Kant on conceptual schemes

INTRODUCTION
Try to imagine what it would be like to have sensory experience but with no ability to think about it. Thinking about sensory experience requires concepts – at the most basic level, being able to distinguish what comes from the different senses (vision, hearing, etc.), and then being able to distinguish types of properties, e.g. colour from shape. If we couldn’t think about sensory experience, it would be completely unintelligible, no more than a confused ‘buzz’. For instance, and very importantly, we couldn’t tell that we were experiencing anything – i.e. objects. The idea of an object is the idea of something that is unified in some way - a colour, shape, position, and so on, going together; or even more fundamentally, something that exists in space and time.

A ‘buzz’ doesn’t deserve the name ‘experience’. Experience is experience of – experience of objects, in fact, experience of a world of objects, i.e. objects that stand in organized relations (in space and time) to each other.

How is it that our experience is intelligible in this way? We take it for granted that we see desks, hear cars, smell roses. But we shouldn’t take it for granted, and this leads to a, perhaps the, fundamental question in epistemology: how is it that we can make sense of reality, so that we have experience and not a buzz?

In Critique of Pure Reason, Immanuel Kant argued that intelligible experience – experience of a world of objects – presupposes and requires certain, very basic concepts, which he called categories. These concepts, taken together, form our fundamental conceptual scheme. Kant argued that sensation is completely meaningless to us unless and until it is brought under these basic concepts.

Kant thought that there was only one basic conceptual scheme that could provide experience as we know it. There can be no other set of concepts which creatures like us could have. The conceptual scheme is necessary for experience at all; so any creature that we think has experience – intelligible experience of objects, not a confused buzz – must have these concepts.

KANT ON THE STRUCTURE OF EXPERIENCE
Knowledge is a relation between the mind and reality. Philosophers like Descartes, Locke and Hume took this relation for granted, in the form of ‘experience’. For example, Locke begins his account of how we acquire concepts by saying that

The Senses at first let in particular Ideas. (Essay Concerning Human Understanding I.II.15)

This just takes it for granted that our minds are set up to represent the world as it really is. Kant’s great insight was not to take this for granted, but ask how this is possible. In Locke, there is no real explanation here of how we can know about the world through
experience. Perhaps the senses are completely misguided. Descartes argues that we have the innate concept PHYSICAL OBJECT and that God, who is the source of innate concepts, guarantees that this concept applies to reality. But if his argument for God’s existence fails (which Kant thought it did), then we are left with the possibility that our innate concepts are also misguided.

The answer, Kant thought, lay in thinking further about experience. Firstly, we know that intelligible experience is possible, because we have it. Intelligible experience is what we mean by ‘experience’, in the sense of a perceptual experience of something. Experience is of objects. So experience has a certain structure – it is structured by objects, and these objects exist in space and time. It is through experience that we gain knowledge. So what makes this structure of experience possible? If we could answer that, we would have shown why it is that we can know about reality.

**Categories: an example**

We want to know what makes the structured experience of objects possible. Kant answers that it is the possession and application of certain basic concepts, each of which contribute to the concept of an ‘object’. His argument for the (twelve) concepts he lists and no others is contentious, and many philosophers think it doesn’t work. What has been more influential are his arguments for each concept in turn. One argument that has been thought particularly powerful is his argument for the concept CAUSALITY.

The argument is this (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B232-8). To experience the world in terms of objects involves distinguishing between the time in which our experiences occur – when we have them and in what order – from the time in which the objects exist. For example, I can, at two times, look at an object from two different angles, seeing different sides of it. My perception of the object changes, and one experience follows the other in time. But I don’t say that the object has changed, or that there are two different objects, one of which follows the other in time – I say that the object has remained the same over time. Kant gives the example of looking around a house. I have a series of perceptions, changing in time, but the house remains unchanged. However, on another occasion, we say that the changes in our perceptions reflect changes in the object. Kant gives the example of watching a ship sailing down a river. In this case, it is not just that my perceptions change over time, the object itself is changing (in position). How is it possible that can we make the distinction between the sequence of changes in my perception and the sequence of changes in the object? Obviously, it is possible; but how?

Kant’s answer is that in the case of looking around the house, we understand that the order of the perceptions can be changed, e.g. we could have looked at the walls top to bottom instead of bottom to top, say, without the house itself changing. In other words, the order in which we have the experiences doesn’t change what we experience. When the object doesn’t change, the order of perceptions is not determined. In the case of the ship, the order of the perceptions cannot be different: we first see the ship upriver and then we see it downriver. If we saw the ship first downriver and then upriver, we would be seeing a different event – not a ship sailing down the river, but a ship sailing up the river. So when the objects change, we cannot change the order of the perceptions. The order of the perceptions is determined by the object changing.

This means that we have an idea of a ‘necessary temporal order’. Without this idea we couldn’t make the distinction between perceptions that change because the object does and perceptions that change when the object stays the same. This idea is that of
CAUSALITY. Causality is the relation between cause and effect, and we think that effects follow causes; in fact, we think that effects must follow their causes. We say that an event $c$, e.g. letting go of a pen, causes another event $e$, the pen falling to the floor, only when $e$ regularly follows $c$.

