

E-content for B.A. Philosophy

Recommended for B.A.Honours III Paper–IV & B.A. Honours I Paper–II

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IMMANUEL KANT

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of unit is to outline Kant's epistemological and metaphysical positions in philosophy. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a philosopher of enlightenment, is famous for his epistemology and metaphysics. His outstanding contribution to Western philosophy is laudable, especially in his notion of phenomenon and *noumenon*, categorical imperatives in moral philosophy. His transcendental idealism is seen as an attempt to resolve the issues of rationalism and empiricism in approaching reality.

INTRODUCTION

Immanuel Kant has been regarded as the most important modern philosopher and the paradigmatic philosopher of the European Enlightenment. He is also one of the most influential German Idealist philosophers and the founder of Transcendental or Critical Idealism. Kant proposes a "change in point of view" to reform metaphysics from the shackles of dogmatism and scepticism. While dogmatism, according to Kant, trusts in the principles of metaphysics "without a previous critique of the faculty of reason itself, merely with a view to their success," scepticism holds a "general mistrust in pure reason," again, "without a previous critique, merely with a view to the failure of its assertions." Metaphysics has hitherto been a merely random groping ..., a groping among mere concepts." In spite of his strictures on the traditional metaphysics, he is ready to admit that "the idea of is as old as speculative human reason," and is "what rational being does not speculate either in scholastic or in popular fashion?" Interestingly, Kant opens the first *Critique* with a statement of the inevitability of metaphysics, indicating that it

is “prescribed by the very nature of reason itself.” Dogmatic metaphysics attempts to have *a priori* knowledge of reality independent of sensibility and experience.

The new metaphysics, which, for Kant, is only worthy of the name, is metaphysics as a science, “a system of *a priori* knowledge from mere concepts” and “the inventory of all our possessions through pure reason, systematically arranged.” Assuming that the quest of human reason for metaphysics is inherent to human nature (“natural disposition”), he looks for a justification of its ideas in the practical realm. Metaphysics of morals is indirectly a concession Kant gives to fulfill the natural quest of human reason for the realization of its ultimate ideals, which he rejects as untenable on the basis of the principles enshrined in the *Critique* itself. Kant tailors human natural disposition for metaphysics into the new metaphysics.

Reflecting on the development of his philosophy, Kant distinguished three periods: The ‘dogmatic period,’ The ‘sceptic period,’ and The ‘transcendentalist period.’ Kant’s philosophy can be characterised as an attempt to answer three fundamental questions: a) What can I know? b) What ought I to do? c) What may I hope for? He addresses these questions in his important works namely the three Critiques. a) In 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* was published. ‘Pure reason’ means a critical enquiry into the faculty of reason with reference to all the cognitions to which it may strive to attain independently of all experience. b) It is true that his original conception of his critical philosophy anticipated the preparation of a critique of moral philosophy. *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), the result of this intention, is the standard source book for his ethical doctrines. *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), one of the most original and instructive of all of Kant’s writings - was not foreseen in his original conception of the critical philosophy. Thus it is perhaps best regarded as a series of appendixes to the other two Critiques. The work falls into two main parts, namely “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” and “Critique of Teleological Judgment.”

METHOD OF KANT

Kant uniquely synthesizes Rationalism and Empiricism into Critical Philosophy of his own, by inspiration of both, eliminating the faults of both thoughts and critically unifying the strengths of these opposing philosophical insights. He rejected rationalism for being so dogmatic in metaphysics and the second for too sceptical in epistemology. His main objective was to save religion from reason and yet at the same time to save science from scepticism. For Kant, knowledge proper must have universal and necessary factors along with factuality. Such knowledge is found in mathematics and physics. Empiricism cannot give such knowledge as on the basis of experience, strict universality and necessity cannot be obtained. So empiricism cannot explain knowledge as it is found in mathematics and physics. According to Rationalism, there is a universal faculty of reason by virtue of which each individual has certain innate ideas.

This theory explains universality and necessity according to Kant. All men have the same innate ideas because of their possessing a common faculty of reason. But the difficulty of rationalism lies in another direction. Innate ideas are subjective, being in the mind of human knowers. There is no guarantee that they will be true of facts. The upshot of the review is that reason, unaided by experience, can build castle in the air only, and by no stretch of imagination can it lay claim to actuality. Therefore, Kant discarded rationalism on the ground that it dealt with airy structures without correspondence with facts. Kant did not reject empiricism and rationalism outright. He tried to give solution based on the Critical, Transcendental and Agnostic philosophy.

