

IMMANUEL KANT CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON (1781): AN OVERVIEW

Kant represents, many argue, the culmination of early modern philosophy and the beginning of philosophy as the discipline we know today. The importance of Kant's legacy is impossible to underestimate: all philosophy since Kant is justly described as post-Kantian, though the form it has taken in non-English speaking countries such as France and Germany is arguably quite different from that which predominates in Anglophone countries such as the UK and the USA. Indeed, this difference in Kant's reception has resulted in a split in contemporary philosophy between the so-called Analytic philosophy which prevails in English-speaking countries and the so-called Continental philosophy which has predominated in non-English speaking countries.

The great achievement of Kant's so-called *transcendental* philosophy is, it is often said, to have synthesised the respective points of view of empiricism and rationalism. Inspired in particular by the work of an empiricist named David Hume, whose ideas he strove at all costs to disprove, Kant believed that he succeeded in solving the precise nature of the relationship which exists between mind and world. He rejects both the *innate* model of mind and the *idealist* model of knowledge advanced by Rationalists such as Descartes. He rejects, in other words, the view that because our ideas are entirely innate, rather than acquired, our mind is completely pre-given, as well as the concomitant view that our mind shapes what we find in the world. He rejects, too, the *constructivist* model of mind and the *materialist* model of knowledge espoused by Empiricists such as Locke. That is, he rejects the belief that our consciousness, which is a *tabula rasa* prior to experience, is acquired rather than pre-given and merely reflects or corresponds to the world which it perceives. For Kant, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. His basic contention is that we have no access to the world itself apart from the shaping frameworks imposed on it by the human mind. This shaping is accomplished by those innate features of the mind which are the pre-conditions for human experience of reality. The way in which the mind is structured provides several so-called *a priori forms* for synthesising, collating and interpreting the flux of sensations which humans experience and which is the source of our knowledge of the external world (Locke and many of his heirs preferred the term *associating* or *combining* in this regard). In this way, an arguably artificial order (artificial in the sense of not originating in the things themselves but imposed by humans) is imposed on the flux of natural sensations. It is in this way that we make sense of or render intelligible the perceived world by imposing on the flux of experience a rational order which may not be immanent in the things or events themselves. From this point of view, the mind is not a passive recipient of sense-impressions but an active agent ordering the universe in pre-conditioned ways. Kant's heirs have all adopted what many term a *conventionalist* model of knowledge: our knowledge of the things themselves is always already shaped through certain filters, as it were, rules or conventions for making sense of reality. However, the ordering capabilities of the mind could not be brought to bear unless there is a world of physical things for it to operate on. It is the material objects of this physical world which impinge on our senses, furnishing the sensations which then must be conceptually ordered through those categories which inhere *a priori* in the mind.

Several crucial questions subsequently arise. What exactly are these filters, forms, or conditions through which the external world is not only apprehended but conceptually ordered? Is their source physical or non-physical? That is, are they the product of the physical structure of the brain and related material factors (e.g. the nature of language) or of some non-material source (a soul, as it were)? Though many philosophers in the nineteenth century, for example, the so-called German Idealists, thought the latter correct, most philosophers today believe that the former is correct: various material factors (mainly the nature of the brain and of language) are responsible for how we view things. Furthermore, to what degree is it that only our *perceptions* of the world are shaped by these forms (the world itself remaining unaffected thereby) and to what degree is the world itself a product of the mind? In other words, do our thoughts, even though pre-formed in certain ways, have no effect upon reality *per se* (materialism) or does mind prevail over matter (idealism)? Again, though the German idealists thought the latter correct (as indicated by their very name), most philosophers today think that the former is correct: our thoughts have little or no effect on the world of things to which they are merely a response, rather than a source. Thirdly, to what extent is it possible to break through the lens of the mind to see reality as it really is independent of the forms and categories imposed by the mind? Some believe that this is a fruitless task (we are hopelessly mired in the categories furnished by language which shape how we view the world) while

others, such as phenomenologists, think that it is in fact possible.

