

KANT'S PROJECT

PHIL 4/871

University of Nebraska–Lincoln
mclear@unl.edu

August 23, 2023

1 Kant — Biographical Overview

- Lived & died in Königsberg, Prussia (1724–1804)
- Attained professorship at the University of Königsberg in 1770
- Wrote the “critical” philosophical works relatively late in his career (c. 1781–1790)¹
- Some relevant contemporaries
 - John Locke (1632–1704)
 - G. W. Leibniz (1646–1716)
 - Christian Wolff (1679–1750)
 - David Hume (1711–1776)
 - Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)
 - Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762)
 - Christian August Crusius (1715–1775)

2 The Project

1. To set metaphysics on the “secure path of a science” (Bix-x)
2. To explain how propositions making claims of universality and necessity about the empirical world (e.g. Necessarily, all events have a cause), what Kant calls “synthetic a priori cognitions” could be both true and known to be such
3. To articulate the limits of rational inquiry and explanation
4. To explain why metaphysics (and inquiry in general) tends to overstep these limits
5. To articulate rational bases for faith (though not necessarily knowledge) in an immortal soul, God, the kind of freedom required for moral responsibility, and other “ideas of reason”

3 Cognition & Judgment

Cognition (Erkenntnis): A (i) *conscious* representation of an object that is (ii) in “agreement” with respect to which object it is a representation of and (iii) puts one in a position to know the “real” (i.e. metaphysical) possibility of the object²

Judgment (Urteil): A combination of representations (specifically, concepts) in a single consciousness, whose unity is the bearer of truth or falsity³

¹ Kant's Major Critical Works:

- *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87)
- *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as a Science* (1783)
- ‘Idea for a Universal History With a Cosmopolitan Aim’ (1784)
- ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (1784)
- *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)
- *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786)
- ‘Conjectural Beginning of Human History’ (1786)
- ‘What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?’ (1786)
- *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788)
- *Critique of (the Power of) Judgment* (1790)
- *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793)
- *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797)
- *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798)

² The genus is representation in general (*repraesentatio*). Under it stands the representation with consciousness (*perceptio*). A perception that refers to the subject as a modification of its state is a sensation (*sensatio*), an objective perception is a cognition (*cognitio*) (A320/B376)

³ The unification of representations in a consciousness is judgment ... thinking is the same as judging or as relating representations to judgments in general. (Prolegomena §22, 4:304)

4 Two Distinctions

- A priori/posteriori
 - distinction applies, in the first case, to judgments, and then derivatively to cognition and to epistemic attitudes (e.g. knowledge)
 - two meanings
 1. independent vs. dependent on experience
 2. 'from grounds' vs. 'from effects'
- Analytic/synthetic
 - applies to propositions
 - concerns the source or manner in which a proposition is true
 - * analytic truth is 'conceptual' truth, whereas synthetic true has some non-conceptual basis

5 The Prevailing Early Modern Conception of Knowledge

- Leibniz/Wolff conception of truth as 'containment'
- Empiricist theory of truth (e.g. Locke & Hume)^{4,5}
 - agreement between ideas
 - * universal/necessary/a priori
 - correspondence of ideas to facts
 - * contingent, local, a posteriori

4

A Priori	A Posteriori
analytic	analytic
synthetic	synthetic

6 Kant on the A Priori

- A priori knowledge is *independent* of experience in some but not all ways (e.g. for its justification but not for its acquisition)⁶
 - we need experience in order for our cognitive faculties to develop
 - experience is necessary for concept acquisition
- All a priori knowledge is characterized by its universality and necessity
- A priori knowledge is knowledge of a thing from its ground or cause

7 Kant on the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

7.1 Conceptions of Analyticity

Kant characterizes the analyticity of judgment in four different ways:

1. The predicate is 'contained' within the subject (A6-7/B11)⁷
2. The predicate is 'identical' with the subject (A7/B11)
3. Analytic judgments are ones which are 'explicative' rather than 'ampliative' (A7/B11)

⁵ All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, relations of ideas and matters of fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain...Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible [Hume (2007), 28].

