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## **Kant's ' Critique of Pure Reason'**

Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason is generally accepted as the most influential work in " modern" Western philosophy. Coming at the end of the Enlightenment, and the opening of Romanticism, Kant's great work offered a disciplined model for considering the great existential questions, such as whether or not God exists, whether there is an afterlife, a soul, etc. Reason, Kant argued, is the discipline by which such arguments, for or against, must proceed. Any argument that unduly relies on the theoretical, he reasoned, is highly suspect. Critique of Pure Reason offers provides a bridge between the traditional, religious orientation and the rise of science and the rational world.

Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason and his subsequent writings are generally considered to be the most influential philosophical treatises in modern history. Kant's profound contributions to the system of logical inquiry and to understanding the nature of consciousness and experience is on par with the foundational writings of Plato and Aristotle, who invented what has become the Western tradition of philosophy. Kant offered a re-interpretation of the principles of metaphysics; specifically, about the nature of God and about how human beings can know the world around them. In his influential work on Kantian philosophy, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger explains the difference between that which can be intuited and that which is produced by intuiting. According to Heidegger, " Space and time are each a mode of pure intuiting and at the same time something intuited. They are a pure intuiting which does not need any determination in

terms of sensation(they are) something given, not something which is to be produced by this intuiting” (Heidegger, 1997, 84). It is in this way that Kant shows that experience and reason can come to a mutual accommodation.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which identifies Kant as the “central figure” in modern philosophy, describes Kant’s influence as follows: “He synthesized early modern rationalism and empiricism, set the terms for much of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy, and continues to exercise a significant influence today in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, aesthetics, and other fields” (Rohlf, 2010). Born in 1724 at Konigsberg, in East Prussia, Kant was raised by pietistic, evangelical Lutheran parents whose religious belief was centered on introspection, Bible study and emotionalism. Kant’s personal development, in large part, was a reaction against the emotionalism of his parents’ religious convictions in favor of reason. As a student at the University of Konigsberg, Kant’s exposure to the great British and German philosophers, including Christian Wolff, John Locke and Isaac Newton, as well as to the Aristotelian school of philosophy, gave him a peerless background in the foundational tenets of Western thought. It is this background that provided the theoretical basis for the Critique of Pure Reason, itself a profoundly influential work for the modern school of philosophical thought.

A pure academician, Kant rarely left Konigsberg, where his life centered around the university, where his lectures earned him international fame. The French philosopher J. J. Rousseau influenced him deeply, as did the principles of the French Revolution. These influences led Kant to turn away from

theoretical notions of philosophy and toward rationalism. Rousseau's rejection of theological philosophy had a formative influence on Kant and his stance on religion. Kant was less interested and involved in politics, though he was of a decidedly liberal orientation, and his theological lectures reflected his liberalism, though the decidedly autocratic, totalitarian Prussian state in which Kant lived eventually decided to repress them. Kant's views increasingly came under the control of state censorship, a degrading state of affairs but which was not enough to motivate Kant to leave his native city. In fact, it is said that he rarely traveled more than 100 miles outside of Königsberg (2000).

The Critique of Pure Reason was conceived and written at a kind of ideological crossroads in the development of modern philosophy. Kant's reassessment of reason and its nature within the framework of human experience reflects the blurring of Enlightenment thought, with its assertion of scientific empiricism, gave way to Romanticism. As such, Kant's core work stands as a distillation of Enlightenment concepts of progress and of tradition, of the notion that reason would lead to the affirmation of God's existence, of the existence of a soul, and the possibility that science and religion could be compatible, even mutually advantageous (Rohlf, 2010). The crux of the matter, for the Enlightenment and for Kant to consider, was if nature is governed by immutable laws of causation, like a machine, then can there ever be room for tradition, for notions of religion, of good and evil, and even of basic considerations of morality? (2010). If there is no such room, then human beings do not truly have freedom of choice, but are simply playing out the parts allotted to them by nature. The great crisis of the age

was the fact that the Enlightenment threatened many of those core beliefs upon which Western society was founded.

Kant's great achievement, for which *Critique of Pure Reason* is justifiably celebrated, lies in the fact that he showed that reason itself was sufficient to prove that morality and religion are consistent with the scientific advances of the Enlightenment. In this, reason has sovereignty and can exist independent of experience and of the natural world. It is reason that takes man's intellect to its furthest reaches and sets limits for what he can know. As Kant argued, it is reason that poses the questions: "whether the world has a beginning and a limit to its extension in space; whether there exists anywhere, or perhaps in my own thinking Self, an indivisible and indestructible entity – or whether nothing but what is divisible and transitory exists" (Kant, 1896).

