

RRS: On Kant's Critique of Pure Reason

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Abstract

As part of the Rex Reviews Series, Kant's first and greatest critique is on the table, where some of his philosophy is elucidated, his themes, project, and the limits of such a project are briefly outlined, and finally, why such a book had a lasting impact on me personally. From his opaqueness to the merits and path-finding direction of his philosophy, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* rightfully is a masterpiece of philosophy, errors notwithstanding.

RRS: On Kant's Critique of Pure Reason

I knew of Kant since my youth, but I truly discovered him coming into adulthood. I picked up the Penguin's version of Kant's masterpiece, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (which saw many essays, smaller books, and two other critiques follow in its wake), and was entranced. It is in no doubt due to the first critique that made Kant an instant success, a success which was as bizarre as it was spontaneous. The early editions of the masterpiece were poorly written, grammatically chaotic, and, above all, nearly incomprehensible to all but a small number of people, and that is assuming that its readers had the patience to read pages composed of just one or two sentences. Kant, in German, despite the revisions he made in the later editions, remained mostly like another language hidden in German. It, in fact, may be one of the rare cases where reading a translation may actually be preferable to the original.

Resting aside his style for now, Kant's philosophy is painfully systematic and impressive. And while his entire philosophy is not to be found in his first critique, it is very clear that his works and conclusions hereafter are based on the system he had created in the first, however weary and patchy they really came to be. It is often spoken that Kant's critical philosophy was set to find the limits of reason, what reason can and cannot tell us about something. A crucial part of which, in summary, that is often left out is how we can know the things that, as Kant asserts, are known and certain in the first place. David Hume, whom Kant felt awakened him, had already questioned the whole validity of philosophy. Kant, as well as Hume, rightfully noticed that the important subjects and beliefs of human experience extended well past what can be seen empirically, but the Humean model left a bad taste in its conclusions. Kant necessarily had to answer, and in the process inherited a tradition of lofty questions he felt were insufficiently addressed by his contemporaries (like that of Christian Wolff's philosophy). How can, for

instance, in a Newtonian and deterministic universe, there be free will? What about God? What about the immortality of the soul? These are questions that must be confronted and, as Kant saw, are indispensable, as they are the problems of what he calls pure reason, and as such, problems that have been tackled and undertaken by metaphysics historically, however dogmatically.

The basics of the *Critique of Pure Reason* are not to be underestimated. Within these measly 700 pages lies an entire universe, one that begins with an answer to Hume, where Kant (1781/2007) says, "With respect to time, therefore, no knowledge within us is antecedent to experience, and all knowledge begins with experience. But although all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it arises from experience" (p. 37). Kant then transitions to knowledge that is distinguished from just being empirical; it is knowledge "before the fact," so to speak, and it is called a priori. It is a kind of knowledge that is independent of experience. This stands in relation to a posteriori knowledge that is in experience and is empirical. Then comes along a most needed distinction between what are called analytic and synthetic judgements. Analytic judgements are necessarily true by definition; they are analytic because they are "thought through identity" (p. 43). A famous example is that all bachelors are unmarried men, and this is the case because to be a bachelor is to be unmarried. Synthetic judgements, on the other hand, are not thought through identity; they are experiential, that is to say, they are empirical and learned through experience. Often, they must be verified, put through a wringer, because it does not follow that they are necessarily true.

Kant now harks back to what he believes is certain: mathematics and the natural sciences are a priori, but something is amiss; they are certain and "before the fact" and possess necessity, but how can that be when one has to discover the natural laws of the universe in science, and in

mathematics, one has to understand and learn enough of pure mathematics to understand why $7+5=12$? In Kant's words:

But if we look more closely we find that the concept of the sum of 7 and 5 contains nothing beyond the union of the two numbers into one, whereby nothing is being thought as to what this single number may be which combines both. We by no means arrive at a concept of twelve by thinking that union of seven and five; and we may analyse our concept of such a possible sum as long as we please, still we shall never discover in it the concept of twelve. (p. 46)

Analysis alone will never complete the process of $7+5$, there must always be a synthetic element, a referent in experience that helps these concepts go along, despite the fact that pure mathematics is a priori. It is therefore synthetic a priori. This begs one of the central themes of the entire critique: how is synthetic a priori knowledge possible in the first place?

It is from these building blocks, this line of questioning, and the questioning of metaphysics' role that the *Critique of Pure Reason* lays out its universe. Starting from transcendental aesthetic (from which we learn that time is a formal a priori, space is a priori, and both are non-empirical), Kant reasons to the categories of the mind and then finally to his famous Copernican Revolution—where the experiencer plays a role in constructing the world around them, instead of encountering the world raw and for what it is. There are undeniable preconditions to experience at all, says Kant, and the implications of this extend well over just the objects we find in the world, and we come to find that the *ding an sich* (the thing-in-itself) can never be reached—as a reminder, Kant wants to ask what is possible in experience, and he is

not concerned with objects as they are in themselves, but what is accessible to us. In other words, what the preconditions of experience are and the limits of what is accessible through experience.

It is important to at least understand a bit of Kant's project so that one can gaze at its horizon and properly understand its magnitude. As they are important to my ideas on the matter, and for fear of this turning into a summary of the first critique, I will not go through all Kant says in his most recognized work, despite my belief that at the very least, the Antinomy of Reason (a later section of the book) and, of course, his sections on the impossibility of the ontological and cosmological proofs of God should be read. Indeed, the whole thing should be read ten times over because it speaks to a sublime thinking, and in my view, this is what makes Kant a thinker of the finest order—it is the scope of what he attempted to do and his damaging criticisms. If a man is measured by their ambitions, surely there are few that can stand up to Kant's willingness to deal with the sheer problems of magnitude he tackled, and for better or for worse, his philosophy set the grounds for German Idealism and still many movements and impulses down till today.

