Kant’s Question: How is synthetic a priori knowledge possible?

(Note: synthetic statements are statements whose negations are not logically contradictory. Synthetic statements are not “true by definition,” but purport to say something substantive (non-trivial) about how the world is.

We have a priori knowledge of a statement when we do not need to consult sense experience to justify our belief that the statement is true. We have a posteriori knowledge of a statement if we do need to consult sense experience to justify our belief that the statement is true.

According to Kant, one thing that Hume has correctly shown is that we do not have a posteriori knowledge of any claim that involves either necessity or universality, e.g., that when billiard ball B hits billiard ball A, A necessarily moves; or that all events have causes (universality). Kant agrees with Hume that sense experience can only show us that something did happen (not that it happened necessarily) and that experience can never justify any claim purported to be universally true, since we have not experienced everything. So, Kant thinks that any claim that purports to be necessarily true or universally true must be known a priori, if known at all.

Analytic statements (if true) are necessarily true, so they must be known a priori. The disagreement between Kant and Hume concerns whether or not we have a priori knowledge of any synthetic statements. Hume did not see how this could be possible. Kant’s goal is to explain how it could be possible.

Finally, metaphysical knowledge,—if we have any,—would be synthetic a priori knowledge—non-trivial knowledge about reality that can be justified without appeal to sense experience. So, if Kant can show how synthetic a priori knowledge is possible, he will have shown how metaphysical knowledge is possible. But not all synthetic a priori knowledge is metaphysical. The claims of arithmetic and geometry are synthetic a priori, but not metaphysical.)

Kant’s answer: Synthetic a priori knowledge is possible because all knowledge is only of appearances (which must conform to our modes of experience) and not of independently real things in themselves (which are independent of our modes of experience). This claim, that we know only appearances and not things in themselves, is known as Kant’s transcendental idealism. So Kant’s claim is that if in experience we knew things as they were in themselves, then Hume would be correct, and there could be no synthetic a priori knowledge. But since we know instead only appearances (i.e., how things appear to us), and since how things appear to us must conform to our subjective modes of experience, we can know in advance of experience that these experiences will (necessarily and universally) conform to the only ways in which we could possibly know or experience objects. So, synthetic a priori knowledge is possible, but only because certain aspects of our experience of objects reflects something that we (i.e., our mind’s) contribute to that
experience, and has nothing to do with how objects are independently of being experienced.

(This is not to say that the object doesn’t likewise contribute something to our experience of it. Rather, what the object contributes can’t be known a priori.)

Now, the fundamental question in understanding Kant is understanding what he means when he says that we know only appearances and not things in themselves (that is, in understanding what transcendental idealism really means). On some readings of Kant (not mine) appearances are essentially just collections of ideas that exist only in the mind. So, on this reading, Kant’s view turns out to be much like Locke’s—i.e., that we directly experience only things that exist in our minds, and merely infer the existence of a mind-independent reality that causes those appearances in our minds. But on this view, Kant is subject to the same criticisms as is Locke. If Locke’s view “collapses” into Berkeleian idealism, then so would Kant’s.

But this is a misunderstanding of Kant. When Kant says that we know only appearances and not things in themselves, he does not mean that the objects of experience are mind-dependent (that would lead to Berkeley or Hume). Rather, he means that the experience of objects is (partly) mind-dependent. That is, transcendental idealism (on this reading) is not the view that the objects that we perceive are mind-independent, but instead the view that everything that we can know about them must conform to our subjective modes of experience. That is, Kant is not claiming that the objects of experience are different from what we initially thought (i.e., that they are mind-dependent objects rather than mind-independent objects), but rather that the experience of objects is different from what we previously thought (i.e., we do not know-as-they-are objects, but instead only know-as-they-appear objects).

Now, according to Kant, knowledge of an object must always have a “sensible” aspect and a conceptual aspect. Kant believes that in each case, there is a subjective contribution that can be known a priori. Space and time, Kant says, are the pure forms of sensible intuition. That is, space and time are not parts of reality in itself, but are simply due to the ways that we organize the sensory “data” that we receive in sense experience. So, in Kant’s language, space and time are transcendentally ideal.

But there is another subjective contribution to experience. Once we have organized the sensory data into a spatio-temporal array, we must still interpret it as an experience of objects. Kant thinks that there are rules for how we must necessarily do this interpreting. These rules lie “in us” and are necessary for the possibility of any experience. These are what are known as the “Categories of the Understanding.” Their origins, Kant thinks, are in (what you might call) the categories of judgments, i.e., of statements or propositions. Kant claims that all experience involves judgment (i.e., “judging” that this thing is a cup, for example). So, the forms of experience will mirror the forms of judgments. And consequently, knowledge of the necessary forms of judgments (i.e., of statements) will lead to knowledge of the formal conditions necessary to experience something as an object.