Part I

KANT’S PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS
A

**A posteriori** In the B edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defines "a posteriori" as he is defining its more important contrastive term, "a priori":

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 impressions) provides out of itself … it is therefore at least a question requiring closer investigation … whether there is any such cognition independent of all experience and even of all impressions of the senses. One calls such *cognitions a priori*, and distinguishes them from *empirical* ones, which have their sources a posteriori, namely in experience. (B₂ [1787]/CECPR:136)

In providing these definitions, he simultaneously introduces one of the *Critique’s* central projects, viz., establishing that what had been called "empirical" cognition must be understood as having both elements that come (a posteriori) from the senses and a priori elements that are independent of the senses. Besides their source in sensory experience, a posteriori cognitions differ from a priori ones in being contingent and in lacking genuine universality, whereas the a priori are necessary and universal (A₁ [1781]/CECPR:127). A posteriori representations are also presented as supplying the “matter” of empirical cognition (A₂₀/B₃₄ = CECPR:156).

**Related terms:** *A priori, Matter*

**A priori** It is a mark of the centrality of the “a priori” to Kant’s theoretical philosophy that the introductions to both editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* begin with definitions of “a priori” and its contrastive term, “a posteriori.”

Experience … tells us … what is, but never that it must necessarily be thus … For that very reason it gives us no true universality … Now such universal cognitions, which … have the character of inner necessity, must be clear and certain for themselves, and independently of experience; hence one calls them a priori cognitions: whereas that which is merely borrowed from experience is … cognized only a posteriori, or empirically. (A₁–₂ [1781]/CECPR:127)

[A]lthough all our cognition commences *with* experience, yet it does not … 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 … It is therefore … a question … whether there is any such cognition independent … of all impressions of the senses. One calls such *cognitions a priori*. (B₁–₂ [1787]/CECPR:136)

A priori cognition contrasts with a posteriori cognition because it is not based on sensory impressions. The 1781 account introduces the a priori by noting a limitation of propositions based on sensory experience. They cannot be truly universal and necessary. The B definition is

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cast in terms of the sources of cognition: a posteriori cognitions have their source in sensory impressions; the sources of a priori elements of cognition are the activities of the faculties.

The definitions indicate two ways in which cognitions can be a priori. A proposition that is universal and necessary, e.g., “every alteration has a cause,” is a priori. But “even” an empirical proposition, e.g., “the table is brown,” is a combination of a posteriori and a priori elements. The two ways in which apriority are involved in cognition set up two ways of defining the epistemological project of the first Critique. On one, the goal is to show how the universal and necessary propositions of mathematics, natural science, and metaphysics are possible (B20–2/CECPR:147–8; see also Pro, 4:286 [1783]/CETP81:75–6).

The question of the “possibility” of a priori cognitions concerns legitimacy. How can universal and necessary propositions be legitimate parts of cognition? After distinguishing a priori cognition, Kant makes another distinction, between “analytic” and “synthetic.” In analytic judgments, the predicate concept is “contained in” the subject concept, so the activity of dissecting the subject concept can establish the universal and necessary truth, e.g., “all bodies are extended” (A7/B11 = CECPR:141). Truths of mathematics, science, and metaphysics are not analytic, however, but synthetic (or so Kant maintains). So the question of the legitimacy of these principles turns on the question of how a synthetic a priori proposition is possible.

In demonstrating the legitimacy of synthetic a priori judgments, “a priori” becomes linked to another key Kantian term, “transcendental”: “I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as that is to be possible a priori” (A11/B25 = CECPR:149). The legitimacy of a priori cognition is established through a special kind of reasoning that produces transcendental cognition. In the case of a priori concepts and judgments, the reasoning is based on a principle: “[the principle] that they must be recognized as a priori conditions for the possibility of experiences (whether of the intuition that is encountered in them, or of the thinking)” (A94/B126 = CECPR:225). Through reflecting on the necessary conditions for the possibility of experience, philosophers obtain transcendental cognition that the necessary and universal propositions of science and metaphysics are necessary in a different sense. They are necessary for any empirical cognition whatsoever. Such reflection does not depend on evidence of the senses, so the proof of the legitimacy of a priori propositions is a priori, based on reasoning.

