

Can Critical Philosophy End the Epistemological Dilemma?: On the Break of Modern Philosophy from Descartes to Kant

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ABSTRACT

The core epistemological dilemma in modern philosophical development originated from the "subjectivity turn" established by Descartes. Building upon universal doubt, Descartes established "I think" as the unshakable foundation of knowledge certainty and elevated "reason" to the supreme foundational status. While this turn provided an internal basis for seeking objectivity in knowledge, it also implicitly objectified the world into material and spiritual entities that were mutually independent and non-interacting, forming a sharp dualism. Kant's critical philosophy consciously responded to this dilemma with a pivotal "breakthrough". In his **Critique of Pure Reason**, he proposed the "Copernican revolution", reversing the traditional epistemological stance of "subject conforming to object" to "object conforming to subject". He advocated actively constructing empirical objects through transcendental cognitive forms rather than passively reflecting objects. At least for phenomenal knowledge, Kant bridged the subject-object divide left by Descartes, laying an effective foundation for the objectivity of scientific knowledge. However, Kant's overall solution gradually slid into agnosticism, with his strict dichotomy between phenomena and noumena fundamentally limiting the scope of human cognition.

KEYWORDS

Descartes; Kant; Mind-body dualism

1 The definition of reason in dualism and the turn of philosophical epistemology

1.1 The definition of "reason" under the framework of Cartesian dualism and its epistemological presupposition

After the European Renaissance, Descartes began his exploration of self-consciousness in **Meditations on First Philosophy**. Through the famous "universal doubt" (doubt about all existence), he established the proposition "I think, therefore I am", which laid the foundation for modern philosophical rationality and became the cornerstone of his mind-body dualism. The phrase "I think, therefore I am" can be directly translated as "I think, therefore I exist" —meaning that when questioning the existence of other things, one must not doubt their own thoughts. The doubting "self" (mind) inherently exists, thereby proving the existence of spiritual entities. Meanwhile, Descartes used God as a guarantee to derive the objectivity of material entities and reconcile the mind-body dichotomy. "I think, therefore I am" formed the basis of rationalism, while the God argument bridged reason and faith by ensuring knowledge's reliability.

"Since I know I exist and observe that nothing but my thinking constitutes my essence, I can correctly conclude: My essence lies solely in being a thinking entity." In Meditation VI, Descartes demonstrated the separability of mind and body by emphasizing the essential difference between the mind's thinking nature and matter's extension, noting their identical attributes. Guided by this logic, Descartes argued that the mind and body could be completely separated through thought, making them effectively divisible. This reasoning directly led to the famous question of "how mind and body interact".

Although the dualistic premise of mind-body opposition created a significant epistemological rift, Descartes fundamentally transformed rationality into an "intensionless thinking entity," granting it ontological primacy. This essentially constructed a new metaphysical epistemological framework rooted in subjectivity. While this dualism shattered traditional cognition, it also provided philosophy with a decisive tool to break free from scholastic constraints. When Descartes proclaimed "I think, therefore I am" in **Meditations on First Philosophy**, he not only established mental activity as the unquestionable absolute foundation but also mathematized the material world, rendering extended entities objects of rational precision. This seemingly fragmented dualistic structure actually contained the seeds of modern subjectivist philosophy— As contemporary Descartes scholar Genevieve Rodis-Lewis noted: "Descartes 'ghost problem' was not a flaw in his system but a price modern self-affirmation must pay."

Within this dualistic framework, Descartes defined "rationality" as an innate human quality—a clear perception of truth acquired through pure thought, free from sensory interference. He advocated mathematical deduction as the paradigm for understanding the world and established a fundamental principle: the criteria for verifying truth and obtaining reliable knowledge do not originate from sensory experience but must rely on the inner light of reason. From a rationalist standpoint, he challenged the traditional authority of scholastic philosophy, attempting to replace religious blind faith with the autonomy of philosophical reason. Following Descartes' approach of using mathematics to study the world,

rationality can be understood as encompassing all bounded, organized, and rule-based mental activities that ultimately point to truth. In essence, Descartes established a framework — rationality reaching truth, which raises a fundamental question — how can we determine the truth of knowledge through thought and existence? This inquiry into understanding the world's reality thus initiated the epistemological shift in philosophical history.

1.2 The core epistemological problem caused by the dualistic view of rationality: How does the inner mind reach the external world?

