

8 Experience and Understanding: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*^{*}

The history of the theory of knowledge is sometimes presented as a battle between two opposing camps of philosophers – *empiricists* (from the Greek, *empeiria*, ‘experience’), who believe sensory experience is the basis of all knowledge, and *rationalists* (from the Latin, *ratio*, ‘reason’), who believe the inner light of reason enables us to acquire knowledge that is independent of experience. The contrast can be overdone, and it easily leads to oversimplifications; but we can, none the less, discern empiricist elements in the above extracts from Aristotle and Locke, while the selections from Plato and Descartes reveal a distrust of the senses that is characteristic of the ‘rationalist’ outlook. Leibniz, as the above extract (no. 6) shows, stressed the importance of sensory stimulus for the mind, but nevertheless insisted on the innateness of a ‘host of objects of our intellectual ideas’. In his monumental work the *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781, the celebrated German philosopher Immanuel Kant attempted to resolve some of these tensions.

Kant’s views on knowledge were strongly influenced by David Hume, whom he credited with having roused him from his ‘dogmatic slumbers’. Kant’s fundamental thesis is that the only possible objects of human knowledge are phenomena – the empirically observable objects of the world around us. ‘Nothing is really given us,’ he argued, ‘except perception and the empirical advance from this to other possible perceptions.’¹ He is thus deeply suspicious of the claims of ‘rationalist’ philosophers of knowledge to describe a reality

going wholly beyond the observable world. But he is equally critical of Locke’s thesis that knowledge arises from the ‘empty cabinet’ of the mind being furnished with sense impressions. As he puts it at the start of the extracts quoted below, ‘although all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience’. According to Kant, the mind, in experiencing the world, necessarily interprets it or processes it in terms of a certain structure: it comes to the world already armed with ‘concepts of the understanding’. These concepts are described by Kant as *a priori*, meaning prior to, or independent of, experience. But Kant takes a crucially different route from previous innatists who had suggested that the mind was simply endowed (by God, as Descartes maintained, or from a previous existence, as Plato had it) with a range of nonempirical concepts and truths. Instead, Kant argues that all the concepts of the understanding are derived from certain fundamental categories which are *presupposed* by experience. Categories such as the categories of substance and causality are fundamental preconditions for our being able to experience the world at all. Kant thus offers a compromise between, or rather a synthesis of, empiricist and rationalist approaches to knowledge. Knowledge involves a kind of fusion of ‘intuitions’ (sensory representations) on the one hand, and the concepts of the understanding on the other. As he puts it below, in what has become a much-quoted slogan, ‘thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind’.



The distinction between pure and empirical knowledge

There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. For how would our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action unless the objects affecting our senses produced representations, and also aroused the activity of our understanding

^{*} Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781; 2nd edn 1787]. Trans. N. Kemp Smith (2nd edn, London: Macmillan, 1933); with minor modifications. The extracts printed here are from the Introduction, Sections 1 and 2 (B1–5); the ‘Transcendental Logic’, Section 1 (B74–5); and from the ‘Transcendental Analytic’, Bk I, ch. 2 (‘Transition to the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories’), B124–6.

¹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A493, B521.

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to compare these representations? How, furthermore, could our knowledge be awakened unless our understanding, by combining or separating these representations, worked up the raw material of the sensible impressions into that knowledge of objects which is called experience? In the order of time, therefore, we have no knowledge antecedent to experience, and with experience all our knowledge begins.

But though all our knowledge *begins* with experience, it does not follow that it all *arises out of* experience. For it may well be that even our empirical knowledge is made up of what we receive through impressions, and of what our own faculty of knowledge supplies from itself (sensible impressions serving merely as the occasion). If our faculty of knowledge makes any such addition, it may be that we are not in a position to distinguish it from the raw material until with long-practised attention we have become skilled to do so.

