DID KANT RESCUE CAUSALITY? AN OVERVIEW OF KANT’S RESPONSE TO HUME

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I. Introduction

Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) *Critique of Pure Reason* is universally held to be a watershed in metaphysics and epistemology.¹ And Kant’s resuscitation of causality, after its decisive death at the hands of David Hume (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, chs. 4-7), remains one of its most philosophically significant contributions. It is this component of the *Critique* that will be the focus of my paper. However, to evaluate the philosophical adequacy of Kant’s restoration of causality rightly, I will need to look also, albeit briefly, at the success of Kant’s overall project in his first *Critique*.² Ultimately, I will argue that Kant is successful at grounding the principle of causality due to his recognition of it (and reconfiguration of it) as a metascientific, and not a scientific, principle. But there is more: for Kant had to also show that such metascientific principles were justified (and indeed required) in order for any scientific knowledge at all. In essence Kant’s move is to agree with Hume that empirical observation can never establish the law of causality, but then to show that this is because causality (as but one of a larger set of a priori forms and categories) is a metascientific presupposition that makes possible empirical observation in the first place.

II. Kant’s First Critique

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¹ One doesn’t have to stop there: it is clear that Kant’s first *Critique* may be legitimately held to be a momentous work in the philosophy of science, the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of mind, among other important philosophical subdisciplines.

² That I will devote considerable space to investigating Kant’s broader project does not at all remove my attention from the topic at hand, viz., causality. For in evaluating Kant’s broad system I will be continuously keeping an eye on the issue of causality, and pursuing that as my main task in all that I investigate.
As was mentioned above, whether Kant was successful at grounding the principle of causality largely depends upon whether Kant succeeded in his project (in the first *Critique*; hereafter “CPR”) as a whole. This is because the establishment of causality was not the entirety of Kant’s task in the CPR, though again, it was a crucially important component. In fact there were three main questions that Kant sought to answer in the CPR: 1) How are synthetic a priori judgments of mathematics possible?; 2) How are synthetic a priori judgments of natural science possible; and 3) How are synthetic a priori judgments of metaphysics possible? These three questions in turn spring from one main question that Kant was concerned with: How are synthetic a priori judgments possible? A little background will be necessary to show why Kant equated answering these questions with the task of metaphysics.

Kant’s primary purpose in the CPR was to establish metaphysics as an intellectual discipline (which he called a “science”) that, like the other sciences that were enjoying great success in Kant’s day, would yield significant advancements in human understanding. Up until Kant’s efforts, confidence in metaphysics had been on the wane due to two factors: (1) the devastating arguments produced by Hume against the metaphysical enterprise (as it was then conceived), and (2) the comparatively colossal advancements being enjoyed in the other sciences. This meant that metaphysics was at a standstill – it wasn’t able to join the other sciences in making explanatory advancements largely due to the fact that the way it had been conceived of and carried out, until Kant’s time, was decisively shown by Hume to be inadequate as an intellectual discipline. Hume’s attack on metaphysics, and why it was so effective, can be

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3 Said differently: it is because causality, as a feature of Kant’s overarching metaphysical picture, depends upon this larger framework for its philosophical sustenance.

4 Metaphysics, it must be noted, can refer to either of two things in Kant’s writings: either the rationalistic, speculative, and unjustified conclusions of past philosophers or the metascientific assumptions that are necessary for the possibility of knowledge. Kant rejects the former and argues for the latter. When I refer to Kant’s establishing or justifying metaphysics, I mean the latter conception; when I refer to Kant’s rejection of metaphysics, I mean the former.
best described by contrasting his insights with the insights of a leading figure in a separate discipline. This investigation into Hume in turn sets up Kant’s project and explains why it takes the shape that it does (i.e., why Kant frames his project as one that ought to provide answers to his main questions, given above).

In astronomy, Copernicus advanced a heliocentric cosmological theory that supplanted the previous Ptolemaic, or geocentric, model and in so doing greatly furthered our understanding of planetary motion. In metaphysics, Hume argued that all our knowledge is limited to “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact.” The former, which Kant termed “analytic,” corresponds to a priori knowledge – the only a priori knowledge, according to Hume, that one can have. The latter, on the other hand, includes all knowledge via experience, that is, the sense impressions we receive from the external world. According to Hume, all knowledge of this kind, which Kant termed “synthetic,” is a posteriori; it can never provide us with necessary connections like the kind we postulate when we attribute a causal relationship to the event of one billiard ball striking another. Causality, like other similarly structured metaphysical notions, is inductively inferred but never justified due to the fact that we can never know what must obtain, only what has in the past obtained. Hume’s critique, of which the argument against knowledge of cause-and-effect was just a part, thus called into question the entire discipline of metaphysics.

