

Understanding Kant: Concepts and Intuitions



Hercules Bantas

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Author's Notes

This guide examines Kant's theory of knowledge, specifically his arguments for separating human thought into concepts and intuitions. Based on the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this guide covers his critique of empirical and rational thought, and explains key concepts such as a priori judgements, analytic and synthetic judgements, and the

difference between pure and empirical concepts.

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Kant's Concepts and Intuitions

In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defines human knowledge as being comprised of two separate and distinct parts, namely intuitions and concepts. Using critiques of empiricism and rationalism, he is able to forge a theory that more adequately describes and explains human knowledge than either of the two theories.

Before beginning the analysis of Kant's concepts and intuitions, it will be helpful to define a few key terms. An *analytic judgement* is one in which the truth of the judgement can be ascertained by analysing the meaning of its terms, is necessarily true, and is non-informative (Korner, 1955, p. 17). For example, 'all celebrities are famous' is an analytic judgement because the term celebrity is synonymous with a famous person and is therefore necessarily true. A *synthetic judgement* is one whose truth

cannot be established by analysing its terms (1955, p. 18). For example, 'my cat, Jurgen, is black' is a synthetic judgement because the truth of whether Jurgen is a black cat or not cannot be established by analysing the terms within the judgement. Synthetic and analytic judgements are mutually exclusive.

An *a priori* judgement is a judgement that is logically independent of experience (1955, p. 19), and is the cornerstone of rationalism. An example of an *a priori* statement is the statement inspired by Descartes 'I think therefore I am'. Descartes was able to establish the existence of 'I' without resorting to any empirical or sensory observations (Bantas, *Understanding Descartes: 'I'*, 2011). An *a posteriori* statement is a statement that is dependent on experience and/or sensory data (1955, p. 20). Empiricists argue that all judgements are *a posteriori* because all knowledge is dependent upon experience.

Combining the definitions gives four permutations. Judgements can be: analytic *a priori*, analytic *a posteriori*, synthetic *a priori*, or synthetic *a posteriori*. Analytic *a posteriori* judgements are a contradiction and can be ignored. Analytic *a priori* judgements form an important part of rationalist theory, and synthetic *a posteriori* are the

only judgements that pure empirical theory allows. Synthetic *s priori* judgements are judgements whose truth cannot be established by analysing the terms, but whose truth is also independent of all experience.

Early in *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that a basic flaw exists in the philosophical arguments that preceded him,

But what is still more extraordinary than all the preceding is this, that certain modes of knowledge leave the field of all possible experiences and have the appearance of extending the scope of our judgements beyond all limits of experience, and this by means of concepts to which no corresponding objects can ever be given in experience (Kant, 1929, p. 45).

Kant argues that philosophers and schools of philosophy in general, such as the rationalism championed by Descartes or Hume's empiricism, had set their metaphysics beyond the 'limits' of reason. Reason, according to Kant, must fall within the boundaries of experience. Using reason,

for example, to argue the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient deity is an exercise in futility because the existence, or otherwise, of this deity is beyond human experience and therefore falls outside the scope of human reason.

An argument for the existence, or not, of such a deity would need to be founded on something other than reason,

These unavoidable problems set by pure reason itself are *God, freedom, and immortality*. The science which, with all its preparations, is in its final intention directed solely to their solution is metaphysics; and its procedure is at first dogmatic, that is, it confidently sets itself to this task without any previous examination of the capacity or incapacity of reason for so great an undertaking (1929, p. 46).

Reason is not up to the task of founding metaphysics, which is the science that interrogates problems such as the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient deity exists, and the questions of freedom and the immortality. The promise

of knowledge has lured philosophers of the past into using reason as a foundation upon which to constructing metaphysical arguments and philosophies despite reason being an unsuitable foundation (1929, p. 46). Kant begins constructing a proper foundation for metaphysical enquiry by adopting an empirical initial position.

