KANT’S VIEW OF THE WORLD

This essay is about the way Kant sees the world rather than about his moral philosophy and his theories of justice. This it concentrates on perception of the physical world, and how far this can take us in understanding the world of the mind and how we think and make decisions about our lives. It proposes that Kant can be seen as the founder not just of theories of the problem of knowledge, but also of such modern ideas as existentialism.

This overview concentrates on how Kant revolutionised the then current Enlightenment view of the world, and how he answered the two most fundamental philosophical questions: what constitutes reality, and what knowledge of the world consists of. I shall make only passing reference to his theories of morality and aesthetics and to his later political writings on justice. I shall instead concentrate of the first two critiques of, respectively, Pure Reason and Practical Reason, and on the second part of the third critique, of Judgment. I hope to show by doing this that Kant is still relevant in many aspects of his reasoning, and that he is unique and uniquely useful in the modern world particularly through his understanding of:

• cognition and how it works;

• the relation between knowledge obtained by the senses and science on the one hand and the decisions of everyday life on the other;

• and why, on matters where he was himself less than certain(the existence of God and the immortality of the soul), his arguments are still relevant to modern theology

Kant looked at two particular areas – the world of phenomena, and the world of the will. We will discuss them in turn, but first we need to examine some general concepts fundamental to an understanding of Kant's position, which distinguish him from the other great Enlightenment thinker in this area, David Hume.

Statements of Judgment

Phenomena are detected by the senses and analysed (made sense of) in the mind or brain.

In the first critique, Critique of Pure Reason, by using philosophical analysis (in other words, by asking himself questions rather than doing surveys or experiments) he puts together a credible account of how ideas are built up or synthesised in the mind from sensory perception. This as opposed to a theory of how the mind/brain works based on physiology or psychology.

He develops a method – transcendental logic - which becomes repetitive in his Critiques. Imagine being shut up with Kant for a week, holding a conversation about how we perceive the world around us. He would probably ask what you think you know about ordinary everyday things. He would describe to you how everything you think you know about the world is in fact a judgment of one kind or another. He would classify these judgments as a priori, a posteriori, analytical and synthetic. He would say that from experience, there are things we can all agree on – a priori concepts. Others, we can only agree on if we perceive something through our senses in the same way as other people. More formally, a judgment is a priori, i.e. independent of the senses (e.g. all fathers are male) or a posteriori, i.e. dependent on the senses (e.g. all bodies deprived of support fall downwards).

He might tell you that a judgment must consist of a subject and an assertion about that subject (a predicate), which put together in a sentence constitutes making a statement of judgment.

Furthermore, there are:

• Analytic statements which are propositions that to deny would be contradictory (where the predicate B belongs to the subject A) e.g. a rainy day is a wet day; and

• Synthetic statements which depend on observation (where the predicate B does not belong to the subject A) e.g. that salt dissolves in water.

These concepts can be combined thus:

Analytical a priori statements of judgment, which are true by definition; indeed they are definitions: “Lincoln is the county town of Lincolnshire”.

Synthetic a posteriori statements of judgment, which are true by observation. “That car is a red car” is a simple statement about the colour of a car.

Analytical a posteriori statements of judgment do not exist. There can be no disconnection between the subject A and the predicate B detected by the senses if in advance we have stated that A is defined by B as a condition of its existence as a statement of judgment.

Synthetic a priori statements of judgment are the most interesting. Here the predicate does not belong to the subject by right of definition, but none the less we are not allowed to verify that by reference to the senses. Is this possible? Kant thought it was. For example, in arithmetic, the statement three plus four equals five is such a statement.

In a conversation with Kant, he would probably want to spend some time trying to convince you of the reality of synthetic a priori statements of judgment. He was departing from his senior Hume, who would have none of this reasoning. Hume thought there were analytical statements, or definitions, and empirical statements, which were statements of findings by the senses. If we are to know things, it is through one or other of these two routes. Any laws (such as scientific laws) which emanate from these two sources of information are therefore provisional, since they have no other grounds for truth except what we define as the case and what we sense about our environment.

