

Kant Study Guide I

PHIL410

Prefaces and Introduction

The synthetic a priori

Reading: 1-12, 15-24 in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (Hackett abridged edition)

Ultimate question: Does Kant vindicate empirical knowledge? Does Kant vindicate metaphysics?

Terminological Notes:

- **On the word 'cognition':** Our translator, Pluhar, renders the German '*erkenntnis*' as 'cognition' and '*wissen*' as 'knowledge.' There is dispute among Kant scholars as to the best translation of '*erkenntnis*,' some opting for what is, in English, a more natural rendition, 'knowledge.' There is, however, an important distinction between cognition and knowledge, as understood by Kant, which renders Pluhar's decision a good one: in cognition, we have a mental grasp of something we think of as distinct from us, an object; in knowledge, we have *correct* understanding of that thing. In the *Critique*, Kant's primary task is to describe how cognition might occur, since it is a prior condition of knowledge. (We must have some mental grasp or representation of a reality in order to represent that reality correctly.)
- The **analytic/synthetic** distinction is a distinction in the *logical structure* of a judgment (proposition). This has to do with how the concepts forming the judgment are logically related to each other. 'The bachelor is unmarried' is an analytic judgment inasmuch as 'unmarried' is "part" of the concept of 'bachelor.' 'The ball is red' is a synthetic judgment, inasmuch as neither the concept of *ball* nor that of *red* is logically "contained" in the other.
- The **a priori/a posteriori** distinction is a distinction in the *epistemic source* of a judgment – i.e., a distinction in how we come to know (or cognize) the judgment. Judgments that we can know prior to (or independent of) sense information are known (cognized) *a priori*. Judgments that can be made only after (i.e., with) sense information are *a posteriori*. We can use the same terminology of ideas, speaking now of their source relative to sense information.
- The **necessary/contingent** distinction is a distinction in what is called *truth modality*: a proposition is necessary (i.e., necessarily true) if it cannot be false; a proposition is contingent if it is not necessary (i.e., the proposition could, if true, be false and, if false, could be true).
- The **universal/particular** distinction is a distinction in the *scope* of a proposition or judgment: universal judgments apply to every member of some class; particular judgments apply to only some members of some class. Thus, for example, 'All pigs have tails' is a universal judgment. 'Some pigs have tails' is a particular judgment, as is 'John has a tail.' (Propositions of this latter sort, about a single thing, are also called *singular propositions* or *singular judgments*.)

- The terms **judgment** and **proposition** may be used interchangeably, for the most part. (In making a judgment, one asserts the truth of some proposition.) However, Kant will use the term ‘judgment’ to refer to a specific activity of mind, the combination of subject and predicate to form a determinate thought. Kant will have much to say concerning the structure (logic) of judgments (as of the propositions, then, that they express).
- The term **transcendental** means “beyond that which is contained in experience.” For Kant, certain terms have ordinary empirical cognitive content, such as ‘white’ and ‘square’ and ‘donkey’. Others go beyond this ordinary level of sensible content and constitute the mental framework within which terms like ‘white’ and ‘donkey’ have meaning. These include terms like *space, time, cause, object, all, nothing, if*, and others. (Consider: do you ever *see* space itself? Or is space simply that in which you see things that are square and white?)
- **Intuition, conception, and forms of representation:** Forms of representation are the means by which humans depict reality, mentally. Kant counts two such means, intuition and conception. Intuition may roughly be said to designate sensation; strictly speaking, however, we must distinguish between the “data” of sense per se, in its various forms (sights, sounds, etc.) and the more basic capacity to experience such data as the representation of a world of objects (intuition). Taken together, Kant will speak of an “intuitive manifold.” ‘Conception’, on the other hand, refers to our discursive (verbalizable) means of thinking of reality, and includes both empirical conception (e.g., ‘brown’, ‘cow’, and ‘space’) as well as “pure” concepts such as “real”, “necessarily”, and “not”.

Preface, First Edition (pp. 1-3)

1. What problem for Reason (the “combat arena” of metaphysics) is identified by Kant here?
2. What is a “critique of pure reason,” and why is it needed?
3. Why does Kant think that such a critique amounts to a determination whether metaphysics is possible?

Preface, Second Edition (pp. 4-12)

Central Question: How does Kant’s proposed “critical philosophy” differ from the philosophy of Descartes? I.e., what is it about traditional metaphysics that Kant thinks defeats its purpose, and how does he propose to change that?

Subsidiary questions:

1. What conditions must a study meet in order to be classified as a Science, according to Kant?
2. What is Kant talking about when he says, at Bx, that reason in the sciences implies some form of *a priori* judgment (“cognizing”)?
Note: The remainder of the Bx page expresses the idea that wherever we have reason, we have some *a priori* contribution to the objects of our thought. I.e., something in what we are thinking about (e.g., triangles, material objects) contains elements that derive *not from experience*, but from the mind.
3. What change in thought makes mathematics a true science, according to Kant?

