

Kant on Hypothetical Judgments and The Pure Concept of Cause

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In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant explores the different logical forms of judgments and how they bridge to pure concepts of understanding. One of these logical forms of judgment is the hypothetical judgment of the form: *If A then B*, where A is a proposition called the *antecedent*, and B is a proposition called the *consequent*. As an example, Kant uses the judgment: “If there is a perfect justice, then obstinate evil will be punished”, where “there is a perfect justice” is the antecedent and “obstinate evil will be punished” is the consequent. The importance of such a hypothetical judgment is not derived from the truth of the propositions contained within it¹, but rather from the implication that the truth or occurrence of the consequent is contingent upon the truth or occurrence of the antecedent, i.e., a causal relationship between the antecedent and consequent.

Whether such hypothetical judgments are synthetic or analytic depends on the relationship between the antecedent and the consequent. Synthetic hypothetical judgments are those that introduce new information that is not deducible from the antecedent or consequent alone. Specifically, it is the causal relationship of such judgments that expresses something beyond our understanding of either proposition. In Kant’s example, “obstinate evil will be punished” does not, by definition, contain the notion of “perfect justice”. Instead, the judgment posits a consequence (the punishment of obstinate evil) as a necessary outcome of the existence of perfect judgment, thereby extending our understanding of what perfect justice entails. Similarly, the hypothetical judgment, “If a gas is heated, then it rises”, is synthetic because gas rising does not, by definition, include the notion of the gas being heated — yet a new causal relationship between heated and rising gasses is expressed.

On the other hand, a hypothetical judgment is analytic if no new information is expressed through the causal relationship of the antecedent and consequent. For example, the hypothetical judgment “If a figure is a triangle, then it has 3 straight sides” is analytic. By definition, a figure

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B98.

with 3 straight sides is a triangle² so nothing not already innate to the consequent or antecedent is learned from the causal relationship of the antecedent and consequent. Similarly, the hypothetical judgment “If he is a bachelor, then he is not married” is analytic. This is because, by definition, bachelors are not married so the antecedent already includes the information contained within the relationship between antecedent and consequent. Interestingly, the causal relationship persists within analytic hypothetical judgments as it is secured by definition and is therefore logically necessary.

Notably, Kant contends that the causal relationships expressed through hypothetical judgments mirror causal reasoning and thus lead to our understanding of the concept of cause, <cause>, as a necessary connection between events where one event (the cause) necessarily brings about another event (the effect). He believes that <cause> is *a priori* and therefore exists in the mind prior to any experience as a fundamental principle to organize our experience — allowing us to use causality and dependence within our reasoning.

This is Kant’s fundamental motivation for undertaking the derivation of all twelve pure concepts of understanding (the categories) from the logical forms of judgment: to secure these concepts *a priori* and show that they could not be derived from experience — because we could not empirically derive their necessity nor universality³. Furthermore, Kant claims that experience can only derive the “subjective necessity” and we could never remove them from our cognition like other empirical concepts⁴. Indeed, when Kant speaks of causal relations being rule-governed, he emphasizes that the rule of causality must be necessary and universal — or else it would not be a rule. To Kant, the rule governing causality is part of the inherent structure of the mind, placing it beyond the reach of empirical derivation and situating it as foundational to our cognitive framework.

² Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “Triangle (*noun*),” accessed March 20th, 2024.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B4 & B124.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B4.

Bibliography

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