Kant respected that view, but wanted to add a third category, synthetic a priori, sometimes referred to as a normative category, or a statement of the normal. Kant’s conception of synthetic a priori judgments was a follows:

• they cannot be negated and still be meaningful but they do not require direct sensory input;

• they have to be argued – they are logical positions. Compare analytical a priori judgments, which are definitions, and complete in themselves; and synthetic a posteriori judgments, which are observations, and can be disbelieved or doubted, but are not the product of logic or argument;

• the laws of arithmetic, Euclidean geometry, traditional logic, and Newtonian physics constitute the whole of synthetic a priori judgments – which they probably did in his time.

Hume’s criticism of the notion of causality in respect of sense perception (i.e. that we expect one sense perception to follow another only because we have experienced the same perceptions together in the past, and are psychologically conditioned to it) made Kant re-think his position on how we make perceptive judgments (famously, he said that Hume had “interrupted my dogmatic slumber”). He asked himself whether there are necessary connections which are not abstracted from perception and conditioning. He reasoned that both geometric and arithmetic reason employ such causal relationships to investigate space and number. Kant refers to these relationships as a priori particulars (meaning paramount, given concepts).

How Does This Develop into a View of the Phenomenal World?

Kant thus reasons that we can all agree on certain mathematical relationships, and physical laws which everyone understands tacitly if not necessarily on a codified form. He thought of space and time sequence as a priori (based on experience and not perception).

Space is a priori because if we conceive something in space, we cannot conceive it not in space, so space is a matter of logic rather than perception. So space is an a priori particular or given. Space, he argues, is not only a priori but also synthetic, because when we speak of it we need to describe it in three dimensions i.e. its definition is not obvious from the term, but depends on some logical thinking. Space is thus a synthetic a priori particular. (Kant only knew about Euclidean space).

Time is treated in a similar manner. We cannot conceive of an object in the phenomenal world that is not in time, so time is a priori. Its definition is not obvious from the term, so it is synthetic. Time is thus a synthetic a priori particular.

What is necessary in the mind for cognitive experience to be possible? Or, what is it that we take for granted in order to understand what people are saying to us, or when we make judgments about events?

Kant reasoned that our minds impose a structure of the sense data which we receive about the world. Or, put another way, our minds form for us experiences of the world; they create for us the world as we know it. This is important, because it means that the world each of us experiences is presented to each of us by our individual minds. Space and time are part of the synthetic a priori concepts which each of us have to develop to function in the world.

Consider also the proposal by Hume that causality is based on empirical experience. Could this also be a universal concept which each of our minds has built into it? Kant preferred to see the mind as made up of a matrix of what he called categories of understanding which were sufficiently universal among each of us for accurate mutual communication about what we perceive in the world. In addition to the synthetic a priori particulars of time and space, he suggested twelve other categories of understanding. He thought that concepts are formed from sense perceptions, but they undergo rigorous examination and checking via these categories of judgment to make them objective. To be a priori they must be true for anybody and everybody. Only then can they be regarded as objective conclusions. To say conclusively that “this stone is heavy” (i.e. “there is a general conception that this stone would be judged to be heavy”) must imply that everyone would think that.

Kant distinguishes twelve pure concepts of the understanding divided into four classes of three:

• Quantity

• Unity

• Plurality

• Totality

• Quality

• Reality

• Negation

• Limitation

• Relation

• Inherence and Subsistence (substance and accident)

• Causality and Dependence (cause and effect)

• Community (reciprocity)

• Modality

• Possibility

• Existence

• Necessity

The way the categories are supposed to work is as follows: We look at an objects quantity, quality, relation, and modality, and decide which one of the three sub-headings in each case applies, thus characterising the object.

This list of categories is, according to Kant, exhaustive, and includes all the cognitive tools we need to make judgments and form concepts about what we perceive. Other categories have since been proposed by later philosophers, not least Husserl, who provided a much longer list. Nonetheless, Kant was the pioneer, and his method is valuable in principle as a way of uniting objective judgments based originally on perceptions. These categories are something our minds impose on the world of perceptions to turn them into a world of experience. That world, in Kant’s view, was based on deterministic laws, the laws of maths and science. Nonetheless, all of these laws are part of the phenomenal world, observed by us, based on the senses, and filtered by us in our minds.

