Aesthetic

1

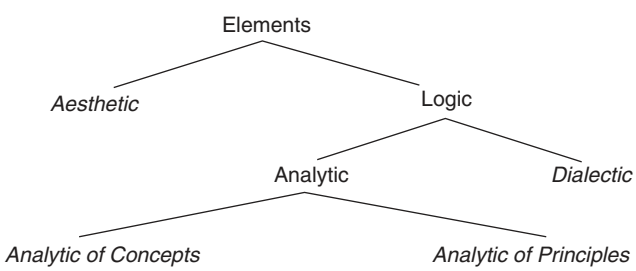
Synthetic a priori judgments

1 The place of the Aesthetic in the Critique

The *Critique* has two parts of unequal size and merit: the 'Transcendental Doctrine of Elements' and, less than a quarter as long, the 'Transcendental Doctrine of Method'. The former is our main concern.

The main division within the Elements is into the Aesthetic and the Logic. For Kant, aesthetic considerations are ones pertaining to our senses—to what we see, hear, feel, taste and smell—and have nothing to do with the artistic questions which would now be called aesthetic. Logic, for Kant, comprises all matters which might be called 'intellectual', such as the assessing of evidence, the drawing of conclusions and the spotting of inconsistencies.

The Aesthetic is a tiny fragment of the Elements, and has no important divisions within it. The Logic divides into the Analytic and the Dialectic. In the Analytic, Kant undertakes to describe how the intellect works when it is on its best behaviour; in the Dialectic he treats of certain misuses of the intellect and of the bad metaphysics arising therefrom. The two are related somewhat as physiology to clinical medicine. The Analytic in turn divides into the Analytic of Concepts and the Analytic of Principles, a division which I shall explain later. The over-all picture, then, is like this:



Three of the italicized items on this chart correspond to the three parts of the present work; the fourth, *Dialectic*, will be the topic of a further book.

The chart puts the Aesthetic on a level with the Logic, and this is misleading. Not only is the Aesthetic vastly the smaller, but also it relates in a quite different way to its nominal subject-matter. The Logic is a direct assault on various philosophical problems concerning the intellect, while the Aesthetic centres on problems not about the senses but about space and time. The Aesthetic and the Logic are nevertheless put on a par by Kant because he thinks that in solving his problems about space and time he can prove something about the senses analogous to something which, he thinks, the Logic proves about the intellect.

Considered as a source of cogent, detailed argument from true premisses to interesting conclusions, the Aesthetic is not impressive; and yet I would make a case for discussing it at length. Kant has a natural, subliminal sensitivity to philosophical problems, so that even where he argues badly his writing is rich in hints and suggestions which can lead one to insights which Kant himself did not have. Moreover, attention to Kant's treatment of his problems about space and time is required for an understanding of the more mature and fruitful parts of the *Critique*.

The 'Transcendental Doctrine of Method' consists in rambling repetitions of material in the Elements; plus an exposition of Kant's views about geometrical method[1]—views which, though ingenious, have been revealed by later work on the philosophy and logic of mathematics as thoroughly and tiresomely wrong. This part of the *Critique* clearly owes its existence to Kant's belief that it ought to exist rather than to the intellectual pressure of anything he has to say in it. It is announced ambitiously: '. . .we shall have to treat of a *discipline*, a *canon*, an *architectonic*, and finally a *history* of pure reason'[2]—and sure enough there are four chapters, whose respective lengths are 86, 37, 20 and 5 pages! I shall sometimes quote from the Method part of the *Critique*, but I shall not discuss it as a whole.

2 Analytic and synthetic

The central arguments of the Aesthetic depend upon Kant's use of the terms 'analytic' and 'synthetic'. He uses them to mark off what he calls two kinds of judgment and what I shall call two ways of construing declarative sentences. If we construe a sentence as analytic, we are taking it 'as adding nothing through the predicate to the concept of the subject, but merely breaking it up into those constituent concepts that have all

1 Views about geometrical method: A 712–38 = B 740–66.
2 'we shall have to treat': A 708 = B 736.

along been thought in it, although confusedly'.[3] For example, 'All bodies are extended' is taken by Kant as analytic because

> I do not require to go beyond the concept which I connect with 'body' in order to find extension as bound up with it. To meet with this predicate, I have merely to analyse the concept [of body], that is, to become conscious to myself of the manifold which I always think in that concept.

A sentence is taken as synthetic if it is taken to 'add to the concept of the subject a predicate which has not been in any wise thought in it, and which no analysis could possibly extract from it'; for example:

> When I say, 'All bodies are heavy', the predicate is something quite different from anything that I think in the mere concept of body in general; and the addition of such a predicate therefore yields a synthetic judgment.