This then is a question which at least calls for further examination, and does not permit any off-hand answer: is there any knowledge that is in this way independent of experience, and even of all impressions of the senses? Such knowledge is called *a priori* and is distinguished from the *empirical*, which has its sources *a posteriori* (that is, in experience).

The expression *a priori* does not however indicate precisely enough the full meaning of our question. For it has been customary to say, even of much knowledge that is derived from empirical sources, that we have it, or are capable of having it, *a priori*; what this is taken to mean is that we do not derive it immediately from experience, but from a universal rule – a rule which is itself borrowed from experience. Thus we might say of a man who undermined the foundations of a house that he might have known *a priori* that it would fall (that is, he need not have waited for the experience of its actually falling). But still he could not know this completely *a priori*. For he had first to learn through experience that bodies are heavy, and therefore fall when their supports are withdrawn.

In what follows, therefore, we shall understand by *a priori* knowledge not knowledge independent of this or that experience, but knowledge absolutely independent of all experience. Opposed to it is empirical knowledge, which is knowledge possible only *a posteriori* (that is, through experience). *A priori* modes of knowledge are called 'pure' when there is no admixture of anything empirical. Thus, for instance, the proposition 'every change has a cause', although an *a priori* proposition, is not a pure proposition, since 'alteration' is a concept which can be derived only from experience.

We are in possession of certain modes of *a priori* knowledge, and even the common understanding is never without them

What we require here is a criterion by which to distinguish with certainty between pure and empirical knowledge. Experience teaches us that a thing is so and so, but not that it cannot be otherwise. First, then, if we have a proposition which is thought of as *necessary*, it is an *a priori* judgement; and if in addition it is not derived from any proposition except one also having the validity of a necessary judgement, it is an absolutely *a priori* judgement. Secondly, experience never confers on its judgements true or strict, but only assumed and comparative universality, through induction.¹

¹ See below, Part VII, extract 5.

We can properly only say, therefore, that so far as we have hitherto observed there is no exception to this or that rule. If, then, a judgement is thought with strict universality, in such a manner that no exception is allowed as possible, it is not derived from experience, but is valid absolutely *a priori*. Empirical universality, by contrast, is only an arbitrary extension of a validity holding in *most* cases to one which holds in all (for instance, in the proposition 'all bodies are heavy'). When, on the other hand, strict universality is essential to a judgement, this involves a special source of knowledge, namely a faculty of *a priori* knowledge. Necessity and strict universality are thus sure criteria of *a priori* knowledge, and are inseparable from each other...

Now it is easy to show that there are actually in human knowledge judgements which are necessary and in the strictest sense universal, and which are therefore pure *a priori* judgements. If an example from the sciences is asked for, we have only to look to any of the propositions of mathematics. If we seek an example from the understanding in its quite ordinary employment, the proposition 'every change *must* have a cause' will serve our purpose. Here the very concept of a cause so manifestly contains the concept of necessary connection with an effect, and of the strict universality of this rule, that the concept would be altogether lost if we tried to derive it (as Hume did)¹ from a repeated association of that which happens with that which precedes... Even without appealing to such examples, it is possible to show that pure *a priori* principles are indispensable for the possibility of experience, and so to prove their existence *a priori*. For how could experience get its certainty if all the rules whereby it proceeds were always themselves empirical and therefore contingent? Such rules could hardly be regarded as first principles...

The idea of a transcendental logic

Our knowledge springs from two fundamental sources of the mind; the first is the capacity of receiving representations (the ability to receive impressions), the second is the power to know an object through these representations (spontaneity in the production of concepts). Through the first, an object is *given* to us; through the second, the object is *thought* in relation to that representation... Intuition and concepts constitute, therefore, the elements of all our knowledge, so that neither concepts without an intuition in some way corresponding to them, nor intuitions without concepts, can yield knowledge. Both may be either pure or empirical. When they contain sensation (which presupposes the actual presence of the object) they are empirical. When there is no mingling of sensation with the representation, they are pure. Sensation may be called the *material* of sensible knowledge. Pure intuition, therefore, contains only the *form* under which something is intuited; the pure concept only the form of an object in general. Pure intuitions or pure concepts are possible only *a priori*; empirical intuitions and empirical concepts only *a posteriori*.

