

Kant's Prolegomena: Topics and Questions
(to be continued)

1 As you know, Kant makes a fundamental distinction in the **Prolegomena** between "**synthetic**" and "**analytic**" judgments, asserts that some of the former are "**a priori**", and offers to explain to us "how" this can be the case.

We have encountered something roughly cognate to the 'synthetic'/'analytic'-distinction before, of course, in the form of Hume's "**fork**": his dichotomy between "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact".

What detailed parallels and contrasts do you think one might trace between these two distinctions, in the light of the (relatively few) concrete examples Hume and Kant gave for them, in the texts we have read? What do you make, in particular, of their contrasting analyses of simple mathematical (arithmetical and geometric) judgments?

In class, I asked whether Hume's distinction between "relation(s) of ideas" and "matter(s) of fact" should be regarded **itself** as a 'relation of ideas', or a 'matter of fact'. . . . Might one pose a similar dilemma for Kant's dichotomy?

Is the judgment, in other words, that there 'must' exist a determinate distinction between "synthetic" and "analytic" judgments, **itself** synthetic or analytic? Might this question **itself** be one of the questions Kant asserts "reason" 'must' pose for itself, but cannot answer in any decidable way?

For comparison, it might perhaps be useful to recall that Kant asserts -- in 267 and 270 -- that the (essentially Aristotelean) "**principle of (non)contradiction**" is **analytic**, but Leibniz' "**principle of sufficient reason**" is **synthetic**. Do you agree with these characterisations?

2 In class, I suggested that Kant's claim to provide an answer for his question "**How are synthetic a priori judgments possible?**" amounts to a very elaborate form of **postulation** ("transcendental deduction") that

2.1 there 'must' exist a uniquely specifiable 'intended interpretation' (call it E) of **Experience**. The '**apodictically certain**', '**a priori**' relational structures of E, in turn, are determined by

2.1.1 '**constitutive**' '**forms of intuition**' (of the 'manifold' of Newtonian space and time, provided further with a particular 'handedness' or orientation), which govern our uniform and 'intuitive' apprehension of the inner and outer world(s); and

2.1.2 equally '**constitutive**' '**categories of the understanding**' which govern our equally uniform '**concept**'-formation about the relations ('causality', for example) between the data given to us by these 'intuitions'

In effect, I suggested, Kant's claim is that **without** such unique and determinate underlying structures -- for 'our' (?) 'intuition' and 'concept'-formation -- '**we could not even call the 'existence' of such structures into question** (as he believed Hume did).

More precisely, I suggested that Kant may have been attempting a kind of extended dialectical '**cogito-argument**', construed -- along 'Augustinian' lines -- as a discovery of an (alleged) invariant or fixed point for 'Humean' doubt.

One might try to paraphrase this argument -- very briefly and roughly -- as follows.

2.2 Should one ever attempt to **doubt** the 'existence' of such intuitive and conceptual structure(s) (as on Kant's view Hume did), then **the very intuitive and conceptual structure(s) of one's doubts would bear witness to the 'existence' of what one tried to doubt.**

This is my own idiosyncratic interpretation, of course, but I hope it will provide a framework for some relevant questions in what follows.

It may, for example, give rise to a 'Kantian' counterpart of a traditional puzzle about Descartes' original cogito-argument.

Descartes, notoriously, leaves **very** obscure what the 'I' which emerges

Boos
Hume (2)
1st Enquiry

Do you think we should then try to relativise the fork somehow (to particular kinds of "ideas" or experience(s)", for example)? Or hold it in suspension? Or value it, perhaps -- but mainly as an heuristic principle, as I suggested for the "microscope" above in 2?

Or should we rather -- in simple fairness --

"commit it to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion" (165)?

('Who lives by the fork, shall die by the fork'?)

4 Hume makes it very clear in Section V of the first Enquiry that the "inference" of causality is not drawn "by any process of reasoning", but by "some other principle" (p.42), and that

This principle is Custom or Habit. For whenever the repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding, we always say that this propensity is the effect of Custom (p. 43)

Here, then, is a kind of preestablished harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas. . . . (p.54)

Custom is that principle, by which this correspondence has been effected; so necessary to the subsistence of our species. . . .

Those, who delight in the discovery and contemplation of final causes, have here ample subject to employ their wonder and admiration. (55)

What do you think the implications of these extraordinary claims might be?

(Compare a remark of Pascal, that

J'ai grand peur que cette nature ne soit elle même qu'une premiere coutume, comme la coutume est une seconde nature.

I'm much afraid that this nature may only be a first custom, as custom is a second nature. Pensées, #126/93)

Is Hume really appealing, for example, to 'ordinary' or 'customary' (?) sense(s) of 'custom' here? Or is he actually smuggling in some much stronger, "subreptive" ones (in Kant's language)?

How, moreover, on Hume's own account, could 'Custom' actually begin?

Much less evolve, or develop?

Might it even (god forbid) have to be almost 'innate' -- at least in some of its more rudimentary and dispositional forms? (Compare, for example, the problems Hume poses for "Adam" on p. 27; or the "man who has no tincture of natural philosophy" on p. 28; or the person who is "brought on a sudden into this world" on p. 42)

Might there be a sense (according to Hume) in which 'custom' would have to presuppose 'experience', and 'experience', in turn, presuppose 'custom'?

And if this is so, might attempts to block this emergent regress lead rather naturally to Kant's view: that there 'must' exist certain sorts of faculties or judgments which are (god knoweth how) "synthetic a priori"?

5 In the opening pages of Section XII, Hume distinguishes between "antecedent" and "consequent" skepticism, and makes it clear that the former may roughly be identified with Cartesian hyperbolic doubt, and the latter with his own, "more mitigated skepticism or academical philosophy" (p. 161).

What do you make of this distinction ("antecedent" and "consequent", for example, to what 'All' of experience? And if not, how much?)?

Does the dichotomy seem to you more one of "reason" (relatively straightforward conceptual criteria, for example, by which one might hope to discern the two notions it involves)? Or more one of "fact" (in which "nature" arbitrarily rules out one, or at least favors one over the other)?

Whatever your construal of Hume's distinction, do his arguments on its behalf strike you as tenable? Plausible?

Whatever the dichotomy's epistemic status, might it be a valuable one, at least -- in the literal sense that Hume's arguments for it appeal ultimately to value-judgments: assertions that are essentially 'practical' and ethical (in Kant's language), rather than speculative?

(Is Hume really arguing, in other words, that we ought to be "consequent" skeptics -- rather than "antecedent" ones, or 'dogmatists', or whatever?)