Descartes' mind-body dualism, also known as substance dualism, demonstrated the existence of "I" through doubt, thereby establishing two distinct entities: "matter" and "mind." This revolutionary framework delineated the ontological distinction between extension and thought, yet simultaneously created a pivotal epistemological challenge in modern philosophy: How could the mind, confined within its own certainty, transcend its inherent nature to acquire objective knowledge of the external world? The question of "mind's access to the world" first emerged in the "Wax Cube Experiment" from *Meditations on First Philosophy* — When Descartes asserted that wax's essence could only be grasped through intellect rather than senses, he exposed an interpretive divide between the knower and the known. This epistemological chasm between "mind and world" became a core issue in modern philosophy, directly driving the philosophical shift from ontology to epistemology.

However, this radical dichotomy confined the knower to the realm of ideas while isolating the known from intellectual discourse, creating a communication barrier between them. This problem manifests two interconnected epistemological dilemmas. First, Descartes attempted to ensure consistency between mental representations and external objects through the "God-guaranteed doctrine," but Alain Arnault's fatal critique in *Fourth Series of Rebuttals* challenged this approach: Without clear knowledge of God's existence, one cannot establish truth standards; yet proving God's existence requires presupposing the validity of these standards. This circular reasoning jeopardized the legitimacy of rationalist epistemology. Secondly, while Locke confined knowledge to "correspondence between ideas" in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume's thorough empiricist analysis in *A Treatise of Human Nature* demonstrated that causal relationships are merely projections of mental habits. He argued that we can not actually prove the necessary connection between sensory impressions and external objects. This skeptical stance poses a risk of undermining the claims of natural science knowledge.

2 The core disputes between rationalism and empiricism in truth-seeking

Modern scholars have developed two opposing schools of thought regarding epistemology: Continental Rationalism and British empiricism. Following the Middle Ages, the Renaissance emerged under the guise of ancient Greek and Roman culture, serving as a platform for bourgeois intellectual liberation. This era witnessed the rise of humanist ideologies, advocacy for practical happiness, and reverence for scientific rationality. Marked by Cartesian philosophy, rationalism took shape with its staunch belief in "innate ideas" — the conviction that humans could construct a complete knowledge system through pure reason. Characterized by deductive reasoning as its defining method, this philosophical movement initiated the modern rationalist school in Europe.

In contrast to "rationalism," empiricism stands as an alternative epistemological doctrine that posits sensory experience as the source of knowledge. It maintains that all understanding is acquired through experience, provided that the accuracy of known methods and experiences within a defined scope is ensured. By continuously expanding and refining this foundation, one can ultimately attain a correct understanding of the world with truth as the ultimate objective. Notable thinkers like John Locke and David Hume proposed that the human mind functions as a "tabula rasa," where knowledge is entirely shaped through acquired experiences.

2.1 Core question: How can humans comprehend truth?

In the history of philosophy, the question "How can humans comprehend truth?" has become the central inquiry in epistemology, fundamentally addressing the legitimacy of human knowledge. This proposition inherently encompasses three interconnected sub-questions: Does knowledge originate from a priori reason or acquired experience? Is the criterion for truth logical self-evident or empirical verification? And what are the limits of human cognition? The significance of this question as the core of philosophical epistemology lies precisely in its direct connection to the legitimacy of human knowledge. Whether in scientific theories or metaphysics, all must address the fundamental question: "How do we know that what we know is true?"

These divergent answers to fundamental questions gave rise to the two opposing camps of rationalism and empiricism in modern philosophy. Rationalists like Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz maintained that truth must rely on

innate rational concepts, seeking to establish universal necessity through mathematical logical deduction while prioritizing logical consistency as the ultimate standard of truth. However, this approach risks becoming dogmatism. In contrast, empiricists including Locke, Berkeley, and Hume insisted that knowledge must originate from sensory experience, using empirical verification as the criterion for truth. Yet this stance ultimately led to the paradox of skepticism.

Since the 20th century, this age-old epistemological question has taken on new theoretical forms in modern philosophy. Analytical philosophy, through the work of Frege and Russell, transformed the question of truth into a logical analysis of linguistic meaning. Husserl's phenomenology sought to transcend traditional subject-object dichotomy by "returning to things themselves." Pragmatists like James linked truth to practical utility, while Popper's falsificationism fundamentally denied the possibility of absolute truth.

The question "How can humans comprehend truth?" fundamentally reflects on human rational capacities. It requires addressing both the origins and boundaries of knowledge while confronting the dialectical relationship between reason and experience. From classical philosophy to modern thought, the evolution of this inquiry reveals humanity's ongoing exploration of cognitive capabilities—neither overestimating reason's omnipotence nor indulging in fragmented experiences, but rather seeking the necessary conditions for knowledge through critical reflection and reconstruction.