Kant's Epistemology:

Kant begins by arguing that the goal of philosophy is to bring to light the assumptions implicit in our experience of the world. He defines experience as the sum of all cognitions (i.e. all our knowledge of various things) wherein objects are given to us (i.e. objects present themselves to our conscious awareness). The question consequently arises: what is knowledge? Does it arise from our experience of things or does our experience of things derive from the ideas which we have? In other words, do our ideas merely reflect the world or do ideas in fact shape the world? Kant contends that 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 what our own faculty of knowledge (sensible impressions serving merely as the occasion) supplies from itself. 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 practice of attention we have become skilled in separating it. (B1)

In other words, like Locke, Kant is of the view that our *simple* ideas (or *conceptions*) about the world (e.g. the idea of heat) may derive from our physical sensations or *perceptions* (e.g. the sensation of being burnt). In other words, our ideas are at least to some degree stimulated by contact with the physical world (e.g. with boiling water). For Locke, our sensations, which are derived from our contact with the physical world, become the content of our thoughts or ideas. However, Kant argues that all our knowledge cannot be reduced to this. Knowledge is empirical only at a most basic level. *Complex* ideas (e.g. conclusions drawn about our sensations, such as stay away from boiling water) are not formed in some simplistic way by merely adding (or combining or associating, as Locke puts it) one *simple* idea (e.g. water boils) to another (e.g. boiling water burns). Complex ideas are formed, rather, by a process of synthesis: one perception (e.g. boiling water fell on me) is linked to another (e.g. I felt an unpleasant sensation) by the attribution of relationships (e.g. the former event is the *cause* of the latter).

Distinguishing between *intuition* (Aristotle's term for the direct apprehension or *perception* of the things themselves) and *understanding* (Kant's term for the *conceptions* of the relations linking one perception to another), between sensation and knowledge, Kant set himself the task of identifying those conceptual additions supplied by our faculty of knowledge (what he calls elsewhere our synthesising faculty) to the simple ideas derived from our sensible impressions or perceptions of the external world. The question is: what is the nature of these conceptual additions? Kant thinks of the difference between sensation and concept in terms of content and form: empirical sensations are the content of our thoughts, while concepts are the form of our thoughts: Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind (B75).

The question consequently arises: how exactly can we separate the conceptual form of our thoughts from their sensational content in order to arrive at an unmistakable apprehension of the thing-in-itself? This can be accomplished in two steps, he suggested. Firstly, through what he called the *Transcendental Aesthetic* by which we segregate from sensibility everything that belongs to sensation, so that nothing will remain . . . but the mere form of appearances (74). The goal here is to apprehend the elementary forms taken by all elements of the physical world and which shape how they are given to us in perception (how they appear). By form, Kant is not referring to the conceptual forms which the human mind subsequently imposes on things but the way in which objects initially appear or present themselves to our minds. All objects appear in two pure forms--space and time (74-75). What Kant terms the *phenomenal* world is divided into objects which are necessarily extended (that is, they occupy a certain spatial location) and events which occur for a certain duration of time and in chronological sequence. But, confined as it is to the realm of perception, this undertaking only scratches the surface of knowledge and necessitates a second step which he calls the *Transcendental Logic* by which we isolate the understanding and we select from our cognition merely the part of thought that has its origins solely in the understanding (115). Kant's goal here is to identify the basic principles by which we conceptually order the physical world and because of which humans have a predisposition to think in certain ways. The outcome is this: If we abstract from all content of judgement as such and pay attention to the mere form of understanding in it then we find that the function of thought in judgement can be brought under four

headings (123). Kant lists four sets of three a priori concepts which shape our understanding of the objects and events which we intuit through our senses but which we transform via our synthesising faculty. For Kant, these categories are not merely arbitrary or conventional ways of viewing things. Rather, Kant argues, it is the only system there is. This is *the* nature of human consciousness. The categories constitute the logical conditions of *all* possible conscious experience of the world.

