

The Postulates of Empirical Thought

This week we are focusing on the final section of the *Analytic of Principles* in which Kant schematizes the last set of categories. This set of categories is generally known as the *modal* principles, which refer to the modes in which things are given. There are three postulates in question and what Kant does here is describe how the modal notions are related to the nature of experience. The first principle concerns *possibility* which is now determined as “that which agrees with the formal conditions of experience” (A218/B265) and this reference to formality is contrasted with the way he describes the schematization of *actuality*. Whilst possibility is concerned with the formal conditions of experience, actuality by contrast is bound up with “the material conditions of experience” (A218/B266), which, in accordance with the *Anticipations of Perception*, is seen to be in accord with sensation. The third principle concerns the way necessity is to be schematized which is as in connection “with the actual as determined in accordance with universal conditions of experience” (A218/B266), that is, then, with regard to sensation as universally conditioned. These three principles are then subjected to an explanation that serves also to derive some last key points concerning the nature of experience.

The first thing to notice about the modal categories, which is distinctive of them, is that whilst we can determine objects by means of them we do not, in doing so, enlarge the concept of the objects in question at all as all that emerges from the use of these concepts is a relationship of

the concept of the object in question to our capacity of knowing. This does have importance for empirical judgment as what we discover by means of these categories concerns possible experience. To understand this point however we need to begin with an account of the schematization of the concept of possibility itself. As we have already noted Kant relates the concept of possibility, in schematizing it, to the formal conditions of experience. A merely logical understanding of possibility would determine it as only involving the absence of contradiction. This alone, however, does nothing to help us understand whether something is objectively possible. Whether something is objectively possible hence requires something else than mere concepts, that is, it concerns “the conditions of space and of its determination” (A221/B268), which is as much to say, that to grasp the possibility of something requires relating it to the conditions of intuition.

Kant describes this result as one that has a far-reaching utility and influence and he proceeds to describe this by means of discussion of the nature of substance. Substance has been traditionally described as that which is permanent whilst accidents by contrast are mutable. Similarly, causality is understood as involving a relation, which requires that one thing follows inevitably from another and thirdly there is a tendency to represent some things as reciprocally involved with others. Kant here effectively refers back to the three analogies, which we have been tracing in the last few weeks. However his point in doing so is to clarify what has been shown in the demonstration of them, which is the fact that we have, in treating

them, related concepts to perceptions in order to determine the nature of objective reality. We could frame all kinds of concepts of substance, force and action without referring to the conditions of perception and their intuitive basis but in doing so we would not be describing something possible as it is the relation to intuition that describes what is possible.

After making this point Kant considers an objection, which could be raised to this treatment of possibility, by considering how a triangle might be thought to be understood entirely from concepts. Whilst agreeing that the concept of a triangle is *a priori* in the sense of being independent of experience Kant argues that to determine whether it is possible requires a relation to the conditions of experience: “That space is a formal *a priori* condition of outer experience, that the formative synthesis through which we construct a triangle in imagination is precisely the same as that which we exercise in the apprehension of an appearance, in making for ourselves an empirical concept of it—these are the considerations that alone enable us to connect the representation of the possibility of such a thing with the concept of it” (A224/B271). In making this argument, an argument which demonstrates again his commitment to the view that geometry is a body of synthetic *a priori* truths, Kant indicates the rationale of his opposition to the rationalist conviction that mathematical truths support the contention that there is knowledge available to us which requires no reference to conditions of experience. His general point here is that there is nowhere other than experience to find objects corresponding to concepts.