Kant seems to overlook the possibility that a sentence might properly be taken either as analytic or as synthetic, depending on which of two equally standard meanings is attached to one of its terms. His analytic/synthetic distinction between two kinds of 'judgment' amounts, in fact, to an uneasy mixture of (a) a distinction between two ways of construing declarative sentences and (b) a distinction between two sorts of declarative sentence. I shall try to explain this.

The distinction between left-handed and right-handed uses of tennis-racquets does not divide tennis-racquets themselves, for any racquet can be used in either way. As against this, the line between left- and right-handed uses of golf-clubs is also a line between left-and right-handed golf-clubs. Kant seems to intend the analytic/synthetic distinction to divide sentences, as the left/right distinction divides golf-clubs. Presumably he does not think it impossible that there should be a sentence which is sometimes construed as analytic and sometimes construed as synthetic; but he seems to think that there are in fact no such sentences, or none worth mentioning. A sentence can be called 'analytic', then, in the way in which a racquet could be called 'right-handed' if it were our custom never to permit any racquet to be used sometimes right-handedly and sometimes left-handedly.

Kant would no doubt reply that what he calls 'analytic' are not sentences but judgments, and that a judgment is indeed either always analytic

3 All quotations within this paragraph are from A 7 = B 11.

or always synthetic. 'If a sentence can be construed either analytically or synthetically,' he would say, 'this just means that it can express more than one judgment. There is no condemnation of my procedures in this.' But there is. If 'judgment' is to be used like that, then expressions of the form 'The judgment that. . .' will refer unambiguously to a single judgment only if the sentence in the blank admits of only one normal construction. Just as questions of the form 'Is the sentence ". . ." analytic?' may have to be answered by 'Sometimes yes, sometimes no', so questions of the form 'Is the judgment that. . .analytic?' may have to be answered by 'For one of the judgments to which you have referred, yes; for the other, no.' Kant shows no awareness of this possibility.

I shall sometimes follow Kant in speaking of judgments as analytic or synthetic. When I say 'The judgment that all bodies are extended is analytic' I shall mean 'The sentence "All bodies are extended" is, when construed in any normal way, analytic'. But I shall not assume, as Kant seems to, that every sentence can be described either as analytic, i.e. always construed analytically in ordinary discourse, or as synthetic, i.e. always construed synthetically in ordinary discourse. This will limit my use of 'the judgment that. . .'. For example, I may not use the expression 'the judgment that what a man does voluntarily is always what he wants to do', because I think that 'want' is in ordinary parlance ambiguous in such a way that the sentence 'What a man does voluntarily is always what he wants to do' can properly be used to say something which is true by virtue of the meanings attached to the words, and can equally properly be used to say something which is simply false. Thus the phrase 'the judgment that what a man voluntarily does is always what he wants to do' does not uniquely refer to a single judgment.

There is another snag in Kant's account of the analytic/synthetic distinction. He says, in effect, that a judgment is analytic if and only if it is true solely by virtue of the concepts it involves; which I take as short-hand for: A sentence is analytic if and only if on its normal construction it says something true solely by virtue of the meanings of its constituent terms. It follows that self-contradictory judgments are not analytic, for they are not true by virtue of concepts or of anything else. Are they then synthetic? If we take Kant literally, they are: in its normal meaning, the sentence 'All squares are circular' is taken to 'add to the concept of the subject a predicate which has not been in any wise thought in it, and which no analysis could possibly extract from it', which is Kant's formula for a synthetic judgment. This is just an oversight, for Kant certainly intends analytic judgments to comprise only those which are true solely because of

the concepts they involve, and synthetic judgments to comprise only those which cannot be determined by purely conceptual considerations either as true or as false. He thus needs a third class of judgments, namely those which are false by virtue of the concepts they contain. This third class is squeezed out of Kant's account because he wants a classification of judgments which might be judged or thought to be true, and he tends, I think, to assume that no-one could think to be true something which was in fact false by virtue of the concepts involved. This mistake, though unimportant in itself, is a symptom of a major and very insidious defect in Kant's account of the analytic/synthetic distinction, namely the psychological terms in which he states it.

