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The Problem of Knowledge in Hume's Philosophy and Kant's Attempt to Solve it

Abstract

The philosophical motion from Hume to Kant is a cornerstone in the history of philosophy. This is the motion which I will try to evaluate here. The problem of knowledge which was formulated by Hume shows us how the cartesian tradition since Descartes' *cogito* finds itself in a blind alley. This is why Kant's attempt to solve that problem is very vital for epistemology. First of all we will see how Hume's empiricism ends with universal scepticism and I will try to show why he can not avoid that end. Then we will pass on Kant's response to Hume's scepticism. I will discuss whether his response is right and legitimate. In conclusion we will see that despite the strength which Kant's response possess, it contains also some unsolved problems which open door for scepticism.

Key Terms

Hume, Kant, Scepticism, *Matters of Fact*, Causality, Synthetic *a priori*.

Hume Felsefesinde Bilgi Problemi ve Kant'ın Onu Çözme Denemesi

Özet

Hume'dan Kant'a doğru gerçekleşen felsefi hareket, felsefe tarihinde bir köşe taşıdır. Burada değerlendirmeye çalışacağım şey işte bu harekettir. Hume tarafından formüle edilmiş olan bilgi problemi, bize Descartes'ın *cogitosundan* bu yana karteziyen geleneğin kendisini nasıl çıkmaz bir sokak içinde bulduğunu gösterir. İşte bu yüzden Kant'ın bu problemi çözme denemesi epistemoloji için son derece önemlidir. İlk olarak Hume'un empirizminin nasıl evrensel bir şüphecilikle sona erdiğini göreceğiz. Hume'un bu sonu neden savuşturamadığını göstermeye çalışacağım. Daha sonra Hume'un şüpheciliğine yönelik Kant'ın vermiş

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olduğu yanıtı geçeceğiz. Bu yanıtın doğru ve meşru olup olmadığını tartışacağım. Sonuç olarak, Kant'ın cevabının sahip olduğu güce rağmen, aynı zamanda şüphecilğe kapı açan bir takım çözümlenmemiş problemler içerdiğini göreceğiz.

Anahtar Terimler

Hume, Kant, Şüphecilik, *Olgu Sorunları*, Nedensellik, Sentetik *a priori*.

Epistemology or the theory of knowledge is one of the main issues of modern philosophy. Many reasons can be submitted for that fact, but it seems that the main reason is the idea that makes the subject the constituent of all our values, and philosophy as one of the values of mankind makes no exception. Since Descartes – from whom we start modern philosophy – philosophy is based generally on human existence. Almost all philosophers tried to derive everything from the subject, they tried to understand the world based on human existence, and by trying to understand the world based on subject they asked unavoidably the question: “How we know the world?”. That manner I think is the foundation of modern epistemology and philosophy. Since Descartes' *cogito* this is the question which guides mostly philosophy. And this is the question which motivates David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Although they start from the same question, very typical for philosophy they differ in the answer which they give for that question.

When Hume came to the philosophical scene in the early and middle eighteenth century with his sceptical approach I think that modern epistemology which was discussed over two centuries since Descartes almost come to an end in the hands of Hume's scepticism. This shows the strength of his philosophical conclusion about epistemology. It seems like something ended with Hume. Hume was a pure empiricist but unlike his predecessors – Locke and Berkeley – he accepted and derived without exception all consequences of his empirical philosophy. This is the point which makes Hume unique in the history of philosophy. His consistency was so strong that in the end even when he was not happy with his conclusion about knowledge, he remained his philosophical position.

