

IMMANUEL KANT

*Critique of
pure reason*

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tempt from which the road to be taken onward could no longer be missed, and the secure course of a science was entered on and prescribed for all time and to an infinite extent. The history of this revolution in the way of thinking – which was far more important than the discovery of the way around the famous Cape¹¹ – and of the lucky one who brought it about, has not been preserved for us. But the legend handed down to us by Diogenes Laertius – who names the reputed inventor of the smallest elements of geometrical demonstrations, even of those that, according to common judgment, stand in no need of proof – proves that the memory of the alteration wrought by the discovery of this new path in its earliest footsteps must have seemed exceedingly important to mathematicians, and was thereby rendered unforgettable. A new light broke upon the first person who demonstrated the isosceles^a triangle (whether he was called “Thales” or had some other name).¹² For he found that what he had to do was not to trace what he saw in this figure, or even trace its mere concept, and read off, as it were, from the properties of the figure; but rather that he had to produce the latter from what he himself thought into the object and presented (through construction) according to *a priori* concepts, and that in order to know something securely *a priori* he had to ascribe to the thing nothing except what followed necessarily from what he himself had put into it in accordance with its concept.

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It took natural science much longer to find the highway of science; for it is only about one and a half centuries since the suggestion of the ingenious Francis Bacon partly occasioned this discovery and partly further stimulated it, since one was already on its tracks – which discovery, therefore, can just as much be explained by a sudden revolution in the way of thinking. Here I will consider natural science only insofar as it is grounded on empirical principles.^b

When Galileo¹³ rolled balls of a weight chosen by himself down an inclined plane, or when Torricelli¹⁴ made the air bear a weight that he had previously thought to be equal to that of a known column of water, or when in a later time Stahl¹⁵ changed metals into calx^c and then changed the latter back into metal by first removing something and

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^a Kant's text reads “gleichseitig” (equilateral); but on the basis of his correction in a letter to Schütz of 25 June 1787 (10:466), he appears to have meant “gleichschenkelig” (isosceles).

^b *Principien*

^c *Kalk*. Kemp Smith translates this as “oxides,” but that is anachronistic; prior to the chemical revolution of Priestley and Lavoisier, the calx was conceived to be what was left of a metal after its phlogiston had been driven off; only later was it discovered that this process was actually one of oxidation.

then putting it back again,* a light dawned on all those who study nature. They comprehended that reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design; that it must take the lead with principles^a for its judgments according to constant laws and compel nature to answer its questions, rather than letting nature guide its movements by keeping reason, as it were, in leading-strings; for otherwise accidental observations, made according to no previously designed plan, can never connect up into a necessary law, which is yet what reason seeks and requires. Reason, in order to be taught by nature, must approach nature with its principles^b in one hand, according to which alone the agreement among appearances can count as laws, and, in the other hand, the experiments thought out in accordance with these principles^c – yet in order to be instructed by nature not like a pupil, who has recited to him whatever the teacher wants to say, but like an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them. Thus even physics owes the advantageous revolution in its way of thinking to the inspiration that what reason would not be able to work of itself and has to learn from nature, it has to seek in the latter (though not merely ascribe to it) in accordance with what reason itself puts into nature. This is how natural science was first brought to the secure course of a science after groping about for so many centuries.

Metaphysics – a wholly isolated speculative cognition of reason that elevates itself entirely above all instruction from experience, and that through mere concepts (not, like mathematics, through the application of concepts to intuition), where reason thus is supposed to be its own pupil – has up to now not been so favored by fate as to have been able to enter upon the secure course of a science, even though it is older than all other sciences, and would remain even if all the others were swallowed up by an all-consuming barbarism. For in it reason continuously gets stuck, even when it claims *a priori* insight (as it pretends) into those laws confirmed by the commonest experience. In metaphysics we have to retrace our path countless times, because we find that it does not lead where we want to go, and it is so far from reaching unanimity in the assertions of its adherents that it is rather a battlefield, and indeed one that appears to be especially determined for testing one's powers in mock combat; on this battlefield no combatant has ever gained the least

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* Here I am not following exactly the thread of the history of the experimental method, whose first beginnings are also not precisely known.

