

### Part 1–2. LIMIT OF OUR KNOWLEDGE

According to Kant, the possibility of metaphysics rests upon the possibility of “synthetic propositions a priori” – those propositions which express necessary, unchanging truths (cf. “a priori”) and which consist of more than a mere analysis of a concept, thus providing a true progress of knowledge (cf. “synthetic”) (*Prolegomena*, Preamble, IV:276–277).

For Kant, “synthetic propositions a priori” are possible. (In his view, all of mathematics consists of them, § 7, IV:281.) They rely on “pure intuition” (which is given *a priori*, as opposed to “empirical intuition”). Thus, metaphysics is possible; but we have to give up the idea that we know the *things as they are in themselves*: in fact, we only know the *things as they appear to us* (§ 10, IV: 283).

Why? Because we can’t have any perceptions of objects if not in space and time which are the content of “pure intuition”. But space and time, for Kant, are not qualities of the objects in themselves, but they are the “modes of representation” (or “forms of sensibility”) of these objects. In other words, space and time are not a property of the *things* themselves, but of *our knowledge* of the things. If space and time do not belong to the things themselves, and if we can’t know anything but in space and time, then we don’t know the *things in themselves*, but only the *things as they appear to us* (§ 9–13, IV:282–286). [It’s as if we looked at the world through red eye-glasses: we would see everything red, but the color red would not come from the things themselves, but from our glasses (which would be our “mode of representation” of the things). Our perception of “red” would say something about the “things as they appear to us”, not about the “things as they are in themselves”.]

Why are space and time not qualities inherent in the things themselves, but merely forms of representation? Because they are given to us independently from sense perception and conceptual knowledge. Here is Kant’s illustration of this: I know that space can have no more than three dimensions, without seeing this with my eyes and without being able to prove this in a demonstration. I cannot think of objects but in space and time (§ 10–12, IV:283–286).

This is the main claim of Kant’s *Prolegomena* (and already of his earlier *Critique of Pure Reason*):

**We cannot know the *things in themselves*, but only *the things as they appear to us*.**

In part 2, Kant gives more evidence for his affirmation that we can only know things as they appear to us, not as they are in themselves. He says that our entire knowledge of nature works by adding to our perception a “concept of the understanding”, e.g. the concept of causality. The concept of causality is not *derived* from experience, but it is *given* in our understanding – and this is why in cause-effect relationships there is necessary (a priori) and objective validity, and not only a subjective validity that relies on custom or habit (Hume) (§ 27, IV:310–311). “[T]he concept of cause denotes a condition not at all belonging to things, but to experience” (§ 29, IV:312). But if this is so, we must never apply such concepts as “cause” outside of the objects of experience, i. e. we must never refer them to the “things as they are in themselves”, because then they lose their meaning (§ 30, IV:312). What is the advantage of Kant’s position with respect to Hume, since both hold that our philosophical claims must never go beyond the limits of experience (cf. D. Hume, *Enquiry*, ed. E. Steinberg, p. 114)? While Hume *derives* the concept of causality from experience and thus makes it an *a posteriori* concept, Kant says that the concept of causality (and other “concepts of the understanding”) describes laws to which experience must necessarily conform, laws of which we have an *a priori* cognition and which have objective validity (§ 17, IV:296–297; § 20, IV:301 note; § 27, IV:310–311).

### Part 3 & Conclusion. CONSEQUENCE: METAPHYSICS CHANGES ITS FACE

Though Kant’s purpose in the *Prolegomena* is to show how metaphysics is possible, the claim that we can’t know the things as they are in themselves radically changes metaphysics. Before Kant, metaphysics always went beyond (= “transcended”) the boundaries of the “things that appear to us” (i. e. the things that we can perceive with our senses, in other words, the things that are given in our experience). It talked about the soul, God, the origin and duration of the universe etc.

Before Kant, metaphysics claimed to show that the **soul** is an indivisible and therefore immortal substance. But if our knowledge, as Kant affirms, is limited to the “things as they appear to us”, we

cannot say anything about that which is not given in our experience.\* To talk about the soul as an indivisible, immortal substance is to talk about a “thing as it is in itself”, not about “a thing as it appears to us” (since it does not “appear to us” at all in any sense-perception or experience). Thus, we cannot know if it is an indivisible, immortal substance or not (§ 46–49, IV:333– 337).

The same holds true with the affirmation of **God**’s existence. Before Kant, metaphysics tried to demonstrate that God exists. But this is a claim about “a thing as it is in itself”, not about “a thing as it appears to us” (God is beyond our experience and thus can’t be “a thing that appears to us”). Since we can only know things within our experience, we can’t know if God exists or not (§ 55, IV:348; conclusion, IV:355–360).

## THE ANTINOMIES

An important confirmation of Kant’s affirmation that we cannot know the “things as they are in themselves” and a corroboration of his warning that we should not claim to have knowledge about things that we cannot verify in our experience is his treatment of four *antinomies*. In these antinomies, “pure reason” (as it goes beyond the boundaries of experience!) can prove both an assertion and the contradictory assertion:

1. *Thesis*: The world has, as to time and space, a beginning (limit). [= The world is infinite and eternal]  
*Antithesis*: The world is, as to time and space, infinite. [= The world is not infinite and eternal]
2. *Thesis*: Everything in the world is constituted out of the simple. [= Everything is made of atoms]  
*Antithesis*: There is nothing simple, but everything is composite. [= Nothing is made of atoms]
3. *Thesis*: There are in the world causes through freedom. [= Man is free]  
*Antithesis*: There is no freedom, but all is nature. [= Man is not free]
4. *Thesis*: In the series of world-causes there is some necessary being. [= Not everything is contingent]  
*Antithesis*: There is nothing necessary in the world, but in this series all is contingent. [= Everything is contingent]

For instance, as to the third antinomy, “pure reason” can demonstrate both that man is free and that man is not free.\*\* Kant solves this antinomy (and similarly the others) by saying that the actions of man as *appearances* are subject to the necessity of nature, but when we consider the same actions as performed by a person who acts by his reason, we make a claim about a *thing as it is in itself* (§ 53, IV, 345–347). “The incompatibility of these two propositions rests entirely upon the misunderstanding of extending what is valid merely of appearances to things in themselves and in general of mixing both in one concept” (§ 53, IV, 347).

## **Solution: HOW IS METAPHYSICS POSSIBLE AS A SCIENCE?**

Metaphysics is possible as a science that establishes what can be known by reason alone (“here reason has the sources of its knowledge in itself, not in objects and their observation”, IV, 366): “a critique of reason must itself exhibit the whole stock of *a priori* concepts ...” (IV, 365). In other words, we must determine the domain of that which can be known *a priori*. “Critique stands in the same relation to the common metaphysics of the schools as chemistry does to alchemy, or as astronomy to the astrology of the fortune teller” (IV, 366).

\* Cf. IV:292 “... appearance, as long as it is employed in experience, produces truth, but the moment it transgresses the bounds of experience ... produces nothing but illusion”.

\*\* These demonstrations are to be found in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. In short, the argument for freedom is that without it, there wouldn’t be any “ought” – we would never say “you ought to do this or that” if we didn’t presuppose that the person is free to do so. The argument that we are not free refers to the fact that our body’s functions are determined by the necessary laws of biology and physics.