The second way that the a priori figures in cognition, as providing elements for “composite” empirical cognitions, sets up a second epistemological goal of finding the a priori “forms of cognition.” In this way, apriority is also linked to the distinctive Kantian distinction between form and matter:

I call that in an appearance which corresponds to sensation its matter, but that which allows the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations, I call the form of appearance. … the matter of all appearance is only given to us a posteriori, but its form must all lie ready for it in the mind a priori and therefore can be considered separately from all sensation. (A20/B34 = CECPR:155–6)

Kant argues that both types of representations that are required for cognition, intuitions given through the faculty of sensibility and concepts of the understanding, have a priori forms: forms of intuitions and forms of judgment (to which the a priori concepts, the categories, correspond). Beyond these two classes, there is another pure, a priori, transcendental
representation, the “I think” that must accompany all representations (A107, A123/CEPR:332, 240; B131–2/CEPR:246–7; A341/B399 = CECP:411).

Although the Critique of Pure Reason defends a priori forms and judgments as legitimate parts of cognition, it “critiques” rationalists for overextending the reach of a priori cognition. They tried to use the a priori method of analyzing concepts to establish claims about God, freedom, and immortality that are beyond the bounds of empirical cognition.

“A priori” is equally ubiquitous in Kant’s practical philosophy. The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals begins by contrasting empirical and pure philosophy, where the latter involves a priori principles (G, 4:388 [1785]/CEPP:44). When pure a priori philosophy deals with a determinate range of objects, it is called “metaphysics,” so ethics is a “metaphysics of morals” (G, 4:388/CEPP:43; cf. MM, 6:216 [1797]/CEPP:371). In addition to ethics proper (i.e., virtue), Kant takes the philosophy of right to involve both analytic and synthetic a priori principles, e.g., the obligation to obey the state and the right of possession (MM, 6:247, 372/CEPP:406, 506).

Despite the parallels that Kant draws between the theoretical and practical cases, there are important differences. Moral laws must apply universally – not just to human beings but to all rational beings, because the laws are not contingent on any special properties of humans (or on particular inclinations) (G, 4:408, 428/CEPP:62, 79). In these senses, they are universal and necessary and so a priori.

A priori moral laws could not be justified through experience. Kant tries to establish them “analytically,” by disclosing the moral cognition of ordinary agents and then regressing to the pure a priori principles presupposed by that cognition (G, 4:392, 419–20/CEPP:47, 72). The theoretical problem was to show how pure a priori concepts could legitimately be applied to objects of experience. In the practical case, the hard problem is to show how a pure a priori moral principle that has no connection to human desires or purposes can affect volition and so action. What needs to be shown is that pure reason (and its principles) can determine the will (CPPrR, 5:15 [1788]/CEPP:148).

The Critique of the Power of Judgment introduces additional synthetic a priori judgments, those of taste. Although a judgment that an object is beautiful is based on the subject’s feeling of pleasure in the object, it also “judges this pleasure, as attached to the representation of the same object in every other subject, a priori, i.e., without having to wait for the assent of others” (CPJ, 5:288 [1790]/CECPJ:168–9). Even if others do not feel pleasure in the object, they should (CPJ, 5:237/CECPJ:121).

The deduction needed to justify the a priori claim to the necessary and universal agreement in judgments of taste is set up by reflections on the peculiarities of judgments of beauty. They are independent of interests, concepts, purposes, and rules. Given those negative conditions, Kant concludes that pleasure in the object can only be the result of the “free play” of the cognitive faculties (e.g., CPJ, 5:217/CECPJ:102–3). He maintains it is “easy” to justify the necessary and universal validity of the feeling of pleasure, because beauty is not asserted as an objective property of the object. Rather, the deduction merely asserts “that we are justified in presupposing universally in every human being the same subjective conditions of the power of judgment that we find in ourselves” (CPJ, 5:290/CECPJ:171). Beyond reflecting on their distinctive properties, the a priori justification for a priori judgments of taste involves reflecting on the commonality of faculties required for cognition across humans.
Finally, the third *Critique* introduces an a priori, transcendental principle of judgment for cognizing nature (CPJ, 5:181/CECPJ:68; see also CPJFI, 20:232–3 [1780]/CECPJ:34). Despite the apparent contingency of nature in falling under a system of laws, judgment presupposes a principle of purposiveness of nature for the cognitive faculties (CPJ, 5:184–5/CECPJ:70–1).

