

Empirical and Atomic Concepts in Analytic Judgments

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Central to Kant’s epistemology, particularly in the context of how we can come to know things as either *a priori* or *a posteriori*, is his exploration of analytic judgments. An analytic judgment, according to Kant, is one in which the predicate relates to the subject through identity. That is, for affirmative judgments — those that assert a certain predicate applies to the subject — such judgments are classified as analytic if the concept of the predicate is already inherently included within the very concept of the subject itself¹.

Take the judgment “Gold is a yellow metal” for example. The predicate “Yellow Metal” is being applied to the subject “Gold”, so the judgment is affirmative. Moreover, the concept of the predicate, <yellow metal>, is contained within the very concept of the subject, <gold>. This is because, gold, by definition, is a yellow metal.

Judgments can also be negative — so they deny that a certain predicate applies to the subject — and still be analytic. An example might be “No squares are circular”. In this case, the predicate, “circular” is being asserted as not applying to the subject, “squares”. The judgment is analytic because the concept of circularity is not contained within the concept of a square (“a flat shape with four sides of equal length and four angles of 90°”²). By definition, squares are not circular. From this, it becomes clearer that analytic judgments are just assertions that clarify or explicate innate properties of the subject concept.

Importantly, Kant claims that all analytic judgments, such as “Gold is a yellow metal”, are *a priori*. This might seem confusing at first: Isn’t the color and metallic nature of gold learned through experience? Would that not make the judgment “Gold is a yellow metal” *a posteriori*? Although <gold> might be an empirical concept, Kant contends that the truth of an

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B11.

² Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “Square (*noun*),” accessed February 12th, 2024.

analytical judgment is derived from the relationship between the subject and predicate concepts, not from our experience³. We might learn about <gold> from experience, but for the judgment “Gold is a yellow metal” to be understood, we do not need to go beyond our concept of gold. This is because the property of being a yellow metal is innate to the concept of gold; you cannot know the concept of gold without knowing that it is also a yellow metal. In other words, there is no further empirical investigation that needs to be done once the concept of <gold> is known to determine the truth of “Gold is a yellow metal”. Generally, analytic judgments are an analysis of already known (perhaps empirical) concepts and do not hinge on any additional empirical evidence. They live in the same epistemological space as their subject concept and do not extend any further.

Separate from analytic judgments using empirical concepts, it might also make sense to discuss analytic judgments in the context of an atomic concept — i.e., a concept with no constituents. Such a concept would be indivisible and have no other concept contained within itself, so it does not contain within itself any predicates to use within an analytic judgment. It also does not necessarily need to be contained within any other concept. Could an analytic judgment be made using only that atomic concept?

Let such a hypothetical atomic concept be <A>, then any true analytic judgment that can be expressed with just <A> would have to be a tautology, that is, true by virtue of its form. An example is “<A> is <A>” or any other logically equivalent form using just <A> like “Not <A> is not <A>”.

Depending on the precise definition of “*contained within*”, these judgments can be categorized as analytic. For example, for the judgment “Apples are apples”, if the concept of

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B11.

apples is *contained within* the concept of apples, then the judgment is analytic. In general, if “*within*” encapsulates the concept itself, then any concept $\langle C \rangle$ can be made into an analytic judgment of the form “ $\langle C \rangle$ is $\langle C \rangle$ ” (or any other logical equivalent judgment using just $\langle C \rangle$).

Whether a concept can contain itself is a much larger philosophical discussion and depends on the purpose of analytic judgments. Even if concepts can contain themselves, such single-concept analytic judgments (like “ $\langle C \rangle$ is $\langle C \rangle$ ”) would say very little about the nature of the concept itself. Similarly, atomic concepts expressed in such a way would be analytic but only express equivalence with themselves — nothing more.

Bibliography

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