

# Class Nine - Kant's Transcendental Idealism

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Where We Left Off

- **The Distinction Between Conventional and Ultimate:** We saw, in early Indian Buddhism, the emergence of a distinction between *conventional* and *ultimate*, arising, in the first instance, to make sense of the Buddha's apparently contradictory claims about the persons or selves (sometimes speaking as if there are such things and sometimes explicitly claiming that there are no such things).
  - **The Thought:** Things like persons, chariots and the like don't survive physical or analytical decomposition. As such, they can only be said to "conventionally" exist. The *ultimate* existences are the physical and conceptual simples that survive critical analysis.
- **The Metaphysics of the Ultimate Under Fire:** In Hume, and then even more radically in Madhyamaka philosophy, we saw the conception of ultimate reality, consisting in things that are ultimately existent, come under fire.
  - **Causation:** Hume argues against the intelligibility of an object bearing a causal power such that, when placed in a certain circumstance, a certain effect is necessitated. I suggested Nagarjuna can be seen as generalizing this argument, placing Hume's argument as the justification for the rejection of rejecting one horn (the "from another") horn in a dilemma of exclusive and exhaustive alternatives.
  - **Intrinsic (or Extrinsic) Nature:** Nagarjuna, among many other arguments in MMK, argues that we can't make sense of the constituents of ultimate reality as having any natures at all, either intrinsic or extrinsic. Ultimately, the very idea of ultimate reality breaks down under analytical scrutiny.
- **The Remaining Clear Fact:** But it just seems *obvious* that the ordinary objects of our experience—things like books, tables, and waterbottles—are persisting things with various properties and they *do* stand in causal relations.
  - Even if we want to maintain, with Nagarjuna and Candrakirti, that we can't make sense of the idea of there being some *ultimate* reality whose constituents intrinsic natures or stand in causal relations, there remains the question of how to make sense of *conventional* reality as having constituents that at least, *appear* to have natures and stand in causal relations.

## 2 Some Kanttext (good pun, right?)

- **Immanuel Kant:** German philosopher who lived from 1724-1804 (for context, Hume's *Enquiry* was published in 1748, when Kant was 24). Some facts:
  - Grew up Lutheran, and remained devoutly religious throughout his life, which is reflected in his work, though, notably, he doesn't think any *theoretical* arguments can be given for the existence of God.
  - During his early years, actually wrote works of natural science as well as metaphysics, and his work was a more rationalist orientation.

- Whereas previous Modern philosophers fell into the category of *rationalist* or *empiricist*, Kant aimed to *synthesize* rationalism and empiricism.
- **The *Critique of Pure Reason*:** Kant's master work of theoretical philosophy. Originally published in 1781, with the second (B) edition (of which you read the preface) being published in 1787.
  - Arguably (and perhaps not even that controversially) the greatest single work in the Western philosophical tradition.
  - Followed by two other major "Critiques," the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), dealing with ethics, and the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) dealing with aesthetics and teleology.
- **The *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*:** Published in 1783, containing the central ideas of the first *Critique*, which serves as a set of "preparatory exercises" to that larger work (11).

### 3 Kant's Response to Hume

- **Kant's Awakening:** Before the *First Critique*, Kant is said to have been in his "pre-critical" phase (which, since "critical" contrasts with "dogmatic," is just another way to say "dogmatic" phase). It's Hume who woke Kant up from this dogmatism:
 

"I freely admit that the remembrance of David Hume was the very thing that many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy," (10).
- **The Basic Question Raised by Hume which (the Critical) Kant Takes Up:** "Whether such a thing as metaphysics is even possible at all," (5).
  - A negative answer to this question certainly seems to be the result of Madhyamaka philosophy as well.
- **Hume's Attack:** "[N]o event has occurred that could have been more decisive with respect to the fate of this science than the attack made upon it by *David Hume*," (7)
- **Kant on Hume's Opponents:** They completely "missed the point of his problem" and, in proposing solutions, were "constantly taking for granted just what he doubted," (8). These opponents essentially just argued for things that Hume would readily agree with, for instance, that causality is conceptually indispensable, that we could make no sense of nature without it, and so on.
- **Hume's Real Question:** "The discussion was only about the origin of this concept, not about its indispensability in use; of the former were only discovered, the conditions of its use and the sphere in which it can be valid would already be given," (9).
  - **Recall:** Remember the distinction between the *epistemological skepticism* discussed in Section IV and the *conceptual skepticism* discussed in section VII. Kant takes it that Hume's fundamental question is the *conceptual one*—what could the origin of the concept of causality possibly be?
  - **Connecting to Madhyamaka:** Presumably, it is the same basic question that is raised by Madhyamaka philosophy. Nargarjuna's arguments don't simply question whether we're *justified in applying* the concepts of causal relations or intrinsic natures, but, rather, whether we *can even make sense of what it would be for these concepts to apply*.
- **Kant's Basic Agreement with Hume:** Hume showed decisively that the concept of causation (of causal power, of necessary connection, etc.) can't be discovered on the basis of experience. Rather, it must be *a priori*. However, Hume also "indisputably proved that it is wholly impossible for reason to think such a connection *a priori* and from concepts," (7).
  - **Question:** What alternative *is there* if it's not a posteriori (from experience) and it's not a priori from concepts?
  - **Kant's Answer:** *A priori* and *not* from concepts!

