

What Can I Know? Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Preface A and B

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Warm-up

The Limits of Knowledge

What can we know? We know many things about the world around us: whether it is raining outside, the result of last night's game, or how vaccines work. But we also want to know more. For example, we may want to know the ultimate origin of the universe, whether God exists, or whether there are such things as souls. Philosophers have long asked this type of questions — questions that concern a kind of knowledge that goes beyond our experience. A wide range of answers (often contradicting each other) have been endlessly debated. Dissatisfied with this state of inquiry, Kant proposes a revolution in philosophy, which does not consist in devising new answers to these questions, but rather in analyzing our own capacity for knowledge. Such an analysis aims to shed light on the limits of our cognitive faculties and to reveal their true potential. In this article, we will see how Kant's philosophy offers a revolutionary approach to our deep thirst for knowledge.

Introduction

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a major figure of the Enlightenment and the author of some of the most influential writings in the history of Western philosophy, including the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and *On Perpetual Peace*. His contributions to philosophy were highly innovative and encompassed virtually every aspect of the discipline. Kantian insights, such as his account of reason, his distinction between appearances and things in themselves, and his formulation of the categorical imperative have long inspired generations of philosophers and are still hotly debated today.

You will be reading a selection from the Prefaces that Kant wrote to his magnum *opus*, the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant published the *Critique* in 1781 after a decade of publishing silence. In this work, Kant offers a detailed analysis of the sources of our knowledge ('critique' here does not mean a negative assessment, but only a detailed inquiry into reason). Much to his disappointment, his work was not as well received as he had hoped, prompting a revision that resulted in a second edition with important additions (including a new preface). In both Prefaces, Kant presents the gist of his philosophical project in a quasi-narrative fashion. Kant's project in the *Critique* is a 'Copernican revolution' that attempts to solve endless metaphysical controversies and provide a new template for grounding morality. The full text of the *Critique* can be found [here](#).

Key Concepts

A priori: term denoting propositions that can be known independently from experience. For example, propositions such as ‘All bachelors are unmarried’ or ‘The whole is greater than its parts’ can be known without recourse to any experience.

Reason: the faculty that knows a priori. Kant uses this term in a general sense (the knowing faculty as such) and in a specific sense (the faculty that demands ultimate explanations).

Metaphysics: the study of what there is. Traditionally, metaphysics is divided into general metaphysics and special metaphysics. The former investigates the general features of reality and asks questions such as ‘What is possible?’. The latter studies particular kinds of being and asks questions such as ‘Does God exist?’ or ‘Is the soul immortal?’.

Appearances (vs. things in themselves): things as they are experienced by us (also known as phenomena). They should be distinguished from things as they are independently of our experience (things in themselves or noumena).

Transcendental Idealism: Kant’s mature philosophical position. It holds that appearances are not things in themselves, but representations of our mind. It is opposed to transcendental realism, which identifies appearances with things in themselves.

Unconditioned: an ultimate explanation of reality. For example, if I explain why it is raining today by appealing to some atmospheric conditions, I can always ask for the cause of those conditions, and so on. Only a cause that is not caused by anything else (something unconditioned) would give us an ultimate explanation.

Questions We Cannot Answer

Kant begins by describing the fate of our faculty of **a priori** knowledge: **reason**. Reason is presented as a tragic character, wanting to know more than it can ever achieve. Reason simply follows principles that we normally use in experience and yet lead us into the unknown territories of **metaphysics**.

Avii-viii

Human reason, in one sphere of its cognition, is called upon to consider questions, which it cannot decline, as they are presented by its own nature, but which it cannot answer, as they transcend every faculty of the mind. It falls into this difficulty without any fault of its own. It begins with principles, which cannot be dispensed with in the field of experience, and the truth and sufficiency of which are, at the same time, insured by experience. With these principles it rises, in obedience to the laws of its own nature, to ever higher and more remote conditions. But it quickly discovers that, in this way, its labors must remain ever incomplete, because new questions never cease to present themselves; and thus it finds itself compelled to have recourse to principles which transcend the region of experience, while they are regarded by common sense without distrust. It thus falls into confusion and contradictions, from which it conjectures the presence of latent errors, which, however, it is unable to

discover, because the principles it employs, transcending the limits of experience, cannot be tested by that criterion. The arena of these endless contests is called *Metaphysic*.