It is of course important that while each of us is an individual with individual differences and foibles, for the most part we see every physical event in substantially the same way. To explain this, Kant realised that a perception consists of a manifold of presentations i.e. perceived, remembered or imagined data which the mind collects. The application of the categories to this manifold confers objectivity on the judgment. A manifold of presentations might be no more than a stream of impressions. To be useful, such a manifold would need to have some unity. Such a manifold would be a bundle of connected impressions which form a synthesis of connected impressions. The relation between the subject and the manifold Kant calls pure apperception, and the unity of our experience the transcendental unity of apperception.

At its simplest, this amounts to the following: a subject receives sense impressions. S/he cannot form a concept of these unless s/he has access to a list of a priori categories by which to judge the impressions. These, being a priori, s/he can share them with other human beings. The impressions have a synthetic unity (form a manifold), and s/he is related to that manifold by a mental process (generally called thinking).

Kant saw this as a basis for a whole set of judgments about the world as perceived by the senses. Unless a schematised category is applicable to a manifold of perceptions the latter can have no synthetic unity and thus cannot be an object. Every object must correspond to a substratum of a category; so every object must have extensive qualities, which is what thinking adds to perception. Kant thought that the principles of objective experience formed the basis of natural science, which in turn describes, interprets and projects objective experience. These principles are synthetic a priori because while they have to be argued (i.e. they are not analytic and therefore obvious from their definition) neither do they follow immediately from perception. They are made a priori by general experience of what is necessary, and can be taken as given.

All this, may seem obvious, even tautologous. But it does bring in new thinking which goes beyond what Hume had previously said. viz. Not only do we experience objects, but we also apply a priori categories on the way to consciously understanding and agreeing about what we have perceived.

The Transcendental Deduction

After establishing the categories, Kant tries to show that they will work in practice and give objective knowledge.

This problem harks back to the one that Descartes famously had – how did he know that his perception of an object was objective, or whether some demon might be fooling him? His solution to this is equally famously inadequate – he decided that God would not allow humans to be fooled in this way, so what we see is what we get.

Of course, even without invoking demons, it may not necessarily be the case that what we think is an object from observable evidence and reason is actually what the object is. There are optical illusions, and conjuring tricks. But there are also mistakes in observation and interpretation. What Kant wanted to show, without invoking God, was that in fact an entity in the phenomenal world could in most normative cases be taken by the observing agent as real.

His deduction is, however, widely regarded as inconclusive. It relies heavily on three arguments:

The first argument concerns continuity of experience. This is Bishop Berkeley’s argument turned on its head. Whereas Berkeley famously thought that objects existed only in the mind and were not there when unobserved, Kant argues that the observation that an object has continuity to the observer is evidence of its reality.

The second argument takes this concept further. If I am conscious of an object which is repeatedly affected in the same way by the same cause, as in a reproducible scientific experiment, then there is an overwhelming likelihood that the cause and effect and therefore the object are real.

The third argument relates to the nature of time itself. We perceive time as things happening with complete continuity. If it were not so, time would be as a series of instants with no content useful to experience, and we could not operate in the world.

In his excellent "Very Short Introduction to Kant", Roger Scruton points out that none of these arguments completely deals with the problem. For a more satisfactory deduction, we have to wait for Wittgenstein, in his "Philosophical Investigations", where he points out that all our understanding of objects involves language, and that language exists to make public our perception of objects. If there is an objective world, it is the world of language.

Even so, the problem remains perhaps better understood, but not resolved. There is no such thing as certainty about what is real and not real. Only a set of thought structures which each of us agree on, dependent on time and continuity and language, which is, fortunately, good enough for most practical judgments in the world.

