

Kant on: Facts and Values

Facts and Values

- Two main objectives of Kant's philosophy was
 - To justify, in the face of Humian skepticism, the claims of science to have real knowledge of matters of fact
 - To justify traditional religious and moral insights against the scientific view of the world as a purposeless mechanism

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- Kant thought he had pulled that off by:
 - In his view knowledge is possible just because it consists in recognizing an order **projected** into a sensuous manifold by certain synthetical mental acts
 - Knowledge in the scientific sense is guaranteed by the fact that it is limited to the spatiotemporal manifold

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- God and the self are not spatiotemporal so, according to Kant, the conclusions of science have absolutely no relevance, one way or the other, to the moral and religious life
- Some philosophers “see” this line of explanation is better than the Cartesian line of attack on this problem
 - Instead of drawing a distinction on substantial lines—which, supposedly has concomitant complications of interaction and parallelism
 - Kant drew a distinction between what is within and what is beyond the spatiotemporal manifold

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- Some philosophers assert that the object of moral judgment (the locus to which praise and blame, for instance, are ascribed) is the supposedly substantial self of Cartesianism, then morality is indeed a vain and chimerical illusion, for the existence of such a self is inconsistent with the principles of physics

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- But if Kant was correct, then space and time, substance and causality, are forms that the mind introduces into experience
 - And it is asserted that, therefore, the self about which moral judgments are made is not a substance and does not act causally in the spatiotemporal world

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- In Kant's view, it is true that we **cannot** know such a self, for knowledge is limited to what is **within** the spatiotemporal manifold
- It is also argued that is precisely because knowledge is thus confined to the manifold, that we **cannot know** that such a self does *not* exist

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- Kant asserted that we cannot know anything, one way or other, about such a noumenal self
- However, Kant would assert, if there **are any other grounds for believing in its existence, we are warranted in so believing**

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- Kant thought the negative side of his analysis (*Critique*) was that knowledge was restricted to the spatiotemporal manifold—we could only know the appearance, not the thing in itself
- But he asserted that we should bear “in mind, namely, that though we cannot know these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in position at least **to think them as things in themselves**; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears”

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- According to Kant, “. . . .even the assumptionof *God, freedom, and immortality* is not permissible unless at the same time speculative reason be deprived of its pretensions to transcendent insight.”
 - That’s “long” for the concepts have no reference to things in themselves
 - But *God, freedom and immortality*, as concepts, could be used on behalf of the necessary **practical employment of ones reason**

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- Therefore, Kant, “. . . .found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.”
 - For those concepts to have been considered “knowledge” one would have had to make use of principles which apply only to objects of possible experience—but these aren’t objects of the spatiotemporal manifold
 - So, Kant, gives up on scientific or appearance “knowledge” and calls his use of the concepts “faith”

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- This two step strategy has been characterized as involving:
 - The distinction between “knowledge” and “thinking”
 - The concept of faith

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- Unpacking those two items:
 - The distinction between “knowing” and “thinking”
 - Knowing: Kant thought to “. . .know an object I must be able to prove its possibility, **either** from its actuality as attended by experience, or *a priori* by means of reason”
 - Thinking: Kant asserted, “I can *think* whatever I please, provided only that I do not contradict myself, that is, provided my concept is a possible thought”

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- But it is important to notice that Kant thought the mere possibility of a concept did **not** ensure that there was an object corresponding to it
- But there is **something more** required of a concept than mere possibility (or “thinkability”) to qualify as having what Kant called “objective validity”
 - Here, I think, Kant equates “objective validity” and knowledge
 - So Kant is dividing possibility between what he called “logical possibility” and “real possibility”
- The **something more** for “real possibility” can come from two sources
 - What Kant called the theoretical sources of knowledge
 - And what he called the practical source of knowledge

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- Clarifying examples of logical possibility and real possibility
 - I cannot think of a “round square” (not thinkable)
 - I can think of a square (a four angled figure)
 - I can think of a 1,000 angle figure (so both square and 1,000 angle figure are logical or thinkable possibilities)
 - But are both the square and the 1,000 angle figure more than possible figures?

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- According to Kant there is a way to do this
 - I know the square is more than just a logical possibility because I encounter squares in experience
 - This is what Kant meant by grounding objective validity in “the theoretical sources of knowledge”
 - So it follows from that the 1,000 angle figure, though a logical possibility, is not “objectively valid” or knowledge or a **real** possibility unless it is grounded or becomes grounded in our experience—that is, when we experience one.

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- Kant next applied this line of thought to God, freedom, and immortality
 - If they are noumena they are logically possible because one can think of them
 - Are they objectively valid as well?
 - Theoretical knowledge (experience) cannot do the job since such knowledge is limited to phenomena—to occurrences in the spatiotemporal manifold

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- But Kant thought there was another way of moving from logical possibility to objective validity
 - By grounding the concept in the “practical” sources of knowledge
 - So the key question is: what is the “practical” source of knowledge?
 - Note, Kant thought that unless God, freedom, and immortality are objectively real (not mere logical possibilities), the moral life is a vain and chimerical illusion

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- Kant thought our own **strong feelings about the genuineness of our duties** to others is the “**practical**” ground that warrants our belief in the objective validity of these concepts
 - He thought this **practical ground** (our strong feelings about the genuineness of our duties) that warrants our belief in God, freedom, and immortality was in some sense similar to (though at a completely different level) the **theoretical ground** (our strong feelings about the genuineness of our percepts of a square) that warrants our belief in the objective validity of the concept of a four-angled figure
 - This could be visualized in the following way:

Thinking

Knowing

Grounding

Logical
Possibility



Thinkable

Real
Possibility



Objectively valid
or "knowledge"

Within the spatiotemporal manifold: grounded theoretically by actual experience; grounded by our strong feeling about the genuineness of our percept



Not within the spatiotemporal manifold: grounded "practically" by our strong feeling about the genuineness of our sense of duty

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- But what sort of objective validity do God, freedom, and immortality have?
 - In the Western tradition the objective validity ascribed to God has typically been that of substance exercising causal efficacy in the world
 - The same could be said of “self”
 - But the whole argument of the *Critique* rules out this way of thinking about these concepts

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- What is interesting is that all language (both commonsensical and philosophical) is a thing-language, a language descriptive of objects interacting casually with other objects
- It's difficult to find a way of talking about these concepts (God, freedom, immortality) that does not suggest them to be things
 - Some philosophers think the best way to deal with this problem is to think of these concepts as values (Kant does not make this suggestion)
 - Values are not commonly regarded as interacting causally, and they are the objects of enjoying or appreciating, not of perceivings

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- Now to Kant's second main point: the concept of "faith"
 - He did not mean any subjective, private, or whimsical belief that an individual may choose to hold
 - In saying he "denied knowledge" Kant meant that he was limiting the area of applicability of science—limiting it, that is, to the spatiotemporal realm
 - By **belief** he meant *another* kind of experience, but one that was as well grounded & just as public & objective, **in its way**, as scientific knowledge is **in its way**
 - Kant could have said it this way: "I have found it necessary to limit scientific knowledge in order to make room for an appreciation of values"

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- Kant could be interpreted in the following way:
 - What he proposed was to replace the Cartesian dualism-substance theory with a dualism of kinds of experience
 - There is an experience of things in space and time, which he called knowledge
 - There is also an experience or appreciation of values which he called faith
- This distinction was to have important consequences not just in the history of philosophy but in the whole development of culture in the 19th and 20th century