In this passage, Kant claims that reason is concerned with questions that it cannot answer. We typically want to know the cause of an effect, say why it is raining today. But we not only want to know what caused it to rain (the clouds in the sky today) but we also want to know what caused those clouds as well, and so on in a regress that can only stop with an ultimate or first cause. However, reason cannot answer all the questions it raises, leading to frustration.

Connection

Metaphysics

In both Prefaces, Kant portrays the history of metaphysics as a slow decay, from being “the *queen* of all sciences” (Aviii) to a battlefield between different philosophical views on a range of issues, such as the ultimate cause of the universe, the existence of God, or the immortality of the soul. The result of these endless battles is an apparent indifference and apathy towards metaphysical questions. For Kant, however, it is impossible to remain indifferent to metaphysics. Metaphysics is born out of a natural inclination of reason, which cannot be eradicated. Even being indifferent to metaphysics is, so to speak, an implicit metaphysical position. Kant’s project in the *Critique* is a reformulation of metaphysics in new terms—how exactly Kant reformulates the scope and limits of metaphysics is an open question. Stay tuned for an answer to this question below!

Know Thyself!

To reason’s struggles towards metaphysical knowledge, Kant offers a simple, yet effective remedy: self-knowledge. The critique of pure reason is to point out reason’s capacities and limits, what we are capable of knowing, but also where our grasp of reality must fall short.

Axi-Axii

It is, in fact, a call to reason, again to undertake the most laborious of all tasks—that of self-examination, and to establish a tribunal, which may secure it in its well-grounded claims, while it pronounces against all baseless assumptions and pretensions, not in an arbitrary manner, but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws. This tribunal is nothing less than the *Critical Investigation of Pure Reason*. I do not mean by this a criticism of books and systems, but a critical inquiry into the faculty of reason, with reference to the cognitions to which it strives to attain *without the aid of experience*; in other words, the solution of the question regarding the possibility or impossibility of metaphysics, and the determination of the origin, as well as of the extent and limits of this science. All this must be done on the basis of principles.

Connection

The A Priori

Reason is the faculty that knows a priori, that attains cognitions independently of experience. But what does it mean to attain a cognition without the aid of experience? The concept of a priori plays a central role in Kant's philosophy and is still an important concept in contemporary philosophy. It is the opposite of 'a posteriori' and refers to the way we come to know something. If I look out of the window and say 'It is raining now', I am appealing to a determinate experience that I am having (I see that it is raining). The proposition is a posteriori. But in propositions such as 'The whole is greater than its parts' or 'All bachelors are unmarried', I am not appealing to experience to assert knowledge. These propositions are true because of rational reflection alone.

As Kant explains in the Introduction of the *Critique*, the problem of whether metaphysics is possible concerns a specific class of a priori propositions (or 'judgements'). Some a priori propositions are true in virtue of how we define terms. For example, the proposition 'All bachelors are unmarried' is true just in virtue of the definition of the term 'bachelor'. As such, it does not expand our knowledge. Kant calls these propositions 'analytic'. But metaphysical propositions should not only be a priori, they should also be informative (otherwise they would not constitute knowledge). For example, metaphysical propositions such as 'Every event has a cause' or 'God exists' cannot be simply proved from the definitions of 'event' or 'God'. Kant calls these propositions 'synthetic'. To answer the question of whether metaphysics is possible is therefore to establish if synthetic a priori propositions are possible. Check out the video at the end of this piece to learn more about a priori synthetic propositions!

Kant's Copernican Revolution

In contrast to metaphysics, logic, mathematics, and physics became sciences when they adopted the method of self-knowledge and began to identify a priori knowledge – knowledge that does not depend on experience but rather on what reason itself puts into what it knows. Kant wants to extend the same revolutionary approach to metaphysics in order to finally transform it into a science.