Like the empiricists, Kant argues that human knowledge begins with experience,

There is no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. For how should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action did not objects affecting our senses partly of themselves produce representations, partly arouse the activity of our understanding to compare these representations, and, by combining or separating them work up the raw material of the sensible impressions into that knowledge of objects which is entitled experience? In the order of time, therefore, we have no

knowledge antecedent to experience,
and with experience, all our
knowledge begins (1929, p. 41).

Experience is the genesis of human knowledge because without experience people would not have the fundamental 'impressions' of the world around them that 'arouses' understanding and imagination. For example, I cannot know the colour red if I had not experienced the colour red. But experience is only one element of knowledge. It is what we do with our experiences that defines the other element of knowledge - understanding.

Kant argues that understanding couples with experience to generate the whole of human knowledge,

But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience. For it may well be that even our empirical knowledge is made up of what we receive through impressions and what our faculty of knowledge (sensible impressions serving merely as the occasion) supplies for itself (1929, pp. 41-42).

The meld of experience through sensory perception and human understanding to generate the entirety of human knowledge is central to Kant's theory of knowledge. He argues that although experience is the beginnings of knowledge, it is understanding that manipulates and completes it. For example, having experienced the colour red, and then experienced a table, I can manipulate the data supplied by my experiences using my faculty of understanding to imagine a red table. It would have been impossible for me to imagine a red table if I had not previously experienced the colour red and a table.

Having established the role of understanding in human knowledge, Kant argues there exist two faculties that lead to understanding - intuitions and concepts (1929, p. 65). Intuitions are representations in an individual's mind left by sense perceptions,

In whatever manner and by whatever means a mode of knowledge may relate to objects, *intuition* is that that through which it in immediate relation to them, and to which all thought as a means is directed. But intuition takes place

only in so far as the object is given to us. This again is only possible, to man at least, in so far as the mind is affected in a certain way. The capacity (receptivity) for receiving representations through the mode in which we are affected by objects is entitled *sensibility* (1929, p. 65).

Intuitions, as Kant defines them, are representations in our minds left by the evidence of our senses. Intuitions come in two forms, they are either pure (*a priori*) or empirical. Empirical intuitions coincide with the human senses and are colour, sound, taste, smell, and feel. Pure intuitions are time and space and are *a priori* in that they are logically independent of experience, but are informative in that they give us knowledge of our environment.

Kant refines his definition of time and space as the two pure intuitions, beginning with space,

By means of outer senses, a property of our mind, we represent to ourselves objects as outside us, and all without exception in space. In space their shape, magnitude, and

relation to one another are determined or determinable (1929, p. 67).

Space is the pure intuition within which all other intuitions to do with the placement and orientation of empirical intuitions. Kant argues that space has several characteristics that define it as a pure intuition. First, space is not an empirical intuition because in order to represent outside sensations there must be something in another region of space that is acting upon the sensibilities to produce the sensations, therefore the concept of space is presupposed (1929, p. 68). Second, Kant argues that space is a priori because we can never represent to ourselves the absence of space (1929, p. 68). Third, space is a pure intuition and not a general concept of relations of things in general because there is only one space. All spaces are part of one unique space, and not individual, separate spaces (1929, p. 69). Finally, space contains an infinite number of representations within itself - no matter how big a space, or how many spaces we consider, there is always space outside of this space or spaces (1929, p. 69).

Time is, according to Kant, the pure intuition that governs 'inner sense',

Inner sense, by means of which the mind intuits itself or its inner state, yields indeed no intuition of the soul itself as an object; but there is nevertheless a determinate form [namely, time] in which alone the intuition of inner states is possible, and everything which belongs to inner determinations is therefore represented in relations of time (1929, p. 68).

Kant's arguments for time as a synthetic a priori intuition echo those he makes for space. First, time is not empirical as neither coexistence nor succession have ever come within human perception (1929, p. 74). Second, time is a pure intuition because it is a necessary component of all intuitions (1929, p. 74). Third, time has only one dimension and this knowledge is not gained through experience, therefore time is a priori (1929, p. 75). Finally, different times are all part of one and the same time - there are no separate or individual times (1929, p. 75).

