

Kant and his Successors

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The Sorry State of Metaphysics

- Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) was an attempt to put metaphysics on a "scientific" basis.
 - Metaphysics purports to describe reality through concepts which originate in reason alone, independently of experience.
- Kant found metaphysics to be in a state of inconclusive strife between competing schools of thought.
- The reason for this strife is that philosophers had failed to ask two questions:
 - What is the nature of metaphysical judgments?
 - How can metaphysical judgments be justified?
- The method of "critique" asks these preliminary questions.
- When the questions are answered satisfactorily, a system of metaphysics may be constructed in a "scientific" way.

Metaphysical Judgments

- Kant held that metaphysical judgments purport to describe reality in a *strictly universal* way.
 - Example: Nothing whatsoever begins to exist without being caused to exist.
- He claimed in addition that metaphysical judgments are supposed to be necessarily true.
 - Example: Nothing can begin to exist without being caused to exist.
- Hume had shown that judgments purporting to be strictly universal and necessary cannot be justified by appeal to experience.
- Thus, metaphysical judgments are made *a priori*, independently of experience.

How to Judge *A Priori*

- Some judgments can be made *a priori* through the mere analysis of the concepts found in them.
 - Example: Nothing can be an effect without being the effect of a cause.
- “Analytic” judgments of this sort do not provide substantive information about reality.
- Informative judgments are “synthetic.”
- No analysis of concepts can justify the synthetic metaphysical claim that nothing can begin to exist without being caused to exist.
- But it is not clear how can one judge *a priori* except through conceptual analysis.

Synthesis

- Kant claimed that there is only one way in which synthetic judgments can be made *a priori*.
- The concepts in a synthetic judgment belong together because they are connected in the *synthesis* of objects falling under them.
- Kant’s paradigm for the activity of synthesis is the construction of a figure.
 - Example: A triangle is constructed by the juxtaposition of three lines.
- If *all* objects of a kind *must* be constructed in a certain way, then we can judge *a priori* that all objects of that kind *must be* that way.
 - Example: All triangles must have angles whose sum is identical to that of two right angles.
- Geometry contains a body of synthetic judgments made *a priori* on the basis of how figures are constructed.

Space

- The *a priori* synthetic judgments of geometry apply to constructed figures.
- Constructed figures might be construed as *ideal* objects, whose existence depends on their being constructed by a mind.
- How, then, could the judgments of geometry apply to *space*, which would seem not to be an ideal object?
- Kant’s response was that the only way in which geometry applies to space is if *space itself is ideal*.

- According to Kant, space is “transcendentally” ideal.
 - Space is nothing apart from the mind.
 - Space is not a thing existing “in itself” or a property of things existing “in themselves.”

Time and Appearances

- Kant treated time similarly to space.
- Time is a form in which we determine the succession of our mental states.
- Kant held further that since space and time are ideal, so are any objects which are spatial and/or temporal in character.
- Thus, all physical objects and all states of our own mind are ideal.
- Kant called all ideal objects in space and time “appearances.”

Metaphysics as a Science

- Metaphysics can be developed scientifically if (and only if) its judgments are “immanent,” or limited to appearances.
- The judgments of immanent metaphysics are synthetic and are made *a priori*.
- Appearances are synthesized by the human imagination, and the synthesis is constrained by rules provided by the human understanding.
- Judgments which are based on these rules are *a priori* synthetic metaphysical judgments.
- Scientific metaphysics is the discovery of the rules of the understanding and the proof that they are necessary for the synthesis of appearances.
 - Example: Every event occurring in time must be connected causally to some prior event.

Things in Themselves

- Although appearances are transcendentally ideal, they are not entirely artifacts of construction.
- We can abstract from the spatial and temporal forms of objects and think them instead as “things in themselves.”
- According to Kant, metaphysics has traditionally concerned the attempt to make *a priori* synthetic judgments about things in themselves.
- This attempt is the fatal error of traditional metaphysics.

- Synthetic judgments can be made *a priori* only because we construct their objects, but things in themselves are by definition not constructed by us.
- So no valid synthetic judgments can be made *a priori* about things in themselves.

Metaphysics as Illusion

- Traditional metaphysics has tried to validate different kinds of *a priori* synthetic judgments, such as the following.
 - Psychological: The human soul is simple and as such is immortal.
 - Cosmological: Some human actions are free, i.e., not subject to natural causation.
 - Theological: There exists a being (God) which is the most real being that is possible.
- The arguments for these theses do not yield validation, but rather lead to “transcendental illusion.”
- The problem with the arguments is that they confuse conditions which must hold for synthesized appearances with conditions that must hold for things in themselves.
 - Example: There is no infinite regress of causes (in appearances), so there must be an uncaused cause (as thing in itself).

Postulation

- Although we have no proof of the truth of the judgments of traditional metaphysics, they are at least possibly true.
- If the judgments are possibly true, we are entitled to reason *as if* they were true.
- We may *postulate* that there is an immortal soul, that it is free, and that God exists.
- This postulation cannot conflict with any metaphysical principle applying to appearances, since things in themselves are not subject to the conditions of appearances.
- Kant makes the postulations for two purposes:
 - They are essential to morality.
 - The postulation of God as a designer aids us in the discovery of scientific truths.
- This postulation would be impossible if the principles of applying to appearances (e.g., universal causality) also applied to things in themselves.

