

Rationalism and Empiricism

Hume and Kant

David Hume (1711-1776)



- Born in Edinburgh
- Often referred to as the most important of the 18th century empiricists
- Principal figure in the Scottish Enlightenment
- Philosophical masterpiece-
Treatise of Human Nature
- It 'fell dead-born from the press' so he wrote it in two volumes
- Contemporary of Adam Smith and James Boswell

Hume's general theory of knowledge

We can have knowledge of just two sorts of things:

‘Relations of ideas’:

- Logical connections among ideas that belong to formal systems such as mathematics.
- Our knowledge of these is certain, since we know that the contrary is a logical contradiction.
- But they concern only abstract terms defined by us; they don't describe the real world.

‘Matters of Fact’

- What we know from experience about the nature, existence and behaviour of real things.
- Our knowledge of these cannot be certain since the contrary of any fact is logically possible.
- The imagination is free to consider both sides of any factual question.

Hume's Empiricism

- Any concept you may have must be able to be traced back to the sensation from which it derives.
- If you cannot do this, your concept must be an error.
- This allows Hume to use his Empiricism as a tool to critique many branches of philosophy

Hume's Empiricism

- What is God?
 - What are the empirical origins of our sense of a supreme powerful, wise, loving creator?
 - Answer: other people.
 - Thus, God is made in the image by man.
- What is the self?
 - It cannot be traced to a series of empirical sensations as they are always changing.
 - It must, instead be the name given to whole bundle of sensations.
- What is morality?
 - Good and evil cannot be traced back to empirical sensations.
 - they must come from their inner sensations, our emotions.
 - thus morality grows out of our emotions.

Hume and Causation

- The foundations of all knowledge of matters of fact
US.....
 1. What we experience here and now
 2. Or what we can remember
- Knowledge which goes beyond what is present to our senses or our memory rests on **causal inference**.
- How do I know that one thing typically follows another?
- Answer: I rely on **experience**.

Hume on Causation

- The Problem of Induction

From any number of past experience that B follows A, can we logically infer that the next occurrence of A will be followed by B?

- Deduction: All X's are Y. F is an X. Therefore F is necessarily Y.
- Induction: All X's observed in the past are Y. F is an X not yet observed. Therefore F is not necessarily Y.
- **'The imagination is free to consider either side.'**

Hume and Causation

- Take the proposition ‘every event has a cause.’
- It can be denied without contradiction,
- So it is not known a priori.
- We have not experienced all events (especially those outside our experience),
- So it is not known a posteriori

Conclusion: All reasoning about cause and effect is not really logical reasoning but expectation based on habit.

Hume and Causation

- We think of A as the cause of B if they are constantly conjoined:
- A always precedes B;
- A and B are contiguous in space.
- So our minds form the expectation of B whenever A occurs.
- We say things like: 'If A happens, B must follow necessarily.'
- But this is an idea arising from our psychological expectation, not an empirical fact.
- It represents our instinctive expectation that the future will resemble the past.

Hume vs. the Rationalists

- Hume's account of causation deals a critical blow to rationalism.
- Rationalism presupposes that causes and effects are necessarily connected.
- Hume asserts that there is no such necessity – only constant repetition of experience.
- 'Adam, though his rational faculties be supposed, at the very first, entirely perfect, could not have inferred from the fluidity and transparency of water that it would suffocate him, or from the light and warmth of fire that it would consume.

Immanuel Kant



(1724-1804)

- From the Prussian city Kaliningrad, Russia
- One of the most influential thinkers of modern Europe and of late Enlightenment
- Critique of Pure Reason (1781) a critical investigation of reason itself
- Kant believed himself to be creating a compromise between the empiricists and the rationalists
- Never travelled beyond his home province
- Was so meticulous in his habits that people said they could set their clocks by his routines

Kant's 'Problem'

- Kant was a scientist and philosopher.
- But he saw a problem in trying to reconcile the physical sciences and the study of morals and human conduct.

Physical Sciences:

- Base on the assumption that everything that occurs is determined by antecedent (earlier) happenings.

Moral Philosophy:

- Based on the assumption that we are faced with the alternative courses of action that we bear responsibility.