In his book *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume starts his investigation with the nature of our ideas and thoughts. He simply asks: “what is the source of my ideas or thoughts?” As an empiricist the only answer he can give to that question is *experience*. Then he makes distinction between two perceptions which come with experience: *Impressions* and *ideas*. *Impressions* are perceptions of our senses and *ideas* are pale copies of these *impressions*. He argues that to have a thought or idea about something we must have its *impression* which comes from experience. So each thought we have, must correspond to an *impression* (Hume, 1976: 14). Thus our knowledge is strictly limited with *impressions*. If our reasoning doesn't involve thoughts which come from *impressions* then our reasoning has not a legitimate ground. This point eliminates almost the entire metaphysics which was made until Hume because that metaphysics was made with concepts like “substance”, “essence”, “god”,

“platonic ideas”, etc. It is clear to Hume that such concepts have not *impressions* and therefore it is pure nonsense to talk about them like they exist. Hume uses this approach to eliminate metaphysics from philosophy but we can see this approach as the first step towards scepticism. Yet until now knowledge is still possible for Hume within strict empirical rules. But when Hume makes the next step in his empirical analysis this possibility will vanish and Hume will lose any ground to establish a certain theory of knowledge. Let's look at this analysis.

The analysis which we mentioned is about our reasoning and judgements. Hume distinguishes two kinds of reasoning: *Relation of ideas* and *matters of fact*. Sciences as Mathematics and Geometry draw into *relation of ideas* and depend only on operations of mind. These are reasonings which are *a priori* and doesn't depend on something existent in the universe. They carry the evidence in themselves and are absolutely true all the time. Hume isn't concerned with this type of reasonings very much because it is clear for him how they function (Hume, 1976: 22). He is primarily interested in *matters of fact* because this is the area in which we increase our knowledge about ourselves, the world and general the universe. *Matters of fact* don't rely merely on operations of mind; to make this type of reasoning you have to go outside of your mind. You must depend on something which exists in the universe. In contrast to relation of ideas these are reasonings which are *a posteriori* and rely on experience. This is why they don't hold necessarily truths like *relation of ideas*. There is nothing logically wrong to say that the sun will not rise tomorrow from east. This is why *matters of fact* can always be falsificated. The real question here for Hume is: how we know *matters of fact*? Because this is the problematic area in which everything is contingent and therefore establishing a certain epistemology is very vital.

He asks the simplest question: “on what is based our knowledge about *matters of fact*?” As we mentioned above we have *impressions* about facts, then these *impressions* cause *ideas* and thoughts. But what happens with these *ideas* and how our knowledge extends itself? For example how can we derive a proposition like “bread feeds” with the separate *ideas* “bread” and “feed”? What is the connection between these *ideas*. According to Hume if we look closely to the example and general to *Matters of Fact* we will see that all our reasonings about *matters of fact* depends on the relation of cause and effect and that relation is derived entirely from experience (Hume 1976: 24). We experience for the first time that eating bread is feeding us and we conclude that from now on every time bread will feed us. We always think that the future will resemble the past. This is how we see the world. For us the world is based on causality and that is what constitutes our knowledge about *matters of fact*. But here is the problem which arises for Hume, has causality a legitimate ground whatsoever in our knowledge? There is nothing logically wrong in saying that bread which feeded us yesterday will poison us tomorrow. Yet we are sure that such a thing will not happen. We always say that everything has a cause and we think about it like something universal. In our opinion bread causes feeding and always will. To have such an epistemological claim we must found a legitimate ground for causality. So Hume begins to investigate the foundation of the relation between cause and effect. He asks whether we have *a priori* connections about cause and effect, because that *a priori* connection can be the legitimate ground of causality notion in epistemology. He analyses all sorts of relation, reasoning of our understanding, yet he can't find anything *a priori* about causality (Hume 1976: 29). All

he can find as a pure empiricist is the experience of things. All we can have is experience. We merely perceive that something follows another. We perceive that bread feeds, that fire burns, that the stone we throw falls to earth. But is there a causal necessity between bread and feeding, between fire and burning. What is the internal connection between these things? That is a question which transcends experience thus it can't be answered. Because even though we know the size, colour, and the structure of bread we can't know with necessity that bread will feed us. We only experience many things together and conclude that something will follow another thing. This is just a habit of human nature (Hume, 1976: 37). Find a mankind that has not experienced any kind of fire, he would never know that fire burns, but if he had *a priori* knowledge about the causality between fire and burning he should know that fire will burn.