- **Hume vs. Kant’s Categorization of Possible Objects of Knowledge (According to Kant):** Hume’s arguments are completely correct, but there’s a third kind of object of knowledge that he didn’t have in is purview:

	Analytic	Synthetic
A Priori	Hume’s “Relations of Ideas”	Metaphysical Principles (and Math)
A Posteriori	nothing	Hume’s “Matters of Fact”

- **Metaphysical Knowledge, Properly Construed:** For Kant, one doesn’t come to a knowledge of a relations such as cause an effect by simply bringing out what’s already contained in concepts that one has. Rather, it comes from *substantive* reasoning about *what must be the case in order for cognition of objects to be possible at all*. This precedes any *particular* experiences of things in the world, since it concerns the *very possibility* of experience of things in the world. Rather than coming from particular experiences or cognitions, it comes through a reflective investigation of the very faculty of cognition.

## 4 The Copernican Turn and Kant’s Transcendental Idealism

- **Copernicus’s Turn in Astronomy:** “Matters stand here just as they did for the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when things did not go well for explaining the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire host of stars rotates about the observer, sought to find whether things might not go better if he had the observer rotate, and by contrast left the stars at rest,” (144).
- **Kant’s Analogous Turn in Metaphysics:** “The same kind of thing can now be tried in metaphysics, with respect to the *intuition* of objects. If intuition had to conform itself to the constitution of objects, I do not see how anything could be known of that constitution a priori; but if the object (as object of the senses) conforms itself to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, then I can very well imagine this possibility,” (144).
  - **Terminological Point:** When Kant says “intuition” he doesn’t mean what we mean when we speak of “intuition” (saying, for instance, “My intuition tells me that going left is a quicker path). Rather, when Kant speaks of “intuition” he’s simply speaking of experience, or, more precisely, one aspect of experience. An intuition, for Kant, is the presentation of an object to us in experience. For instance, if I see a bottle, the bottle is presented to me in experience, or, in other words, I have an “intuition” of a bottle.
  - **The Basic Idea:** Don’t ask how can we know, a priori, how objects in general are independently constituted. Rather, ask how must objects be constituted, if they are to be cognizable by us, such that we can be given them in experience (or “intuition”) and make sense of them conceptually.
- **The Basic Idea, Stated Differently:** Rather than it being the case that “our cognition through experience conforms to objects as things in themselves,” it’s the case that “objects, as appearances, instead conform themselves to our manner of representation,” (146).
- **A Direct Consequence of this Idea:** The objects about which we have empirical and metaphysical knowledge are not *things in themselves*, which exist completely independently of our cognition, but, rather, *appearances*, objects as they are manifest to us and capable of being conceptually known by us, whose form is conceived of as partially constituted by our capacity for understanding.
- **Appearances and Things in Themselves:** “[Metaphysical] cognition relates only to appearances, leaving the things in themselves, by contrast, indeed actual for themselves, but uncognized by us” (145).
  - **Appearances:** These aren’t the same thing as mere Humean “impressions” or any kind of “perception” for that matter. Rather, the realm of appearances includes *empirical objects in space and time*, thus, things like:
    - \* This gray water bottle.

- \* This desk.
- \* That tree outside.
- **Things in Themselves:** These are things that *exist*—they’re actual—but are beyond the bounds of our cognitive reach, that are in some way *responsible* for the appearances, but for which (because they are beyond our cognitive reach), the exact manner of this responsibility can’t be completely known.
- **Transcendental Idealism:** Appearances (which, for Kant, includes all ordinary empirical objects existing in space and time) “are all together to be regarded as mere representations and not things in themselves,” (A369, 426).
- **Question:** Does this mean that the knowledge we have of objects is really *a priori*?
  - **Answer:** Well, yes and no. Knowledge of particular objects and how they are (my knowledge, for instance, that this object is a blue bottle) is not *a priori*. But knowledge of *what it is to be an object*, and knowledge of *what sort of relations objects, as such, must stand in*, is *a priori*.

## 5 Kant’s Criticism of Dogmatic Metaphysics

- **The Metaphysical Impulse:** The metaphysical impulse is to arrive at knowledge of “the unconditioned,” that which lies beyond any basis on anything else but is rather the basis on which everything else lies.
- **The Unconditioned, on Transcendental Idealism:** “The unconditioned must not be present in things insofar as we are acquainted with them (insofar as they are given to us), but rather in things insofar as we are not acquainted with them, as things in themselves: then this would show that what we initially assumed only as an experiment is well-grounded” (Bxx, p. 112), namely that we can only have metaphysical cognition of appearances, not of things in themselves.
- **The Negative Conception of Noumena:** “The concept of a *noumenon*, i.e., of a thing that is not to be thought of as an object of the senses but rather as a thing in itself (solely through a pure understanding), is not at all contradictory; for one cannot assert of sensibility that it is the only possible kind of intuition. Further, this concept is necessary in order not to extend sensible intuition to things in themselves, and thus to limit the objective validity of sensible cognition (for the other things, to which sensibility does not reach, are called noumena just in order to indicate that those cognitions cannot extend their domain to everything that the understanding thinks). In the end, however, we have no insight into the possibility of such noumena, and the domain outside of the sphere of appearances is empty (for us), i.e., we have an understanding that extends farther than sensibility *problematically*, but no intuition, indeed not even the concept of a possible intuition, through which objects outside of the field of sensibility could be given, and about which the understanding could be employed *assertorically*. The concept of a noumenon is therefore merely a *boundary concept*, in order to limit the pretension of sensibility, and therefore only of negative use. But it is nevertheless not invented arbitrarily, but is rather connected with the limitation of sensibility, yet without being able to posit anything positive outside of the domain of the latter,” (B310-311, p. 362).