Bxvi-xviii

It has hitherto been assumed that our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to ascertain anything about these objects a priori, by means of conceptions, and thus to extend the range of our knowledge, have been rendered abortive by this assumption. Let us then make the experiment whether we may not be more successful in metaphysics, if we assume that the objects must conform to our cognition. This appears, at all events, to accord better with the possibility of our gaining the end we have in view, that is to say, of arriving at the cognition of objects a priori, of determining something with respect to these objects, before they are given to us. We here propose to do just what Copernicus did in attempting to explain the celestial movements. When he found that he could make no progress by assuming that all the heavenly bodies revolved round the spectator, he reversed the process, and tried the experiment of

assuming that the spectator revolved, while the stars remained at rest. We may make the same experiment with regard to the intuition of objects. If the intuition must conform to the nature of the objects, I do not see how we can know anything of them a priori. If, on the other hand, the object conforms to the nature of our faculty of intuition, I can then easily conceive the possibility of such an a priori knowledge. Now as I cannot rest in the mere intuitions, but—if they are to become cognitions—must refer them, as *representations*, to something, as *object*, and must determine the latter by means of the former, here again there are two courses open to me. *Either*, first, I may assume that the conceptions, by which I effect this determination, conform to the object—and in this case I am reduced to the same perplexity as before; *or* secondly, I may assume that the objects, or, which is the same thing, that *experience*, in which alone as given objects they are cognized, conform to my conceptions—and then I am at no loss how to proceed. For experience itself is a mode of cognition which requires understanding. Before objects, are given to me, that is, a priori, I must presuppose in myself laws of the understanding which are expressed in conceptions a priori. To these conceptions, then, all the objects of experience must necessarily conform.

Main Idea

The Copernican Analogy

Kant presents his project as a perspectival shift similar to that of Copernicus in the history of astronomy. Copernicus (1473-1543) was the author of *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*, where he proposed a heliocentric model of the universe, with the earth revolving around the sun. The Copernican model, completed by Kepler's laws of planetary motion and Newton's law of universal gravitation, replaced the geocentric model, where the sun rotates around the earth, proposed by Ptolemy in the 2nd century AD. Many readers have complained that Kant's analogy is not as straightforward as it seems. A brief assessment of how the analogy is supposed to work is in order.

In the Copernican system, the sun replaces the earth as the center of the universe. One might think that Kant's revolution similarly undermines the centrality of human knowledge in the universe. But the spirit of Kant's project goes the other way: by requiring that knowledge must conform to the way we think of things, Kant emphasizes the centrality of the human perspective in accounting for knowledge. However, by relativizing what we know to the ways we perceive the world, Kant is also presenting the latter as a *specific* way of knowing rather than the *absolute* way of knowing. While humanistic in spirit, Kant's project thus entails that human knowledge has no privileged status in the cosmos.

Appearance Versus Reality

Kant's Copernican analogy highlights a change in the way we explain reality. Whereas the Ptolemaic model explains the motions of the planets and stars in the sky as independent and self-sufficient events, the Copernican model explains the same motions as **appearances** due to the relative motion of the Earth. In other words, the same phenomena (motions in the sky) are now explained in terms of a contribution by the observer (or subject). This aspect of the analogy points to the fundamental distinction that Kant derives from his Copernican revolution and that

characterizes his **transcendental idealism**, the distinction between the way things appear and the way they are in themselves.

Bxix-xx

But from this deduction of the faculty of a priori cognition in the first part of metaphysics [general metaphysics], we derive a surprising result, and one which, to all appearance, militates against the great end of metaphysics, as treated in the second part [special metaphysics]. For we come to the conclusion that our faculty of cognition is unable to transcend the limits of possible experience; and yet this is precisely the most essential object of this science. The estimate of our rational cognition a priori at which we arrive is that it has only to do with phenomena, and that things in themselves, while possessing a real existence, lie beyond its sphere. Here we are enabled to put the justice of this estimate to the test. For that which of necessity impels us to transcend the limits of experience and of all phenomena is the *unconditioned*, which reason absolutely requires in things as they are in themselves, in order to complete the series of conditions.

