

Kant

Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics, Preface, excerpts¹

Critique of Pure Reason, excerpts²

PHIL101

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Section II: What is the Self?

Reading II.5

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) marks a turning point in the history of philosophy. His critique of the forms of human thought and experience divides philosophers into those moving beyond “modernism” to “post-modernism” and those who retain a “modernist” mode of thought. As you will see, Kant raises questions about the relationship of human thought to reality that are difficult to answer. Some regard Kant as a skeptic, implying that human knowledge of reality is impossible. Others see Kant as providing insight into such human knowledge as is in fact possible.

Where the self is concerned, Kant attempts an account that employs both empiricist and rationalist methodological tenets. Kant is much influenced by Hume, but thinks that Hume’s empiricism blinds him to a full account of the mind, particularly where the self is concerned. For Kant, not only are our minds supplied with sense information from outside us, but our minds also provide some of the “structure” in which that information is experienced by us. Thus, for Kant, both the information of the senses and the internal logic of the mind play key roles in human knowledge.

In the following, I intersperse Kant’s remarks with my commentary.

As we have seen, Hume argued that careful introspection reveals no impression of a self, and that we therefore lack the idea of “self”. These startling views were much resisted by some of Hume’s peers. But Kant, writing some fifty years later, admired and took them seriously.

However hasty and mistaken Hume’s conclusion may appear, it was at least founded upon investigation, and this investigation deserved the concentrated attention of the brighter spirits of his day as well as determined efforts on their part to discover, if possible, a happier solution of the

¹ *Kant's Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics edited in English by Dr. Paul Carus; with an essay on Kant's philosophy, and other supplementary material for the study of Kant.* Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co. The text includes minor emendations by me. Copyright Status: “Not in Copyright” (as indicated at the Archive.org site, <http://archive.org/details/kantsprolegomena00kantuoft>, 7/11/12.)

² J. Meiklejohn, trans. (*Critique of Pure Reason*. Rev. ed. with an introd. by the translator, J.M.D. Meiklejohn. New York: Colonial Press, 1900; Lacks the B Preface.) Internet Archive: Critique of Pure Reason: Kant, Immanuel, 1724-1804: Free Downloading and Streaming: Internet Archive. <http://archive.org/details/critiqueofpure00kantuoft>. The text includes minor emendations by me. Copyright Status: “Not in Copyright”

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problem in the sense proposed by him, all of which would have speedily resulted in a complete reform of the science.

But Hume suffered the usual misfortune of metaphysicians, of not being understood. It is positively painful to see how utterly his opponents, Reid, Oswald, Beattie, and lastly Priestley, missed the point of the problem; for while they were ever taking for granted that which he doubted, and demonstrating with zeal and often with impudence that which he never thought of doubting, they so misconstrued his valuable suggestion that everything remained in its old condition, as if nothing had happened. (*Prolegomena*, 258³)

Note that Kant has praise for Hume's method, though he resists Hume's conclusions, holding out for a "happier solution" than loss of the concept of self. The "valuable suggestion" mentioned here by Kant is a reference to Hume's method: careful examination of the contents of our own thoughts.

In a well-known passage, Kant cites Hume's critique as inspiring him to develop his own views on the self and other fundamental metaphysical concepts.

I openly confess, the suggestion of David Hume was the very thing, which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber, and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy quite a new direction. I was far from following him in the conclusions at which he arrived by regarding, not the whole of his problem, but a part, which by itself can give us no information. If we start from a well-founded, but undeveloped, thought, which another has bequeathed to us, we may well hope by continued reflection to advance farther than the acute man, to whom we owe the first spark of light. (*Prolegomena*, 260)

Kant's praise is glowing and he gives Hume credit for the opportunity to advance our understanding. Kant gives also a hint as to how he will move beyond Hume. Given Hume's attention to the specific *content* of our thoughts, his conclusions may seem warranted. But, suggests Kant, Hume has considered not the whole of the problem, but only a part of it. What part of the problem did Hume fail to see?

As we have seen, Hume was an empiricist philosopher, meaning that he focused on the contribution that the senses provide to human knowledge. And while Hume's attention to the information of the senses was acute and ground-breaking, it neglected contributions to human knowledge deriving not from without, but from within us. In the following passage, we see Kant open the door to this second source of human thought.

