

KANT'S PHILOSOPHY

Rationalism is a tradition that includes Plato, Descartes, Leibniz and others. It once seemed to provide a secure philosophical foundation for religious beliefs and for morality. But it also was hostile to or incompatible with experimental approaches to scientific inquiry and actually led to many results that were experimentally proven to be false.

If Pure Reason infers that there cannot be any atoms or empty space or action at a distance but experimental investigation clearly shows that there are such things, what reply can a rationalistic philosopher make? Also, the great rationalists themselves were profoundly opposed on issues such as whether animals are capable of thinking and reasoning and whether matter is or is not infinitely divisible.

Empiricism developed partly as a response to the new science and its experimental methods. To many, Empiricism seemed to provide the right way to philosophically support the assumptions and methods of the new science. Yet, as Hume argued, when pushed to its logical consequences, empiricism leads one to the skeptical result that scientific theories cannot be based on anything more solid than subjective features of human nature: human ways of perceiving reality, habit, custom instinct, passion, feeling.

Moreover, empiricism seems able to avoid skepticism only by making the claim that our basic knowledge is not of our own internal perceptions but of the physical things that surround us (Gassendi, Hobbes, Diderot) and this puts into sharp question whether we can know that the soul is anything that can exist independently of the body since, if it is something non-physical, we do not have any direct knowledge of its existence according to this physicalistic version of empiricism. Whether our soul is immaterial and so immortal becomes highly uncertain or even likely false according to this philosophy. Moreover, to the extent that a physicalistic form of empiricism seems right as a philosophy of science, it also seems to require that determinism is true of everything in the universe. That seems to mean that all human actions are completely determined and that moral responsibility is only a myth

Empiricism also raises questions as to whether there can be such things as moral knowledge and objective moral facts. If, as empiricists claim, no moral knowledge is innate, can it really be constructed, as Locke hoped, as a purely

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abstract science like mathematics? Hume argued that it could not. Morality, Hume said, is a matter of feeling, not of knowing. When we judge something to be right or wrong we are just expressing attitudes of approval or disapproval. Morality, according to Hume, is not based on reason, but on a feeling of sympathy with creatures like ourselves. And many empiricists maintained that the new scientific image of the universe had no need of the contemporary presence of a personal God. Skepticism, with regard to religion and morals might seem liberating. But couldn't a complete freedom of thought and morals lead to an aimless relativism, a total social chaos that could be put in order only by totalitarian power?

Perhaps, many science-oriented empiricists said, the universe was once created by a God, but it is such a perfect mechanism that it is capable of operating entirely by itself and could have always existed much as it now is. Human beings clearly have enough potential for rational self-government that they can make agreements with one another which make it possible for everyone to pursue their own self-interests so far as this is consistent with the interests of others who are parties to the agreement. Liberal Constitutional government and free market economies might save us from totalitarianism and lawlessness. But don't these social arrangements also promote and idealize the development of a civilization in which the highest values are comfort, security, wealth, fame and pleasure? Would not such a civilization soon ignore and forget such values as artistic creation, the pursuit of truth for its own sake, religious worship, even love, friendship, family bonds?

Kant thought this intellectual situation was very dangerous. What reason could Philosophy give for retaining traditional religious beliefs? How could religion avoid being taken over by superstitious fanatics and enthusiastic zealots? How could there be any rational criticism of nations or private enterprises in pursuit of empires or profits? As long as their actions are rationally planned and they conform to laws established under social contracts of nations, how could they be anything but rationally justified? But all of this really raises an even more fundamental question.

Why should anyone act morally? How can the difference between scientific theories and conventional, shared, customary beliefs be explained? How could a scientific conception of the universe be compatible with moral responsibility, human dignity, and religious belief? Kant tried to show that they were compatible.

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His leading idea was that the intellectual conflicts and tensions between different philosophical traditions is based on a rivalry of metaphysical pictures promoted by each one. Some tended to argue that spiritual things are the fundamental kinds of things that really exist, that material things are able to exist only because of the spiritual beings (the demiurge, forms, essences, God, souls, monads) . This tradition goes back to Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Berkeley and Leibniz. Others tended to argue that material things are the fundamental beings and that minds or souls can exist only as functions of material things, especially brains. This tradition is also ancient in its origins, going back to Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius and represented in Modern times by Gassendi, Hobbes, Diderot, and D'Holbach.

Some, such as Spinoza and Locke, had tried to construct compromise positions which affirm parts of both of the other two traditions. Kant's hypothesis was that there had to be a very deep reason why, after thousands of years, there was still no general agreement among philosophers on any metaphysical claim. There had to be something wrong with everybody's conception of what sort of enterprise metaphysics is. Kant included himself in his criticism. At one time, he says in his Critique of Pure Reason, he had subscribed to (in his words) the notion of metaphysics as a dogmatic science of pure reason. Perhaps, he thought, what is wrong is that everyone has been treating metaphysics as a developing science but they have been completely mistaken as to the kind of science it can be. He, like other rationalists, had once assumed that metaphysics is a science that attempts to determine a priori, from mere analysis of concepts, what reality in itself must be like. Kant said that the solution to the problem with the nature of metaphysics requires a revolutionary change of perspective, a change analogous to the Copernican revolution in astronomy. He says

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori by means of concepts have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus' primary hypothesis . Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved round the spectator, he tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest.(CPR (B) xvi)

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We may begin an exposition of Kant's philosophy with Kant's way of defining some of his basic technical terminology, those that deal with the fundamental concepts of an object of knowledge and the concept of truth.

A judgement is a truth-claim, a statement or proposition. There are two different basic types of truth-claims: analytic and synthetic.

An analytic judgement is (when true) true in virtue of the definitions of its terms. For example, "All sisters are females". The predicate ("females") is contained in the definition or analysis of its subject ("female siblings"). It is a contradiction in terms to deny an analytic truth. To deny that sisters are females would be to say that female siblings are not female.

A synthetic judgement is one which is non-analytic. Example: "All sisters quarrel". To deny this might be to say something false but it is not a self-contradiction, at least, to say that female siblings do not quarrel. In a synthetic judgement, something is ascribed to a subject that wasn't already implicit in its definition. It can, therefore, add to our knowledge of things. An analytic judgement simply makes explicit what's already implicit in the concept of its subject. So, an analytic judgement cannot add to our knowledge of things.

Knowledge is simply the body of justified truth-claims, whatever they may be. As truth-claims, they may be justified in one of two ways, a priori or a posteriori. So, there are two distinct types of knowledge:

A posteriori knowledge is empirical, i.e. justified by way of evidence drawn from sense experience (observation or experiment). Empirical generalizations like "All sisters quarrel" are examples of this type of knowledge.

A priori knowledge is non-empirical. It does not require justification by way of observation or experiment. Mathematical statements or principles of Logic provide many examples of such knowledge.

Whereas a posteriori knowledge is contingent -- true for the actual world as revealed in sense experience -- a priori knowledge is necessary, true for all conceivable worlds.

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is an investigation of the nature and limits of pure, (i.e., a priori) knowledge. The question is: what can be known about reality independently of empirical investigation? Kant's account of the nature of a priori knowledge had devastating implications for the possibility of a rationalistic metaphysics, metaphysics conceived as an a priori science of Pure Reason. But his account also attempts to reveal the defects in empiricism which make it incline toward skepticism and to remove and correct those defects. Kant wanted to avoid both the skeptical tendencies of empiricism and the dogmatic tendencies of rationalism.