Kant states that both empiricism and rationalism are right in what they affirm but wrong in what they deny. Empiricism affirms that knowledge is constituted by experience and rationalism affirms that knowledge is constituted by innate or *a priori* ideas. Empiricism is right in as much as it points out that propositions of facts can be derived from experience. But rationalism is also right in as much as it points out that knowledge is constituted of *a priori* elements also. Again,

empiricism is wrong in as much as it denies the presence of *a priori* elements involved in knowledge. In the same way, rationalism wrongly denies that sense-experience also constitutes knowledge. The proper view, according to Kant, is “Knowledge begins with experience and does not necessarily originate from it.” Therefore, knowledge proper is a joint venture of sense and understanding. Nevertheless, we shall also find in due course that the mind does not remain satisfied with scientific knowledge of the phenomenon only. It also tries to know *noumena* (thing-in-itself - *das Ding an sich*) as well but becomes impossible. Apart from sense and understanding there is reason which tries to constitute knowledge. Hence, according to Kant, knowledge begins with sense, proceeds to understanding and ends in reason.

According to Kant, any epistemology should have occupied itself with the enquiry of *a priori* elements involved in knowledge. These elements are independent of any experience whatsoever. Indeed, they are the pre-conditions of any cognitive experience whatsoever. Unless, these *a priori* elements be operative, no experience of any object would arise at all. So Kant is not so much concerned with any specific objects of knowledge as with the universal or *a priori* ways of knowing any object. Hence, Kant has called his epistemological enquiry Transcendental. It means something like going beyond ordinary level of experience. The term transcendental signifies the *a priori* condition of all possible knowledge. In Kant’s philosophy ‘*a priori*’ is the mark of necessity. Such necessity can never be explained in terms of experience. E.g. Unity, good, truth. Thus Kant’s method is called transcendental method.

Agnosticism is that branch of philosophy according to which it is claimed that human beings have no faculty for knowing certain ultimate realities. It also holds that any attempt to prove or disapprove the existence of God becomes impossible. Agnosticism, in other words, completely or partially denies the possibility of knowing the nature of Universe. Following this philosophy, Kant maintains that there are things in themselves which are unknown and unknowable. Therefore, he

concludes that we can know objects only as they appear to us, coloured and transformed by our ways of knowing. What these objects are in themselves apart from our ways of knowing, of course, can never be ascertained by us. Hence, according to Kant, knowledge of the *phenomena* alone is possible and *noumena* remain unknown and unknowable. Later on, Kant has maintained that although they are not objects of knowledge, they are yet proper objects of faith. After all, he was a deeply religious man and so he demolished knowledge in order to make room for faith.

KANT'S PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE

Kant observed the sorry and confused state of philosophy which has been reduced to mere groping among concepts. Metaphysics has not been established on sure foundation. Instead man is a metaphysical animal that constantly asks questions about being. Metaphysics is a natural disposition of man. He is driven on by an inward need to ask questions which cannot be answered by empirical employment of reason. The Metaphysics of Kant's time was tinged with dogmatism and illogic and was not worthy of the name 'science' because science sought after precision and perfection. There is still a way for Metaphysics to enter upon the secure path of science. If in the past Metaphysics was not able to enter upon the secure path of science it was because it has been following a wrong path. Therefore Kant felt the need for a kind of radical reordering of presuppositions. Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects outside us. Instead Kant proposed that we should suppose that the external world must conform to our knowledge, to the forms and categories of objects in our mind. This came to be known as "Kantian Copernican Revolution".

Synthetic *a priori* Judgements

From a logical point of view, the propositions that express human knowledge can be divided according to two distinctions. 1) Distinction between propositions that are *a priori*, in the sense that they are knowable prior to experience. Necessity and Universality are the two criteria of *a priori* propositions and both of these criteria

are inseparable. By 'strict universality' means 'true in all possible world.' A *posteriori* propositions are those that they are knowable only after experience. 2) Distinction between propositions that are analytic, that is, those in which the predicate is included in the subject. For example, "All bodies are extended." If we understand the meaning of the term 'material body' whose connotation was taken by Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz to be extension, then certainly the predicate 'extended' is already contained in the subject. And a synthetic proposition is one in which the predicate is not included in the subject. E.g. Material bodies are heavy. Whether a body is heavy or not is known through experience.