**Related terms:** A posteriori, Form, Synthetic a priori, Transcendental  
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Abstraction is central to concept formation. Every concept, as to form, is “a universal representation, or a representation of what is common to several objects” (LJ, 9:91/CELL:589). In this respect, all concepts are “made.” Apropos their content (matter), however, concepts may be empirical or pure. A pure concept is “not abstracted from experience but arises rather from the understanding even as to content,” whereas an empirical one “arises from the senses through comparison of objects of experience and attains through the understanding merely the form of universality” (LJ, 9:92/CELL:590). Therefore, if abstraction figures in the generation of both empirical and pure concepts, it must play different roles in the two cases (see ID, 2:394/CETP70:386–7). Regarding empirical concepts, the task is to identify the “logical acts” (*Handlungen, actus*) of the understanding responsible for “the generation of a concept out of given representations” – namely the acts of comparison, reflection, and abstraction (LJ, 9:93–5/CELL:591–3). Through continued logical abstraction we get higher and higher concepts – till the highest one, respecting which no further abstraction is possible (LJ, 9:96/CELL:596–7). Pure concepts cannot be generated this way. Starting with empirically given representations, the ascent through logical abstraction only results in greater degrees of generality (LJ, 9:96–8/CELL:593–6). Pure concepts are not simply more general, however. Rather, they are strictly universal and necessary, so that without them no experience would even be possible. Hence, they must be acquired originally and a priori, in abstraction from all experience (OD, 8:215–16, 221–2 [1790]/CETP81:306–8, 311–13).

The abstraction involved in the acquisition of pure concepts is indeed essential to the derivation of all rules (principles, laws) that are to have strict universality (B1–6 [1787]/CECPR:118, 136–9). Abstraction in such cases down to an investigation of the relevant object in *abstractio* (as opposed to *in concreto*). For instance, to derive the formal rules of all thinking, logic must study the nature of human understanding merely as the capacity to think, in abstraction from all objects of cognition and their distinctions and from the contingent conditions under which thinking takes place in our minds (Bix/CECPR:106–7; A52–7/B76–82 [1781/7] = CECPR:194–7; LJ, 9:11–16/CELL:527–31). Similarly, moral laws, if they are to hold for rational beings in general, must be derived from the concept of a rational being as such, in abstraction from all empirical conditions of human beings (G, 4:411–12 [1785]/CEP86:64–6) and from all objects of volition (CPrR, 5:109 [1788]/CEPP:227–8).

Only the “speculative understanding” is able to cognize rules completely in *abstractio*, while the “ordinary understanding” always demands examples from experience and so can never have insight into rules a priori (Pro, 4:369–70 [1783]/CETP81:157–9; A, 7:139–40/CEAHE:149–51). Nevertheless, the basic ability to abstract or to look away purposefully

