, which are *a posteriori*, contingent and synthetic, arguing that propositions which did not fit cleanly into either side of this division should be 'consigned to the flames'.

3. *Kant's response to Hume: the Introduction.* Kant rejects Hume's skepticism and his clean division. He affirms that some propositions are known *a priori*, but are also synthetic. Example: 'Every alteration must have a cause' (B5). This is not known *a posteriori*, from experience, so if it is known, it is known *a priori*. But it is not analytically true (A9/B13), so it does not belong on the other side either: it is a synthetic proposition, whose subject does not 'contain the predicate'. Without synthetic *a priori* knowledge there would be no knowledge of the world at all, nor even mathematics (B14). So Kant asks: how are *a priori* synthetic judgments possible? (B19) The *a priori* must, he says, have its roots in the nature of human reason, human experience and the understanding. The understanding 'has rules which I must presuppose as being in me prior to objects being given to me, and therefore as being *a priori*' (Bxviii).

4. Progress of Kant's Introduction

I. *The distinction between pure and empirical knowledge.* Kant begins by conceding to the empiricist that all knowledge 'begins with experience', but points out that it does not for that reason 'arise from experience' (B1). He asks whether we have any knowledge *a priori*, independent of experience, and clarifies what he means by that (B2-3).

II. *We are in possession of certain modes of a priori knowledge.* Kant cites mathematics and the natural sciences as resting on some necessary, universal and *a priori* claims: e.g. any proposition from mathematics; the general causal principle.

III. *Philosophy stands in need of a science which shall determine the possibility, the principles, and the extent of all a priori knowledge.* We think we have *a priori* knowledge when we are doing metaphysics, addressing the problems of 'God, freedom and immortality', questions that conveniently transcend any guidance or correction from experience (A3/B7). We think we are getting somewhere, but at least sometimes we are only analyzing our concepts, not extending our knowledge. (A6/B10)

IV. *The distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments.* Kant defines analytic judgments in terms of 'containment': in an analytic judgment, the predicate is, covertly, 'contained' in the subject. (A7/B10) Later he adds that for analytic

judgments, only the 'principle of contradiction' is required to reveal their truth (B12). Analytic judgments, e.g. 'all bodies are extended', are 'explicative'; synthetic judgments, e.g. 'all bodies are heavy', are 'ampliative'. Judgments of experience, such as the latter, are synthetic and contingent, and rely on experience. (A8/B12) But a priori synthetic judgments, e.g. 'Everything which happens has its cause' must be grasped differently. While analysis of concepts is a necessary part of metaphysics, if it extends knowledge it must rest on synthetic *a priori* principles.

V. *In all theoretical sciences of reason synthetic a priori judgments are contained as principles.* Propositions of mathematics and geometry are all (apart from some trivial definitions) a priori, necessary and synthetic. Natural science rests on many *a priori*, necessary and synthetic propositions. Metaphysics, in its ambition at any rate, consists of *a priori*, necessary, synthetic propositions.

VI. *The general problem of pure reason.* How are synthetic *a priori* judgments possible? Hume's denial of this possibility destroys not only metaphysics, but mathematics, geometry, and science. (B20) We cannot doubt that the latter sciences are possible, since they are actual (true?): but one may have doubts about metaphysics (B21).

VII. *The idea and division of a special science, under the title 'Critique of Pure Reason'.* Pure reason contains the principles of *a priori* knowledge. Knowledge which occupies itself with such principles is entitled 'transcendental' (A12/B25); but Kant's work will be occupied with a part of this domain, namely those principles of a priori knowledge that are synthetic (A12/B26). Kant's negative characterization of the proposal: his purpose is 'not to extend knowledge, but only to correct it'

5. *Reminder: the Copernican revolution.* Kant's description of his project in the Introduction spells out the 'new method of thought' he had hinted at in the Prefaces, according to which 'we can know *a priori* of things only what we ourselves put into them (Bxviii)'.

[T]he new point of view enables us to explain how there can be knowledge a priori; and, in addition, to furnish satisfactory proofs of the laws which form the *a priori* basis of nature, regarded as the sum of possible objects of experience—neither achievement being possible on the procedure hitherto followed. But this deduction of our power of knowing *a priori*... has a consequence which is startling, and which has the appearance of being highly prejudicial to the whole purpose of metaphysics... For we are brought to the conclusion that we can never transcend the limits of possible experience, though that is precisely what this science is concerned, above all else, to achieve. This situation yields, however, just the very experiment by which, indirectly, we are able to prove the truth of this first estimate of our *a priori* knowledge of reason, namely, that such knowledge has to do only with appearances, and must leave the thing in itself as indeed real *per se*, but as not known by us. (Bxix-xx)

6. *The price of knowledge.* We do have knowledge of *a priori* truths that are necessary and synthetic; but the price of this knowledge is that knowledge is circumscribed, never transcending 'the limits of possible experience'; and that knowledge is of mere appearances, not of things in themselves. We can have a kind of 'metaphysics of experience', but we must abandon the grand metaphysical questions about, for example, God, freedom, and immortality.