There is an inextricable link between intuition and understanding, perception and conception, Kant reminds us: the use of this pure cognition rests on the condition . . . that objects to which it can be applied are given to us in intuition (115). Kant argues that without objects to perceive, there would be no knowledge of these objects. Kant's point is that the understanding cannot intuit anything, and the senses cannot think anything. . . . Only from their union can cognition arise (107). An important question consequently arises: what is the object of knowledge? What is it that humans know? The object of knowledge cannot be the perceptions themselves which may be the content of our thoughts but are the object of the senses. In other words, we may perceive sensations but when we acquire knowledge of them, we impose conceptual categories. Nor can the object of knowledge be these conceptual categories which produce knowledge by imposing relationships on the things perceived and are thus not knowable in themselves. The object of knowledge exists, rather, at the intersection of the perceptions and the conceptions, content and form. Knowledge is the fusion of perception and conception. Between perceptions and conceptions, there exists intermediaries which Kant terms *schemata* that are homogeneous with the category . . . and with the appearance (B177) but which are reducible to neither. Cognitive schemata are consciously articulable in the form of general propositions or principles such as: All alterations take place in conformity with the law of the connection of cause and effect (B235). These kinds of conclusions are what we can know, these are the objects of our knowledge, as opposed to either the perceptions (these are the content of our thoughts) or the categories which we impose on our perceptions (these are the form of our thoughts).

It ought to be clear from the foregoing that Kant offers a critique of both the Rationalist and the Empiricist strands of early modern philosophy. While Descartes believed that he had proved that certain thoughts (e.g. concerning the existence of God or the self) are a priori and not the product of experience, Kant was of the view that it is not the *content* of our thoughts but their *form* which is a priori. While Locke thought of the contents of the mind as determined by the external world, Kant believed that it was the other way around: the contents of the world are determined by the mind. For Kant, the world, at least as we know it, is the product of the work the mind does in shaping the flux of sensations, something we do unconsciously and according to certain a priori rules. Through the categories of the understanding, humans turn perceptions (by which objects are reported by the physical senses) into conceptions (conclusions about the perceptions in question) and in this way order an empirical world of objects (things that occupy a particular space) and events (things which occur for a particular duration of time) by imposing relationships between these (e.g. a cause is often thought to link one event with another). If we can all agree on the nature of the world it is not because we have access to the things in themselves but because we share the forms by which the things we perceive are synthesised.

Kant's Philosophy of Mind the Transcendental Self:

Kant concludes that our knowledge of the world is partly derived from and partly imposed on things. This demonstrates, he believed, the existence of two dimensions or parts to the human mind or self. There is a *phenomenal* self (or at least a phenomenal part of the self) which is that part of the mind which deals with perceptions. (What Kant calls phenomena what we would call today phenomena are the things of this world.) This is the mind of which Locke speaks, the mind as a product of experience. However, there is also a *noumenal* or *transcendental* self (or at least a transcendental part of the self) which is the source of the conceptual categories themselves. (Noumena are things not of this world.) This is the mind of which Descartes speaks, the self as the source of experience. (For Kant, something is transcendental if it is necessary for experience but not a product of experience.) Without it, no ordered thought, no assimilation of human experience, would be possible.

The Kantian Legacy:

The legacy bequeathed by Kant to contemporary thought is impossible to underestimate. As mentioned earlier, Kant has been interpreted differently by philosophers in the English-speaking world and on the

Continent as a result of which, broadly-speaking, there are arguably two different trends in contemporary philosophy. In the Anglophone tradition where (British) empiricism is emphasised, the stress has been on understanding the conceptual frameworks (such as language) which shape our knowledge in order to penetrate beneath them and attain to the things in themselves. The goal is objectivity in all spheres of activity, whether this be scientific research or criticism of the arts. Nineteenth century English thinkers like Matthew Arnold, Modernists like Eliot or New Critics like Ransom all stressed the importance of objectivity in criticism. This is the emphasis which we will pursue for the remainder of this course. The Continental tradition, on the other hand, in which rationalism has remained a more potent force, has acknowledged that it may be impossible to know anything outside of the conceptual or theoretical frameworks that shape knowledge. As a result of this, objectivity, whether in scientific research or criticism of the arts, may be an illusion. In the nineteenth century, on the Continent, Kant's thought was initially taken in an idealist direction by the aptly named German Idealists (e.g. Hegel) and a subjective direction in the arts by the Romantics and later in a materialist direction by Existentialists, Marxists and Psychoanalysts. We pursue this emphasis in other courses.