

BACKGROUND TO KANT'S ETHICS: Some key concepts in Kant's epistemology and metaphysics, from the Critique of Pure Reason (1781, 2nd edition 1787)

2 schools of thought Kant thought he had to come to terms with:

1. **Rationalism** (Leibniz 1646-1716; Christian Wolff {most influential philosopher in Germany in Kant's time} 1679-1754): human reason is capable of knowing all of reality, beyond the limitations of human sense experience; mathematics is the model for this type of and possibility of knowledge
2. **Empiricism** (David Hume 1711-1776): we can only know what our senses tell us. What we call "knowledge" is simply organized sense experience. We cannot know an independent reality.

A priori/a posteriori

A priori: knowledge not derived from sense experience

A posteriori: knowledge derived only from sense experience

Analytic/synthetic

Analytic: a proposition that is true because the idea expressed by the predicate is contained in the idea expressed in the subject: "what has shape takes up space"; "a bachelor is an unmarried man." In a sense, analytic statements do not convey any new information.

Synthetic: a proposition in which the connection asserted between the subject and predicate is not analytic. "The UMass philosophy department offers an average of 60 courses per semester." {let's assume this is true. I don't know if it is, but it is close.} "Bachelors are unhappy." Synthetic truths provide knowledge

Empiricism denies that there are synthetic a priori truths. For Kant, this position amounts to skepticism that there is a real world outside human sense perceptions. On the empiricist view, as Kant saw it, there can be no objectivity in human knowledge.

Kant's solution to the rationalism/empiricism dilemma: There are **synthetic a priori** truths. These truths refer only to what can be known through human experience (against rationalism, and with empiricism). However, their truth is not a *product* of experience (as the empiricists think), but is a *necessary condition or feature* of experience. Synthetic a priori truths can be known, in a sense, independently of experience, although they apply or are true only of experience. But they are objective truths, applicable to a reality that is not just our subjective experience.

Kant's main examples of this, especially relevant to his ethics: *space, time*, and especially *causality* ("Every event has a cause"), but mathematics is the clearest example. Hume thought that we observe regularities in nature—sunrise *is followed by* daytime—but not causality itself (that sunrise *causes* daytime).

Noumena/phenomena

Noumena: the realm of things-in-themselves, which is inaccessible to human reason, but is postulated.

Phenomena: the realm of things that can be known by human reason. We can have knowledge of this realm, some of which is a priori (necessary conditions of human experience) and some of which is a posteriori (knowable through contingent experience, most importantly through the sciences).

The "critical" turn in Kant's philosophy means: (1) rational knowledge and understanding is confined to possible objects of experience, (2) but reason has an inherent tendency (seen in rationalism) to overstep its proper domain and try to claim knowledge of the unknowable (sometimes called the "unconditioned"), such as the soul, God, and (in a complicated way that he explains in his ethical philosophy) human freedom; (3) when it does so, it inevitably generates self-contradiction ("antinomies"), and generally goes off the rails, so (4) reason must constantly draw its own boundaries and try to restrain itself from pushing beyond them.