That all our cognition begins with experience there can be no doubt. For how is it possible that the faculty of cognition should be awakened into exercise otherwise than by means of objects which affect our senses? Partly of themselves, these objects produce representations; partly, they rouse our powers of understanding into activity, to compare, to connect, or to separate them, and so to convert the raw material of our sensuous impressions into a cognition of objects, which is called experience. In respect of time, therefore, no cognition of ours is prior to experience, but begins with it. But though all our cognition begins with experience, it by no means follows that it arises solely out of experience. For on the contrary, it is quite possible that our empirical cognition is a compound of that which we receive through impressions and that which the faculty of cognition supplies from itself (sensuous impressions giving merely the occasion), an addition which we cannot distinguish from the original element given by sense, till long practice has made us attentive to and skilful in separating it. It is, therefore, a question which requires close investigation, and is not to be answered at first sight — whether there exists a cognition altogether independent of experience, and even of all sensuous impressions.

³ Page numbers in the *Prolegomena* are from the standard 1911 Akademie edition of Kant's works.

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Cognition of this kind is called *a priori*, in contradistinction to empirical cognition, which has its sources *a posteriori*, that is, in experience. (*Critique*, Introduction, B1-2⁴)

Cognition is our basic state of mind – i.e., “experience”, in which we are aware of ourselves and our surroundings, whether we are walking down a street, or playing tennis, or reading a philosophy text. Kant accepts the seemingly undeniable proposition that our cognition begins with sensation: without a world to experience, there would be little going on in our minds. However, while cognition begins with sense experience, that is not, for Kant, to say that sense impressions make the only contribution to it. Recall Hume’s metaphor of a theater: human experience is like a theater in which the scene is constantly changing. Hume, recall further, had little to say about the “theater” itself – i.e., the “stage” or “props” making possible the action that we experience. Kant’s insight is to ask that very question: how is it possible for us to have the sense experiences that we have? Must the mind not make some contribution to the nature of that experience?

Kant thus draws a distinction between the *a priori* elements of cognition and its *a posteriori* elements.⁵ As you can see, the term ‘*a priori*’ contains the word ‘prior’ and the term ‘*a posteriori*’ contains the word ‘posterior’ – i.e., before and after. The *a priori* is that which occurs in the mind *prior* to the input of the senses, while the *a posteriori* is precisely that which occurs in the mind as a result of sensation. In other words, the mind comprises a system that processes sense information in certain ways. This system makes certain contributions to the manner in which we experience sense information. Kant’s intent is to make a careful study of that mental system, identifying its primary features.

I apply the term *transcendental* to all cognition which is not so much occupied with objects [i.e., the objects of sense] as with the mode of our cognition of these objects, so far as this mode of cognition is possible *a priori*. A system of such conceptions would be called transcendental philosophy.
(A12/B25)

Whereas Hume was focused solely on the content of our experience – its “objects” – Kant’s *transcendental* philosophy attempts to specify the mental conditions making that experience itself possible. Hume, recall, is impressed by the constant variation of human experience. Its contents “pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations,” he observes. Kant acknowledges this fact, but is also impressed by certain forms of regularity and sameness that such experience displays. While the *content* of experience varies, certain other things remain the same. For instance, our experience of other objects is always as in *space*; and all of our experiences are ordered sequentially in *time*. But notice that we do not *see* space; nor do we have any direct sensation of *time*. If Hume were right, and if we don’t have any direct impression of space or time, then we shouldn’t have any idea of space or time. And yet, not only do we have these ideas, it seems, but our sensations – the content of experience – are intimately associated with space and time. How is this possible?

⁴ Pagination in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is from the first (A) and second (B) original editions of the work.

⁵ ‘*A priori*’ and ‘*a posteriori*’ are adjectives, like ‘red’ or ‘interesting’. We can thus attach either term to a noun, such as ‘element of experience’ or ‘information’, to yield ‘*a priori* element of experience’ or ‘*a posteriori* information.’ Similarly, just as we can refer to “the red” or “the interesting”, thus referring to all things red or all things interesting, we can refer to “the *a priori*” and “the *a posteriori*,” making a noun out of the adjective. Note in any case that the ‘*a*’ is part of each expression and not an indefinite article.

Kant's answer is that space and time are among the *a priori* contributions of the human mind to human experience. It is true, he maintains, that we don't see space and don't hear time. Rather, space and time are products of the mind. They are the *means* by which sensations are presented, in our minds, as being either *outside* of us or *within* us. They are the "framework", so to speak, on which the mind "hangs" the various data of sense. In the mental construct of space, we are able to experience images – colors and shapes – as well as sounds and certain bodily feelings.⁶ The result is our experience of ourselves and other things in space. Similarly, in the mental construct of time, the mind places all the data of sense in a series, the result of which is our experience of an "inner" mental life, the sequence of our experiences over time.

Our concern in this chapter lies with the self. Clearly, Kant's notion of the *a priori* carries significant consequences for our understanding of our mental lives and the world that we experience. But how does it help us to move beyond Hume's rejection of the idea of self?

