

Introduction to Kant

The Problem

OK, let me try to summarize the details of today's discussion of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Before publication of the *Critique*, Kant was a rationalist and engaged in just the kind of *a priori* metaphysics that Hume criticized. Kant (like Leibniz and others), that is, thought we could gain knowledge of the nature of reality (of what Hume would call "matters of fact") by reasoning alone. Although Kant was influenced by Hume, he is not, at this point, *responding* to Hume's objections. The "problem," as he sees it here, is that this supposed discipline of metaphysics has not been able to "enter upon the secure path of a science." There are many different metaphysical "systems," and they reach differing (and mutually inconsistent) conclusions about the ultimate nature of reality. Since they purport to discover knowledge that is independent of sense experience, these differing theories cannot be "checked" by comparing them against what we actually perceive. They all claim to be completely correct and *certain*, and yet they conflict with one another. In other words, there is no agreed upon "method" by which to settle disputes, as there are in the established sciences. Kant's goal in the *Critique*, thus, is to examine the nature of "reason" itself to try to discover exactly what we can and cannot know on the basis of reason alone.

A Clue

So, if there is going to be a “science” of “metaphysics” (i.e., of knowledge of the nature of reality on the basis of reason alone), maybe we should look to the already established “sciences” to find some clue as to what makes them “scientific.” The “insight” he discovers is that, as he puts it, “reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own.” Without this, he says, the sciences would amount to nothing more than a “random groping.” What does this mean?

Suppose we set out to learn about the world merely through what we observe. We observe a multitude of independent “facts.” We don’t, strictly, *observe* any “connection” between these facts: we observe one thing happening now, another thing happening later, and so on. (These claims are all very much in the spirit of Hume.) Can any collection of such observations ever tell us about any underlying “laws” in nature? Kant thinks not.

(Again, this is very much like Hume.) On the basis of such random observations, Kant thinks, it would never even occur to us that there were any such “laws” to discover. Yes, he says, we must look to our experience of nature, but we cannot merely follow its “leading strings.” Kant thinks that we must come to our observations of nature “expecting” or “already knowing” that there are “laws” (or necessary connections) there to be found. (In this respect, he disagrees with Hume.) We consult experience not to find out *if* there are any such necessary connections in nature, but rather to find out *what*, specifically, *they are*. This fact, that there are necessary connections in the world for us to discover, is what “reason” has contributed “after a plan of its own.” So, even in the empirical sciences (i.e., even in areas other than metaphysics), we find that we “enter on the secure path of a science” only by recognizing that, in some respects, what we observe is due

to the nature of reason itself. If you like, we can say that, in certain respects, our sense experience of the world around us is the way it is because of the way *we* are (i.e., the way reason operates, ultimately, the way our minds operate), and not *merely* because of the way *the world* is. This is the “clue” we must follow up on if we want to explain how it might be possible to know anything about the world on the basis of reason alone.

The Copernican Revolution

The above is what Kant is getting at in his discussion of a “Copernican Revolution” for metaphysics. He has said that we might have better luck in metaphysics if we assume that “objects must conform to our knowledge” rather than (as, presumably we have been assuming in the past) that “our knowledge must conform to objects.” This is a tricky metaphor. Consider some sense experience we might have, say, a sense experience where we have a mental image of a tree. We have been thinking, Kant says, that in order for this experience to be “true” (i.e., for it to be veridical), our mental image must “match” (at least in some respects) the nature of the independently real tree. This is what it would mean to say that “our knowledge must conform to the object.” And Kant is now suggesting that we assume instead that “objects must conform to our knowledge.” What, exactly, does this mean?