The Schemata

So far as a model of the world based on sense perception is concerned, Kant saw the categories as vital for an objective unity of apperception. Without them, there would be no possibility of us all thinking alike. He did appreciate a problem with the categories which requires a further piece of reasoning: that is, while they present a logical basis for understanding, on their own they do not present us with any a posteriori picture or mental construct of what we perceive.

He holds that these constructs cannot be perceived without schemata. For example, to apply the concept of a dog when we see one, we must be able to produce some mental construct of a dog to compare with the concept we are forming from the visual image. In that way we see a dog, and then know it is a dog. We recognise a dog from the image; the dog then forms not just a meaningless image of a dog because we have given the image meaning. A schema, according to Kant, is “the representation of a general procedure of the imagination in procuring an image for a concept”. Thus, for a posteriori concepts we have the sequence: perception – schemata – understanding, and schemata are therefore referential rules (or a sort of logical conversion kit) for understanding what we perceive.

Kant defined a schema for each category. The links between individual categories and schema is through the a priori concept of time. His reasoning here has something in common with the transcendental deduction: how do we know the categories apply? Because they are repeatable for ourselves and in common experience. The important thing to note here, is not Kant’s derivation of the categories or the corresponding schemata (both of which are flaky and incomplete) but the idea of the role of the categories in interpretative thinking.

The time dependent links which Kant derives are show below:

Category​ Schema​

Quantity (unity, plurality, totality)

Number, measurement

Quality (reality, negation, limitation)

Degree of intensity

Relation (substance, causality, interaction)

Permanence (substance), succession (causality), co-existence of accidents (interaction)

Modality (i.e. empirical thought; possibility – impossibility, existence – non-existence, necessity –contingency)

Possibility in time, existence in time, necessity in time

Principles of Objective Experience

Having established a route from sensory observation to a posteriori understanding via the categories and schemata, Kant looks at the possibility of using this to derive “rules for the objective deployment of the categories”, or a priori Principles of experience that would be objective and universal. Synthetic judgements are about something which has been or will be the case, or something which ought to be the case. The former is theoretical, the latter is practical. Kant is concerned here with the former: synthetic a priori judgements in which a category is applied and which lead to a priori principles and gives what Kant calls “the possibility of objective experience”.

Kant’s enthusiasm for Newton is evident here. He thought that just as motion (say) can be subject to universal laws, that there must be some logical basis for wider laws or at least Principles for how the phenomenal universe appears. He thought that the Principles of objective experience could form the basis of natural science, which in turn describes, interprets and projects objective experience. These Principles are synthetic a priori because while they have to be argued (i.e. they are not analytic and therefore obvious from their definition) neither do they follow immediately from perception. They are made a priori by general experience of what is necessary, and can be taken as given.

Kant distinguishes between laws of nature which are conditions of objective experience and those which are generalisations from objective experience. The former is the rationalist position; the latter is the empiricist position. Synthetic a priori principles cannot substitute for experimental observations, so both the rationalist and empiricist positions are valid approaches to science. Theory and practice exist side by side.

Kant sets up a number of these Principles, too many to discuss in detail here. The most important are the 'Analogies of Experience'.

In the First Analogy, Kant argues that all explanations of change in the objects of perception, if not merely a change in our perceptions themselves, must involve an unchanging substance within the object; otherwise there would be no continuity of the object’s existence. This has an important consequence for science as the logic behind physical and chemical change, and the laws of conservation of mass. In modern time this would be seen as a consequence of the even broader principles of the first and second laws of thermodynamics.

In the Second Analogy, Kant argues that the law of cause and effect is a condition of the objective validity of our empirical judgments. Kant’s involved proof seems to state that objectivity is linked to duration (as in the transcendental deduction) and our continual appreciation of cause and effect, contrary to Hume’s notion that there is no necessary connection, is proof of its existence. Kant says that “causality leads to the concept of action, this in turn to the concept of force, and thereby to the concept of substance.” In other words, we seek causal explanations because we can postulate a world of enduring things.

The Phenomenal World and the Illusions of Metaphysics

We see the world through the lenses of space and time, and reason about it through maths and science. But the synthetic unity of apperception is imposed on all concepts and judgments made from them by the self-conscious subject.