Connection

Appearances and Things in Themselves

A famous tenet of Kant's transcendental idealism is his distinction between things as they appear to us and things as they are in themselves. In his Prefaces to the *Critique*, Kant presents this distinction as a key implication of his revolution. If knowledge must conform to how we conceive the world, then our experiences of the world are limited by how our minds conceive it. But how should we think of the distinction between appearances and things in themselves? The meaning of 'appearances' is relatively clear since the term denotes objects as they are experienced by us in space and time. In several places, Kant claims that the concept of appearance presupposes something that appears but is not itself an appearance) – a thing in itself that is not in space and time. Although we cannot know things in themselves, we can think of them by abstracting from the way we experience objects. This is why Kant also uses the term 'noumenon' (literally, 'something that is thought') to refer to things in themselves. It is important to bear in mind that, for Kant, only the realm of things in themselves could accommodate something that is **unconditioned**. Such an unconditioned would satisfy reason's thirst for ultimate knowledge.

The history of the interpretation of the distinction between appearances and things in themselves is itself an important chapter in the history of philosophy. Philosophers have debated several problematic aspects of this distinction, for example, whether it separates distinct types of things or rather ways of considering the same things (for a helpful resource on this debate see the final *Want to Learn More* section).

A Fresh Perspective

How can we know that Kant's project is on the right track? Why can't our way of representing things correspond to the way things really are? In the Prefaces, Kant presents his Copernican

revolution as a hypothesis that can be proved through the following experiment: What happens if we reject Kant's revolution and accept that reason knows reality as it is?

Bxviii-xx

This attempt succeeds as well as we could desire, and promises to metaphysics, in its first part—that is, where it is occupied with conceptions a priori, of which the corresponding objects may be given in experience—the certain course of science. For by this new method we are enabled perfectly to explain the possibility of a priori cognition, and, what is more, to demonstrate satisfactorily the laws which lie a priori at the foundation of nature, as the sum of the objects of experience—neither of which was possible according to the procedure hitherto followed ... Now, if it appears that when, on the one hand, we assume that our cognition conforms to its objects as things in themselves, *the unconditioned cannot be thought without contradiction*, and that when, on the other hand, we assume that our representation of things as they are given to us, does not conform to these things as they are in themselves, but that these objects, as phenomena, conform to our mode of representation, *the contradiction disappears*: we shall then be convinced of the truth of that which we began by assuming for the sake of experiment; we may look upon it as established that the unconditioned does not lie in things as we know them, or as they are given to us, but in things as they are in themselves, beyond the range of our cognition.

Argument

Experimenting with Reason

In this passage, Kant suggests adopting the distinction between appearances and things in themselves as a hypothetical “new method”. Specifically, Kant’s hypothesis is that appearances are not things in themselves (transcendental idealism) while his experiment is to try assuming that this hypothesis is false. Like traditional metaphysicians, we assume that we know things as they really are. But as Kant shows in the Transcendental Dialectic section of the *Critique*, this assumption leads to contradictions – conflicting claims about the unconditioned. A famous example of such contradictions is the pair of conflicting claims ‘The world is finite’ and ‘The world is infinite’ that Kant thinks can both be rationally demonstrated. On the contrary, transcendental idealism does not give rise to such contradictions and provides us with an explanation of the possibility of a priori knowledge. As a result, it is identified as the correct hypothesis.

It may sound surprising that Kant uses hypothetical reasoning to ground his project. After all, a hypothesis, even if confirmed by an experiment, is not necessarily true. But this “experiment of pure reason” (Bxxi) is only one part of Kant’s strategy. Kant’s hypothesis waits to be confirmed by the analysis of the cognitive faculties in the rest of the *Critique*. In other words, Kant’s argument for transcendental idealism cannot bypass the peculiarities of human knowledge. In the Prefaces, Kant is concerned with presenting the discovery of a new way of thinking, which must, however, be justified and confirmed in a new philosophical system.

The End of Metaphysics?

The result of Kant's revolution may look quite disappointing at first sight. By limiting knowledge to the realm of appearances, Kant seems to be ascribing only a negative function to his new way of thinking about metaphysics. But Kant thinks that his Copernican revolution can also have a positive side as well.