Kant argues that concepts arise from the understanding of intuitions,

Objects are *given* to us by means of sensibility, and it alone yields us *intuitions*; they are thought the understanding, and from understanding arise concepts (1929, p. 65).

Kant argues that concepts form when an understanding is reached of intuitions that are, in turn, gained through the senses. Intuitions, therefore, are the raw material from which concepts are forged. Like intuitions, concepts are either pure or empirical. Empirical concepts are abstract entities such as female, tree, beside, and table. Pure concepts, however, are *a priori*.

Kant argues that pure concepts are objective in nature and contain no empirical data,

Pure *a priori* concepts, if such exist, cannot indeed contain anything empirical; yet, none the less, they can serve solely as *a priori* conditions of a possible experience. Upon this ground alone can their objective reality rest (1929, p. 129).

A pure concept will not contain any data supplied by the senses, but can be used to interpret such data. For example, the statement 'every time I have observed a fire nearby, I have experienced heat and light' is based upon empirical evidence, namely seeing and feeling the light and heat produced by a fire. The statement 'fire produces light and heat' is objective because there is no empirical or sensory data contained in the proposition.

Kant goes on to argue that pure concepts must contain some empirical or sensory evidence,

But the *elements* of all modes of *a priori* knowledge, even of capricious and incongruous fictions, though they cannot, indeed, be derived from experience, since in that case they would not be knowledge *a priori*, must none the less always contain the pure *a priori* conditions of a possible experience and of an empirical object. Otherwise nothing would thought through them, and they themselves, being without data, could never arise even in thought

(1929, p. 130).

A pure concept, therefore, must describe an empirical object or objects or other sensory data in order to have any meaning. Using the fire example from the previous paragraph, if there was no empirical data or object, then the objective statement 'fire produces light and heat' would be meaningless because the subject would have no experience of the object fire or the sensory data of heat and light.

By separating two aspects of human thought - the sensory impressions of an object and the reasoned manipulation of data produced by that object - Kant gives a plausible explanation of human knowledge. Using concepts and intuitions, Kant is able to explain human creativity, which empiricism could adequately achieve. The following example illustrates the differences between Kant's theory of knowledge and a purely empirical theory: My father is a very short man and finds that most tables and chairs are too large for him to sit at comfortably while having dinner. However, after he shortened the legs on both the chair and the table, he found he could sit more comfortably. An empiricist's explanation of my father's ingenuity would require him to have previously experienced a shorter table and chair and therefore already be in possession of the

knowledge that they would seat him more comfortably. Kant, on the other hand, would argue that my father manipulated the sensory data of the chair, the table, his height and his discomfort to reach the conclusion that he would be more comfortable with a shorter table and chair. He would have formed concepts (pure and empirical) to explain and manipulate the data presented to him - in the form of intuitions - by his senses.

Kant used a critique of empiricism and rationalism to forge a coherent and viable theory of human knowledge. By breaking human knowledge into two distinct strands, namely sensory and empirical thought that he labelled intuitions, and the process of understanding that he labelled concepts, he was able to discuss and explain human knowledge far more adequately than either empiricism or rationalism.

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About The Author

Dr Hercules Bantas has been teaching and reading political science for the better part of a decade. It is his opinion that he is too often immersed in some weighty tome or other, the authors of which *always* use one thousand words where one hundred words would suffice. It was while juggling no less than three weighty tomes by the same author and trying to understand what the fellow was trying to say that the idea of The Reluctant Geek Guides was born. He is well aware that publishing clearly written and unambiguous guides to important ideas in the human sciences is frowned upon in some circles, but he's going to do it anyway. Despite his well documented grumpiness, Hercules claims to like people and can be contacted by

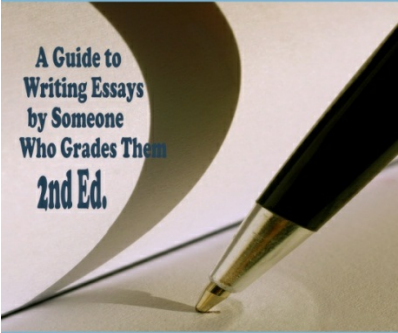
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