Handout 27:
Introduction to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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1   THE SYNTHETIC A PRIORI

Recall Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact:

	RELATIONS OF IDEAS	MATTERS OF FACT
Modal status	Necessary	Contingent
Epistemic status	Knowable by thought alone *a priori*	Knowable only through experience *a posteriori*

Kant thinks there is another important distinction to be made: that between *analytic* and *synthetic* truths. On Handout 14, we defined analytic truths as truths in which the predicate is somehow contained in the subject. Analytic truths are *a priori*, since to know an analytic truth it is sufficient to grasp the concept of the subject in such a way as to see that the concept of the predicate is contained in it. E.g.,:

(1) Triangles have three sides.

(2) Bachelors are unmarried.

In *synthetic* truths, the predicate is not contained in the subject, and so the truth cannot be known merely by understanding the terms involved in the sentences which express them. Hume's "matters of fact" are synthetic, because they are contingent (if they were analytic, they would be necessary). But are there any ideas that are both synthetic, and yet necessary and knowable *a priori*?

   Kant's answer is yes. He thinks that there are *synthetic a priori* truths. Moreover, these are the truths that philosophy (and much of science) aims to discover:

	ANALYTIC	SYNTHETIC
A PRIORI	Logical and definitional truths	The good stuff
A POSTERIORI	*Space available here?*	Humean matters of fact

Kant thinks that one of the most urgent tasks for philosophy is to explain how synthetic truths can be known *a priori*. In particular, he thinks that it is the key to resolving certain skeptical puzzles that have plagued previous philosophers; for example, Hume's skeptical argument about our knowledge of unobserved matters of fact. The key to that argument was that we cannot know that nature is uniform (i.e., that unobserved occurrences exhibit the same regularities as do those we've observed), since that's a matter of fact, and matters of fact can only be known through experience. Well, Kant agrees that the uniformity principle is a *synthetic* proposition. But while he also agrees with Hume that it can't be known through experience, he does not thereby conclude that it can't be known. If it can be known *a priori*, it can be known. So explaining the possibility of the synthetic *a priori* will enable us to see how we can know that nature is uniform.

Kant adds other important propositions to the category of the synthetic *a priori*:

1. All mathematics. E.g., $7 + 5 = 12$. To get from 7 and 5 to 12, we must "go beyond [the] concepts and avail ourselves of the intuition corresponding to one of the two: e.g., our five fingers, or five dots" (AW 726a). This is more immediately plausible with larger numbers. Same goes for geometry: "That the straight line between two points is the shortest is ... synthetic ... [f]or my concept of *straight* contains nothing about magnitude, but only a quality" (AW 726b).

2. The principles of natural science (esp. physics). E.g., the conservation of matter: "For in the concept of matter I do not think permanence" (AW 727a).

3. Metaphysics. "Metaphysics is not at all concerned merely to dissect concepts of things [...] and thereby to explicate them analytically. Rather, in metaphysics we want to expand our *a priori* cognition. In order to do this, we must use principles which go beyond the given concept and which add to it something that was not contained in it" (AW 727a).

Kant claims that if we consistently applied Hume's argumentative techniques, we'd have to conclude that no synthetic *a priori* knowledge is possible. But this is bad! It would mean that "all we call metaphysics," "all pure philosophy," and "pure mathematics" would all have to be abandoned (727b). Yikes!

3 KANT'S ANSWER, IN BRIEF

So how *is* synthetic *a priori* knowledge possible? Here's the basic idea: certain truths are necessary conditions for the possibility of any experience of an empirical world (i.e., of a world that we experience as spatial and temporal). These are synthetic *a priori* truths, and we can know them because (a) we know that they are necessary for the experience of an empirical world, and (b) we know that we experience an empirical world.

Note that the answer contains a negative aspect: if something *isn't* a necessary condition for the possibility of experience, and it is not analytic or *a posteriori*, then it can't be known. Kant holds that such propositions include every substantive claim about God, freedom, and immortality. So we cannot know that God exists (or doesn't); we cannot know that we are free (or that we are not); and we cannot know that immortality is possible (or not). As Kant says, "I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith" (AW 724b).