

## Remote Learning Module for 27 April 2020

### Lecture Notes: Kant's Copernican Revolution, Gun & Camera in Hand

Last time we followed the course of Kant's speculative life, from his early schooling at the Collegium Fridericianum, through his studies at the University of Königsberg, where he eventually settled to teach philosophy until shortly before his death in 1804. Today, we'll examine the essential purport of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, wherein he presents his "Copernican Revolution for Thought," arguing that the entire prior history of Modern Philosophy misunderstood the problem of knowledge so thoroughly that nothing short of a wholesale reorientation of the relation between ideas and things can liberate our thinking from the chains of skepticism, on the one hand, and dogmatism, on the other hand.

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### — The Problem —

(1) Descartes' original project had been to put epistemology and physical science on firm foundations, that is,

- (a) To save epistemology from skepticism, and
- (b) To rescue physical science from dogmatism.

(2) In pursuit of this project, Descartes's proposal was to analyze reality into two metaphysically distinct substances: *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (matter). Minds are endowed with the natural light of reason; material things are regions of space, endowed with various physical properties. The natural light, by way of the principle of contradiction, delivers *analytic* truths (whatever is or implies a contradiction is necessarily false), which can be known *apriori* (that is, independently of experience). In turn, the clarity and distinctness of an idea is the measure of its objective reality: the more clear and distinct an idea is, the more its object (its reference) *conforms* to the idea. Matter obeys strictly deterministic mechanical laws; there are no final causes operative in the physical world. Such is Cartesian Dualism.

(3) Cartesian Dualism, however, leaves mind-body interaction mysterious at best, incoherent at worst; likewise, Descartes' doctrine of innate ideas demands the transcendental agency of a supernatural cause (God) in order to account for the conformity of these ideas to real things. In the face of these difficulties, the *rationalist* tradition (Kant's own labeling) collapses Cartesian Dualism, attempting to reduce physics to mathematics. While the *empiricist* tradition (again, Kant's labeling) rejects Descartes' innateness epistemology, attempting instead to derive physics from experience.

(4) Eventually, Hume demonstrated conclusively that neither project works, but that the fruit of all these labors is indigestible, because

- (a) Rationalist epistemology founders on dogmatism, and
- (b) Empiricist physical science founders on skepticism.

- (5) This is problem that Kant sees himself as inheriting from his predecessors:
- (a) To save epistemology from dogmatism, and
  - (b) To rescue physical science from skepticism.

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### — The Revolution —

(6) Descartes and his successor on both sides of the English Channel assumed in both epistemology and natural science that knowledge consists in forging ideas so that they *conform* to objects. According to Kant, all of the experiments in achieving the requisite conformity (ranging from Spinoza's monism and Leibniz's phenomenalism to Locke's representational realism and Berkeley's immaterialism (which Kant called "subjective idealism")) failed. They failed, on analogy, in exactly the same way that all pre-Copernican attempts to devise a coherent model of the Solar System from the assumption of a central Earth failed.

(7) On this analogy, Kant proposes a new, revolutionary hypothesis. The *new problem of knowledge* amounts to determining how the mind manages to get objects to conform to ideas. In short, we ask: *How must the world be in order for us to be able to know it?*

(8) Why look at the problem this way? Because, after Hume's skeptical doubts (like the astronomical problem of retrograde motion) rendered both rationalism and empiricism bankrupt, it would seem that Descartes' original project can never be completed, since we can never extract enough data from immediate experience to formulate universal and necessary laws of nature sufficient to guarantee the conformity of our ideas to things-in-themselves. But this is not our problem, says Kant: our problem isn't that we have too little data, but that we have too much. In other words, as Hume so ably demonstrated, from our burgeoning store of disparate sense impressions, we can't account for our claims to have objective knowledge of stable, independent objects all obeying universal laws of nature.

(9) Hume's solution to this problem was to look to the *Principles of Association* whereby our minds organize and structure our ideas (themselves derived from original impressions), thereby generating the marks of coherent thought. Hume's principles operate on what we observe: we perceive instances of resemblance, contiguity, and causal succession in the world; we do not, however, observe instances of strict identity, logical implication, or sufficient reason (the stuff of metaphysical reasoning) in the world; hence, Hume's doubt. Finding this doubt unsatisfactory, Kant, no stranger to scientific investigation, concludes that even Hume was working with a wrong-headed account of scientific method. A scientist, according to Kant, is not like a student who listens to everything a teacher has to say, recording each pronouncement in an ideal notebook, thus producing knowledge; rather, a scientist is like a judge who compels a witness to answer pre-formulated questions.

(10) Scientific method is not, in other words, the *passive recording* of miscellany of facts (*pace* Francis Bacon); it is *active inquiry*—that is, it asks questions, and to ask questions is to have some idea of what a satisfactory answer would look like. On analogy, in order for a judge to determine that a defendant is guilty under the law (objective guilt), the judge must be able to determine whether or not the provisions of a given statute have been satisfied. If a defendant, for

example, is charged with, say, Breaking and Entering, a judge will not ask the defendant what s/he had for breakfast, but, whether or not, upon entering the building in question, s/he did or did not have the owner's permission. In positive law, the relevant questions come from the statutes. If the analogy is to hold for science, even in the face of Hume's doubt, we'll need to determine where the relevant questions come from; this is our problem.

(11) Kant's solution is this: the relevant questions come from the *apriori* structure of the mind. If we are to have objective knowledge, then the flux of our sensations must be ordered in advance, and in certain specific ways, so as to ground that knowledge. Again, on analogy: if a judge is to ascertain objective guilt or innocence, then the various testimonies of witnesses must conform to the *pre-established conditions* for objective guilt or objective innocence. We cannot know before inquiry that a defendant is guilty or innocent; but we must know beforehand what sort of information we would need in order to establish guilt or innocence. Thus, legal statutes are provided *apriori*, while legal judgments are established *aposteriori*. And just as we can't expect to derive sound judgments from the legal statutes alone, nor from testimony in the absence of statutory stipulations, so too we cannot know how things are in the world without both *apriori* concepts and *aposteriori* percepts. As Kant will put the matter succinctly in the *Prolegomena*: "concepts without percepts are empty; percepts without concepts are blind."

(12) Our concepts, then, are what provide us with grounds for the very possibility of objective knowledge. While we *cannot* know how things-in-themselves are, independently of our experience, we *can* know how things must be in order for us have objective experience, rather than having mere figments of our sensory imaginations. Things-in-themselves are unknowable *noumena*, while the empirical objects of experience are knowable *phenomena*. Physical objects, then, *must* occupy space and time (the forms of intuition), and they *must* be subject to a range of concepts of the understanding, including predication, causality, and identity. Apropos causality: what distinguishes a law-like regularity from an accidental regularity, according to Kant, is necessitation, and since Hume was quite right to conclude that we can't synthesize necessity from observation alone, Kant concludes that we *synthesize* necessity from our *apriori* concept of causality: we know, *before inquiry*, that if ever A causes B, then the antecedent, A, necessitates the consequent, B.

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On Wednesday, we'll look to Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as a Science*—the short treatise he composed as an introduction to his new critical philosophy. Be well everyone, and, remember: social distancing, however phenomenal, does save noumenal lives, thereby keeping our empirical and transcendental egos metaphysically united.