

## **KANT AND OBJECTIVE REALITY**

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**Objective:** Existing independently of the individual mind or perception; related more to the object or representation out of which knowledge is constructed than to the subject possessing the knowledge.

### **Immanuel Kant**

The problem of objective rationality was a major theme in 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. In constructing a theory of knowledge, most European philosophers fell into one of two groups: the *rationalists* or the *empiricists*. Rationalists emphasized the role of the logic and the intellect; empiricists emphasized the role of experience and the senses. Kant attempted to integrate aspects of both models into a radically different philosophy of knowledge, combining the best of both perspectives and refining them into a unified epistemology.

The *rationalist* perspective posited that all knowledge is based on reason. They believed that the existence of innate ideas, e.g., the law of cause and effect, the idea of God, and the capacity for language and mathematics, are all necessary to organize our perceptions into a coherent, unified whole that would otherwise remain a maelstrom of chaos. The *empiricists*, on the other hand, believed that all knowledge is based upon perception and direct sensory experience. All of our ideas evolved from the organization of our perceptual experience, requiring no pre-existent knowledge or foundations of rational thought to build upon.

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Kant attempted to reconcile these two radically divergent philosophies by re-examining the question of objective rationality. He constructed a composite worldview holding components of both perspectives, coupling intuition and conceptualization to one another:

Concepts without intuitions are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind<sup>1</sup>.

The *a priori* structure of the human mind actively orders the contents of our sensations into a rational and coherent whole. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains.

But even though all our cognition starts with experience, that does not mean that all of it arises from experience. For it might well be that even our experiential cognition is composite, consisting of what we receive through impressions and what our own cognitive power supplies from itself, sense impressions merely prompting it to do so<sup>2</sup>.

Kant's approach to the problem of objective knowledge was non-derivative. He wanted to solve the problem of objectivity without appeal to any higher power or prime mover. He did this by breaking down cognition into two parts: the experience itself – *conception*, and the pure concepts of understanding not derived from experience, those formed from the architecture of the rational mind—*intuition*. The empiricist argument that we can never truly know any true objectivity then loses its base, as we all experience the world through these universal, shared architecture of experience and comprehension.

## Conception and Intuition

Kant's interpretation of *conception* defined it as the active mental cognition of categories, such as color, shape, or texture, to make sense of objects. Without concepts we would have no tool with which to differentiate among relationships between objects.

Conception, however, is dependent upon intuition. *Intuition* lies in the rational human construction of the forms of *space*, the outer sense, and *time*, the inner sense. Space gives order to the spatial relationship of objects; time allows the formation of a self-aware interpretation of our inner states. Both concepts and intuition are required for experience; they are the *a priori* elements that allow for rational thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Course notes, Kant

<sup>2</sup> Kant 16

## The Boundaries of Knowledge

Kant's theory of knowledge purported to solve the problem of objective reality—we all share the same rational categories with which we construct a model of the world. However, our understanding is limited, as we cannot know that which is real through *things in themselves*. Our objective constructions of the universe around us are constrained to our models of the underlying principle or phenomena. Kant's philosophy was a compromise between scientific intransigence and empirical skepticism. His philosophy allowed for the formation of scientific objectivity by assuming that all men are endowed with the same cognitive structural framework through which they construct a subjective model of reality.

## References

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