

## **Introduction to Kant: The Project of Critique**

This course is focused on the interpretation of one book: *The Critique of Pure Reason* and we will, during the course, read the majority of the key sections of the work, setting out a basis for interpreting them. First we should have some general sense of the work before we look at the detailed elements of it. To do this it is useful to begin with an enquiry into the title of the work. The key word within it is “critique” and this is the term that is the most difficult to investigate but minimally means an investigation that is motivated by a notion that there is something problematic about certain procedures in use. “Pure Reason”, by contrast, should remind us, in the first instance of the view, as adopted by Descartes, that there is an element of cognition that is not dependent on sensory input or derived from experience. So a first sense of the title of the work would be to suggest that there is something about “pure reason” that is problematic.

This impression would be substantiated by the preface to the 1<sup>st</sup> edition. At the beginning of this preface Kant suggests that there is a “peculiar fate” of reason. This consists in the fact that whilst certain questions naturally arise for thought from the very nature of reason itself it is not the case that these questions can be answered by reason. Since in adopting a “pure” approach reason abandons the field of experience it follows that the arguments between thinkers about the nature of metaphysical truth are endless and yet that the grounds of error seem not

ascertainable. Since this problem might well appear to be simply a fault of rationalists it would seem plausible to think that an empiricist position would be a preferable one to adopt. Kant anticipates this line of argument and mentions the attempted reform of metaphysics attempted by Locke. But whilst Locke wished to end the problems generated by appeal to principles of pure reason his method for doing so was effectively to suggest that all such claims rested purely on experience, a notion Kant suggests is insufficient.

The dispute between rationalists and empiricists appears to be one without any evident means of resolution but Kant suggests that we should try a new method of analysing the controversy within modern metaphysics between these approaches. This is the method of a self-investigation of reason in order to discern its limits and this suggests that the emphasis on *critique* is an emphasis on a form of investigation that is self-reflexive. Kant describes metaphysics as concerned with knowledge that is independent of experience and so if we undertake a critique of reason then, in investigating the nature and possibility of reason having limits, we simultaneously articulate a criticism of the very possibility of metaphysics itself. So much as this Kant made clear in the preface to the first edition of the *Critique*.

But, before we go further in the investigation of the basic background of the *Critique*, it is worth mentioning that the work was published not once, but twice. The first edition appears in 1781 but the reception of it was not as Kant would have hoped with the responses to it

indicating, on his view, a number of misunderstandings about the views presented in it. In response to these apparent failures to grasp the point of the work Kant later produced a popular guide to the *Critique* entitled the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics that would be a Science* (1783) before subsequently reworking a number of central passages of the work for its second edition in 1787. The relationship between the two editions of the *Critique* has itself ever since been controversial with some philosophers and commentators taking the first edition to be preferable to the second whilst others adopt the view that the later edition is preferable to the earlier. (The pagination of the first edition is referred to as “A”, that of the second as “B”.)

Rather than make any judgment on this view as yet it is first useful to note that the *Prolegomena*, which appears between the two editions of the work, lays emphasis on the conception that enquiries have to be carried out before metaphysics could succeed in becoming a *science*. Not only is this the case but the preface to the second edition of the *Critique* opens not with a set of statements about reason, although clearly Kant continues to be concerned with that, but instead with the nature of science. In some respects the emphasis on science is still part of the same diagnosis that Kant presented in the first edition of the current state of philosophy. As in the first edition he pointed to the apparently interminable dispute between schools of philosophy so here he points out that such a failure to agree “any

common plan of procedure” (Bvii) ensures that metaphysics is very far from having entered on the path of being a science.

The relationship that is postulated between science and metaphysics is further articulated in terms of the argument that if reason is to be involved in scientific knowledge then something must be known in sciences in a manner which is *a priori*. This gives a further sense to the notion of “pure” reason: it is reason that is capable of determining its object in an *a priori* manner. In suggesting this Kant makes a comparison between metaphysics and two sciences that he assumes initially to be given, namely, mathematics and physics. Mathematics is an *a priori* science in a pure sense as it does not take its objects from experience at all Kant suggests. We will subsequently have to look in more detail at this view of mathematics but let’s grant it for now. The first point is that if mathematics is taken to be purely *a priori* then it is, in this respect, different from physics which has to rely, at least partially, on sources of knowledge that are distinct from that of reason or, to put this another way, whilst physics is an *a priori* mode of knowledge it is not so purely.

