

Immanuel Kant's Theory of Knowledge: Exploring the Relation between Sensibility and Understanding

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Kant's critique of reason does not provide an ultimate justification of knowledge, is not the last word in philosophy but is an initial thesis aimed at successfully solving the challenge posed by two warring schools of thought during Kant's time: empiricism and rationalism.¹

Following the ancient-Greek's nothing-in-the-mind-without-passing-through-the-senses (Aristotle), Immanuel Kant's inquiry of knowledge starts with the things "seen" or "experienced."² Such inquiry entails the materials and a process by which there can (probably) be known. It probes into or upon the constitution of human reason – an epistemic investigation from within yet necessarily involving from without. This is so because "in the mind we have the pure forms of sensible intuition and the pure concepts of an object in general. Extraneous to the mind we have the unknown and unknowable source of the matter for these forms, the source of that out of which our contentful experience is made."³

Kant mentions two faculties of the mind that are involved in the knowing process, namely, sensibility and understanding. "He distinguishes between the *receptive* faculty of *sensibility*, through which we have intuitions, and the *active* faculty of *understanding*, which is the source of concepts."⁴ Through the former, the objects are "given" while

¹ Otfried Höffe. *Immanuel Kant* trans. Marshall Farrier (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 55.

² We should not be misled that by starting with things seen or experienced, knowledge would mean like a result of or is consequent to such experience. It can be the case that experience is a condition for the possibility of knowledge, and thus, not due to experience that knowledge is possible. Later, we learn that experience alone does not suffice to make knowledge possible. In the meantime, we shall take note what is indicated in the Introduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "knowledge begins **with** experience but it does not arise **from** experience." Besides, what is of foremost importance to Kant is the *a priori*, and not the *empirical*.

³ P.F. Strawson. *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Routledge, 1966), 20.

⁴ See Strawson, 86.

through the latter, objects are “thought.”⁵ The receiving faculty, that of sensibility, deals with space and time as pure intuitions. On the other, the thinking faculty, one of understanding, treats concepts or categories (as pure concepts). Thus, these faculties of the human reason presuppose the two elements of knowledge: contents or intuitions and thoughts or concepts for sensibility and understanding, respectively. Simply, the faculty of receptivity receives something spatial and temporal by means of sensibility; the faculty of thought (also called, faculty of spontaneity of concept), in a manner of understanding, thinks of a concept.

This paper aims at presenting the coming-to-be of knowledge through the operations of the mind in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (Hereafter referred to as *Critique*). The discussion here is more analytic in nature because nothing is practically added from the contentions of distinguished scholars. Drawing from what has already been established in the scholarly materials, the major content of this paper is therefore not groundbreaking nor a discovery. Rather, it situates itself in a modest position by critically exposing the correlation of sensibility and of understanding in the knowing process.

Consistent to Kant’s theory as outlined in the *Critique*, this paper proceeds by initially explaining the faculty of receptivity under the general heading of Transcendental Aesthetic,⁶ following it up with faculty of thought under Transcendental Logic, and finally, working out the interconnection of these two necessary aspects of knowledge, or better, that which bring about knowledge.

Transcendental Aesthetic

The “aesthetic” as used by Kant here is a philosophy that has something to do with our sensibility, our senses, and thus, is not yet on philosophy of art. In this context, aesthetic is “not a theory of the beautiful or of taste ... but rather a science dealing with

⁵ See Strawson, 48.

⁶ Separating the faculty of sensibility is not actually true in practice. However, this is to be done in order to resolve some issues specifically or peculiarly pertinent to each faculty of human reason. In my own terms, these faculties have their own distinctive features by the manner they operate but then both are loyal to one objective, which is to come up with a knowledge. That is why, these faculties or operations of the mind have to co-operate for the possibility of knowledge.

the *a priori* principles of sensibility or intuition.”⁷ In particular, it “does not investigate all intuition but only its pure forms, space and time, as sources of knowledge.”⁸ Its concern is a “critical” view of the ontological possibility of space and time on account that “they belong only to the form of intuition, and therefore to the subjective constitution of our mind, apart from which they could not be ascribed to anything whatsoever.”⁹ Let us now painstakingly discuss these pure intuitions.