The distinction between the analytic and the synthetic is based on the content of propositions. Here the question is: "Does the proposition add or does not add to cognition or knowledge?" If it does, it is called synthetic, if it does not, it is called analytic. However, the distinction of *a priori* and *a posteriori* propositions has reference to the sources of cognition. *A priori* propositions stem from pure reason or pure understanding. As such they are valid independently of any experience whatsoever. *A posteriori* propositions, on the other hand, are derived from experience. They, therefore, require experience for their validation. For the most of the empiricists, *a priori* and the analytic propositions, and, *a posteriori* and the synthetic propositions are identical. But, for Kant, synthetic propositions instead of being *a posteriori* may be *a priori*. For the empiricists and rationalists, who are unanimous in claiming that the analytical propositions are *a priori* in their nature, they are absurd and self-contradictory and consequently nonsense. For Kant, however, synthetic propositions *a priori* are most significant in scientific cognition and are found in mathematics and in physics. For example: $5+7$ are together equal to 12. It is universal, necessary and *a priori* in mathematics. Every event has a cause. Although it is not part of the concept of an event that it be a cause, it is universally true and necessary that every event has a cause. These judgements or propositions are synthetic as they explain the progress of science and they are *a priori* as they explain the universal aspect of scientific knowledge.

The Process of Knowledge

Kant was meditative and methodical. A desire for thoroughness has made him highly analytic. As such Kant divides and sub-divides his subject into indefinite details. It was Kant who has introduced the tripartite division of mental processes into cognition, cognition and affection. Corresponding to these three divisions, the three Critiques are developed. In the history of philosophy, Critique of Pure Reason has played more important part than the other critiques. For Kant, knowledge requires both sensation (empiricists) and understanding (rationalists). Sensation supplies the data for knowledge to the understanding. Kant said, "Objects are 'given' to us by means of sensation and it alone yields us 'intuitions'; they are 'thought' through the understanding, and from the understanding arise 'concepts'." Therefore, it is only from the united action of sensation and understanding we can obtain knowledge. The only valid use of the understanding consists of its 'thinking of the data' supplied to it by sensation. Using the understanding to go beyond to the data of sensation is an illegitimate use of the understanding.

The contribution of sensation: The data of sensation come to us through various sense organs and present themselves to us in a confused and unconnected way. This is known as 'matter' of sensation. These must be ordered properly. In sensation there are two 'a priori' forms which provide this ordering namely, 'space' and 'time'. Space is nothing but the form of all appearances of outer sense. It is the subjective condition of sensibility under which alone outer intuition is possible for us. Time is the determinate form in which alone the intuition of inner states is possible. Neither space nor time is derived from experience nor do they represent any property of things in themselves. They are a priori forms according to which we organise and perceive sense data. The objects of our sense experience are represented as being spatio-temporal.

The contribution of understanding: The confused sense data are supplied to reason which organises them in spatio-temporal forms and passes on the result to understanding to be 'thought' by it through concepts.

The Twelve Categories of Kant

There are 12 basic categories (concepts) according to which these sense-data are thought. Each category is linked to a type of judgement. These judgements can be brought under four groups: quantity, quality, relation, and modality. Each of these heads has ‘three moments’; the last moment is the synthesis of the first two moments.

Table of Judgements	Illustrations	Derived Concepts
Quantity: Universal Particular Singular	All politicians are corrupt Some are honest Vijayakanth is corrupt	Unity Plurality Totality
Quality: Affirmative Negative Infinite	Man is mortal The soul is not mortal The soul is immortal	Reality Negation Limitation
Relation: Categorical Hypothetical Disjunctive	God is just If God is just, he will punish sinners God is either just or unjust	Substance – Attribute Cause – Effect Reciprocity of agent – Patient
Modality: Problematical Assertoric Apodictic (Beyond Dispute)	This may be poison This is poison Every effect must have a Cause	Possibility – Impossibility Existence – Non-Existence Necessity – Contingency

Hence, according to Kant, knowledge is the application of pure concepts of the understanding or categories to objects furnished us by the senses and perceived as spatial and temporal. Categories serve to make experience possible.

Noumena and Phenomena

Kant made a famous distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*. The *noumenon* (plural *Noumena*) is the thing-in-itself (*das Ding an sich*) as opposed to the phenomenon—the thing as it appears to an observer. Though the *noumena* holds the contents of the intelligible world, Kant claimed that man’s speculative reason can only know phenomena and can never penetrate to the *noumenon*. ‘*Phenomena*’ refers to ‘things perceived’, that is, the things as-we-know-it. ‘*Noumena*’ refers to ‘things thought’, that is, the things in themselves. By this distinction Kant wanted to show that what we know is the appearance of reality, clothed under the a priori forms of space and time and invested in a category. In other words, we can never

know anything in its pure state, divested of forms and categories. Therefore, knowledge consists in getting objects to conform to the forms and categories of the mind. The universality and necessity of cause and effect relationship, weakened by David Hume, is now restored in strictness.

Check Your Progress

1) What does Kant mean by *noumena*?

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2) Explain the difference between synthetic and analytic propositions.

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3) Why is the importance of Kant's Philosophy in Western Philosophy?

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4) name the Twelve Categories after Kant.

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