Practical Reason

- Metaphysics as described thus far is carried out by reason in its *theoretical* use.
- It tells us what *is* and *must be* the case about appearances.
- Reason also has a *practical* use.
- It tells us about what *ought to be* the case, thus providing a basis for regulating human action.
- The claim that there is an action that ought to be performed implies that the action *can* be performed.
- Kant concluded from this that an obligatory action presupposes freedom on the part of the agent to perform it.
- This freedom can be postulated of the agent as a thing in itself.

Autonomy

- The basis for moral obligation lies in practical reason alone.
- Practical reason prescribes a law to itself.
- In this sense, the human agent possessing practical reason is *autonomous*.
- A moral act is one which is undertaken for the purpose of obeying the moral law.
- No act which is undertaken for any other purpose (e.g., sensuous impulse) has any moral worth.
- The fundamental feature of a moral act is its *universalizability*: any agent with practical reason would will the basis for that action to be a law.

Kant's Reception

- Although Kant's new philosophy had some defenders (most notably Reinhold), it was subjected to a great deal of criticism.
- The first reviewers of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Feder and Garve, associated transcendental idealism with the idealism of Berkeley.
- Eberhard claimed that there was nothing new in Kant's metaphysics that had not already been established by Leibniz.
- Schulze (anonymously) charged that Kant did not prove that appearances are subject to rules based in the human understanding.
- Maimon objected to the fact that the metaphysical principles Kant endorsed are too general to be used to derive concrete knowledge about the world.

Jacobi's Criticism of Kant

- Jacobi found the weak point of Kant's system to lie in Kant's description of the origin of appearances.
- Kant had claimed that the "matter" of appearances is contributed by sensation.
- Jacobi concluded that sensation must be the product of things in themselves, since it could not be the product of appearances.
- But the claim that things in themselves produce sensations is impermissible in Kant's system, in which only claims about appearances are objectively valid.
- Speaking of things in themselves, Jacobi famously quipped, "without this presupposition I could not get into the system, and with this presupposition I could not remain in it."
- His conclusion was that Kant must abandon all positive claims about things in themselves, even at the risk of solipsism.

Fichte's Early Reactions to Kant

- J. G. Fichte initially greeted the Kantian system, particularly its doctrines of freedom and morality, with great enthusiasm.
- Upon reviewing Schulze's criticisms, he concluded that Kant's system lacked justification.
- What is lacking is a *first principle* from which the whole system can be derived.
- It is to be found in an *absolute subject* which is the basis of all activity of representation.
- This absolute subject (or "self") acts upon itself and so determines itself.
- It is a being of the understanding (noumenon) known through intellectual intuition, but it is not a thing in itself.

Fichte's Idealism

- Fichte rejected the notion of things in themselves, on the grounds that if the self could think them, they would not be things in themselves but instead stand in some relation to the self.
 - This argument is similar to one advanced in another context by Berkeley.
- Thus, all reality stands in relation to the self.
- From this Fichte concluded (again in the manner of Berkeley) that all reality *depends on* the self.
- The self, in turn, can depend on nothing but itself: it is *self-positing*.

Fichte's Spinozism

- Given that reality depends on “the self,” the question arises as to whether reality is unified.
- If there is more than one self on which reality depends, then there would be more than one reality.
- Thus, “the self” must be a trans-personal being to which individual selves are somehow related.
- This is similar to the system of Spinoza.
 - It understands individual selves as limitations of a single absolute self.
 - The “self-positing” of the absolute self is similar to the “self-causing” of Spinoza’s substance.
- A difference is that the absolute self posits an “other,” a non-self, in opposition to it.
 - There is nothing which is opposed to Spinoza’s substance.

Schelling's Alternative

- The system of Schelling differs from that of Fichte in that it takes the non-self (“nature”) not to be a posit of the self.
- Just as the self determines itself, nature is also self-determining.
- Schelling’s approach has the advantage of not requiring the mysterious activity of the self’s positing a non-self.
- On the other hand, the system apparently faces the problem of dualism.
- It postulates two distinct entities, each self-determining, which raises the question of how they are related to each other.
- The solution is supposed to be that there is an underlying identity of the subject (self) and object (nature).
- A primary goal of Hegel’s system was to explain how there could be such identity in the face of difference.

Fichte on Religion and Morality

- As with Kant’s system, Fichte’s “transcendental idealism” is closely related to his views on religion and morality.
- Again as with Kant, Fichte held that only morality can provide a proper basis for belief in God.

- Fichte had earlier argued that so-called revealed truths of religion must be subjected to a rational standard.
- His position led to the accusation that he was an atheist.
- The essay “On the Foundation of our Belief in a Divine Government of the Universe” attempts to clarify his position.