Analytic vs. Synthetic

- Kant introduced the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements.

Analytic: statements in which the predicate B belongs to the subject A, as something which is covertly contained in this concept A.

They tell us nothing about the way the world is, but simply clarify what is involved in our concepts.

Synthetic: statements in which the predicate lies outside the subject. They give us substantial piece of information about the world.

If these are the only two options, then philosophy is in trouble because when we talk of metaphysics....

We don't want to say our talk is merely tautological.

Neither is it empirical

Classifying knowledge

- All analytic statements are a priori.
- All posteriori judgements are synthetic.
- But you can have a synthetic a priori statement?
- Yes, you can, says Kant!

Maths and Geometry $7+5 = 12$

Is universal and necessary (thus a priori).

But the concept 12 is not contained in 7 or 5 or + or = or in their combinations- synthetic.

Other examples: every event has a cause

we can know with absolute certainty (thinks Kant), that any event will be caused (thus a priori). Is it not contained within the concept of an event, that it have a cause (thus synthetic).

How can the synthetic *a priori* be possible?

Kant's answer is both radical and astonishing.

- Take geometry as an example: There can only be one explanation of our a priori knowledge of the properties of space:
- **The spatial properties of the world must be contributed by us, the knowing subject.**
- That is, the world as it is in itself, is not made up of objects arranged in space. Only the world as it appears to us is spatial, and this is precisely because space is nothing more than our way of representing the world to ourselves.
- In Kant's own terminology, space is nothing more than a form of intuition-i.e. perception.
- Space and time are features of the phenomenal world – the world as it appears to us.
- The noumenal world – the world of things as they are in themselves is a-spatial and a-temporal.

- Take causation as another example:
- Causal relations are projected into the world by us, the experiencing consciousness.
- Consequently causation too is a feature only of the world of appearances (the phenomenal) and not the world of our cognitive faculties (the noumenal)
- We all think of the world in terms of time and space, cause and effect, unity and plurality etc.
- We do this not because that is the way the world is, but rather because that is the way our mind orders our experience.
- There can be no knowledge without sensation, but sense data cannot alone provide knowledge either.

Smashing the Rationalist/Empiricist division!

- Kant's epistemology:
- Knowledge is possible because it is about how things appear to us...
- ...not about how things are in themselves
- Reason provides the structure or form or what we know...
- ...the sense provide the content

Conclusion

- So Kant critiques both empiricism and rationalism.
- The empiricist view is wrong, since the mind is not a mere tabula rasa which passively receives knowledge of the world through the senses.
- The rationalist is wrong since reason alone can never give rise to knowledge, since knowledge demands both concepts and the raw data supplied by the senses.

Kant Continued

Implications of Kant's Epistemology

- We can never know anything about things we do not experience and organise in terms of the mind's structure. e.g. God, soul, freedom and other metaphysical topics.
- We can never know if our ideas about the world are true because we are limited to phenomena (things as they appear).
- But whilst Kant held that we have no 'real' knowledge of such things, he maintained that we can have a 'practical' knowledge of them.

Consider free will:

- When I consider my actions as part of the phenomenal world, I am obliged to regard them as produced by rigid deterministic laws.
- But when I consider those same actions as they are in the noumenal world, I am not so obliged.
- We don't have to make a choice between two apparently incompatible ways of looking at the world: the ethical/spiritual vs. the scientific.
- There is room in the world for both determinism and freedom, spirituality and science.

- The philosophy of Immanuel Kant is sometimes called the Copernican revolution of philosophy, to emphasize its novelty and huge importance. Kant synthesized rationalism and empiricism. After Kant, the old debate between rationalism and empiricism ended, and epistemology went in a new direction. After Kant no discussion of reality or knowledge could take place without awareness of the role of the human mind in constructing reality and knowledge.
- Kant revolutionised philosophy. Kant showed that the mind, through its innate categories, constructs our experience along certain lines (space, time, causality, self etc.) Thus, thinking and experiencing give no access to things as they really are. We can think as hard as we like, but we will never escape the innate constraints of our minds. Kant forces philosophy to look seriously at the world for the agent (what Kant called the phenomenal world) independently of the real world outside consciousness – the world in itself (the noumenal world).