**Related terms:** A priori, Categories, Concept, Form, Logic

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**Accident (accidentis, Accidenz)** Kant’s understanding of this term is based upon the use of the Latin accident in the previous metaphysical tradition and in particular in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* (1739/4th ed. 1757), where it is defined as a being that “cannot exist except as a determination of another (in something else) . . . whose being [esse] is belonging [inesse]” (§191). As Baumgarten explains, “the existence of an accident is INHERENCE” (§192). This is contrasted principally with substance, which “can exist, although it is neither in something else, nor the determination of something else” (§191), and whose “existence . . . is SUBSISTENCE” (§192). In the metaphysics lecture notes, Kant routinely adopts these definitions as a basis for expressing his own views (e.g., MMr, 29:770 [1782–3]/CELM:178). Moreover, according to Baumgarten, every accident, insofar as it is an actual being that inheres in a substance, must have a ground of such inherence, which is called power (vii) (§197). Hence, a power is not an accident, but rather a substance and something substantial (§198). This can be usefully contrasted with two definitions provided by Christian Wolff, which Kant also drew upon frequently in his writings (e.g., ML2, 28:563–4 [1790–1]/CELM:328): (1) An accident is “nothing other than a limitation” of a substance, i.e., of a thing “which has the source of its alterations within itself” (Vernünftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt, und der Seele des Menschen [1747], §114); and (2) “A being, however, which is not modifiable,” as contrasted with a substance, i.e., “a perdurable and modifiable subject” (Philosophia prima sive ontologia [1736], §768).¹ Thus, while Baumgarten defines accidents in terms of their essential inesse, Wolff defines them instead as limitations of substance that cannot be modified and so go in and out of existence while the underlying substance, which is variously limited or modified, endures as a kind of substrate.

The concept of an accident characteristic of Kant’s mature philosophy is found in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where it is located in the first division under the categories of relation: “Of Inherence and Subsistence (substantia et accidentis)” (A80/B106 [1781/7] = CECP:212). Despite this placement, he later explains that there is no real relation between substances and accidents, because accidents are “the determinations of a substance that are nothing other than particular ways for it to exist,” or more precisely “the way in which the existence of a substance is positively determined” (A186–7/B219–30 = CECP:302–3; see also MMr, 29:769/CELM:177–8; ML2, 28:563/CELM:327; R4053, 17:399 [1769]). In *Metaphysic Vokkemann*, Kant is similarly reported to have said: “However, accidents are not particular things that exist, but rather only particular ways of considering what exists, and so these do not require support, rather it indicates only the various determinations of one and the same thing. Only substances exist, and these must not be regarded as distinct from the accidents” (MVo, 28:429 [1784–5]). As this quotation indicates, Kant’s denial of a real relation between a substance and its accidents is the basis for his rejection of John Locke’s general definition of substance as what stands under and supports accidents (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, xxiii, 2; see also R5860, 18:371 [1780–9]).

Despite this warning, Kant notes that there remains an important logical relation here:

> Nevertheless, thanks to the conditions of the logical use of our understanding, it is still unavoidable for us to abstract out, as it were, that which can change in the

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¹ “accident, accidentis, Accidenz”
existence of a substance [i.e., the accidents] while the substance remains, and to consider it in relation to what is necessarily real and fundamental, thus this category also stands under the title of relations, but more as their condition than as itself containing a relation. (A186/B230 = CECPR:303)

As determinations of the existence of substance, Kant further explains, accidents are always real, and hence are never negations, which merely “express the non-being of something in the substance” (A186/B230 = CECPR:302; see also MvS, 28:510 [1785–9]; R3778, 17:291 [1764–6]). In the lecture notes, Kant sometimes explains this by emphasizing Baumgarten’s definition of accident in terms of inesse, noting that something cannot have inesse if it does not have an esse, i.e., a being or reality (MvS, 28:510). Although Kant regards it as potentially misleading, he also accepts the traditional way of speaking that ascribes a “particular existence” to accidents themselves, which is called “inherence,” and is contrasted with the mode of existence belonging to substance, which is called “subsistence” (A186–67/B230 = CECPR:302–3). Nevertheless, substance and accident are not distinct things, and hence the substance–accident relation is narrower than the relation of cause to effect, which also holds between separately existing things (Mvi, 29:1003 [1794–5]/CELM:471). Accidents are also distinct from parts, since they are united by a third, not into an aggregate (R5869, 18:372–3 [1780–9]).

As one part of the relational category of substance–accident, Kant argues that the origin of this concept lies in the role it plays in determining the logical function of the categorical judgment with respect to an object in general. As such, an accident is what is necessarily represented as the predicate of a certain subject, which latter is therefore substance (A73/4/ B98–9 = CECPR:208–9; MMr, 29:769/CELM:177; MvS, 28:481; MVo, 28:428; ML2, 28:563/ Celm:327–8).