If pens didn’t (almost?) always fall to the floor when we let go of them, we wouldn’t say that letting go of them caused them to fall to the floor. Blinking isn’t followed by the pen falling to the floor; sometimes it is, sometimes it isn’t. We don’t think blinking causes pens to fall.

So CAUSALITY is precisely the concept that things happen in a certain, determined order. So Kant concludes that without the concept of CAUSALITY I cannot distinguish between an object changing and just my perceptions changing.

Finally, I need this distinction to be able to experience objects at all. So without CAUSALITY, I can’t have intelligible experience. So CAUSALITY is necessary for experience to be possible.

THE CONCEPTUAL SCHEME
Kant argued that there were twelve concepts, including UNITY, SUBSTANCE, NECESSITY, CAUSALITY and others, that together were necessary for experience. Because they are necessary for experience, they are a priori – logically ‘prior’ to experience, rather than derived from experience. We do not have experience at all without them, so we cannot derive them from experience. Kant argued instead that they were part of the structure of the mind. They are each aspects of the ‘pure thought of an object’ (Critique of Pure Reason, B80), and it is this that the mind brings to experience.

Our experience – every perceptual experience we have – is completely shot through by these concepts. It can be tempting to interpret Kant as saying that our experience is made up of two separate things: sensation and concepts. We apply the concepts to sensation to derive experience. But Kant would object: there is no such thing as pure sensation for us. We can’t even talk about it meaningfully, because by definition such sensation is not something we can think about (as it comes ‘before’ the application of concepts). Consider: we don’t have a confused buzz, we only have experience of objects. Experience, for Kant, is always conceptualized; and all experience is conceptualized (in the first instance) in the same way – as experience of objects. There is only one conceptual scheme, and it is necessary for all experience.

If there is variation in conceptual schemes between cultures or languages, then, it cannot be very great. All conceptual schemes must use certain concepts for there to be experience at all. Kant argues that you need certain concepts in order to be able to state – or think or experience – anything at all. This isn’t an empirical argument, e.g. Kant doesn’t do any psychological or anthropological investigation. It is an a priori argument, based on the nature of our experience.

IMPLICATIONS
What are the implications of Kant’s theory? The most important regards the relation between the mind and the world. Experience, we have said, has a certain structure – it is experience of a world of objects; and this structure is made possible by certain key
concepts which contribute to the ideas of an ‘object’ and of an objective world, including CAUSALITY, SUBSTANCE, UNITY and so on. These concepts can’t be derived from experience, because they are what make experience possible in the first place. So they are a priori; Kant says they are part of the nature of the mind.

So we reach this conclusion: that the ‘object’-ive nature of experience is a reflection of the nature of the mind. This means that our experience of and our thoughts about everyday objects – tables, plants, and so on – is not a straightforward presentation of what exists completely independently of the mind (what Kant calls ‘things-in-themselves’). The idea of an object doesn’t reflect the world, it reflects the mind. So everyday objects are defined by our structured experience of them.

So now if we try to think of how things are, how reality is, quite independent of these a priori concepts of ours, we find we cannot. We cannot know what reality is completely independently of how we think about reality – which is in terms of objects. And yet we clearly don’t want to say that reality depends entirely on our minds – something exists independently of our minds, the something that produces experiences. But we cannot know anything about this ‘something’ – we have to think using our a priori conceptual scheme.

This doesn’t mean that the world of experience – the world of objects – isn’t real. Of course it is real; indeed, it is by definition ‘objective’. However, it is defined by the contribution our mind makes as well as the (unknown) contribution made by whatever is completely independent of our minds.

THE CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY OF EXPERIENCE

We saw that Kant starts from the objection to empiricism and rationalism that it cannot explain the relation between the mind and the world that is necessary for knowledge. The empiricists assume that the senses ‘let in’ the world as it really is; rationalists assume that our innate concepts match it. Both assumptions are unjustified. Perhaps the way we experience or conceptualise the world is completely different from how the world is. But has Kant left us in the same position?

He would argue that he hasn’t. He has shown how we can know about the world – the world of physical objects that we experience with the senses; we can know about it because the world as we know it is structured by our a priori concepts. How things are is given by these concepts, so there is no question of a ‘match’ between our minds and how things are.

But then what about how things are independent of our minds? About this we can know absolutely nothing; we cannot even coherently think about it. But this is not an objection for Kant, because there is no meaningful way in which we could know about it. If Kant had argued just that our experience is a certain way, we could object that our concepts were a limitation to our knowledge – we weren’t able to experience the world as it really is. But Kant has argued that our experience must be the way it is – there is no alternative to experiencing the world as a world of objects, so there is no alternative way of experiencing ‘the world as it is’. Any alternative wouldn’t be ‘experience’ at all.

For example, the distinction between the temporal order of experience and the temporal order of objects is not just what makes experience of objects possible. It is also necessary if we are to be able to talk about experience of objects. The distinction between the
temporal order of experience and the temporal order of objects is part of the general distinction between experience and the world which we experience. Without this distinction, ‘experience’ would not be ‘experience of’ anything.

This makes our experience properly objective, the basis of knowledge of how things are. What we don’t know – how the world is completely independently of our minds – is what it is impossible to know. So there is nothing here we could know but don’t.