Perhaps you will already have anticipated the answer. While the self does not "appear" in sense as an "object" or content of experience, it is nevertheless "there" as part of the "background" or "framework": on Kant's account, the self is one of the mind's *a priori* contributions to the basic nature of our experience. But which contribution, and what is the effect on our experience of this contribution, exactly?

Consider the fact that human experience is complex in various ways. Note in particular that we are capable of experiencing more than one thing at a time. We can see at the same time as we hear, touch at the same time as we smell or taste, for instance. How, exactly, is this possible?⁷

⁶ The popular 1999 film, *The Matrix*, includes a scene analogous to Kant's account of space. The "white room" or "loading room" presents the viewer with a blank, white space, which can then be filled with images – colors, shapes – thereby completing the viewer's visual experience. This "blank space" pre-exists the data, enabling one to experience that data, rather as Kant's notion of space is the *a priori* pre-condition of sight and sound. See the image below, and here for the film clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMI1QUjRs7M>



Fig. 1 Morpheus, in the "loading room"

⁷ Note that it is clearly not adequate to say, simply, that "I" exist, in my mind, and am thus able both to see and hear at the same time. It is not as though there is a tiny person, what is called a *homunculus*, within your skull, peering out through your eye-holes and hearing through your ear-holes. The very question is how that "I" may be said to exist as a feature of mind in the first place, how that "I" can be aware of more than one thing at once – how, that is, the mind *constructs* the "I".

How are the various forms of human thought thus *unified*, brought together to form a single consciousness?

It is important that we not take for granted this *unity of mind*. Notice how different sight is from sound. One might say that as such they have nothing in common. Or, again, emotion: one can feel happy at the same time as one looks through the windshield of one's car. One is subject to multiple distinct experiences at once. If these mental activities were completely distinct from one another, however, this would be impossible. That is, if there were no unity of experience, then there would be not one but *multiple* subjects of experience, for the given mind. The subject of one's hearing would distinct from the subject of one's vision; and neither of these would be the subject of one's emotions; and so on. In other words, one would have not a single mind; rather than being one person, one's body would contain multiple, distinct minds, minds that were unaware of each other and each other's contents.⁸

Since it is evident that the human mind is not thus dis-unified but is rather unified, we have then another respect in which human experience displays an order or regularity not explained by Hume. On Kant's view, the unity of human cognition is the result of a certain *a priori* form, what we otherwise call *the self*. Kant writes,

The "I think" must accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought; in other words, the representation would either be impossible, or at least be, in relation to me, nothing. ... All the diversity or manifold content of intuition, has, therefore, a necessary relation to the "I think," in the subject in which this diversity is found. ... [The "I think"] is in all acts of consciousness one and the same; and unaccompanied by it, no representation can exist for me. The unity of this apperception I call the transcendental unity of self-consciousness, in order to indicate the possibility of *a priori* cognition arising from it. For the manifold representations which are given in an intuition would not all of them be my representations, if they did not all belong to one self-consciousness; that is, as my representations (even though I am not conscious of them as such), they must conform to the condition under which alone they can exist together in a common self-consciousness, because otherwise they would not all without exception belong to me. (B131-132)

Kant here calls our attention to two questions. First, what must be true of a content of mind if it is to be experienced by "me"; and, second, what must be true of two (or more) contents of mind if they are both to be experienced by "me" at once? Consider a sense datum such as an image of redness. (If you rub your eyes hard, you will see an image of redness.) Notice that your consciousness of this redness has a *structure*: there is the image of redness itself; and then there is "you", viewing it. "You", of course, do not appear in the image: the image is only of redness. Nevertheless, we can distinguish an aspect of the experience as a whole corresponding to you and your conscious awareness of the image of redness. This awareness of the image we might call the "I think" component of the experience. On the one hand, we have redness; on the other, we have the "I think." If we put these together, we get your experience of redness, since, it seems, part of that experience as a whole is *your* being aware of the redness. As a whole, we may refer to this as the *subject-object structure* of human conscious experience.

Kant asserts that this structure of our cognitive states requires an explanation. And he agrees with Hume that the "I" component is not a part of the experience if we consider only the *object* of the experience, i.e., the redness alone. But there *is* more to the experience; it has a *subject*. The

⁸ In what is sometimes called "multiple personality disorder" (or dissociative identity disorder), a single mind is the subject of two or more distinct personalities *at different times* – i.e., in sequence. At one time, one personality is on display; at another, a different personality. The case we are considering here of the dis-united mind, however, implies the co-existence of multiple subjects of experience at a single time.

redness *appears* – i.e., as *to* a subject of experience.⁹ This form or structure, however, is not evident in the sense impressions alone; it must not then derive from sensation. It must, Kant concludes, be a product of the mind itself. Part of the *a priori* functioning of the human mind, then, would appear to entail giving to sense data an *experienced-by-me* structure. Contents of the mind that lack this structure would be “nothing to me,” as Kant remarks.¹⁰ The mind contains not simply redness, but redness-experienced-by-me. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what redness might be without its experience-by-me aspect. It is an *appearance*, for Kant. In response, then, to the question what must be true of a content of mind if it is to be experienced by “me”, Kant suggests that the content must have an “I think” form. It must be so processed that it has a thought-by-me structure.