What is space? Space is an essential condition where things must be found. Since everything must be found at a certain place, space is a necessary presupposition by which we are able to observe or intuit. It is not a product of our abstraction after we observe some-thing. For Hartnack, it is not an empirical concept derived from external experience, that is, not a concept formed by abstraction.¹⁰

Further, space is representation that is undeniably and logically imaginable. As a necessary representation, space is impossible to think away because no-thing can be represented without thinking of space. “The assumption that we could have a representation where space is thought away would be meaningless.”¹¹ So also, space is pure intuition; it is only one though consisting of different segments or parts that do not constitute it. “Space is not compounded of (in the sense of made up of) different portions of space, but these portions of space necessarily presuppose space.”¹² Finally, space is a priori, a form of intuition rather than a concept.¹³ We can talk of “here” and “there” as space without necessarily having a concrete association to things observable to us. This “here and there” is given a priori before we observe the things on it (space).

Now, what is time? Time is not empirical that only comes after experiencing. But, in every experience, time is assumed. “Time itself does not occur at a certain point in time and does not itself take a certain time. The presupposition of something taking

⁷ See Höffe, 53. It should be noted that the intuition here is an ordinary one and not psychic.

⁸ Höffe, 53.

⁹ See Henry E. Allison. *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 81, citing Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

¹⁰ See Justus Hartnack. *Kant's Theory of Knowledge: An Introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason* trans. M. Holmes Hartshorne (Indiapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), 18.

¹¹ Hartnack, 19.

¹² Hartnack, 19.

¹³ See Hartnack, 20.

time does not itself take time.”¹⁴ Moreso, time is a necessary idea that could not be thought away so that a world can possibly be imaginable in time, happening before or after something else.¹⁵ In addition, time is an *a priori* intuition, already presupposed in segments, periods, moments, temporal units. It is never the case that time follows after the segments, etc. Lastly, time is an intuition so that it logically precedes any periods or units or parts of time, and is not therefore formed or given by these periods, etc.¹⁶

Noticeably, the parallelism on space and time is justified by arguing against the empiricist’s and rationalist’s tendency. In opposition to empiricism, space and time are *a priori* representations and in contrast to rationalism, they are not conceptual but intuitive in character. On the one hand, space and time as *a priori* is independent of experience so much so they are already presupposed in every experience and any perception involving from experiencing. Space and time too are representations for their independence to objects perceived, that in turn necessitate space and time for their appearance. On the other, space and time are not concepts on account of their singularity and unity. There are in concepts subspaces and periods of time as dependent parts but there is only one single space and one unified time. And what is more, space is intuitive for the infinite extent of representations within it while concept can only include a set of representations under it.¹⁷

In this light, how do we determine the function of sensibility? If space and time are, for Kant, *a priori* forms of outer intuition and inner sensing (empirical reality) and the sole condition under which objects can appear (transcendental ideality), sensibility then has a special role in starting up with experience. The possibility of experience is not possible without intuition. We suppose this is what Strawson means by “sensibility brings *a priori* to experience.”¹⁸ Our conception of experience or shall we say, an idea of experience consists of spatio-temporal elements. Thus:

We can conceive of no form of experience which does not involve a temporal ordering of the particular items of which

¹⁴ Hartnack, 23.

¹⁵ See Hartnack, 23.

¹⁶ See Hartnack, 24-25.

¹⁷ See Höffe, 58-59.

¹⁸ Strawson, 72.

we become aware; and perhaps ... we cannot coherently conceive of any form of experience which does not involve a spatial ordering of at least some of those items.¹⁹

Parsons refers this sensibility as faculty of intuition that is *sensible*. As such, we have intuitions only after being *affected* by objects. And the primary instance of this is *sense perception* like seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling.²⁰ In the words of Höffe:

The direct reference of knowledge to objects and the point of orientation for all thought is intuition, which directly grasps a particular. Intuition entails that an object is given. The only possibility for objects to be given to man lies in receptive sensibility, the capacity of the mind to be affected by objects.²¹

Further, Parsons argues that the “limitations of our knowledge to objects of possible experience must mean more than that the objects should be such as might present themselves in some way or other in a possible experience.”²² If indeed objects do not “appear” themselves to us, then there would never be knowledge at all. Parsons emphasizes further that “everything about the object which we can know must be able to show itself in experience and must therefore be limited by the general conditions of possible experience.”²³

Transcendental Logic

The task of Transcendental Logic is to determine the *a priori* of understanding or to identify the concepts or concept-types necessary for knowledge.²⁴ It is a theory of thought - a science that investigates not only the forms (formal) but also the contents (material) of thought; that examines how it is possible for the concepts of thought not to

¹⁹ Strawson, 72.