That conclusion made by Hume shook up epistemology. The history of philosophy is almost entirely based on causality. Even all sciences are based on causality. So if you admit that cause and effect is simply a habit of human who merely is perceiving things together you are destroying all sort of theoretical foundation of knowledge. So scepticism appears here with all his power. Because knowledge requires certainty, objectivity and universality. But Hume transforms knowledge into some uncertain belief that the future will resemble the past. That is simply admitting that certain, objective and universal knowledge is not possible, we could only have beliefs about something. In this way we lost our theoretical ground for knowledge. It seems for Hume that the entire philosophy since Ancient Greece was a waste of time because if you throw the notion of cause and effect from philosophy how can you establish any theory. In this sense scepticism is unavoidable. Hume also accepts the empirical claim that we can know directly and certainly only our mental content. But this means that we can not leave our mental state. This leads us to solipsism. Because we can not determine what we perceive, are the impressions corresponding to external objects? We can't know that, again this can only be a belief. Any kind of necessary truths about our experience can't be established. We are left by Hume with scepticism almost about everything.

After Hume philosophy was in a big crossroad and there were huge doubts against philosophers. In this situation Kant came to the philosophical scene with his critical approach and tried to answer all vital questions which were raised by Hume against philosophy. He offered a new and original way for epistemology. As it is known his critical philosophy is incredible detailed and therefore we can not touch on every detail of his thought. I will try to give a general account of his philosophy in regard with his answer to Hume.

To understand the complexity of his approach we shall look at the assumptions which he makes. First of all like Hume, Kant accepts that our knowledge begins with experience, in that point he is an empiricist. But he doesn't stop here like Hume because in order to generate knowledge we must shape our experience. As he says in *Prolegomena*, if we don't do that our experience can't have any certainty and universality; this was also Hume's conclusion. We must have *a priori* forms which organize the untidiness of our perceptions. "Kant took Hume's tendencies of the mind to pass from one idea to another, without which we could not construct the world, and

canonized them as *a priori* forms of the understanding.” (Robinson, 2004). These *a priori* forms of our reason constitute the universality and necessity of our knowledge and without them we even can't talk about knowledge because Hume showed us that the cluster of perceptions can't build up anything necessary about knowledge. But according to Kant, Hume couldn't see that we have these *a priori* forms. So for Kant knowledge is possible and scepticism therefore is false. Now he has to show how that certain and universal knowledge is possible.

Kant accepts the distinction between analytic *a priori* and synthetic *a posteriori* judgements. This is the same distinction which was made by Hume between *relation of ideas* and *matters of fact*. But Kant argues that we have also a third kind of judgement which any philosopher couldn't see. He calls these judgements synthetic *a priori*. In these judgements we have *synthetic* judgements, which extend our knowledge about the universe, combined with *a priori* forms which shape our synthetic information. Synthetic *a priori* judgements are the heart of Kant's epistemology. Because these judgements certify the certainty of our knowledge. Kant thought that if he can show that we have *a priori* forms which constitute our knowledge then he can solve the problem of knowledge. So his solution lies within synthetic *a priori* judgements. Kant's aim is to show how these judgements are possible. Because in his mind he doesn't have any doubts about their existence. He only tries in his critical philosophy to persuade us about their existence and to show us how they are possible (Kant, 1995: 24).

Kant claims that we have *a priori* forms which we impose to the experimental content which we perceive. For example space and time are pure *a priori* intuitions of our reason and we experience everything under these forms. Our concepts of space and time are not concepts which can be abstracted from experience. They are concepts which belong to the subject in order to make experience possible. Without such concepts we can't experience anything because everything we perceive is under space and time. That is the first point where Kant goes beyond Hume's epistemology. Because unlike Hume who claims that all we have in our reason is due to experience and therefore our mind is a passive actor in knowledge, Kant makes his famous Copernican revolution and claims that we have *a priori* forms independent from experience. That revolution changes the reception of the subject. The subject is now active in generating knowledge and imposes his *a priori* forms to experience.