Kant thought that this limits our ability to see the world in its noumenal form and leaves us with a conception of the world only in its phenomenal form, i.e. a conception synthesised from our perceptions.

Noumenon means ‘not-phenomenon’, so while we can experience phenomena we cannot experience noumena. Noumena are an important concept in morality and religion; less important in science.

In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant examined various antinomies or contradictions thrown up by metaphysics in the phenomenal world. They are:

• Can the self be an object of experience? (i.e. is consciousness real?)

• Does the world have a beginning in time and a limit in space?

• Does God exist?

Kant shows that the idea introduced by Descartes that consciousness is the proof of existence has no basis in the phenomenal world, because consciousness has no reality in and of itself any more than existence does.

The world can only be shown to have a limit in time and space by finding out what happens at the beginning or end of the process, and this gives rise to an infinite regression of investigations of the process which can never come to an end.

There are several ingenious classical arguments which purport to show that God exists in the phenomenal world. They are the cosmological argument (the existence of God the creator is necessary); the ontological argument (the most perfect being that can be conceived must exist, therefore God exists); and the argument from design (the universe is so ordered and perfect only a superior being could have designed it). Kant dismisses all of these. The first because the statement assumes a creator, who must in turn be created; the second because the statement only defines God, without offering any proof of his existence; the third because we can (as with the case of the world’s beginning and end) have no conception from enquiry of how things started or will be completed.

Kant’s arguments are not so much complete demolitions of the illusions of metaphysics as demolitions of them within any world we can investigate (i.e. the phenomenal world).

The World of Practical Reason

But that’s not the end of it. For Kant, the mental world as not merely a set of concepts derived from sense data. There is also the question of freedom of the will. A person has beliefs, attitudes and s/he has to take decisions. It might be easy to proceed with logical, sense based data in maths, sciences like physics, and their applications in engineering and medicine. But what about questions where what one can judge from sense data are not the end of the problem? What about moral questions, or even ethical and how-to-live life questions generally? Will any system of thought or decisions based on what you can observe in the world ever be enough to allow one to make judgments about the world and in particular one's part in it, how one should or can behave in it? People don’t think scientifically all the time, not because they are incapable of doing so but because science doesn’t answer all the questions people have, and people have a tendency in those cases either to guess, or turn to religion or other beliefs which are not necessarily a priori. In short - even after assessing whatever factual or scientific evidence they can get - they have freedom to take decisions as they like.

However one describes it, and what ever background or events lead up to such action, one is then exhibiting freedom of the will. We’ll leave aside here the classic metaphysical question of whether we have freedom of action at all, or whether everything we do is predetermined. If we had long enough in a conversation with Kant he would deal with that by saying it doesn’t matter, but as a gesture, he will move from talking about theoretical reason to practical reason. All of us, without exception, act as though we have freedom of the will – and so we’d better consider how we make our judgments under that pretence, if it is one. Kant thus thought of this part of his philosophy, employing practical reason, as different from the pure reason of his work on perception in the phenomenal world.

A Brief Look at Kant’s Work on Morality

Kant first asks the question whether or not there are moral laws on which we can base our practical decisions. He believed in reason, and reason can do (nearly) anything. He thought through some basic rules of morality based on the categorical imperative.

“Act so that the maxim of thy will can always hold good as a principle of universal legislation.”

If I was concerned in more detail with Kant’s moral philosophy in this overview, I would need to stop here and consider how he came to this somewhat ex cathedra statement. In the Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (summarised elsewhere in this site) he gives seven version or corollaries of the categorical imperative, and indicates how he derived it (although even then it comes across as a statement which was obvious to Kant though not necessarily to other moral philosophers.)

He goes on to show that the categorical imperative is synthetic partly because it is fitted by definition to confer universal advantage so that to negate it would be nonsense, and also because if it is applied to various acts A which predicate outcomes B, while A is not necessarily implied by B, it must be is synthetic. So, he says, like concepts of space, number and the categories in the phenomenal world, its veracity cannot be denied. It is not based on any proposition other than logic, so it fulfils the condition that it is entirely abstract, and therefore a priori.