For Kant, mathematics was the language of reason, whereas philosophy was the realm of the metaphysical. Math, he explained, could be used to demonstrate the nature of knowledge and experience. The functioning of mathematical equations had been considered a matter of synthetic judgment, a transaction the outcome of which could only be proven by combining a series of values, each of which relied upon another. This synthesis, however, could also exist in a priori terms. Kant cited the example the problem  $7 + 5 = 12$ , through which no amount of analysis will find 12 in either seven or five. Seven is worth seven, and five is worth five, and the number 12 is 12 (Kant, 1896, 134). Each number has its own particular and unique value and property, which exists independent of the others. For Kant,

mathematics was a means for proving that synthetic thinking can exist a priori. Kant sought to utilize this synthetic/a priori model in a study of metaphysics, in which the language of reason could be applied to considerations of the transcendent. This led Kant to seek out the nature of the world, not through means that were not self-evident, but through the application of experience, with reason providing the limitations of interpretation.

Ultimately, Kant determined that a synthetic/a priori model for the metaphysical is not possible because metaphysics are inherently dialectical (Grier, 2012). His conclusion concerning metaphysics, and the claims of metaphysicians, is that a systematic approach governed by reason is needed. As such, “one of Kant’s main complaints is that metaphysicians seek to deduce a priori synthetic knowledge simply from the unschematized (pure) concepts of the understanding” (2012). This, Kant insists, is doomed to fail because the acquisition of metaphysical knowledge cannot come from concepts alone, because such conclusions are arrived at with intuition (2012). Thus, without benefit of reason and experience, the metaphysical must be consigned to a different realm entirely.

The Critique of Pure Reason was Kant’s answer to the Scottish philosopher David Hume, who argued that human knowledge of the world around is limited to associations created by “sense-impressions” (Kreis, 2000). Hume questioned the applicability of mathematics to objects, since our impression and interpretation of these objects is a product of our sense-impressions (2000). To a considerable extent, Critique of Pure Reason is Kant’s answer to

this problem, an answer that he labored on for some time and which “ shows that the immediate objects of perception are due not only to the evidence provided by our sensations but also to our own perceptual apparatus which orders our sense-impressions into intelligible unities” (2000). This is the determination that led Kant to claim that “ though our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it arises out of experience” (Kant, 2008).

As previously mentioned, much of Kant’s philosophy is concerned with the existence of God and with reconciling God’s existence in a rational universe. Kant’s views on the subject can be divided into two periods, his pre-critical and critical periods. His pre-critical approach to the problem finds expression in his contention that there are things that are simply beyond human experience, and as such we cannot claim to know that these things do or do not exist. Kant illustrates this concept by explaining that there is a difference between the hundred dollars in his pocket, and the hundred dollars that he imagines to be in his pocket. The difference between them does not impact the concept of a hundred dollars. “ To say that something ‘ exists’ – even in the case of God – is not to predicate a property that its concept lacks if the thing did not exist (Rossi, 2009).

It is through this conceptual argument that Kant contends that there is a theoretical argument that states, with validity, that God exists (Rossi, 2009). He arrives at this conclusion because, as noted previously, he has shown that this argument is based on a concept of the possible (2009). It is during his critical period that Kant reversed his position and claimed that no

theoretical argument can prove the existence of God. It is at this time that Kant arrives at the conclusion that here that he there can be no validity to a claim of knowledge that lies beyond the limits of human experience. “ It lies beyond the powers of human reason to bring us to any knowledge of an unconditioned ground for the framework within which we apprehend objects in their spatio-temporal relations” (2009). Thus, to seek beyond the limits of experience is to enter the realm of the speculative. It is here that Kant begins to make the distinction between the “ constitutive” and the “ regulative.”

The constitutive claim is one that addresses objects and concepts that are within our human realm of experience, whereas regulative refers to that which serves as a starting point for a line of inquiry. Kant refuted the logic of Wolff and Leibniz, who posited the theoretical existence of God by virtue of the existence of the human soul, though Kant insists that such knowledge can be nothing more than theoretical. It is in the Critique of Pure Reason that Kant’s contentions concerning the existence of God reaches their fruition. Kant argues that human reason, not faith or theory, is the very agent by which the existence of God may be asserted. Thus, Kant writes in the second edition of Critique that he “ had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (1896). This leads to what Kant called his moral argument for the existence of God.