²⁰ See Charles Parsons. “Infinity and Kant’s Conception of the ‘Possibility of Experience’” in *Kant: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Robert Paul Wolff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 39.

²¹ Höffe, 54.

²² Parsons, “Infinity,” 40.

²³ Parsons, “Infinity,” 40.

²⁴ See Strawson, 72-73.

be empty but rather relate to real objects; and looks into the origin, extent and limits of empirical knowledge.²⁵

Understanding or the faculty of spontaneity or of thought has the concepts for its element of knowledge. This faculty operates (and therefore, thinks) by means of concepts.²⁶ This is so because thinking presupposes nothing but concept.²⁷ By concept, this pertains to what comes from the understanding. Since understanding operates with sensibility, concept is both *a priori* and empirical. It can be supposed that concept is *a priori* in a sense of being formal or logical; it is empirical in the way that it formalizes or rationalizes the object under study. But more than this, for Schrader, “a concept is a rule of combination or synthesis. All combination ... is the work of understanding. It would follow from these two statements that both *a priori* and empirical concepts are rules of combination and, further, originate in the understanding.”²⁸ Underlining the concepts distinctive feature,²⁹ Schrader further contends that “empirical concepts share at least this much in common with *a priori* concepts in Kant’s theory, namely that both are form of

²⁵ See Höffe, 65-66. Kant considers this part of his work – this uncovering of the pure concepts of the understanding – as the hardest or most difficult. And it is indeed. This is the reason why there should be extra cautious in treating the subject matter. Schrader would say: “Presumably a complete account of the formal structure of experience would provide us with a fully articulated conceptual system. A fully adequate deduction of concepts should exhibit the logical interrelationship of all concepts. It should enable us to move from the simplest empirical concepts to concepts of the highest logical order. **It would be too much to expect, of course, that any theory should perform this task in complete detail. But it should at least provide us with a principle for filling in the outline to the degree that our inclination and our patience permit.**” And he cautions: “But we must be careful that we do **not completely misconstrue** Kant’s **whole theory** of concepts.” George Schrader. “Kant’s Theory of Concepts” in *Kant: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Robert Paul Wolff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 140; 141. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ Before Kant, concepts and ideas were interchangeable or were taken similarly. It should be noted that Kant distinguishes “concepts” from “ideas.” With Kant, not all concepts are ideas. Ideas have special connotation. Examples of ideas are of God, Freedom, Immortality. In here, we remember the opening lines of the First Preface of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* about those “questions” or “pieces of knowledge” which cannot be answered because they transcend the powers of human reason. We realize here that concepts, which spring from the Understanding, are only to be located within the faculty of thought, and not to be found beyond it.

²⁷ When you think, that is inevitably, a concept.

²⁸ Schrader, 135, citing *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Kemp Smith.

²⁹ Concepts may be different nominally but they are unique in character. What is meant here is that concepts vary and yet are one and the same.

unity. They reflect the spontaneous and synthetic function of understanding.”³⁰ And so, if intuition provides unstructured sensations directly coming from space and time, concepts are the ones that synthesize and determine them. What is spatio-temporal in sensibility is now being identified in understanding. It is the understanding or faculty of thought that, as Höffe states:

...‘thinks up’ rules in order to comprehend what is intuitively given, and checks whether what it thinks works as an interpretation of what is given ... Without thought there is only an unconnected, indeterminate something, a jumble of sensations but not the unity and determinacy of a reality; without thought there is not yet a world at all ... thought has not direct contact with reality; it is discursive: transmitted by concepts, not intuitive: looking directly.³¹

Following Kant, Young emphasizes this crucial role of thought to knowledge. For him, knowledge is not simply an analysis of concepts or contents but a kind of synthesis.