If the *receptivity* of our mind, its power of receiving representations in so far as it is in any way affected, is to be called 'sensibility', then the mind's power of producing representations from itself, the *spontaneity* of knowledge, should be called 'understanding'. Our nature is so constituted that our intuitions can never be other than

¹ See below, Part VII, extract 6.

sensible; that is, it comes from the faculty, on the other hand, of the understanding. To think of the other. Without sensible intuition, no object would be thought. Concepts are blind. It is only by adding the object to the concept, to bring them under the concept's functions. The understanding is brought through their union...

Transition to the transcendental logic

... There are only two sources of first intuition, through which the concept (corresponding to the object) is evident that the first principle is *a priori* in the mind and that it agrees with this formal principle, that is, be empirically derived. Concepts do not also arise just intuited, but through the knowledge of objects, presupposing them in advance. Now all experience depends on the through which something is intuited. Concepts of objects are conditions. The object is given on the fact that (so far as the object is) that experience becomes possible, since only

9 From Sensibility to Understanding Georg Hegel

In standard courses on the history of the 'analytic' tradition which have been common in Anglo-American philosophy, it is the custom to move swiftly to the beginning of the twentieth century, with only the

* G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, trans. J. B. Baillie, Part I, II, III, and Section

sensible; that is, it contains only the mode in which we are affected by objects. The faculty, on the other hand, which enables us to *think* the object of sensible intuition is the understanding. To neither of these powers may a preference be given over the other. Without sensibility, no object would be given to us; without understanding, no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind. It is therefore just as necessary to make our concepts sensible, that is, to add the object to them in intuition, as to make our intuitions intelligible, that is to bring them under concepts. These two powers or capacities cannot exchange their functions. The understanding can intuit nothing, the senses can think nothing. Only through their union can knowledge arise...

Transition to the transcendental deduction of the categories

... There are only two conditions under which the knowledge of an object is possible, first *intuition*, through which it is given, though only as appearance; and second, the *concept* (corresponding to this intuition) through which an object is thought. It is evident that the first condition, whereby objects can be intuited, does actually lie *a priori* in the mind as the formal ground of the objects. All appearances necessarily agree with this formal condition of sensibility, since only through it can they appear, that is, be empirically intuited and given. The question now arises whether *a priori* concepts do not also serve as antecedent conditions, needed if anything can be, not just intuited, but thought of as an object in general. In that case, all empirical knowledge of objects would necessarily conform to such concepts, because only by presupposing them in this way is anything capable of being an object of experience. Now all experience does indeed contain, in addition to the intuition of the senses through which something is given, a *concept* of an object as thereby given or appearing. Concepts of objects in general thus underlie all empirical knowledge as its *a priori* conditions. The objective validity of the categories as *a priori* concepts rests, therefore, on the fact that (so far as the form of thought is concerned) it is only through them that experience becomes possible. They relate of necessity and *a priori* to the objects of experience, since only by means of them can any object of experience be thought.

9 From Sense-certainty to Self-consciousness: Georg Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit**

In standard courses on the theory of knowledge in the 'analytic' tradition which today dominates Anglo-American philosophy, it has often been the custom to move swiftly on from Kant to the twentieth century, with only the briefest of passing

references to what happened in between. The principal casualty of such an approach is the Hegelian movement, which in fact exerted an enormous influence even in Britain and America during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Georg

* G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [1807], English version adapted from Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (London: Sonnenschein, 1910), extracts from Preface, Introduction, Section A, Parts I, II, III, and Section B, Part IV (pp. 21–3, 25, 90–1, 104–5, 110–11, 113–14, 125–6, 129, 164–5).