Not to demerit his other works either, as they are works of great importance, such as his *Critique of Judgment* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, his *Prolegomena*, and his *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*. A prolific writer and titan of philosophy in the latter half of his life, he still very much was a human, and what comes with being a human comes error, and I will not give into an illusion that says Kant's philosophy (as a whole) and what rests in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is, by any stretch of the imagination, perfect. Some of his views are dubious, and others are downright untenable. For instance, if there is a *ding an sich*, a thing in itself that can be said to exist concretely and have an existence independent of us, then, according to Kant's philosophy, how can we be sure such a thing exists at all if we can never get to the raw object in

itself and only view objects as seen through our eyes? How would we know? Kant takes it for granted and places heavy emphasis on the fact that it is, and that while we know phenomena, it is noumena that eludes us, and it begs the question if noumena exists at all if it's something we can't ever reach.

For another, Kant's shiftiness regarding his answers about free will, God, and the immortality of the soul are unsatisfactory. Here Kant is railing on what reason can and cannot do but fully admits that despite drawing his lines philosophically, and indeed on what can and cannot be known, he still believes in God, free will, and immortality of the soul because he believes it is necessary and inescapable to carry such beliefs. Kant lets the cat out of the bag: he attempts to justify what he has personally always believed to be the case, dulling a bit of that intellectual edge as if he never wanted to take his beliefs the entire way, as Hume did. He allows wiggle room for faith and stops right there, and while I am certainly in agreement that some of the most important beliefs in life cannot be proven (if they can at all), it becomes painfully obvious that after 500 pages of universe building along with deep criticisms, the last few pages where Kant deals with those questions of importance lack the critical eye that was present throughout the rest of the book—after all that, he still was himself a product of religious morals and certain religious attitudes. And this did not go unnoticed; years later Nietzsche would pick up on this and point out these exact blunders. And I give that it is abundantly clear that Kant never refuted God's existence, nor did he seek to; he instead wished to refute what he felt had been dogmatic attempts and proofs of said existence—not the actual faith or belief itself.

And then we come to the problems of the aforementioned obscurity, one my predecessor, Walter Kaufmann (1980), put eloquently in the first volume of *Discovering the Mind* when contrasting Kant's philosophy to Goethe's:

Kant himself suggested, and it has been widely believed, that his language was the price he paid for being scientific, but in fact it cloaks a lack of rigor. It really is a cloak, a veil of concepts that comes between the thinker and experience and allows him to ignore experience. The language is the language of scholasticism that spurns any description or analysis of our experience, looks down its nose at psychology and history, and juggles concepts, setting up dichotomies and trichotomies with the aid of curious terms, without stopping or stooping to ask whether what is most important has not been left out. Kant's language is a scandal not only stylistically but also methodologically. (pp. 167-168)

It is no scandal to suggest that Kant's opaque style made it more difficult for him to be criticized. And it also is no logical leap to say that his style convinced the next generation of philosophers that to be taken seriously, they needed to write like Kant. The whole standard of German Idealism was born out of Kant's shadow and is notorious for producing tomes of difficult language—it may be true that Kant may have formally started what is generally considered the baseline of German philosophy, but with that the tradition certainly inherited Kant's deficiencies. Actually, Kaufmann, in the same volume, recounts the story of a young Fichte who rose to fame only because his *An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* had been mistakenly taken as a piece by Immanuel Kant—for it to be revealed later that it was indeed Fichte's (73).

And while this list of criticisms is non-exhaustive, it is also noteworthy that his accomplishments in philosophy speak for themselves. For his egregious errors, he remains great. Not for a sparkling style or a refreshing read, but the reward of understanding Kant is the reward of seeing the world in a new way. And although my predecessor is vicious to Kant, and not for unwarranted reasons, he also rightfully recognized that there was something pertinent and important to Kant's direction and philosophy. When reading the first critique, it was very clear

that something else had taken place beneath its pages. Kant indeed believed he had nailed down some of the great problems of philosophy while simultaneously showing what reason could not say and what it could. *The Critique of Pure Reason* is a foot in the door to his later philosophy, and while I struggle to find an ounce of poetry in it, there is a kind of mesmerizing quality about it, somewhere beneath all its dryness and technicality.

It is the reason why I chose the Critique for the Rex Reviews Series: its greatness is in its vision, criticism, and novel ideas that still baffle the reader today. If one knows the history of philosophy, they probably know Kant, and right next to the Categorical Imperative are the ideas in the first critique. It is great not because it is famous; it is great because its ideas opened an entirely new direction to seeing the world and philosophical problems—regardless of if they were "correct" or absolutely certain. And in my own writings and thoughts, Kant is a prime example of destroying the dogmatizing arguments of theologians who still insist on using the ontological and cosmological arguments for proof of God's existence. Curiously, if one knows Kant, pure reason seems less convincing the more one thinks of it, and it speaks volumes to Kant's intentions when he falls back on it when writing his ethics. *The Critique of Pure Reason* nonetheless has a magnetic value of its own, and while it is a commitment to read, there is nothing else quite like it. It has an identity and aura, and it is these qualities that make it fascinating and why, for me personally, it is among the texts in my repertoire whose contents will never be forgotten.

References

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(Original work published 1781).

Kaufmann, W. (1980). *Discovering the mind (Vol. 1)*. (pp. 73, 167-168.) McGraw-Hill Book Company.