2.2 The logical dilemma of the two camps

Schools Rationalism ultimately fell into dogmatism. Descartes, representing rationalists, established "clear and distinct perception" as the criterion of truth. In *Discourse on Method*, he wrote: "The ability to correctly judge and distinguish truth from falsehood—what we call conscience or reason—is inherently equal for all. Our disagreements arise not from some having more reason than others, but simply because we approach thought through different lenses, examining entirely different objects." However, the inherent reliability of this reasoning capacity remains unproven, creating a fundamental epistemological paradox. Although Leibniz constructed his knowledge system through "rational truths" and the law of non-contradiction, this argument based on the self-evident nature of reason actually falls into circular reasoning. If the validity of the law of non-contradiction depends on other more fundamental rational principles, then what guarantees the validity of those principles? Spinoza attempted to ensure the rigor of his philosophical system through geometric methods, yet failed to explain the empirical foundation of its definitions and axioms, reducing the system to a self-contained deductive framework. This rejection of empirical verification reaches its peak in Malebranche's claim of "seeing everything within God," completely severing the connection between cognition and the empirical world.

The dogmatic tendencies of rationalism first emerged in Descartes' "I think" argument, where the system required divine assurance for rationality's reliability while necessitating rational proof of God's existence—a paradox Alain Arnault termed the "Descartes' Circle." Leibniz's monadology posited the universe as a collection of spiritual entities, while Wolff's mathematical metaphysics—both revealing rationalism's dogmatic traits in ontology and methodology. The dilemma profoundly influenced modern philosophy: Husserl's demand for phenomenology to "suspend natural attitudes," and Habermas' critique of the "philosophy paradigm of consciousness" represent reflections on rationalism's dogmatism. These developments demonstrate that although rationalism provided rigorous logical frameworks, its neglect of empirical verification and detachment from concrete knowledge ultimately trapped it in an inescapable dogmatic predicament.

Empiricism ultimately descended into skepticism. In his *Treatise of Human Understanding*, Locke proposed the "tabula rasa" theory, asserting that all knowledge originates from two forms of experience: sensation and reflection. While this proposition shattered rationalism's innate nativism, it failed to resolve the inherent limitations of empirical knowledge. Berkeley equated existence with perception, thoroughly implementing empiricist principles but leading to the dissolution of material substance and casting doubt on the reality of the objective world. Hume's skepticism pushed this dilemma to its extreme by arguing that causality is merely a product of mental habituation, fundamentally undermining the universal necessity underlying empirical knowledge.

The root of empiricism's inherent skepticism lies in its epistemological presuppositions. While insisting that knowledge must remain within empirical bounds, it fails to explain how experience can yield universal truths beyond individual observations. This paradox is most evident in Hume's "bundle of perceptions" theory: when the self is reduced to a stream of sensations, not only does the reality of the external world become problematic, but even the subjectivity of cognition itself becomes untenable. As Kant later observed, empiricism resembles "a blind man trying to recognize rainbow colors through touch"—unable to justify the possibility of mathematics and natural sciences, which inevitably leads to its skeptical conclusion.

This dilemma drove Kant to embrace transcendental philosophy, seeking a new path between rationalism and empiricism. In the preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he declared: "Hume's insights first shattered my dogmatic delusions." Kant recognized the need to transcend the traditional subject-object dichotomy by examining the

transcendental conditions of human cognition, thereby reconstructing the relationship between reason and the world——a conceptual reversal that ultimately became known as the "Copernican Revolution" in epistemology.

3 Kant's worldview adjustment and its argument for the development of cognition

3.1 The core of worldview adjustment

Kant's transcendental turn marked a fundamental transformation in modern epistemological philosophy, fundamentally restructuring the relationship between reason and the world through the "Copernican Revolution." He endowed the cognitive subject with the power to "legislate for nature," where intellectual categories are not abstracted from nature but serve as conditions enabling natural cognition. This transcendental idealism avoids both empiricist skepticism and rationalist dogmatism. Through his **Critique of Pure Reason**, Kant overturned traditional philosophy's ontological adherence to substance, epistemological commitment to naive correspondence theory, and methodological inheritance of scientific objectivity. By shifting philosophical focus from objects to subjects, he achieved a worldview transition from "object-centered" to "subject-centered."