Space and time are not the only forms which we possess. Our understanding has also twelve *a priori* forms which Kant calls *categories* of understanding. These categories compose our experience and transform it into universal knowledge which no one can doubt. What Kant is doing here is generalizing the causality problem of Hume. He argues that causality is one of these *categories* and there are eleven others which all together constitute knowledge. And that is the essence of synthetic *a priori* judgements. Because if we have *a priori* forms or *categories* which are certain, universal and doesn't derive from experience and if these forms shape our knowledge then judgements which possess these *a priori* forms have legitimate foundation for certain knowledge.

Hume couldn't realize that we have such *categories* because these categories can't be derived from experience and in Hume's mind something which doesn't come from experience is nothing. That's why Hume according to Kant couldn't see the possibility of *synthetic a priori* judgements. He was blinded by his own extreme

empiricism. Hume occupied himself only with synthetic judgements and thought he had shown that *a priori* propositions regarding cause and effect are impossible (Kant 1998; B19/ B20). If he could see for example that Mathematics and Geometry were based on synthetic *a priori* judgements then he could maybe realize that our mind has pure *a priori* forms (Kant, 1995: 18). By doing so he could also realize that causality is a form of our reason which doesn't derive from experience. The *category* of causality is the ground of natural sciences. This is the *category* with the others which makes sciences as physics, chemistry and biology possible. So Kant thought that he had solved all problems of epistemology and argued that with the synthetic *a priori* judgements he found a safe ground on where he can establish a certain and universal theory of knowledge. He asserts that any kind of scepticism ends with his critical philosophy.

In order to criticize Kant's position we must entirely assimilate his critical philosophy but that is not possible for such a short time that we have here. For example the validity of synthetic *a priori* judgements is extremely questionable, and it is shown by many philosophers - for example Quine - that these judgements raise many doubts. But that requires diffusive analysis which we can't do here. Instead I think that even if we accept Kant's synthetic *a priori* judgements and his critical philosophy there are still many questions to ask. Whether his theory of knowledge escapes scepticism is questionable for me. Because as one of his contemporaries – Schulze – said, Kant couldn't establish genuine truths about objective reality. Because he never left his empirical point that we only know with experience. And if experience is shaped by the *a priori* forms of our reason then we can never reach to the real objects or the thing in itself. That is a point which is also accepted by Kant, but if we can't extend our knowledge to the real objects then we can't determine the objective validity of our judgements. All we can do is establishing subjective necessity of certain views. But that's exactly what Hume did. Hume argued all way throughout his philosophy that we can't have any real objective foundation about knowledge. Solomon Maimon who also was one of Kant's contemporaries thought that any knowledge which occurs from experience can not have any certainty. We know that one of the components of Kant's knowledge is experience and that component according to Maimon can't give us the "reality" which we are searching for. Therefore Maimon thinks that by generalizing Hume's problem Kant couldn't show us how "real" knowledge is possible (Rockmore, 1993: 20).

Another sceptical danger which awaits Kant according to me is the danger of solipsism. If we appeal to an empirical stand point then we can not leave our mental state. Because as we mentioned above, there is an empirical claim that we can know directly and certainly only our mental content and that claim leads all empiricist to solipsism. We know that in some way Kant is an empiricist. He says that our *a priori* forms shape our experience. But we can ask: which experience? I think that this question is not answered successfully. Because Kantian forms may as well shape our experience which doesn't leave our mental state. These forms do not guarantee the existence of the external world. We saw also that experience by no means guarantee that existence. As a consequence Kant can not demonstrate with certainty the existence of the external world.

When we come to the notion of causality we can ask what the profit of knowing is that we have such a *category*. When we experience for the first time something, we don't know if there is some connection between the things which we perceive. We perceive it and make directly an inductive derivation. But this is exactly the derivation which Hume criticized deeply. By no means can we explain with experience the relation between two things that happen one after another. Here the categorical causality principle can't help us to explain the internal connection between things that come one after another (Reichenbach, 2000: 88).

As a conclusion we can say that Hume's empiricism leads us to pure scepticism and Kant offers a new approach to that scepticism. But he carries some problems as we saw above, but again which theory doesn't? Our task is to see the contributions which these theories give us. In this perspective I think that Hume and Kant are treasures and this is why they deserve to be explored.

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