Kant implies that the way to discover whether one construes a sentence of the form 'All *F*s are *G*' analytically is to 'think the concept' associated with the subject and to note whether in so doing one also 'thinks the concept' associated with the predicate. This introspectionist account of the examination of meanings encourages Kant to restrict the label 'analytic' to such sentences as are obviously, trivially, self-evidently analytic. For example, he says of a certain theorem about triangles that it is not analytic because to discover that it is true

> I must not restrict my attention to what I am actually thinking in my concept of a triangle (this is nothing more than the mere definition); I must pass beyond it to properties which are not contained in this concept, but yet belong to it.[4]

The references here to 'the mere definition', to what is 'contained' in a concept, and to 'what I am actually thinking', all suggest a restriction to what one would first think of when asked what 'triangle' means, or to what one might first say when asked to explain what it means: a theorem about triangles, it seems, is to count as analytic only if it is true by definition, true in such a way that someone could not doubt it if he knew the meanings of the relevant words. Also:

> The concept of the sum of 7 and 5 contains nothing save the union of the two numbers into one, and in this no thought is being taken as to what that single number may be which combines both. The concept of 12 is by no means already thought in merely thinking this union of 7 and 5; and I may analyse my concept of such a possible sum as long as I please, still I shall never find the 12 in it.[5]

4 'I must not restrict': A 718 = B 746. 5 'The concept of the sum': B 15.

> That the straight line between two points is the shortest, is a synthetic proposition. For my concept of *straight* contains nothing of quantity, but only of quality. The concept of the shortest is wholly an addition, and cannot be derived, through any process of analysis, from the concept of the straight line.[6]

In each of these passages, Kant concludes from the most casual of premisses that analytic procedures cannot yield a certain result. Given the complexity which such procedures may have, and the novelty of the results which may be proved by them, is this not rash? It is, unless we take 'any process of analysis' to refer only to the scrutiny of what goes on in one's mind when one 'thinks' a concept.

This narrowing of 'analytic' to something like 'true by definition' is—like the introspectionist account of meaning which helps to generate it—contrary to Kant's own considered intentions. He takes the analytic/synthetic distinction to divide two radically different ways in which judgments can be shown to be true. In his paradigmatic picture of what it is to show that a judgment is analytic, the judgment's truth is shown to stem from the definitions of the words which express it or from facts about what first comes to mind when we consider what those words mean. But from a judgment which is in this way self-evidently true or true by definition, we may derive, by steps whose validity is warranted by elementary facts about meanings, a conclusion which is not self-evident or true by definition. In proving such a conclusion we use the same means as in showing that something expresses a self-evident or definitional or 'merely verbal' truth; for in each case we merely attend to the meanings of words. Kant nowhere suggests that he gives any theoretical weight to the difference between simple and complex, or short and long, investigations of meanings. On the contrary, he repeatedly says that a synthetic judgment is one whose truth cannot be derived 'from concepts', or whose predicate 'no analysis could possibly extract from' the subject because it is not contained even 'covertly' in the subject. Consider this passage:

> No doubt the concept of 'right', in its common-sense usage, contains all that the subtlest speculation can develop out of it, though in its ordinary and practical use we are not conscious of the manifold representations comprised in this thought.[7]

6 'That the straight line': B 16. 7 'No doubt the concept': A 43 = B 61.

Here the concept is described as a 'thought', but it is allowed to contain more than we are 'conscious' of its containing. There is no room here for an equation of the analytic with the trivial.

So we have a problem. Kant denies that the theorems of Euclid's geometry are analytic: do we take this as saying that they cannot be verified by purely conceptual means, or only that they are not true by definition in a quite narrow way? To see what makes this problem important, we must examine two more of Kant's technical terms.

3 A priori and a posteriori

'A priori' and 'a posteriori' are among Kant's hardest-worked technical terms. His use of them is complex and many-layered, but all we need at this stage is the division of judgments into a priori and a posteriori on the basis of what risk a judgment runs of being falsified by experience.

'Necessity and strict universality', says Kant, 'are. . .sure criteria of a priori knowledge.'[8] The context clearly implies that necessity and universality are entailed by apriority as well as entailing it. Thus, if the judgment that all *F*s are *G* is a priori, then experience *cannot* render it false by yielding even a single *F* which is not *G*. If it is a posteriori, then it *could* be falsified by experience.

The exegesis of the Aesthetic is largely an inquiry into the role which the words 'cannot' and 'could' and their cognates play in Kant's account of apriority and aposteriority. It may be noted at once, however, that Kant counts as a posteriori many judgments for which we have never found, and are confident we never shall find, a counter-instance. For example, the judgment that every human body is larger than any ant would be described by Kant as a posteriori. The 'cannot' through which 'a priori' is explained has to be stronger than that arising from 'flatly against what we have so far discovered about how the world works'.