But another consideration needs to be made before accepting the categorical imperative as a basis for morality. Kant realised that this consideration was indeed freedom of the will – an agent needs to have freedom of the will to decide whether or not to live by any principle or none. It is thus through his work on morality that Kant came to study the epistemological status of freedom of the will, which is of interest to us here because it forms a major component of Kant's view of the world.

The Status of Freedom of the Will

The question for Kant is not one of whether free will exists, but whether it is always the case that we have that choice, or whether some things at least are predetermined by our backgrounds. In the Second Critique, the Critique of Practical Reason, he spends a long time working through this and decides, eventually, yes – freedom is a firm synthetic a priori base for morality and practical reason generally.

To do this, Kant first splits the world into the part based on the senses, amenable to the pure theoretical reason of the first critique, and that of the working of free will in the mind, his present subject. He equates these with the phenomenal and noumenal worlds respectively.

He looks at some differences between the concepts of theoretical or pure reason, and those of practical reason. Pure reason has objects, practical reason has ideas. Pure reason has causality, practical reason has freedom. Pure reason has senses; practical reason has desires of the will. Laws of pure reason are laws of physics and happen naturally but laws of practical reason are formal and happen because we see them as options. It follows that a law of practical reason can be disobeyed in practice, but with the result that the world would in some way cease to work in quite the same way. While in the phenomenal world we are concerned with sense perception, in the noumenal world we are concerned with what we can have.

But is there any substitute for causality in the practical world? Is our will guided by anything that is so inevitable? Kant says that if an agent reasons practically in order to work out his or her will, s/he use a form of causality since the concepts are linked (so s/he believes) logically (if this, then that etc.) in his or her imagination.

He then sets out a set of Categories of Freedom, in order to “produce the reality of that to which they refer (the intention of the will)”:

I. Quantity

Subjective, according to maxims (practical opinions of the individual)

Objective, according to principles (precepts)

A Priori, both objective and subjective principles of freedom (laws)

(While Kant calls this category ‘Quantity’, in line with his practice in the First Critique, it appears to be more a list of how an agent can make choices.)

II. Quality

Practical rules of action

Practical rules of mission

Practical rules of exception

(Again, while Kant follows his previous practice, this category is about how an agent takes action or pursues the next step after making an initial choice.)

III Relation

To personality, to oneself

Reciprocal, to others

This category applies to the agent’s relation to or with other agents.

IV Modality

Permitted or forbidden

Duty or contrary to duty

Perfect or imperfect duty

The category applies directly to the restrictions or control the moral agent ought to place upon the action proposed; i.e. to duty.

What Kant is doing here, and throughout the Critique of Practical Reason, is inventing two approaches to philosophy: one is the essential (scientific, sensory based) approach relating to universal, repeatable observations of the world; the other is the existential (mind based, ideas dependent) approach relating to concepts of what the world seems to be like to the individual agent. These differently conceived worlds are a consequence of his original division of the world into the sensible and non-sensible, or, respectively, the phenomenal and noumenal (or, as he sometimes calls it, supersensible). He struggles to unite the two. He does not succeed because the task is impossible.

Kant's main interest in developing laws for decisions outside of scientifically informed choices was, as we have seen, to set up a moral code. He was aware that people do not act morally when following their free will. His view is that they ought to. But more generally existential problems are not all moral. His parallel aim of developing a practical version of transcendental logic for making choices under conditions where the will is free is useful here.

A Summation of Kant’s Position on Freedom of the Will.

In the deterministic world of pure speculative reason, freedom has no place. But in the world of pure practical reason, it is a postulate of the moral law, and by extension, the basis for our existential position in the world. Nonetheless the concept of freedom has to be derived and not merely observed. Classical determination in the phenomenal world is derived from the causality of events in time. But freedom in practical reason is not determinable in terms of causation by one event following another antecedent event.