In any event, whilst the history of mathematics can be traced to the Greeks and its peculiarity as a mode of knowledge has been granted in some sense in philosophy since Plato, the area of knowledge we term “natural science” (of which physics is the principal part) is much more recent. The nature of the breakthrough that enabled there to be such a thing as the natural sciences, is described by Kant in an important and interesting

manner. Kant gives some examples of breakthroughs in the area of natural science but we will just select the most famous that he mentions which is the example of Galileo, an experiment of which he describes as being to cause balls, “the weight of which he had himself previously determined, to roll down an inclined plane” and then states that the light that emerges from this experiment is learning that reason “has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own” (Bxiii), an observation amplified when he states:

Accidental observations, made in obedience to no previously thought-out plan, can never be made to yield a necessary law, which alone reason is concerned to discover. Reason, holding in one hand its principles, according to which alone concordant appearances can be admitted as equivalent to laws, and in the other hand the experiment which it has devised in conformity with these principles, must approach nature in order to be taught by it. It must not, however, do so in the character of a pupil who listens to everything that the teacher chooses to say, but of an appointed judge who compels the witnesses to answer questions which he has himself formulated. Even physics, therefore, owes the beneficent revolution in its point of view entirely to the happy thought, that while reason must seek in nature, not fictitiously ascribe to it, whatever as not being knowable through reason’s own resources has to be learnt, if learnt at all, only from nature, it must adopt as its guide, in so seeking, that which it has itself put into nature. (Bxiii-xiv.)

Kant had earlier describes mathematics as a kind of construction of reason but we noted he also presents the view that mathematics is, in some sense, purely based on reason. By contrast, natural sciences, including physics, require of necessity reference to experiment as in the case of Galileo. However the experiments themselves have to be organized according to a plan such that if natural laws are to be capable of being

formulated that there has been something of a system in the experimental approach to nature.

This point is subsequently suggested by Kant to be important in understanding the nature of metaphysics. Metaphysics, like mathematics, is based on reason though, unlike mathematics, it rests just on concepts. (We will note later that something else is required for mathematics, something that Kant will term “intuition”.) If both mathematics and natural science have achieved agreement in method so that there are not disputes within them concerning the right approach to adopt then it may be that something was carried out in them that needs to be emulated in metaphysics. This leads Kant to suggest the following point:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. (Bxvi)

Kant is here suggesting a revolution in method. We should not begin with a conception that we have an *a priori* knowledge that must conform to what we understand objects to be. Rather, we should experimentally investigate the conception that perhaps what we understand objects to be should be grounded on what we can discover *a priori* concerning our mode of knowledge. Kant compares this revolution in method to that of Copernicus who, rather than taking himself to be at rest and the stars moving, adopted the reverse view. It is this *reversal of perspective* that Kant takes then to be

important for metaphysics to have a possibility of emulating the success of the sciences.

This reversal of perspective provides the basis for an experiment of reason:

In dealing with those *concepts* and *principles* which we adopt *a priori*, all that we can do is to contrive that they be used for viewing objects from two different points of view—on the one hand, in connection with experience, as objects of the senses and of the understanding, and on the other hand, for the isolated reason that strives to transcend all limits of experience, as objects which are thought merely. If, when things are viewed from this twofold standpoint, we find that there is agreement with the principle of pure reason, but that when we regard them only from a single point of view reason is involved in unavoidable self-conflict, the experiment decides in favour of the correctness of this distinction. (Bxixn)

The *Critique of Pure Reason* is then an experiment that is intended to demonstrate the need for adopting the method that “we can know *a priori* of things only what we ourselves put into them” rather than assuming that what is known *a priori* is grounded on such precedent sense of what is. Whilst we initially adopt this conception only as a hypothesis it will be the point of the work as a whole to demonstrate the correctness of the view in question. It follows however that what the *Critique* presents is, as Kant himself puts it, “a treatise on the method” of metaphysics, not “a system of the science itself” which would rather be capable of formulation only on the basis of the *Critique*.

The point of the enterprise of the *Critique* thus, against empiricism, to validate the claim that there is a real place for claims to *a priori* knowledge in philosophy and hence that metaphysics does have a real ground so that philosophy has an area of knowledge of its own and is not

only a form of generalization of human and moral sciences. However if this is the point of the *Critique* in relation to empiricism it is also its point, in relation to rationalism, that much of what has been claimed concerning this *a priori* knowledge has no ground as it has no relationship to experience. Navigating thus between the twin perils of rationalism and empiricism the argument will be for a more modest form of metaphysics than the former but a much wider domain of philosophy than is admitted by the latter.