In several sets of lecture notes and in the Opus postumum, Kant outlines and employs what he refers to as the “scholastic” distinction between accidens praedicabile and accidens praedicamentale (Mvi, 29:1004/CELM:472; MMr, 29:769/CELM:177; MMr, 29:802–3/CELM:146–7; OP, 21:136 [1796–1803]/CEOP:45). The former are defined as accidents of an essence, and since essence is what is necessary in a thing, these are understood to be contingent and merely formal predicates. The latter, however, are defined as accidents of substance, and as such are real things involving existence. The shape of a city square, for example, is an accidens praedicabile, while the weight of a body is an accidens praedicamentale (Mvi, 29:1004/CELM:472). It is clear, however, that Kant prefers to reserve the term “accident” for accidens praedicamentale alone, and only this is consistent with his usage in the CPR discussed above (see also R5283, 18:142–3 [1776–8]). In these and other texts, including the CPR, Kant adapts this distinction, referring to the categories as “predicaments” (Prädicamenten, the German for something praedicamentale), and all other pure but derivative concepts as “predicables” (Prädicablen, the German for something praedicabile): “Let me be allowed to call these pure but derivative concepts the predicables of pure understanding (in contrast to the predicaments [i.e., the categories])” (A82/B108 = CECPR:113; see also RP, 20:271–2 [1793–1804]/CETP81:363; Pro, 4:323–4 [1783]/ CEP81:115–16; Mvi, 29:984/CELM:453; OP, 22:88/CEOP:193). It is unclear, however, whether this distinction has more than a superficial relationship to the related distinction between kinds of accidents.

In Kant’s pre–Critical writings, the term appears surprisingly rarely, and generally in a way consistent with the usage of Baumgarten and Wolff (e.g., PM, 1:479, 482 [1756]/CETP70:56,
Acquaintance (Kenntnis, nosco) / 9

59; OPA, 2:90 [1763]/CETP:70:134; ID, 2:389 [1770]/CETP:70:380). However, R3783 shows that his private view was much closer to the view expressed later in the Critique of Pure Reason: “Accidents are not particular things that inhere in the subject, but rather predicates of a subject, i.e., ways in which it exists. The concept of inherence is a logical aid” (R3783, 17:292 [1764–6]; see also R3781, 17:291 [1764–6]).

Kant conceives of accidents in his practical philosophy through an analogy with the theoretical conception outlined above, and thus as something that cannot exist except as inhering in something else. In the Metaphysics of Morals, he writes:

Land (understood as all habitable ground) is to be regarded as substance with respect to whatever is movable upon it, while the existence of the latter is to be regarded only as inherence. Just as in the theoretical sense accidents cannot exist apart from substance, so in the practical sense no one can have what is movable on a piece of land as his own unless he is assumed to be already in rightful possession of the land. (MM, 6:1701 [1797]/CEPP:414)

Similarly, Kant notes that “the rank of nobleman in a state is not only dependent upon the constitution itself; it is only an accident of the constitution, which can exist only by inherence in a state (a nobleman as such is conceivable only in a state, not in the state of nature)” (MM, 6:1703/CEPP:503; see also MM, 6:265, 268–70/CEPP:417, 419–21). In R6709, Kant indicates also that the duties included in duties to oneself fall under the concept of accidents (R6709, 19:138 [1772]/CEPP:410).

Related terms: Categories, Determination, Force, Reality, Relation, Substance

Note

1. For an example of Kant connecting Baumgarten’s and Wolff’s definitions of substance, see R229, 18:147 [1776–8]/CEPP:226. Kant employs a Wolffian conception of substance, and hence also of accident, at A144/B183 = CECPR:275.

