Kant’s Copernican Revolution

While the thoughts are still fresh in my mind, let me try to pick up from where we left off in class today, and say a little bit more about Kant’s claim that “reason has insight only into what it produces after a plan of its own.” (CPR, B Preface, p. 200 in our text)

Kant’s problem, as he describes it in the opening paragraphs of the second edition Preface to the Critique of Pure Reason, is to find a way to understand how reason might enter “the secure path of a science.” A look at the various competing metaphysical systems suggest that reason, or our ability to learn anything significant about the world by thinking alone, has not entered such a “secure path.” (And this doesn’t yet even begin to take into account Hume’s criticisms that there couldn’t possibly be any such “secure path” for metaphysics.) This disturbs Kant, who has spent his professional life creating just such metaphysical systems. He wants to find a way to explain how reason might be able to enter such a path. Ultimately he will suggest how this might happen. But at this point, he suggests merely that we look at other disciplines that presumably have entered this path. (That is, he suggests that we look at disciplines that have discovered some method for learning about the world, at least in part through the use of reason.) Kant looks at logic, mathematics, and physics (actually, not what we might today think of as physics, but simply the “natural sciences.”) What we discover by looking at these examples, Kant claims, is that “reason has insight only into what it produces after a plan of its own.” In explaining what this means, Kant suggests that metaphysics needs to undergo a kind of “Copernican Revolution.” And the result of this “Copernican Revolution” will be Kant’s original philosophical position, known as “Transcendental Idealism.” So what I’m trying to explain here is how this discussion of what reason “produces” is to be understood through his talk about Copernicus, and how we are to understand his resulting “transcendental idealism.”

The question, then, is how we can come to have knowledge by reason alone. What can we know about the world around us simply by pure thinking? Kant’s answer, that “reason can have insight only into what it produces after a plan of its own,” means that what we can know by thinking alone are merely things that are true simply because of the way “reason” operates. “Reason,” for Kant, can mean many different things, but when we talk here about the way that
reason operates, he means, roughly, the way the mind works, the way consciousness itself works. So what Kant is saying is that what we can know by reason alone are merely things that are true simply because of the way the mind works, or things that are true simply in virtue of the nature of consciousness itself.

What in the world does this mean? Well, think about how you understand the nature of consciousness. I’m not talking here about what you do or do not know about how the brain and central nervous system works, but what you understand about what it means to be conscious, or what it’s like to have a conscious experience. Consciousness is the process by which we become aware of things. When we become conscious of something, we have a mental representation of that thing, and we think that the nature of that thing determines the nature of our conscious representation of it. That is, when I have a conscious experience of something, I think that the nature of that experience (what it’s like to have that conscious experience) is determined by the nature of the object I am conscious of. Capturing this notion, we might say that consciousness is “transparent” to its object. By that I mean that we don’t think of consciousness itself as doing anything other than “conveying” to us some object of awareness. Consciousness itself is like a “clear glass,” something that information about the object just “passes through” without being changed or altered by the process. So, the nature of the conscious experience itself (what it’s like to have that conscious experience) is determined solely by the nature of the object I am conscious of. Kant will challenge this notion that consciousness is ever “transparent” to its object.

(Let me note here that I am talking about consciousness in general, and not merely sense perception of objects I believe to exist outside of my mind. So in order to avoid further difficulties that might arise in thinking about sense perception, consider simply your consciousness of your own inner states or sensations. When I am conscious of one of my own mental states, I think that the conscious experience I have of that inner state is simply a direct awareness of that inner state. I think that the inner state, by itself, determines what my conscious experience will be like. This is what I mean by talking about consciousness being “transparent” to its object. At least when I am aware of my own inner mental states, I think that I aware of
those “objects”—those inner mental representations—exactly as they are. This, again, is what
Kant will challenge.