Analytic judgments are all a priori, and for them at least a suitably strong sense of 'cannot' is available. If 'All bodies are extended' is analytic, then we may say 'There cannot be a body which is not extended' on the grounds that the meanings of the relevant terms do not allow 'a body which is not extended' as a consistent phrase whose realization can be expected, feared, hoped for or theorized about. While 'body' and 'extended' have the meanings which render 'All bodies are extended'

8 'Necessity and strict universality': B 4.

analytic, the impossibility of there being a body which is not extended is guaranteed by conceptual considerations and is, on the face of it, of a quite different kind from the impossibility of an occurrence which, though consistently describable, is ruled out by well-tested scientific hypotheses.

Of course, an analytic sentence may come to express something false, for one or more of the words in it may change in meaning; but in that case the judgment (or proposition) expressed by the sentence will not be the one now expressed by it; and it is this judgment or proposition which is declared to be a priori, i.e. incapable of refutation at the hands of experience. Powerful arguments have been adduced by Quine,[9] and can be extracted from Wittgenstein,[10] for saying that there is no sharp distinction between what a word means and what it in fact applies to; and from this two consequences follow. (a) The analytic/synthetic distinction is not sharp either: for analytic sentences are defined as ones which say something true solely by virtue of what their words mean and not at all by virtue of the facts about the things their words apply to. (b) The a priori/a posteriori distinction is not sharp either: for a priori judgments are defined as ones which cannot turn out to be false; so that an a priori judgment must be expressed by a sentence which cannot come to say something false except by coming to express a judgment other than the one it now expresses, i.e. except by changing its meaning. The view of Quine and Wittgenstein, however, is that there is no sharp line between the case where we move from saying 'It is the case that S' to saying 'It is not the case that S' because we have come to mean something different by S, and the case where we make this move because we have changed our minds as to the facts. There is much force in this, but it does not dissolve the problem which Kant creates for us when he says that *some judgments are at once synthetic and a priori*. (I take this to mean that a sentence may express a judgment (i) whose truth does not derive solely from the meanings of the words in the sentence, but (ii) which cannot be rendered false by experience.) Even if there is little point in saying that a sentence is analytic or that it expresses an a priori judgment—a matter to which I shall return at the end of §15—I think Quine would agree that, in so far as 'analytic' and 'expressing an a priori judgment' have any intelligible use, they *go together*. It is just this which Kant denies.

9 W. V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), chh. ii and iii.
10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1953) §§185–95; *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Oxford, 1956), Pt. I §§1–5, 113–41.

In saying that every analytic judgment is a priori, Kant would presumably have the agreement of everyone who has any use for the expressions 'analytic' and 'a priori'. If every synthetic judgment were a posteriori, then the two ways of classifying judgments would coincide. I believe that they do coincide, in so far as one can see how they work at all; but Kant thinks that some judgments are at once synthetic and a priori, i.e. that some sentences can be construed both as synthetic and, on that same construction, as expressing something whose refutation by experience is, in a suitably strong sense, impossible. This commits him to finding for 'impossible' a sense which is (a) stronger than that of 'flatly against what we have so far discovered about how the world works', and (b) other than that of 'ruled out by the meanings of the words involved'. For a judgment is a priori only if its refutation is 'impossible' in a sense which satisfies (a), and is synthetic only if its refutation is 'impossible' in a sense which satisfies (b).

It is because I cannot find for 'impossible' a sense satisfying both (a) and (b) that I deny that any judgment can be both synthetic and a priori. Kant is acutely conscious of the attractiveness of the view that one cannot say something synthetic except at the price of saying something which could be refuted by experience. He therefore sees it as a major problem to show how it is possible for a judgment to be at once synthetic and a priori. He asks '*How* is it possible. . .?' because he does not doubt that some judgments, including those expressed by Euclid's theorems, *are* both synthetic and a priori. His most famous formulation of the problem first appeared in his *Prolegomena*,[11] and was then incorporated in the second edition of the *Critique*; but the problem itself dominates the Aesthetic in both editions.

As well as asking what risk of refutation a judgment runs, we may ask what grounds there can be for thinking it to be true. In addition to 'Might you be wrong?' there is 'How do you know?' Kant raises the question of the grounds for a judgment by putting with great force the case against synthetic a priori judgments.[12] When we make a judgment 'in which the relation of a subject to the predicate is thought', we assert a connection between two concepts. Kant implies that we can fairly ask of any such judgment 'What connects those two concepts in the way the judgment says they are connected?' If the judgment is analytic, the answer is easy: triangularity is linked with straight-sidedness as required by the judgment that all triangles are straight-sided, because the latter concept is a part of

11 His most famous formulation: *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, §4; B 19.
12 Kant raises the question: A 7–10 = B 11–14.