Agents have a choice about what they do. Without this choice there would be no possibility of a moral law, or indeed of making existential choices. It is significant that even now, in a Court of Law, when a Judge is considering a sentence, while s/he takes into account social background, psychology and the context of the crime, the element of at least some freedom of choice by the perpetrator is still assumed.

So, freedom of the will, i.e. choice, is a priori – we cannot imagine a human being without it. This leads to action, and action is mediated by guilt and indicated by conscience. A more modern existentialist, such as Sartre, would see freedom of the will in very similar terms.

Kant and Religion

As well as freedom of the will and its consequences for moral behaviour and existential choices generally, Kant considered two other concepts to be the outcomes of practical as opposed to theoretical reason: the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. Sense data is no use in considering the reality of these concepts, he said. In other words, scientific investigation falls short of a complete answer. Neither could he find a synthetic a priori principle, such as the many he found for perception of the phenomenal world, and the one (freedom) he found for the working of the will, to support any arguments for their reality. Kant is, of course, famous for his demolition of the logical proofs of God in the Critique of Pure Pure Reason (see above) but these apply only to the phenomenal world and therefore ultimately depend on sense data observations. It would be fair to say that Kant removed the possibility of proving the existence of God in the world as we know it through the senses. But he confessed himself unable to disprove the absence of God or an immortal soul in the mental world not based on phenomena - the one he called the noumenal world. To emphasise his position again for the sake of clarity: Kant could not assume the absence of God or the immortality of the soul in a hidden world the senses couldn’t detect.

So what was the solution? Here Kant brings in another concept – teleology. Before proceeding further, it is worth looking at the concept of teleology in more detail.

Teleology

In the physical world, events are causally related in time – one causes another. However, to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, causality was not enough to explain the complex system in which we live. At least some entities in the world were thus said to be teleologically related by purpose. Everything has a purpose, and that purpose is there not merely because of causation by chance. Arguably, it was an implicit acceptance of teleology that caused Newton to say that he was not merely investigating physical events but truly wished to understand the mind of God. An enlightenment, pre-Darwin thinker such as Kant or Newton thought that everything had a place; we can only understand the working of the machinery, as it were, and not the grand scheme into which everything is placed. The theory of evolution, the quantum theory, and the Standard Model of the universe, which are entirely mechanistic explanations of systems that might be said to have been put in place by a grand design – not necessarily emanating from God, have put that notion under severe pressure, but Kant and Newton would see the rule as fixed and proved by observation. Science is work in progress – but purpose was not something given to mere mortals to understand.

Kant’s work on teleology is set out in his third critique, the Critique of Judgment. He claims here that teleology is necessary to explain the complexities of biology, and writes quite lyrically about the impossibility of any explanation through physical science of the beautiful complexity of even a blade of grass. As we have seen, he has already propounded a moral system based on non-physical principles and independent of sense data, and he considered any other sociological questions (for example, questions about justice) to be beyond the reach of science. Nonetheless, he did derive a synthetic a priori principle, freedom, which most of us are still able to accept as necessary for a moral and just life. But for other things beyond the limits of the science of the time he was apt to rely on teleology. Even morality, as set out in the second critique, could be said to be an effort to interpose reason to derive a moral law in an area which was essentially teleological – the conflict between desire and duty.

For enlightenment thinkers like Kant, therefore, teleology is something of a stop-gap concept which is brought in where causality and mechanistic explanation are inadequate. That sort of thinking has not altogether gone out of fashion, especially among religious communities. Causality explains how things happen, teleology explains why things happen. Why is there a God? Because the universe is too complicated to explain without one. Why do edible plants exist? For the purpose of sustaining life. If science and causality tackles the how, religion and teleology tackle the why.

Practical Reason, the Immortality of the Soul and God

Kant’s view in the second critique on these questions can now be dealt with fairly briefly:

He first looks at the idea of a summum bonum, or highest good. This is an ancient Greek concept meaning the highest wisdom. Whatever its precise definition, it is an ideal or goal. The summum bonum consists of a perfect harmony of morality leading to happiness - not something that happens in this world.