4. What insight is it that made natural science possible, according to Kant? (I.e., what does it mean to say, at Bxiii, that “reason has insight only into what it itself produces”?)
5. At Bxvi, Kant says that the assumption that our cognition must conform to objects has led *a priori* knowledge of those objects nowhere. Why is that? And what reversal does he propose in order to arrive at *a priori* knowledge of objects? [Think about whether this makes sense to you; it may not, at first.]
6. What will be the result, for metaphysics, of “making objects conform to our cognition”? (See Bxviii-xix.)
7. Why does Kant worry, at Bxix-xx, that his new style of metaphysics will confine our knowledge to the *appearances* of things, never extending to those things as they are in themselves? What is Kant’s opinion of this outcome?
8. What expansion beyond the bounds of possible experience does Kant allow for reason, at Bxxi?
9. Copernicus’ revolution in astronomy was to reorient our understanding of celestial motion from *in the sun* to *in us*. In what respect does Kant intend a similar revolution in his treatment of our knowledge of the world? (See Bxxii, n5.)
10. What is the difference, as understood by Kant, between thinking of a thing in itself, on the one hand, and – what he maintains to be impossible – cognizing a thing in itself? (Bxxvi-xxvii)

Introduction, Second Edition (pp. 15-24)

Central Question: What is the synthetic a priori and what is its role in human knowledge?

Subsidiary questions:

1. What does Kant mean when he states that experience may include an element of *a priori* cognition? (B1-2)
2. What is the difference, as Kant uses these terms, between a pure and an impure *a priori* cognition? (B3)
3. Only *a priori* judgments can be *necessary* (*A must be B*) and *universal* (*All A’s are B*). I.e., we do not learn the necessity or universality of judgments from experience. Yet some judgments are both synthetic and known *a priori*. E.g., every event has a cause. What problem do such judgments raise, according to Kant? (A9/B13-A10/B14)
4. Why does Kant maintain that all mathematical and geometrical judgments are synthetic? Does this mean that such judgments are learned from experience? (B14-16)
5. What is the significance of Kant’s claim that “ALL THEORETICAL SCIENCES OF REASON CONTAIN SYNTHETIC A PRIORI JUDGMENTS AS PRINCIPLES,” where the skeptical problems raised by Descartes are concerned? (Heading Title V, p. 18)
6. How does Kant propose to advance our knowledge in Metaphysics? (B18)
7. Why does Kant identify as the central problem of pure reason the question ‘How are synthetic judgments possible *a priori*?’ (B19 and following)

8. Where, according to Kant, did Hume's understanding of the problem of reason fall short? (B19-20)
9. Why does Kant think that the critique of pure reason will lead to science (of metaphysics) and, thus, enable us to avoid skepticism? What problems have previous attempts at metaphysics led to? (B22-24)
10. What is the critique of pure reason? What is its expected result? (B24-5)
11. What is "transcendental philosophy" as Kant uses that expression? (A12/B25)
12. What are the two stems of human cognition, as Kant identifies them? (A15/B29-B30)

Some Further Notes:

The Copernican Revolution

- Since the time of Bacon, Copernicus, Newton et al, we see tremendous success in the sciences: why?
- The application of strict rational guidelines to scientific enquiry and theory-construction yields progress; i.e., the concept of Natural Law: rational principles governing nature and, at the same time, making nature intelligible to us.
- A metaphor for this movement: Copernicus' adjusting the world so as to fit the data. (I.e., representing the apparently motionless earth as in motion about the apparently moving sun.)
- Kant and metaphysics: a similar move: if intuition (i.e., sensibility) must conform to the character of objects, we can have no a priori knowledge of them; but if the character of objects (as objects of sense – i.e., appearances) conforms to human intuition, then it becomes possible to explain that knowledge.

Kant's Critical Philosophy

"[E]verything intuited in space or time, and hence all objects of any experience possible for us, are nothing but appearances. I.e., they are mere presentations that – in the way in which they are presented, viz., as extended beings, or as series of changes – have no independent existence outside our thoughts. This doctrinal system I call *transcendental idealism*. The realist in the transcendental meaning of this term turns these modifications of our sensibility into things subsisting in themselves, and hence turns *mere presentations* into things in themselves." (A490-491/B518-519)

Transcendental Realism: a metaphilosophical view according to which the proper objects of empirical knowledge are things in themselves – i.e., empirical objects are objective, mind-independent entities.

Transcendental Idealism: a metaphilosophical view according to which the proper objects of empirical knowledge are objects insofar as they conform to the *a priori* conditions of human thought and sensibility – i.e., empirical objects are not wholly mind-independent.

These are “metaphilosophical” views in the sense that they are about how philosophy should be conducted; strictly speaking, neither is an ontology or an epistemology, though both entail both, as we shall see.

Kant maintains that these two views are exhaustive and mutually exclusive; see *Antinomies*.

Empirical Reality: the public, intersubjectively accessible, spatiotemporally ordered realm of human experience; the external world as ordinarily conceived; investigated by physics, biology, etc.

Appearance: a potential object of experience; how a thing in itself appears to a conscious human being.

The Synthetic A Priori

Examples:

- The interior angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees.
- $5 + 7 = 12$
- The law of gravity: $F = g(m_1m_2/r^2)$
- Every event has a cause.

Their features:

- Synthetic: the predicate is not contained in the subject.
- *A priori*: we can know the proposition to be true without referring to experience.
- Necessary: it is not possible that the claim be false.
- Universal: the proposition applies to everything (i.e., everything included in the class expressed in the subject).

Kant presupposes that many such judgments are, indeed, true. The question is: How can we have such knowledge?

Kant: If Transcendental Realism is true, then we cannot know any synthetic a priori propositions to be true. I.e., we cannot know any necessary, universal features of empirical reality (natural laws, universal truths), and certainly cannot know them *a priori*. But we do.

So: Postulate Transcendental Idealism.

Kant will argue that Transcendental Idealism is true on the basis of contradictions implied by Transcendental Realism (see *Antinomies*), and some confirmation of the view is to be had from the Transcendental Aesthetic and from the Analogies of Experience.