It might seem here as though Kant is asking us to assume that the objects we experience exist only “in” our minds. If objects existed only in our minds, then, it seems, they would obviously have to “conform” to our minds. But this is not, I think, what Kant is really suggesting. Consider again, our perception of the tree. We think, at least in perception as opposed to hallucination, that our experience of the tree (our sensation) is entirely determined by the nature of the tree. (We assume, that is, that our

knowledge, our experience, must “conform” to the nature of the object we are perceiving, i.e., the tree.) But now, let me add a new element to this thought experiment: suppose that when we were looking at the tree, we were wearing sun glasses. The sun glasses would, of course, change the colors that we see. If we were wearing sun glasses when we looked at the tree, we would know that “part” of our visual image of it would be the result, not of the real nature of the tree (of its “real” colors), but due to the nature of the sun glasses. (We know that the sun glasses change *how* colors appear to us.) In this respect, our knowledge of the tree would not “conform” *merely* to the object, but would also be, at least in part, the result of “how” we were seeing the tree (the result of the sun glasses). If you like, part of “how” the object appears to us would be due not to the nature of the independently real object (in this case, the tree), but would be due instead to how we are experiencing it. Part of our experience, of our knowledge, would then “conform” not (merely) to the object, but instead to the nature of *how* we are experiencing it.

It is something like this that Kant is suggesting. *Huh*, you ask, *is Kant saying that we are wearing sunglasses?* Well, not literally, of course, but there is something right “in spirit” about this suggestion. Kant is suggesting that part of how things appear to us is (as we thought before) due to the nature of independently real objects that we are experiencing, but (and this is what is new in what he says) part of our experience is due to the “nature of us,” i.e., part of how we are experiencing the object is due to the nature of how our *minds work*. So, Kant is not saying that *nothing* in our experience must “conform” to the nature of the “thing in itself,” but only that *not all* of it does. What he is saying is that part of our experience of objects reflects the way that we necessarily perceive things, and not the way they “are in themselves” independently of our perceiving them.

What all these “parts” are, and *why* Kant thinks all of these things are matters we will come back to. But let me go back to the claim that we might have better luck with metaphysics if we recognize that “reason has insights only into that which it produces after a plan of its own.” By “reason,” again, Kant is talking about what we can know (what we can justify) independently of sense experience. So, what we can know about the nature of the world as we experience it are the parts of this experience that are due to the ways our minds work and are not due to the way the objects are, independently of our perceiving them. That is, some aspects of our experience are due to (and “conform” to) the reality that exists whether we perceive it or not. But other aspects of our experience simply reflect the “subjective” aspects of how we (necessarily) experience anything at all. Since this “subjective” aspect of our experience is due to the ways our minds work (it is due, in fact, to the necessary conditions of the possibility of *consciousness*), we can have *a priori* knowledge (knowledge by reason alone) of these *aspects* of how things (necessarily) appear to us.

So back to the metaphor, one last time: Suppose that I am wearing pink sunglasses. Given this (and given that I *know* this), I can know in advance of experience that whatever I see, I will see *pinkly*. *What* I see, a chair, a tree, or whatever, depends upon the nature of the reality I am looking at, and that part of my experience can’t be known in advance (can’t be known by reason alone). What I can know in advance of experience is that whatever I see, I will see “*pinkishly*.” Kant’s claim, then, is that, because I can know certain things about how anything at all must appear to me, I can know these aspects of “appearances” by reason alone.

Transcendental Idealism

Kant says that we only know “appearances,” and that we do not know “things in themselves.” One major interpretive question about the *Critique* concerns exactly what he means by this. Without right now going through all the details, let me tell you what I think he means: we can only know things *as they appear* to us (given the necessary conditions of the possibility of conscious experience), but not *as they are in themselves* (i.e., as they are independently of our experience of them). So, there *is* a reality that exists whether we perceive it or not. But we have those “sunglasses” on. That is, our conscious experience of objects is never “passive” or “transparent.” Rather, it is necessarily *interpretive* and *active*. So we can only know this independent reality *as* it necessarily appears to us through conscious experience. It is because of this necessary “subjective” contribution to how we experience things that we can know, by reasoning alone, certain truths about how things must necessarily appear to us. But the “flip side” of this is that we can *never* know things as they are, independently of our experience of them.