If we assume a world in which the sunnum bonum exists where morality leads to happiness, then God needs to exist - not as the creator of the phenomenal universe - but as the ultimate moral facilitator. God and the immortality of the soul are necessary suppositions if the sunnum bonum is to be attained. In short: no God then no immortality of the soul and no sunnum bonum.

We cannot suppose the existence of anything without the evidence of sense based on speculative reason. Nor, Kant says, is it “necessary to suppose the existence of God as a basis for obligation in general.” This rests on the autonomy of reason itself. The existence of God and the immortality of the soul therefore rest on faith - faith not initially in God but in the sunnum bonum and the necessity to strive for it.

The assumption of teleology or purpose for the world, thus led Kant to offer what for him are less than cast iron arguments for the foundation concepts of religion. Having dismissed God in the first critique, he tries to argue for the possibility of His existence in the second critique, and completes this in the third. It is worth quoting his statement in Critique of Judgment in full: “What in the end can be proved by even the most complete teleology? Does it perhaps prove that such an intelligent being [as God] exists? No, it proves no more than this, that – our cognitive faculties being what they are – we cannot at all form the conception of such a [teleologically organised] world unless we regard an intentionally acting being as its supreme cause.” We must note that there is no synthetic a priori concept behind any of this, only a unifying judgment or notion.

Kant thus went as far as he could with the denial of God and the immortality of the soul. He couldn’t disprove either except within the phenomenal world, and he thought both had to exist to fulfil a purpose, though the principle was more teleological hunch than rooted in a synthetic a priori concept. He thought he could see sufficiently into the noumenal world to define morality, but he could not solve the problem of what the senses could not detect except by the expectation of a purpose in life and for life.

The upshot of all this was that he produced working guidelines for disciplining the workings of the free will via deontological (or duty based) ethics: adhere to the categorical imperative. But God and the immortality of the soul were a matter for assuming a sunnum bonum, or highest good, which formed a purpose for life and why we are here.

Conclusion

So what has Kant influenced?

Theoretical reason, senses, synthetic a priori concepts of perception, this, so far as it goes, forms the basis of our conception of the practical, physical world. Later philosophers have tried to challenge Kant's reasoning, and in particular have called into question of the reality of synthetic a priori concepts. Continental philosophers have tended to sympathise with Kant, who is their ultimate mentor, although many have been critical of his approach. British philosophers have tended to follow the empiricism of Hume. In America, Charles Pierce, the founder of pragmatism, studied Kant in detail and was heavily influenced by him.

As this overview tries to explain, his philosophy has lead to a divide between essentialist approaches base on sense data and the physical world, and existentialist approaches based on freedom of the will and the mental world. While existentialism is a course taken by continental philosophy since Kant's time, I have argued that he laid its foundations in the second critique.

This overview does not discuss the moral philosophy, aesthetics and theory of justice, where Kant used his view of the world as composed of pure and practical reason to great effect. His moral philosophy is now regarded as one end of a spectrum of work which is abstract and takes no note of consequences of actions. Most moral philosophers and experts on jurisprudence would not tend to such an extreme. Also, he doesn’t deal at all well with modern cross cutting moral problems. Ethics has moved on from Kant, but at the expense of a clear definition of the Moral Law, where he still is the leader.

Finally: For God, immortality and religion generally, Kant’s assumption of the sunnum bonum and teleology weaken his base, but, it has to be said, don’t demolish it. These concepts are ideas that are not a priori but have not been disproved. And Kant is right that these problems are not soluble by speculative or theoretical reason based ultimately on sense data and observation, if only because we can’t know everything by that route.

The enlightenment and the extensions of enlightenment philosophers’ contributions to it go on and on. Darwin is a turning point, and so is modern physics extending beyond the merely phenomenal and into what is virtually a whole new branch of metaphysics in the form a string theory and its recent developments. We are more sophisticated now and take a wider view than Kant did about what constitutes science, and we are more sceptical. He was convinced that things exist for a purpose. But Kant's view of the world is still relevant to the problems of modernity - which is in many ways merely phase II of the Enlightenment movement of which he was such an important member.