After explaining this schematization of possibility Kant turns next to his account of actuality. The relationship of this concept to perception is not, he is careful to explain, one of immediate connection. Rather what is required for something to be declared actual is the connection of its object with some actual perception in accord, once again, with the principles of the analogies that we have been treating recently. As with the treatment of possibility, so also with the treatment of actuality does Kant make the point that mere concepts of things can do nothing to guarantee existence. Perception applies content to something such that its mere possibility can be declared actual. Possible perceptions can be related to the principles of the analogies in such a way that we can make the transition from one actual perception already given to the conviction that another is also actually given. An example that Kant uses here is instructive: “Thus from the perception of the attracted iron filings we know of the existence of a magnetic matter pervading all bodies, although the constitution of our organs cuts us off from all immediate perception of this medium.” (A266/B273) Here we look at something that is already given to our perception and in accord with Kant’s generally regressive mode of argumentation reach something else that is its condition and which, as such a condition, can be declared actual. We do perceive the attraction exerted on the filings and this perceptual observation of attraction requires a principle to account for its operation and this is what leads to the postulation of a state within matter that we call “magnetic”. Here in describing the operative way

we can agree something is actual Kant effectively accounts for the possibility of scientific laws that explain what is observed by means of something that is not, thus clarifying his reason for thinking of actuality as not requiring immediate relation to perception. Our senses, he argues along with Leibniz, are “gross” and not themselves sufficient to determine actuality. Our knowledge goes rather as far as perception and the laws governing it reach.

Having described both possibility and actuality Kant turns finally to necessity. Necessity, following the account of actuality, refers not to formal or logical necessity but to something material in existence. However the existence of sensory objects is not something we can know in an absolutely *a priori* fashion, only in a comparatively *a priori* fashion, that is, in relation to something else that is given. What fits under this heading, says Kant, is merely “the existence of effects from given causes” (A227/B279), so we do not know the existence of substances thereby but only “the relations of appearances”. What we do here is again follow a regressive mode of reasoning inferring from a given existence to another one. What follows from the law of causality in appearances is the sense of necessary existence as being existence under laws. *Existence under laws is fundamentally what nature itself means on Kant’s account.* Four consequences follow from this understanding of nature. The first is that nothing happens through blind chance. This follows from the law of causality directly but a second consequence is that whilst there is necessity in nature it is not a blind

necessity or, in other words, the necessity in question is intelligible and thus not akin to fate. This is a modal principle but one that in relating necessity to causality is part of the principles of understanding. The third consequence is that nature is governed not merely by laws but by laws that operate continuously. From this third principle Kant derives as a fourth that there are no gaps between appearances. The third and fourth principles in their turn have the consequence of forbidding the postulation of a vacuum in experience on Kant's view (A229/B281). The relation of the four consequences together is to give us a general sense of the effect of the modal principles: "They are all entirely at one in this, that they allow of nothing in the empirical synthesis which may do violence or detriment to the understanding and to the continuous connection of all appearances—that is, to the unity of the concepts of the understanding." (A229-30/B282)

We cannot make sense of other forms of intuition than those of space and time and even if we could they would not be possible forms of our experience. Our understanding concerns itself only with "the synthesis of that which is given" (A231/B283). This key point makes clearer than anything else the status not merely of the postulates but of all the principles that Kant has traced in the *Analytic of Principles*. The reason why Kant terms the principles that he has called "postulates of empirical thought" as "postulates" is subsequently explained by reference to how the term "postulate" is used in mathematics. As Kant puts it: "in mathematics a postulate means the practical proposition which contains nothing save the

synthesis through which we first give ourselves an object and generate its concept” and it is similar with the postulates Kant has here treated which emerge solely as the way in which we frame the other principles, taking them effectively as already proved and simply clarifying what has been shown in showing them.

What has been so shown however can in general terms be stated as that the categories, apart from intuition are merely forms of thought and without intuition we cannot think an object by means of them. So no synthetic propositions can be proved just by reference to the categories alone. However we do not merely need intuition in the general sense, we need “outer intuition”. This is again proved by reference to the principles of the analogies. The First Analogy cannot be shown without reference to intuition in space (of matter). Space alone is stable and permanent, time the realm of constant flux. Similarly the prime example of causation is motion or “alteration in space”. The conclusion of this section effectively concludes also the consideration of Kant’s statements of principles with the statement: “all principles of the pure understanding are nothing more than principles *a priori* of the possibility of experience, and to experience alone do all *a priori* synthetic propositions relate” (B294).