Knowledge requires more than the mere intuition of a manifold in space and time. It also requires that this intuited manifold ‘be gone through in a certain way, taken up, and connected’... The act of doing this, of ‘putting different representations together and of grasping what is manifold in them in one cognition’ ..., Kant labels ‘synthesis.’³²

He further states:

Synthesis plays an essential role in knowledge ... for it is what provides our concepts with content. As far as content is concerned, ‘no concepts can first arise by way of analysis’ ... On the contrary, synthesis is ‘that which first gathers the elements for cognition and unites them to form a certain content.’ And hence it is ‘what first gives rise to cognition.’³³

³⁰ Schrader, 135, citing *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Kemp Smith. So also, Schrader asserts that “empirical concepts are, also, *a priori* with respect to their form. They represent the attenuation of thought...” Schrader, 152.

³¹ Höffe, 66-67.

³² Young, 104.

³³ Young, 104.

Indeed, “merely taking in what is given does not yield knowledge, in which sensations are not simply replicated but processed. For knowledge we thus need concepts which originate in the understanding in the strict sense and with the help of which sensations can be ‘thought’: brought together and ordered according to rules.”³⁴ For Strawson, “Kant thinks that there are such concepts and has his name for them ready: they are the categories, the pure concepts of the understanding.”³⁵ These pure concepts of understanding can also be referred to as the intellectual condition of human knowledge. Following Aristotle, Kant would in short, refer these concepts as categories.³⁶ In here, *a priori* is to be distinguished with “pure.” Allison writes:

In the case of concepts, unlike that of intuitions, ‘pure’ cannot be equated with ‘a priori’. This is because it follows from Kant’s theory of sensibility that there are a priori concepts that express formal conditions of intuition. These are the very concepts with which the mathematician is concerned ... Pure concepts can, therefore, be characterized as concepts that have their origin (“seat”) in the nature of human understanding or, equivalently, as those that express a fundamental law or function of the understanding.³⁷

Strawson asserts that “unless the concepts we employed in application to our experience implicitly involved the application of certain very general notions (categories), it would be impossible that there should be any such thing as self-conscious awareness.”³⁸ As already mentioned, there would be no knowledge if not at first experienced. Following Kant, Young asserts that “we can have knowledge only of those things of which we can have sensible intuition, and that knowledge of such things requires apprehension of the manifold of sensible intuition through which they are given to us.”³⁹ Simply stated, we should not mistake pure reasoning with knowing. Pure reasoning is thinking without experience; knowing is thinking with experience. We

³⁴ Höffe, 55.

³⁵ Strawson, 73.

³⁶ Allison, 115.

³⁷ Allison, 116.

³⁸ Strawson, 20.

³⁹ J. Michael Young. “Functions of thought and the synthesis of intuitions” in in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* ed. Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 103.

cannot claim to know without experiencing it. For instance, we can have a beautiful argument but we cannot go further than that. As Young states: “Insofar as they serve to give unity to the synthesis of intuition, the functions of thought are said to constitute pure concepts of the understanding, or categories.”⁴⁰

Possibility of Knowledge

Kant’s theory of knowledge is summed up in a statement: “Thoughts without contents are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.”⁴¹ This means that knowledge is a combination of thoughts and intuitions (contents and concepts)⁴² so that the absence or lack of one element makes knowledge impossible. The interplaying of sensibility (with its power to receive) and understanding (with its power to think) comes about knowledge. The formula, if it were to appear mathematically scientific, is “sensibility” plus “knowledge” equals “knowledge.”

When we are thinking without contents, we are groping with concepts. Thinking involves something (e.g. content) given to me by way of intuition. We realize here that the activity to think is not necessarily equated to the activity to know. “Thinking” is not immediately about “knowing.” Sometimes, we think marvelously but without content and we cannot claim that we know. It is then incorrect to say that we know just by thinking. Since the senses do not think but the understanding does, both sensibility (Aesthetic) and understanding (Logic) must work to come up knowledge.

In knowledge, there is a duality of intuitions and concepts and a necessary co-operation of sensibility and understanding. Simply put, concepts are not enough; intuitions are needed. There must always be the two: thinking and receiving. The implication is, as Hartnack writes:

⁴⁰ Young, 105.