Despite his refutation of the theoretical affirmations of God’s existence, Kant writes in Critique of Pure Reason that would like nothing better than to meet an individual who knows that there is a God and an afterlife. “ For a man who



knows that is the very man for whom I have been so long in search of. As all knowledge, if it refers to an object of pure reason, can be communicated, I might hope that, through his teaching, my own knowledge would be increased in the most wonderful way” (Kant, 1896, 664). Without the imposition of reason, there can be no “faith” in the supposition of God’s existence. In other words, theory is little more than a faith-based argument. “If we surrender and take a man who is entirely indifferent with regard to moral laws, the question proposed by reason becomes merely a problem for speculation” (665).

Thus, reason must wield an organizing, systematic influence on cogitation and logic. Otherwise, key components of the logical process are omitted. In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant speaks of the “highest aim” to which reason is appointed. “These highest aims must according to the nature of reason, possess a certain unity in order to advance by their union that interest of humanity which is second to no other” (Kant, 1896, 640). This is reason in its regulative function, serving the important purpose of establishing guidelines by which philosophical inquiry must proceed. In “The Canon of Pure Reason,” Kant explains this position by citing the spiritual nature of the human soul as an example. Spirituality and immortality may be well understood, but no empirically oriented explanation could possibly be offered because “our concept of an incorporeal nature is purely negative and does not expand our knowledge in the least,” nor does it offer any substantial rational ground from which to draw any but fictitious conclusions” (Kant, 1896, 641).

Yet if we reach a condition of pure reason we reach the realm of the transcendental, that which exceeds the empirical. Such a concept transcends the possibility of experience, and yet must be considered as being part of the “conditioned existence of all phenomena” which “requires us to look out for something different from all phenomena” (Kant, 1896, 457). In other words, we must always be open to the possibility of that which lies beyond the empirical bounds of experience and knowledge. When our ideas become transcendent, “they serve not only for the completion of the empirical use of the understanding but they separate themselves entirely from it and create to themselves objects the material of which is not taken from experience and does not rest on the completion of the empirical series, but on pure concepts a priori (457).

This is one of the most important assertions Kant makes in *Critique of Pure Reason*. Just because we have not seen it, touched it, smelled it, etc., is no basis upon which to refute the existence of something (or someone). Here we have the basis upon which agnosticism is founded, the contention that it is impossible to deny the existence of God since God is something that we cannot see, hear, feel or fully understand. This is what Kant refers to when he speaks of things that separate themselves completely from the empirical, “the material of which is not taken from experience” (457). By the same token, Kant forces those who would make purely theoretical claims to follow the discipline of reason, to obey the rules of logic in determining the viability of key existential questions. While there are valid arguments for and against

the existence of God, the most important component of such arguments is in the structure of the argument itself, which must be informed by reason.

This is the reason for the word problems and mathematical equations that Kant employs in *Critique of Pure Reason*. The example of 100 real versus 100 imaginary dollars is a case in point. Regardless of whether the 100 dollars in his pocket is real or imaginary has nothing to do with the concept of 100 dollars. Thus, whether or not one can see and feel the money has no bearing on the existence of the idea itself. “ If we were concerned with an object of our senses, I could not mistake the existence of a thing for the mere concept of it; for by the concept the object is thought as only in harmony with the general conditions of a possible empirical knowledge, while by its existence it is thought as contained in the whole content of experience” (Kant, 1896, 484).

So it is with the concept of God. As an “ object of our senses,” the existence of a higher being cannot possibly be mistaken for the concept of it (484). In this way, Kant constructed a philosophical bridge between the traditional theological model of God and the eminence of reason as a product of the Enlightenment. The triumph of reason left Europe’s great thinkers with the problem of how God and the ancient teachings of the church could possibly be in line with the laws of the natural world. The two appeared to be mutually exclusive schools of thought. Kant’s great work of philosophy is more than a self-serving accommodation between the rational and the spiritual. Kant constructed an exquisite philosophical architecture, one which offered a pathway for either argument, for or against the existence of God,

based on the structure of reason and the discipline it lends to transcendental concepts. As such, Kant's Critique of Pure Reason has proven to be a remarkably adaptable blueprint for understanding how the scientific and the spiritual intertwine.

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