

On the difference between pure and empirical cognition.

There is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience; for how else should the cognitive faculty be awakened into exercise if not through objects that stimulate our senses and in part themselves produce representations, in part bring the activity of our understanding into motion to compare these, to connect or separate them, and thus to work up the raw material of sensible impressions into a cognition of objects that is called experience?⁷ **As far as time is concerned**, then, no cognition in us precedes experience, and with experience every cognition begins.

But although all our cognition commences **with** experience, yet it does not on that account all arise **from** experience. For it could well be that even our experiential cognition is a composite of that which we receive through impressions and that which our own cognitive faculty (merely prompted by sensible impressions) provides out of itself, which addition we cannot distinguish from that fundamental material until long practice has made us attentive to it and skilled in separating it out.

It is therefore at least a question requiring closer investigation, and one not to be dismissed at first glance, whether there is any such cognition independent of all experience and even of all impressions of the senses. One calls such cognitions *a priori*,^c and distinguishes them from empirical ones, which have their sources *a posteriori*, namely in experience.⁸

The former expression^d is nevertheless not yet sufficiently determinate to designate the whole sense of the question before us. For it is customary to say of many a cognition derived from experiential sources that we are capable of it or partake in it *a priori*, because we do not derive it

immediately from experience, but rather from a general rule that we have nevertheless itself borrowed from experience. So one says of someone who undermined the foundation of his house that he could have known *a priori* that it would collapse, i.e., he need not have waited for the experience of it actually collapsing. Yet he could not have known this entirely *a priori*.⁹ For that bodies are heavy and hence fall if their support is taken away must first have become known to him through experience.

In the sequel therefore we will understand by *a priori* cognitions not those that occur independently of this or that experience, but rather those that occur *absolutely* independently of all experience. Opposed to them are empirical cognitions, or those that are possible only *a posteriori*, i.e., through experience. Among *a priori* cognitions, however, those are called pure with which nothing empirical is intermixed. Thus, e.g., the proposition "Every alteration has its cause" is an *a priori* proposition, only not pure, since alteration is a concept that can be drawn only from experience.¹⁰

II.

We are in possession of certain *a priori* cognitions, and even the common understanding is never without them.

At issue here is a mark by means of which we can securely distinguish a pure cognition from an empirical one.¹¹ Experience teaches us, to be sure, that something is constituted thus and so, but not that it could not be otherwise. **First**, then, if a proposition is thought along with its necessity, it is an *a priori* judgment; if it is, moreover, also not derived from any proposition except one that in turn is valid as a necessary proposition, then it is absolutely *a priori*. **Second**: Experience never gives its judgments true or strict but only assumed and comparative universality (through induction), so properly it must be said: as far as we have yet perceived, there is no exception to this or that rule. Thus if a judgment is thought in strict universality, i.e., in such a way that no exception at all is allowed to be possible, then it is not derived from experience, but is rather valid absolutely *a priori*. Empirical universality is therefore only an arbitrary increase in validity from that which holds in most cases to that which holds in all, as in, e.g., the proposition "All bodies are heavy," whereas strict universality belongs to a judgment essentially; this points to a special source of cognition for it, namely a faculty of *a priori* cognition. Necessity and strict universality are therefore secure indications of an *a priori* cognition, and also belong together in-

separably. But since in their use it is sometimes easier to show the empirical limitation in judgments than the contingency in them, or is often more plausible to show the unrestricted universality that we ascribe to a judgment than its necessity, it is advisable to employ separately these two criteria, each of which is in itself infallible.¹²

Now it is easy to show that in human cognition there actually are such necessary and in the strictest sense universal, thus pure *a priori* judgments. If one wants an example from the sciences, one need only look at all the propositions of mathematics; if one would have one from the commonest use of the understanding, the proposition that every alteration must have a cause will do; indeed in the latter the very concept of a cause so obviously contains the concept of a necessity of connection with an effect and a strict universality of rule that it would be entirely lost if one sought, as Hume did, to derive it from a frequent association of that which happens with that which precedes and a habit (thus a merely subjective necessity) of connecting representations arising from that association.¹³ Even without requiring such examples for the proof of the reality of pure *a priori* principles in our cognition, one could establish their indispensability for the possibility of experience itself, thus establish it *a priori*. For where would experience itself get its certainty if all rules in accordance with which it proceeds were themselves in turn always empirical, thus contingent?;^a hence one could hardly allow these to count as first principles. Yet here we can content ourselves with having displayed the pure use of our cognitive faculty as a fact together with its indication.^b Not merely in judgments, however, but even in concepts is an origin of some of them revealed *a priori*. Gradually remove from your experiential concept of a **body** everything that is empirical in it – the color, the hardness or softness, the weight, even the impenetrability – there still remains the **space** that was occupied by the body (which has now entirely disappeared), and you cannot leave that out. Likewise, if you remove from your empirical concept of every object,^c whether corporeal or incorporeal, all those properties of which experience teaches you, you could still not take from it that by means of which you think of it as a **substance** or as **dependent** on a substance (even though this concept contains more determination than that of an object^d in general). Thus, convinced by the necessity with which this concept presses itself on you, you must concede that it has its seat in your faculty of cognition *a priori*.