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^a *Principien*

^b *Principien*

^c *Principien*

bit of ground, nor has any been able to base any lasting possession on his victory. Hence there is no doubt that up to now the procedure of metaphysics has been a mere groping, and what is the worst, a groping among mere concepts.

Now why is it that here the secure path of science still could not be found? Is it perhaps impossible? Why then has nature afflicted our reason with the restless striving for such a path, as if it were one of reason's most important occupations? Still more, how little cause have we to place trust in our reason if in one of the most important parts of our desire for knowledge it does not merely forsake us but even entices us with delusions and in the end betrays us! Or if the path has merely eluded us so far, what indications may we use that might lead us to hope that in renewed attempts we will be luckier than those who have gone before us?

BXVI *Von* I should think that the examples of mathematics and natural science, which have become what they now are through a revolution brought about all at once, were remarkable enough that we might reflect on the essential element in the change in the ways of thinking that has been so advantageous to them, and, at least as an *experiment*, imitate it insofar as their analogy with metaphysics, as rational cognition, might permit. Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects^a must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects^b before they are given to us. This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus,¹⁶ who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest. Now in metaphysics we can try in a similar way regarding the intuition of objects. If intuition has to conform to the constitution of the objects, then I do not see how we can know anything of them *a priori*; but if the object (as an object^c of the senses) conforms to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, then I can very well represent this possibility to myself. Yet because I cannot stop with these intuitions, if they are to become cognitions, but must refer them as representations to something as their object and determine this ob-

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^a Objecte
^b Objecte
^c Object

ject through them, I can assume either that the concepts through which I bring about this determination also conform to the objects, and then I am once again in the same difficulty about how I could know anything about them *a priori*, or else I assume that the objects, or what is the same thing, the *experience* in which alone they can be cognized (as given objects) conforms to those concepts, in which case I immediately see an easier way out of the difficulty, since experience itself is a kind of cognition requiring the understanding, whose rule I have to presuppose in myself before any object is given to me, hence *a priori*, which rule is expressed in concepts *a priori*, to which all objects of experience must therefore necessarily conform, and with which they must agree. As for objects insofar as they are thought merely through reason, and necessarily at that, but that (at least as reason thinks them) cannot be given in experience at all – the attempt to think them (for they must be capable of being thought) will provide a splendid touchstone of what we assume as the altered method of our way of thinking, namely that we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them.*

This experiment succeeds as well as we could wish, and it promises to metaphysics the secure course of a science in its first part, where it concerns itself with concepts *a priori* to which the corresponding objects appropriate to them can be given in experience. For after this alteration in our way of thinking we can very well explain the possibility of a cognition *a priori*, and what is still more, we can provide satisfactory proofs of the laws that are the *a priori* ground of nature, as the sum total of objects of experience – which were both impossible according to the earlier way of proceeding. But from this deduction of our faculty of cognizing *a pri-*

* This method, imitated from the method of those who study nature, thus consists in this: to seek the elements of pure reason in that **which admits of being confirmed or refuted through an experiment**. Now the propositions of pure reason, especially when they venture beyond all boundaries of possible experience, admit of no test by experiment with their **objects**^a (as in natural science): thus to experiment will be feasible only with **concepts and principles** that we assume *a priori* by arranging the latter so that the same objects can be considered from two different sides, **on the one side** as objects of the senses and the understanding for experience, and **on the other side** as objects that are merely thought at most for isolated reason striving beyond the bounds of experience. If we now find that there is agreement with the principle^b of pure reason when things are considered from this twofold standpoint, but that an unavoidable conflict of reason with itself arises with a single standpoint, then the experiment decides for the correctness of that distinction.

^a Objecte
^b Princip

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Von

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