On p. 201 our text, Kant writes, “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge
must conform to objects.” But, on this hypothesis, reason (metaphysics) has not been able to
enter upon this “secure path as a science.” Kant thinks that we will have better luck explaining
how it might be possible to know something on the basis of reason alone “if we suppose that
objects must conform to our knowledge.” This is the Copernican Revolution that I mentioned
above. Kant thinks that in making this change in how we understand the relation between
knowledge and its object we would be “proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus’ primary
hypothesis.”

Copernicus, recall, is the guy who suggested that the earth revolves around the sun. Prior
to Copernicus, it was believed that all heavenly bodies revolved around the earth. But on that
hypothesis, we could not explain the observed orbits of many objects in the sky. Copernicus
realized that by rejecting this fundamental assumption, and by assuming that all planets in our
solar system revolved around the sun, we could better explain their perceived orbits. So,
Copernicus had better luck at explaining the observed phenomena by rejecting—actually
“reversing”—this fundamental assumption.

Kant thinks that he is doing something similar here. We have been assuming that
knowledge must conform to objects—that is, we have been assuming that when we know
something, our knowledge of it, the mental state we have, is determined by the nature of the
object we know. On this assumption, we cannot explain how we could know anything about
objects independently of experiencing them. But Kant is suggesting that we will have better luck
explaining the possibility of knowing something by reason alone if we assume that objects must
conform to our knowledge—that is, if we assume that how an object appears to us is a function, at
least in part, of the nature of our knowing mind, and not merely a function of the nature of the
object known. So when Kant says that “reason has insight only into that which it produces after
a plan of its own,” what he means is that what we can know by reason alone are only those
features of our experiences of object that are due, not to the nature of the object we are
perceiving, but instead are due to the nature of reason itself, that is, that are due to the nature of what it is to be conscious of any object in the first place.

So, Kant is rejecting the notion that conscious is ever “transparent” to its object. To help explain this, let me use a metaphor. Suppose that you could only see when you wore a pair of rose-colored sunglasses. You have had some kind of terrible injury to your eyes, and you are totally blind, except when you put on these glasses. But these glasses give everything a “rosy” tint. Now, you know that the “rosiness” of your visual images when you wear these glasses does not reflect a feature of the world around you--it is not as though the entire world got rose-colored after your eye injury. You know that this rosiness is a function of the glasses you must now wear in order to see anything at all, and not a feature of the world of objects you are perceiving. Are you following me? In this scenario, the rosiness of your visual images is not a matter of how things really are, “in themselves,” apart from your seeing them. It is, instead, merely a function of how things necessarily “appear” to you once you put on these glasses. And of course, in this story, you cannot see except when you put on these glasses. So, you can now know, in advance of actually putting on the glasses, that everything you see will be “rosy.” This is not because the world you see, in itself, is really rosy. You can know that everything will appear rosy only because this rosiness is a function of the glasses you must wear in order to see anything at all. What you can know in advance of (visual) experience are only those features that are due to the way your glasses work, and not any features that are due to the way the world is in itself.