⁶ although all our cognition commences *with* experience, yet it does not on that account all arise *from* experience. For it could well be that even our experiential cognition is a composite of that which we receive through impressions and that which our own cognitive faculty (merely prompted by sensible impressions) provides out of itself, which addition we cannot distinguish from that fundamental material until long practice has made us attentive to it and skilled in separating it out. (B1-2)

⁷ In all judgments in which the relation of a subject to the predicate is thought...this relation is possible in two different ways. Either the predicate *B* belongs to the subject *A* as something that is (covertly) contained in this concept *A*; or *B* lies entirely outside the concept *A*, though to be sure it stands in connection with it. (A6/B10)

4. Analytic judgments are those knowable by means of application of the principle of non-contradiction (A151/B190)

7.2 The Problem of Synthetic A Priori Judgment

- There are knowable (and known) universal/necessary/a priori judgments concerning reality that are *not* explicable in terms of conceptual analysis⁸
 - propositions of mathematics (physics & arithmetic)
 - propositions of natural science (Newtonian mechanics)

1. How are synthetic a priori judgments so much as *possible*?
2. What is the extent of our knowledge of the truth of such synthetic a priori judgments?
 - Why must we have synthetic a priori judgment to explain knowledge of even the most basic relationships between elements of reality?⁹

8 Questions & Problems for Kant

8.1 Analyticity & Definition

- Are analytic truths true by definition?
- Can a synthetic judgment be converted to an analytic judgment by modification of a definition?¹⁰

8.2 Containment – Subjective or Objective?

- Maass's challenge – what non-subjective criteria can we give for “what is thought” in a subject concept?¹¹
 - If no non-subjective criteria can be given then it is possible that there are no fundamentally or irreducibly synthetic judgments
- Possible replies from Kant
 - Distinguish analytic from synthetic based on *logical features* of concepts
 - ★ Logical division by *differentia* in terms of species/genus distinction¹²
 - Distinguish analytic from synthetic based on proof of “objective reality” of concept

8

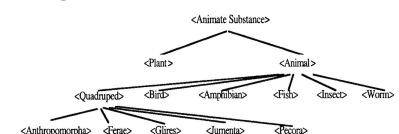
A Priori	A Posteriori
analytic	analytic
synthetic	synthetic

⁹ Take the proposition ‘Everything that happens has its cause’...the concept of a cause lies entirely outside [the concept of an event] and indicates something different than the concept of what happens in general, and is therefore not contained in the latter representation at all. How then do I come to say something quite different about that which happens in general, and to cognize the concept of cause as belonging to it, indeed necessarily, even though not contained in it? What is the unknown =X here on which the understanding depends when it believes itself to discover beyond the concept of A a predicate that is foreign to it yet which it nevertheless believes to be connected with it? (A9/B13)

¹⁰ If one had the whole concept of which the notions of subject and predicate are *compartes*, synthetic judgments would be transformed into analytic ones. One wonders to what extent there is something arbitrary here. (Notes on Metaphysics (c. 1769) R3928, 17:350)

¹¹ the judgment in question, analytic for me, may be synthetic for another; insofar as one thinks this, another that, one more, another less, in a given concept (Maass (1789), 188–89)

¹² Logical Division:



9 The 'Copernican Revolution' & Transcendental Idealism

- Instead of assuming that our knowledge must 'conform' to its object we assume that objects conform to our manner of knowing them¹³
- Two conditions on the object of knowledge
 - how objects appear (Transcendental Aesthetic)
 - * space & time
 - how object are thought (Transcendental Logic)
 - * the categories

References & Further Reading

- Allison, Henry E. 1973. *The Kant-Eberhard Controversy*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 2004. *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: Revised and Enlarged*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Beck, Lewis White. 1955. "Can Kant's Synthetic Judgments Be Made Analytic." *Kant-Studien* 47 (1-4): 168–81.
- . 1969. *Early German Philosophy*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- . 1972. "Lovejoy as A Critic of Kant." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33 (3): 471.
- . 1978a. "Did the Sage of Königsberg Have No Dreams." In *Essays on Kant and Hume*, 38–60. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 1978b. *Essays on Kant and Hume*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gardner, Sebastian. 1999. *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Routledge.
- Hogan, Desmond. 2013. "Metaphysical Motives of Kant's Analytic–synthetic Distinction." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 51 (2): 267–307.
- Hume, David. 2007. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: And Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maass, J. G. 1789. "Über den höchsten Grundsatz der synthetischen Urtheile; In Beziehung auf die Theorie von der mathematischen Gewissheit." *Philosophisches Magazin* 2: 186–231.
- Melamedoff-Vosters, Damian. 2021. "Kant's Argument for Transcendental Idealism in the Transcendental Aesthetic Revisited." *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 0. <https://doi.org/10.1515/agph-2019-0039>.
- Schechter, Joshua. 2021. "The Theoretical Significance of the A Priori/A Posteriori Distinction." In *Beyond Sense? New Essays on the Significance, Grounds, and Extent of the A Priori*, edited by Dylan Dodd and Elia Zardini. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Cleve, James. 1999. *Problems from Kant*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹³ Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest. (Bxvi–xvii)