



Immanuel Kant

Critique of Pure Reason

Immanuel Kant was born in Königsberg, Prussia on April 22, 1724. He was the fourth of eleven children. His early education was at the Collegium Fredericianum, a school run by his Lutheran pastor at which he learned to love the Latin classics. At the age of 16 he enrolled at the University of Königsberg, where he studied mathematics and physics. After his father died, he was forced to give up his academic studies and took a position as a private tutor. In 1755 help from a relative enabled him to complete his degree, and he took a position as a lecturer at the university for the next fifteen years. He began lecturing in mathematics and physics, but gradually began to move out into the broader field of philosophy. By 1770 he had made a name for himself as a philosopher and was finally awarded a chair as professor of logic and metaphysics. Kant taught at the University for 27 years, and the “critical philosophy” that he articulated in his writing was taught in philosophy classes in every German speaking university. In 1792 his unorthodox religious views prompted the King of Prussia to forbid him to publish anything more on religious thought. He continued to teach and to write until 1797 and died at his home on February 12, 1804.

CONTEXT

Kant's thinking cannot be understood outside of the context of the two lines of rationalist philosophic inquiry to which he was responding: Rationalism and Empiricism. Both schools were concerned with the question of how the mind acquires knowledge of the world out-side of itself. The Empiricists argued for an a posteriori reasoning based on the senses (recall Locke's tabula rasa) while the Rationalists looked to an a priori kind of reasoning that began with a basic truth contained in whole or part in an idea (e.g. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am."). Kant found that neither line of reasoning was adequate for doing metaphysics, so he synthesized aspects of the two and developed an entirely new approach that he sets out in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1794.

Descartes began his philosophic thinking with a radically skeptical act and answered it with what he claimed was the only self-evident truth: he thought. It was on the basis of that move that he formulated the cogito, "I think, therefore I am," making all being around him contingent on his mind and severing himself from his body and the world of being it made available to him. Kant proceeded to make that first move twist in on itself even more by making all things outside his mind conform to it. The mind becomes the conditioner, determiner, regulator of everything outside of itself, filtering everything through its own innate categories. The fruits of this modern philosophic endeavor have been tremendous in one sense, opening up depths of human subjectivity that were not known before. But they have also had their tragic cost, cutting man off from any means of knowing the world objectively and of learning what it has to offer if he only made adequate place for the world and the self-evident existence of the things outside his mind. Modern man has increasingly lamented his confinement inside his own head; nearly all great modern literature is a testimony to the tragic consequences of that fact. But we didn't come to this confinement accidentally; we came to it by a denial of our bodies and of the humility and hard work required to attain a knowledge of Being.

Kant is widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of our modern world. His philosophy was further developed by Hegel, it constituted a major part of the work of Karl Marx, and strains of it can be found in the works of Nietzsche.

SUMMARY

Preface to the 2nd Edition: In his Preface Kant sets out for the reader his intention in writing his Critique of Pure Reason. He begins with the question whether metaphysics can advance with the certainty that characterizes science. Looking at the progress of metaphysics to date, he suggests that the fact that its advocates have repeatedly come to a standstill and been forced to retrace their steps and begin anew is a clear indication that it has not attained the certainty of science. He further suggests that simply establishing the path by which such certainty could be found would be an important service. It is this that he proposes to do.

He offers a brief review of the evolution of the sciences: logic, mathematics, and physics, taking particular note of the revolutionary moments that sparked rapid progress in each field. It is this revolution in thought, as yet unknown in metaphysics, which Kant proposes to offer. He gives the example of what Copernicus did when he could make no progress within the framework of the heavens revolving around the spectator and so reversed the assumption to see if progress could be made if the spectator revolved while the heavens remained at rest. Using this as an analogy, he proposes to reverse the long-standing assumption that our cognition must conform to the objects outside our minds and assumes instead that the objects we cognize as outside our minds must conform to our cognition. The Critique of Pure Reason is a treatise on this approach. He would apply the Critique according to the rigorous requirements of Christian Wolff, 1679 – 1754, (whom he calls the greatest of the dogmatic philosophers), that is, establishing fixed principles and clear definitions and subjecting demonstrations to severe scrutiny instead of rashly jumping to conclusions. He concludes the Preface with the statement of his belief that the propositions and the demonstrations used to support them will stand unchanged, a belief he bases on the results of his moving from the simplest elements up to the complete whole of pure reason and then backwards again from the whole to each individual part.

Introduction: In Section I Kant establishes the definitions of a priori knowledge—knowledge absolutely free of all experience—and a posteriori knowledge—empirical knowledge available only through experiences or by means of the senses.

II both establishes that a priori knowledge does exist and then sets out the criteria for identifying it: necessity and strict universality, neither of which belongs to empirical knowledge.

III asserts the need for a science that can examine a priori knowledge, determining its possibility, principles, and limits and cautions against the temptations to continually expand those limits once we move beyond the bounds of experience.

IV distinguishes between analytic judgments—in which the predicate is contained in the subject—and synthetic judgments—in which the predicate is related to the subject while standing outside of it (“Socrates is a man” is an example of the first, since the predicate man is contained in the name, and “Socrates is white” is an example of the second, since the predicate is related to the subject but not essential to it). While synthetic judgments are easily made with the aid of experience, synthetic a priori judgments are problematical.

V is devoted to demonstrating not only the existence of synthetical a priori judgments as principles in mathematics and physics but their necessity in metaphysics.

VI defines the universal problem of pure reason in the question: “How are synthetical judgments a priori possible?” The solution to this question contains the solution to other questions: How is pure mathematical science possible? How is pure natural science possible? And the question of primary concern to Kant is, how is metaphysics possible as a science?

VII defines what Kant calls the particular science of the Critique of Pure Reason. It is not itself a system of pure reason and must not be called a doctrine; it is rather to be understood as the propaedeutic, the necessary preparation for such a system. Its primary function is not to enlarge the bounds of reason but to purify them and protect them from error. This system, which he calls transcendental philosophy, is concerned not with objects but with the mode of our cognition of these objects from the perspective of a priori judgments. The Critique he describes as the sketch of transcendental philosophy, containing all of its principles but not the philosophy itself because it is limited to the examination of synthetical knowledge a priori.