This is what awakened Kant from his “dogmatic slumbers”; this is what invigorated him to pursue an intellectual project of no less importance than the complete overhaul and reconstitution of an entire philosophical discipline. Given the state of metaphysics after Hume’s critique, Kant saw nothing less than a “Copernican revolution” as necessary for its revitalization. In order to achieve such a feat, Kant realized that he would have to investigate the very possibility of metaphysics, which to him was synonymous with investigating the possibility of
synthetic a priori knowledge. I will flesh out below, in my discussion of causality, why exactly Kant saw this question as the central one to ask and answer.

III. Causality

I have shown, in broad brushstrokes, why Kant saw the need to rehabilitate metaphysics. There were systemic failures with metaphysics that Kant, with the aid of Hume, recognized and set out to correct. We will see here, by looking at Hume, Kant, and the problem of causality, why it is that Kant conceived of his project in the way that he did, and how exactly he was successful in answering it.

Hume’s critique of causality concluded that we are unjustified in postulating anything like a causal law or principle, since laws or principles posit necessary connections, which are precisely the kind of regulatory mechanisms which we can never observe empirically. But what about non-empirical knowledge? Surely if the principle of causality cannot be observed empirically then it can be established via some other means? Not so, according to Hume, for recall that the only other kind of knowledge available to us is what he called “relations of ideas,” i.e., knowledge that logically follows from concepts and definitions. But this kind of knowledge cannot ever yield empirical knowledge (which, recall again, Hume called “matters of fact”). So Hume’s attack on causality stems from his categorization of it as both a necessary and an empirical proposition. But according to Hume, our avenues to knowledge are exhausted by either going the route of empirical observation (matters of fact) or going the route of logical analysis (relations of ideas), but – and here’s the key thing – never can both routes be taken together.

Kant’s genius was to show precisely how it is possible that certain truths, say, the principle of causality, can be both synthetic (empirical) and a priori (necessary). Thus Kant’s system

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5 More accurately: Hume’s insights. For Kant and Hume never worked alongside each other.
provided the metascientific machinery with which to build and uphold a body of knowledge previously unavailable given Hume’s demolition of it.

This is why Kant conceived of his project the way that he did; this is why he asked the question he did – in order for metaphysics to be possible (which involves metascientific notions like causality), there needs to be a way to have knowledge that is at the same time synthetic and a priori. His answer to his own question was that yes, synthetic a priori truths are possible. The principle of causality is one such synthetic a priori truth that Kant’s CPR argued was justified. How so? Causality was said to be a metascientific principle, i.e., a “concept of the understanding,” that makes it possible for beings like us to have experience and empirical knowledge of the world. It is thus a condition of experience; indeed, the acquisition of empirical knowledge requires it and the possession of empirical knowledge presupposes it. This is the gist of Kant’s conclusion with regard to causality in the “Second Analogy” of the CPR, though there are subtle considerations involved in Kant’s argument that will need to be briefly touched on.

The way Kant argues for this conclusion is, first, by saying something about the nature of perception. Perception, Kant notes, is for us successive. Yet we must be able to distinguish between internal, or subjective, succession of perceptions and the succession of perceptions of the objective kind, which have in view objects that are undergoing change. But there is a problem that further complicates things: our perceptions are all successive, so what is the determining key to unlocking the challenge of which successions of perceptions amount to a purely subjective dynamic and which amount to a recognition of actual change in objects, i.e. a succession of perceptions that observes objective changes. The answer, the determining key, is the principle of causality.
That this is so can be seen by thinking a bit about what constitutes the difference between the (purely) subjective successions of perception that I noted above, and the objective successions of perception that observe external change. The difference is that the latter kind of successions, the objective kind, are characterized by a necessary order. That order is causality. Purely subjective perceptions allow me to dictate the “flow” or direction of what I am perceiving, and the way I am perceiving it. I can look at something and scan it left to right, or right to left; again top to bottom, or bottom to top. Not so with objective changes. These follow a necessary pattern that is characterized by the principle of causation. A river flows in a direction that it does independently of the way my mind perceives it. It is undergoing change (causally, of course), and this constrains the way I perceive it. This necessary feature of perception underwrites the principle of causality.

IV. Conclusion

It took a genius of colossal measure to weather Hume’s withering attack on such intuitively common-sensical notions as causality. Kant was that genius – he met the challenge and more. I have shown how he resuscitated the principle of causality, and how this task was accomplished within the larger, more thoroughgoing project of rehabilitating metaphysics as a whole. This was (and remains) significant not because he enabled philosophers to speculate once again – because he didn’t; rather, this was significant because he put metaphysics on sure footing, perhaps for the first time in its storied history, by carefully explaining and showing how exactly certain metascientific notions not only are to be useful in our investigation of the world, but our investigation of the world (roughly: the life sciences) require these metascientific notions, which now, because of Kant, we are justified in accepting.
Works Cited