Bxxiv-xxx

A cursory view of the present work will lead to the supposition that its use is merely *negative*, that it only serves to warn us against venturing, with speculative reason, beyond the limits of experience. This is, in fact, its primary use. But this, at once, assumes a *positive* value, when we observe that the principles with which speculative reason endeavors to transcend its limits lead inevitably, not to the *extension*, but to the *contraction* of the use of reason, inasmuch as they threaten to extend the limits of sensibility, which is their proper sphere, over the entire realm of thought and, thus, to supplant the pure (practical) use of reason [i.e. its use in relation to actions]. So far, then, as this criticism is occupied in confining speculative reason within its proper bounds, it is only negative; but, inasmuch as it thereby, at the same time, removes an obstacle which impedes and even threatens to destroy the use of practical reason, it possesses a positive and very important value. In order to admit this, we have only to be convinced that there is an absolutely necessary use of pure reason—the moral use—in which it inevitably transcends the limits of sensibility, without the aid of speculation, requiring only to be insured against the effects of a speculation which would involve it in contradiction with itself ... I cannot even make the assumption—as the practical interests of morality require—of God, freedom, and immortality, if I do not deprive speculative reason of its pretensions to transcendent insight. For to arrive at these, it must make use of principles which, in fact, extend only to the objects of possible experience, and which cannot be applied to objects beyond this sphere without converting them into phenomena, and thus rendering the *practical extension* of pure reason impossible. I must, therefore, abolish *knowledge*, to make room for *belief*. The dogmatism of metaphysics, that is, the presumption that it is possible to advance in metaphysics without previous criticism, is the true source of the unbelief (always dogmatic) which militates against morality.

The *Critique* establishes that the only valid domain of human knowledge is experience. Whenever reason transgresses this limit, it mistakenly takes the way things appear for how they actually are. Not only would this be unwarranted, but it would also leave no room for freedom and morality. Kant thinks that the possibility of freedom would not be even thinkable if reality itself obeyed the principles of our knowledge, as reason's principle of causality would result in a purely deterministic universe. In other words, our fundamental ignorance of things in themselves that results from the *Critique* allows us to leave room for how we typically think about the moral realm.

Famous Quote

“I Must, Therefore, Abolish *Knowledge*, to Make Room for *Belief*”

Kant’s limitation of knowledge makes room for a new foundation of morality on more solid grounds. This foundation is announced in this work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, and later developed in works such as the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

So what is left of metaphysics in Kant’s system? The limitation of knowledge to experience allows for the elaboration of a proper metaphysics of morals. But it would be wrong to say that only moral metaphysics survives Kant’s demolition of previous doctrines. For one thing, the very analysis of the a priori sources of cognition can be seen as an inquiry into objects as such, a feature of general metaphysics. Second, Kant analyzes the a priori elements of science resulting from his Copernican revolution in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Finally, Kant repurposes the rational sources that demand the unconditioned as regulative principles and rules for the investigation of nature.

Summary

In Prefaces A and B of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proposes a revolutionary way of conceiving of our knowledge of reality. His transcendental idealism accounts for the possibility of a priori knowledge by limiting the domain of what we can know to how we experience things. Kant’s critical analysis of knowledge also establishes a key positive result: by making us aware of the cognitive limits of our reason, it leaves room for a moral understanding of the world and the ways in which we can act in it.

Video

For a recap of Kant’s account of metaphysical knowledge and an introduction to Kant’s distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements which Kant presents in the Introduction to the *Critique*, check out this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZtQXteAE-w>.

Want to Learn More?

If you want to know more about how Kant develops the justification for his Copernican revolution and his transcendental idealism, pick up the story with the Transcendental Aesthetic and Analytic sections of the *Critique* (his analysis of human knowledge) and the Transcendental Dialectic section of the *Critique* (his discussion of the contradictions to which traditional metaphysics leads us). To learn more about the concept of a priori, check out this entry in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<https://iep.utm.edu/apriori/>). This article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy offers a helpful orientation among different interpretations of transcendental idealism (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-transcendental-idealism/>).

Acknowledgements

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