

# Kant's Project – Defending the Synthetic A Priori

PHIL 4/871

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## 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)<sup>1</sup>
- 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 Two Distinctions

- A priori/posteriori
  - distinction applies to propositions & epistemic attitudes
  - independent vs. dependent on experience
    - \* innate vs. learned
  - archaic notion of knowledge ‘from grounds’ vs. ‘from effects’
- Analytic/synthetic
  - applies to propositions
  - concerns the source or manner in which a proposition is true

### 2.1 The Prevailing Early Modern Conception of Knowledge<sup>2</sup>

- Leibniz/Wolff conception of truth as ‘containment’
- Empiricist theory of truth (Locke & Hume)
  - agreement between ideas
    - \* universal/necessary/a priori
  - correspondence of ideas to facts
    - \* contingent, local, a posteriori

#### <sup>1</sup> 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)

<sup>2</sup>

A Priori	A Posteriori
analytic	synthetic
synthetic	analytic

### 3 Kant on the A Priori

- A priori knowledge is *independent* of experience for its justification but not for its acquisition<sup>3</sup>
  - 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

### 4 Kant on the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

#### 4.1 Conceptions of Analyticity

Kant characterizes the analyticity of judgment in four different ways:

1. The predicate is 'contained' within the subject (A6-7/B11)<sup>4</sup>
2. The predicate is 'identical' with the subject (A7/B11)
3. Analytic judgments are ones which are 'explicative' rather than 'ampliative' (A7/B11)
4. Analytic judgments are those knowable by means of application of the principle of non-contradiction (A151/B190)

#### 4.2 Containment Analyticity

- Logical division by *differentia* in terms of species/genus distinction<sup>5</sup>
  1. The division of a genus is *complete* — the various species of a genus, taken together, *exhaust* the genus
  2. Membership in a species is *exclusive* — no species may be predicated of another
- Intensional conception of logical containment
  - *Content*: the group of intensional concepts (marks) that a concept "contains in" itself as components
  - *Extension*: the group of lower, or more specific, concepts a concept "contains under" itself
  - content & extension are related to one another *reciprocally*<sup>6</sup>
- For one concept to 'contain' another is to have that concept as a member of its extension in a strict hierarchical ordering of genus/species relationships where concepts are distinguished according to their (non- overlapping) *differentia*

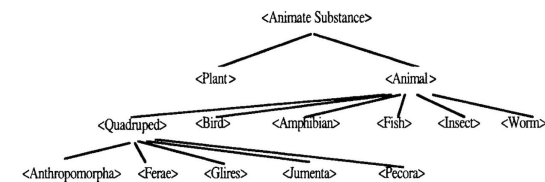
#### 4.3 Analyticity & Definition

- Are analytic truths true by definition?
- Can a synthetic judgment be converted to an analytic judgment by modification of a definition?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 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)

<sup>4</sup> the predicate B belongs to the subject A as something that is (covertly) contained in this concept A (A6/B10)

<sup>5</sup> **Logical Division:**



<sup>6</sup> **Logical Reciprocity:**

- \* A is in the content of B iff B is in the extension of A
- \* If B is in the content of A, & B excludes C, then A excludes C
- \* If B is in the extension of A, & A excludes C, then B excludes C

<sup>7</sup> 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)

#### 4.4 *The Problem of Synthetic A Priori Knowledge*

- There are knowable universal/necessary/a priori truths concerning reality that are *not* explicable in terms of conceptual analysis<sup>8</sup>
  - propositions of mathematics (physics & arithmetic)
  - propositions of natural science (Newtonian mechanics)
- How do we know necessary/universal truths concerning the empirical world?<sup>9</sup>

8

A Priori	A Posteriori
analytic	synthetic
synthetic	<del>analytic</del>

#### 5 *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 them<sup>10</sup>
- Two conditions on the object of knowledge
  - how objects appear (Transcendental Aesthetic)
    - \* space & time
  - how object are thought (Transcendental Logic)
    - \* the categories

#### *Further References*

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<sup>9</sup> Take the proposition 'Everything that happens has its cause'...the concept of of a cause lies entirely outside [the concept of 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)

<sup>10</sup> 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)