Courtney Fugate

Acquaintance (Kenntnis, nosco) Acquaintance is one of several “degrees of cognition” Kant distinguishes. However, the nature of acquaintance and its place within the taxonomy of degrees of cognition depends on which text one considers. The most important of these texts are the transcripts of Kant’s logic lectures. In these texts, which were written by Kant’s students, Kant appears to introduce acquaintance as well as the other degrees of cognition as an alternative to the taxonomy of representations commonly used by the Wolffian school, according to which mental contents are either clear or obscure, distinct or indistinct, complete or incomplete, and adequate or inadequate. Both the position of Kant’s comments within the lecture notes and the fact that they do not correspond to the content of any of the passages in the logic book Kant used as the basis for his lectures suggest this view. Despite the difficulties associated with using these lectures as evidence for Kant’s own views, the notion of acquaintance we find in them is therefore quite likely of Kantian provenance.

According to the Blumberg Logic, the earliest instance of the distinction, a person is acquainted with X only if she is able to represent it as falling under a universal concept (LB, 24:133–4 [early 1770s]/CELL:104–5). Acquaintance is here distinguished from both
merely representing (*Vorstellen*) an object and consciously representing one (i.e., representing it and being aware that one is so doing) on the one hand and from understanding (*Verstehen*) on the other, the latter of which is characterized as acquaintance “through the understanding” (LB, 24:134/CELL:104). Each of these degrees of cognition is then further distinguished from insight (*Einsehen*) or the “cognition of something through and by means of reason” (LB, 24:133/CELL:104). In a subsequent passage, conscious representation is identified with knowledge (*Wissen*), comprehension (*Begreifen*) is identified as a further degree of cognition, and the remaining degrees of cognition distinguished so far (with the exception of representation) are ordered from least to greatest: knowledge, acquaintance, understanding, insight, and comprehension (LB, 24:135/CELL:105–6). A third passage adds “representation” to this list as the least degree of cognition and associates each of the six degrees identified thus far with a Latin term, which in the case of “acquaintance” is *nosco* (LB, 24:136/CELL:107). What remains unclear in the Blomberg Logic, however, is whether a person can be acquainted with an object merely by representing it as falling under a universal concept or whether one must also be conscious of doing so. It is unclear, for example, whether my implicitly recognizing an object in my path as an obstacle and unconsciously moving to avoid it counts as acquaintance with the object or whether acquaintance demands that I also be aware of having so characterized it.

This ambiguity is also present in the accounts of acquaintance given in the Busolt Logic and Dohna-Wundlacken Logic. However, the latter also supplements the characterization of acquaintance found in the Blomberg Logic by describing acquaintance (albeit somewhat circularly) as a representation of something such as “one is acquainted with it in comparison with others as to their identity and diversity” (LDW, 24:730 [1792]/CELL:466; cf. LBu, 24:616 [c. 1789–90]). One reasonable interpretation of this somewhat cryptic passage is that a person is acquainted with X only if (i) she represents it by means of at least one universal concept and (ii) is able to distinguish it from other objects or kinds of objects. The Dohna-Wundlacken Logic also omits knowledge from the degrees of cognition and introduces perception (*Wahrnehmung*), which is characterized as representing something “with consciousness,” placing it between representation and acquaintance in the taxonomy.

The more nuanced sense of “acquaintance” introduced in the Dohna-Wundlacken Logic is then retained in the Jäsche Logic, which for the first time makes clear that acquaintance does not require conscious representation. This latter claim is consistent with the discussion of acquaintance in the earlier logics, but it is not found explicitly in them. The Jäsche Logic also distinguishes acquaintance from both perception and cognition (*Erkenntnis*), characterizing the latter as being “acquainted with something with consciousness” (LJ, 9:65 [1800]/CELL:570). Finally, the Jäsche Logic uses the contrast between acquaintance and cognition to illustrate the difference between the mental abilities of humans and animals. While the former are capable of both acquaintance and cognition, the latter are capable only of acquaintance.

Apart from the considerations mentioned in the first paragraph, it is primarily the Jäsche Logic’s use of acquaintance and cognition to contrast animal and human mental abilities that suggests that acquaintance is one piece of an array of conceptual distinctions intended to supplement or replace the Wolffian division of representations. According to this tradition, a representation of X is clear only if a person is able to distinguish X from other objects and distinct only if a person is also aware of the features in virtue of which X is so distinguished. Kant draws on these distinctions in *The False Subtlety of the Four Syllogistic Figures* to contrast human and animal mental abilities and