Arguments for God’s Existence

- Philosophers have misunderstood the task of proofs of the existence of God.
- They do not serve to convince the unbeliever.
- They can only explain the conviction a believer already has.
- Belief in God is like belief in material objects: neither requires persuasion.
- The proper goal of a proof is to show how belief in God caused in rational beings by their essence.
- The belief is not an arbitrary assumption but can be shown to be a necessary consequence of reason.

God and the Sensible World

- Philosophers have tried to demonstrate that God’s existence is necessary for the existence and nature of the world of the senses.
- Like Hume and Kant, Fichte held that no such inference is warranted.
- From the standpoint of common sense and natural science, the sensible world is self-sufficient or complete in itself, existing “simply because it does.”
- The laws of the sensible world organize appearances from within the world, and nothing external is needed.
- Creation from nothing, in which thoughts are transformed into matter, cannot be explained.
- Nor can it be understood how thought can give order to unintelligent matter, which is self sufficient and eternal.

Transcendental Philosophy and the Sensible World

- There is another way of regarding the world of the senses which avoids the problems of the naturalistic account of it.
- Transcendental philosophy holds that the world of the senses is only a reflection of inner activity of the self.

- Then the world of the senses has no independent existence.
- So the world of the senses cannot be explained by any relation to a God who is external to the inner activity of the self.

Freedom and the Supersensible

- The ground of a moral order is not to be found in the world of the senses.
- If there is a moral order, its ground must be in something “supersensible.”
- We find a concept of the supersensible in the freedom of our own activities.
- Our free activities are purposive rather than indefinite.
- Purposiveness and the purposive self cannot be found in the world of the senses, but are “posited by the free self from its inner nature.”
- The supersensible just is my own self and my necessary goal.

Proof of Human Freedom

- To doubt the freedom of my activities is tantamount to doubting my own self.
- It is simply categorically true that we act freely.
- My freedom is infinite, so I can doubt whether I act freely.
- But to doubt that one acts freely requires directing one’s will to do so.
- This direction requires the formation of a goal and the determination of one’s self to pursue it.
- Thus, the very act of doubting proves the freedom of the act.
- The truth of our freedom is the secure starting-point of our reason.

“Ought” and “Can”

- Some philosophers hold that to determine what we ought to do, we must first determine what we are able to do.
- This is backward.
- There is an evident and internal moral imperative which determines what we ought to do.
- We then posit the possibility of what we know that we ought to do.
- To deny the primacy of the moral imperative is to deny the moral law itself, and it misconstrues the sequence of our rational processes.

Freedom, Morality and the Sensible World

- The role of the world of the senses, with its immanent laws, is to provide a sphere of operations for free action.
- The sensible world does not play any role in the determination of the morality of an action.
- The sensible world does not prevent free selves from carrying out their self-determined activities (a view held by Kant).
- Because the world is based on a moral law higher than natural laws, moral deeds inevitably succeed and immoral deeds inevitably fail.

Action and the Sensible World

- According to transcendental idealism, appearances are the result of laws given by the self.
- Appearances set boundaries to our actions.
- It is clear and certain that there are such boundaries, but they are beyond our understanding.
- The fact that we have duties to act on the limiting world of the senses reveals its existence.
 - “Our world is the sensualized material of our duty; the latter is the truly real in things, the genuine primal stuff of all appearances.”
- Our duty is revealed in the world of the senses.

The Divine is the Moral Order of the World

- True faith is the identification of the divine with the moral order of the world.
- The order is constituted by right actions.
- Faith is manifested by one’s happily and naturally doing what is right.
- To act on the basis of the calculation of consequences is true atheism.
- One does not act from conscience, but acts like God in the sense that the right action is what is best for himself.
- Calculation presupposes that an act contrary to conscience can bring about some greater good, which is inconsistent with the divine governance of the universe.

Knowledge and the Moral Order

- Our inner nature reveals that the moral order is the beginning of all knowledge of objects.
- Freedom and our moral vocation are the beginnings of knowledge of ourselves.
- To invoke God in order to have knowledge is thus of no value.
- To try to prove that God exists in order to validate one's knowledge of the moral order removes the inner basis for belief in that order and cannot replace it.
- Faith collapses if it is supposed to be based on an argument—one that cannot in fact be given.

Anthropomorphism

- Even an argument for God's existence were persuasive, it would not prove what it is supposed to.
- The God arrived at in this way would have to be a personal being like ourselves in order to explain the moral order.
- But the concepts of personality and consciousness belong only to finite beings.
- To regard God as a conscious personal being would be to regard God as finite.
- Thus the conception of God is nothing more than a duplication of one's self in one's thoughts, which cannot explain the infinite moral law.

The Divine Plan

- The most certain thing in the world is that there is a divine moral order which is the plan of the universe.
- This fact is the basis of all other certainty and is "in fact is the only truth that is absolutely objectively valid."
- The divine plan is comprehensive, encompassing every action, both of rational beings and of nature.
- But candid reflection shows that the notion of God as a separate substance is "impossible and contradictory."
- The "true religion of joyful morality" is furthered by the denial of the scholastic notion of a separate God.