Given the notion of such a structure, a structure enabling sense data to be experienced by a conscious subject, Kant can formulate an answer to the question how the mind may be aware of more than one thing at once. The answer is that the objects of experience, in the mind, are given the *same* “I think” structure in each case, so that one and the same subject of experience is conscious of them all.

This proposition is ... the condition of all [conscious] thought; for it states nothing more than that all my representations in any given intuition must be subject to the condition which alone enables me to connect them, as my representation with the identical self, and so to unite them synthetically in one apperception, by means of the general¹¹ expression, “I think.” (B138)

That is, just as the image of redness must have a certain form if it is to be experienced by me, so too multiple sense data must have the *same* form if they are to be experienced by one and the same “me”. Your sight of these printed words and the sound of, say, your own breathing have something important in common, on this view. They both have the form of your being conscious of them, a single form shared by both. If they did not share this form, then you would not be conscious of both states at once.

As understood by Kant, then, the self is an *a priori* condition of conscious, unified experience. To see more clearly the nature of Kant’s concept of self, consider just what conditions must be met if *one and the same* structure is to attach to multiple, distinct contents of experience. What sort of thing can be the same one thing in multiple settings? It will not be a physical object that is the subject of multiple forms of experience. For one thing, we do not experience the self as a

⁹ Notice, then, that the two components of our experience have a reciprocal structure. The *objects* of experience, sense data, appear *to* us. They are oriented *to* us, to be experience *by* us, rather as a movie screen is oriented toward an audience. And like the audience in the theater, we as *subjects* of experience also have an orientation – i.e., towards the possible objects of experience. Like the viewer waiting for the movie to begin, the subject is the mental possibility of entertaining some object of experience. Keep in mind that both of these structures – the object’s orientation *to me* and my (the subject’s) orientation to the object – *must both be constructed by the mind*. They cannot be taken for granted. Human experience is constructed, in the mind, so as to have subject-object structure, the structure of a subject perceiving some object. It is the fact of this construction, the *a priori* mind, that Kant is trying to call our attention to.

¹⁰ It would seem that there are such contents of mind, if prevailing theories of the un- or sub-conscious are true. Some human thoughts lack this “I think” form.

¹¹ Recall that *general* expressions are concepts. As general, concepts are capable of unifying many things under a single thought. This is precisely what Kant has in mind, here: “I think” is a general expression, a concept. Consequently, in thinking, “I think,” my mind expresses as many multiple instances of ‘I think’ as are instantiated at present in my mind.

physical object – it has no spatial location. Further, it is not clear that one and the same physical object could be related in exactly the same way to different kinds of thing. An *ideal* object, on the other hand, could relate to more than one thing at once.

Consider, for example, one sort of ideal object, a logical structure. Logical structures are found in statements and sets of statements. For instance, we find the subject-predicate form in these statements:

The cat is on the mat.

Some dogs are blue.

My name is Alfred.

In each of these statements, we have a subject term ('The cat', 'Some dogs', 'My name') to which is attached a predicate ('is on the mat', 'are blue', 'is Alfred'). Note, then, that one and the same logical form is present in each of these three statements. We have here an instance of one thing, a logical structure, attaching to three different things – the particular words of the three statements.

Kant's concept of self is the concept of a similar kind of thing. The "I think" may be thought of as a logical form.¹² It confers on each experience-content the same logical form, namely, the "I think" or *experience-by-me* form. If this form is indeed ideal, then it is possible that in each case it is one and the same form, uniting multiple kinds of experiential content under a single subject of experience. It is in this sense that we may identify Kant's concept of self as the concept of a rule of transcendental logic unifying conscious experience under a single subject.

Ask Yourself

1. What is the *a priori* and how is it distinct from the *a posteriori*?
2. To what extent does Kant accept Hume's conclusions, and to what extent not?
3. What does Kant think that space and time are, exactly?
4. By what means does Kant understand the contents of conscious experience to be unified?

¹² To be precise, Kant's "I think" is not simply a rule of logic, but a rule of transcendental logic. Logical form is something that may be found in statements whether they are entertained by a mind or not. Transcendental logic is the form of logic particular to the human mind.