This is what Kant is suggesting--not, of course, that we are all wearing rose-colored glasses, but that consciousness is always “active” and never merely “transparent” to its object. (You might say that, for Kant, consciousness is always “interpretive.”) It is never simply a matter of passively conveying data to the mind about an external world, but always a matter of “shaping” or “interpreting” that data according to its own internal rules.) In becoming conscious of an object, the mind does something similar to what those rose-colored glasses do: it organizes or categorizes that data according to its own internal rules. And--just as in our rose-colored glasses example, where we can know in advance of seeing any object that it will appear rosy--if we can know how our mind necessarily organizes the data it receives, we will then be able to know something in advance about how objects will necessarily appear to us.
Later in the *Critique* (unfortunately, in parts we won’t be able to read in this course), Kant offers a positive argument that the mind has just these kinds of necessary rules of its own for organizing the data of experience into an experience of objects. But at this point, it is merely offered as an hypothesis that could explain the possibility of gaining knowledge by reason alone. Kant believes (at least on my understanding of Kant) in the existence of a world that exists apart from our experience of it. This is a world of, what he calls, “things in themselves”--things that exist, and have whatever properties they have, independently of how or whether we experience them at all. And he agrees with Hume that it could never be possible, by reason alone, to know anything about the true natures of these things in themselves, as they are apart from our experience of them. So, he is suggesting here, *if* it is possible for us to know anything by reason alone, it could not be anything about how these objects are apart from our experiences of them, but only about features about how they appear to us that are due the way our minds necessarily organize the data of experience. (What he will soon argue is that since there is in fact some knowledge by reason alone--and not just knowledge of mere logical truths, then it must be the case that there are these organizing features inherent in the nature of consciousness. The existence of these organizing features of mind--what “reason contributes according to a plan of its own” is the only possible explanation for the knowledge that we actually have through reason alone.) This is what he means by saying that “reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own.” What we can know by reason alone is only what, in our experience of the world, is due to the way objects necessarily appear to us (given the way our minds work), and not features of our experience that are due to how objects really are in themselves.

This is Kant’s “transcendental idealism.” Kant’s language in the text when he talks about all of this is subject to many different interpretations. So what I am saying here is my own interpretation of Kant. (Mind you, it is not “mine” alone: there is a whole camp of Kant interpreters who understand things this way.) Kant, as we will see, says that we know nothing of “things in themselves,” but instead know only “appearances.” (That claim, that we know only appearances and not things in themselves, is the definition of “transcendental idealism.”) What he means by this is that we know things only *as they appear* to us, given this interpretive nature of consciousness itself, and never *as they are in themselves*, apart from how they appear to us.
through consciousness. And it is only because it is possible for us to learn something about these necessary, internal, rules for how consciousness interprets the data it receives from mind-independent things in themselves that it is possible for us to know anything, independently of experience, about how those objects will necessarily appear to us.

To sum up (and to make sense of what Kant says about geometry and the natural sciences in these beginning paragraphs), Kant agrees with Hume that experience, by itself, could never be sufficient to justify our belief that the world is governed by causal laws of nature. The most we could say is that we have observed various regularities in our experiences. In this case, reason, or science in general, would be nothing but a “random groping,” a mere collection of observations. But, Kant thinks, what “reason produces” (i.e., what is due to the nature of the mind’s own internal rules for organizing and categorizing the data it receives from the senses) is the very fact that the world, as we necessarily experience it, must be bound by necessary laws. This is, for Kant, not a feature of the world as it is in itself, but is instead a necessary feature of any and all consciousness of objects. Mere sensations, by themselves, no matter how many we collect, could never be enough to justify our beliefs that the sensations we have in the future must follow the same patterns as those we have had in the past. Rather, Kant thinks, it is due to the nature of consciousness itself (not due to the inner nature of the objects we are conscious of) that we will always experiences objects as standing in necessary relations to one another. Exactly what those necessary relations are we do in fact learn from experiences. But that things will always as appear to us as necessarily related to one another is something that “reason produces.”

Finally, just to avoid a possible misconception, none of these necessary “internal” rules that consciousness uses to “interpret” the data it gets from a mind-independent world of things in themselves should be confused with any individual interpretations or personal biases that we may individually bring to experience. Maybe I have my own “unique” way of understanding the world. Maybe different cultures likewise have their own different ways of seeing things. All of this may be true, but it is not what Kant is talking about here. What Kant means to be talking about are organizational rules that are necessary to any conscious state at all that can be called a representation of an object. So Kant is not talking about the rules that govern his consciousness, or even the rules that govern human consciousness. What he is claiming is that consciousness
as such is always interpretive: there is no such thing as being conscious of something “as it really is.” Consciousness, because of its own internal unature, is always categorizing and interpretive. Consciousness is always of “mere appearances.”