⁴¹ In German: *Gedanken ohne inhalt sind leer; anschauungen ohne begriffe sind blind.* This statement also clearly asserts the contrast between intuition and concept but their difference establishes a unified whole for knowledge.

⁴² Citing Kant’s *Critique*, Parsons indicates: “intuition ... ‘relates immediately to the object and is singular,’ in contrast with a concept, which ‘refers to it mediately by mean of a feature which several things may have in common.’” Charles Parsons. “The Transcendental Aesthetic” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* ed. Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 63.

What does not appear in time and space and is not conceptualized (i.e., is not comprehended by means of concepts) does not, according to Kant, satisfy the necessary conditions of being known. Not only can it not be known or thought (and therefore not be talked about); it cannot even be said to exist.⁴³

Hartnack further contends that “certain concepts exist whose existence is not the *result* of experience but on the contrary the *condition* of it.”⁴⁴ On the other, Strawson would say:

it seems that there is no conceivable way in which concepts could be instantiated in our experience except by our being aware of instances of them in space and time ... Space and time themselves are accordingly declared to be ‘in us’, to be simply the forms of our sensibility, nothing but our ways of being aware of particular things capable of being brought under concepts.⁴⁵

In other words, what specific knowledge do we gain or arrive in linking the dual faculties of human reason? Strawson asserts of Kant’s model of the theory of knowledge that the co-operation of both faculties is essential to experience, or necessary for empirical knowledge.⁴⁶ Allison introduces a technical term called *epistemic condition* in the hope to define, examine, or clarify the conditions of human knowledge. With epistemic conditions of understanding (pure concepts) and that of sensibility (space and time or forms of human sensibility), knowledge is constituted. These two types of condition are necessary conditions of the possibility of experience, and as such, bring about experiential knowledge. But it does not stop here (experiential knowledge). The conditions also figure out the nonempirical knowledge (e.g., of mathematics and metaphysics).⁴⁷

⁴³ Hartnack, 28-29.

⁴⁴ Hartnack, 144.

⁴⁵ Strawson, 20.

⁴⁶ See Strawson, 48; also 71. But this is not viewed from Humean form of empiricism – sensationism which overemphasizes knowledge as only given in experience, and which in turn seems to lead to the impossibility of all knowledge. See Hartnack, 144.

⁴⁷ See Allison, 10-11.

Accordingly, knowledge is not only analytical. There would be no knowledge if there is no synthesis of what is received spatio-temporally and what is thought of conceptually.

Conclusion

In this inescapable duality of sensibility and understanding in Kant's theory of knowledge, we can conceive of an overarching question pertinent to our analysis above: "How can I know?" To answer this, we may say that through sensibility and understanding, that is, by intuiting and thinking, we are able to know. It is therefore never an option to exclude one activity from the other in terms of knowledge. Such a question is also indicative of the necessary materials from which knowledge happens. To think is never sufficient for the knowing process. And so, to intuit or receive is to be supplied. This does not imply that one is secondary than the other. Both are essential for knowledge – a knowledge which comes from (or originates) the experience of the senses and of thought. Thinking backed up by experience would simply mean that the latter is also needed to proceed towards knowledge. With what is given and thought of, knowledge consists of both intuitions and concepts or in their pure forms: space and time, and categories, respectively. In a word, when we think, we use concepts; when we intuit, we receive something from space and time. And both have to work hand in hand.

The possibility of knowledge is not however dichotomizing between sensibility and understanding. There is no clear cut distinction between the two stems of knowledge and by no means that one is independently separate from the other for knowledge to be possible. The differentiation⁴⁸ of the two faculties is done so to systematically and critically undertake how such a synthesis of what is received by the sensibility and of what is thought about in the understanding happens in the knowing process. These two departments of the mind remain as interlocking items. In fact, the discussion on Transcendental Aesthetic already presupposes the indispensable interaction of these stems of knowledge, asserting of their equal standing and reciprocal dependence.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Although it is not true in practice to isolate one faculty, it is done so in order to (re)solve the problematic concerning human knowledge.

⁴⁹ See Höffe, 54.

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