The core of the "Copernican Revolution" lies in three interconnected theories: First, Kant proposed the epistemological reversal that "objects must conform to cognition," replacing the traditional presupposition that "cognition must conform to objects." This reversal is not merely a shift in perspective but fundamentally reconstructs the conditions for cognitive possibility. Second, through the theory of "synthetic unification of transcendental apperception," Kant demonstrated that the objectivity of knowledge does not originate from objects themselves, but rather results from the subject's categories of understanding organizing sensory data. Finally, the famous distinction between "phenomena and noumena" defines the boundaries of cognition while reserving space for practical reason, enabling Kant to establish a dialectical connection between theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy.

The "Three Critiques" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Critique of Judgment*) form the systematic expression of Kant's worldview, completing the critical reevaluation of classical philosophy. The *Critique of Pure Reason* reveals that knowledge serves as the prerequisite and foundation for transforming perception into wisdom; the *Critique of Practical Reason* demonstrates that morality acts as the social safeguard for this intellectual transformation; while the *Critique of Judgment* shows that aesthetics represents the ultimate destination of this cognitive process. This worldview adjustment centered on subjectivity manifests in four theoretical innovations: First, space-time as the pure form of sensory intuition provides a transcendental explanation for the universal necessity of mathematical knowledge; Second, categories as pure concepts of understanding establish a transcendental foundation for natural sciences; Third, ideas as regulative principles of reason both restrain theoretical rationality from overstepping boundaries and guide cognitive development; Fourth, the introduction of reflective judgment achieves a dialectical unity between particularity and universality in aesthetic and teleological domains.

As Heinrich noted in **Between Kant and Hegel**: "Kant's worldview transformation sought not to negate objectivity, but to reconstruct the concept of objectivity on a deeper foundation." This philosophical shift redirected inquiry from absolute truth pursuit to examination of cognitive conditions. Through this paradigm change, Kant not only resolved Hume's epistemological crisis but also laid the groundwork for German idealism and the evolution of modern philosophy as a whole.

3.2 The paradox between truth-seeking and human physiological limits

Through prolonged practical exploration, we have discovered that humans cannot objectively assess knowledge from the perspective of truth itself. This reveals our inherent limitations in fully grasping rational capabilities. Centered on the fundamental question "How can humanity comprehend truth?", two major schools of thought emerged: Rationalism and Empiricism. However, as both approaches pushed their doctrines to extremes, their respective flaws became apparent—Rationalism descended into dogmatism while Empiricism succumbed to skepticism.

The fundamental reason humans cannot fully grasp rationality lies in our lack of reliable methods to acquire universal experiences and effective means to verify the truth of these methods. This creates an epistemological dilemma: even if humans possess some innate rational capacity that points toward truth, we cannot confirm the reliability of this ability itself. Therefore, we must confine our cognitive scope to the verifiable domain, meaning "we are limited to what we can know." From a phenomenological perspective, the basic content of human knowledge consists of perceptual materials acquired through bodily senses and conscious processing and judgment of these materials. For instance, while modern science can derive conclusions like "bull's eyes have a special reaction to red" through instrumental analysis, such understanding involves three levels of uncertainty. First, it is an inference based on indirectly measured data; second, we cannot fully comprehend its mechanism of action; third, this understanding itself is subject to revision. This contrasts sharply with direct perception—— which is immediate but also non-transferable.

Therefore, if we persistently pursue the essence of reality beyond physical limitations, we inevitably fall into the quagmire of skepticism. This collectively reveals the fundamental constraints of human cognition—— We cannot fully rely on internal rational capacities, as they lack a demonstrable correspondence with the external world. Nor can we depend entirely on external experiences, given their inherent randomness and limitations. Kant's transcendental philosophy attempts to strike a balance between these two extremes: while acknowledging that knowledge must originate from experience, it emphasizes the need for systematic organization through transcendental forms. Although this solution is groundbreaking, it also implies a fundamental truth about human cognition: what we comprehend are truths of the phenomenal world, not the absolute truths of the noumenal realm itself. In this sense, the pursuit of truth is perpetually constrained by the limits of human cognitive capacity—the most profound paradox in epistemology.

3.3 The possibility and process of knowledge development

When exploring the potential of human knowledge development, we must acknowledge two fundamental truths: First, rationality cannot be fully mastered; second, empirical methods alone cannot yield absolutely certain knowledge. Kant's philosophy reveals that humans inherently possess cognitive capacities with universality and necessity, enabling them to pursue truth through rational methods within known boundaries. This transcendental nature manifests in multiple dimensions: Firstly, humans can accept mathematical theorems' necessity beyond empirical verification, such as the universal validity of " $1+1=2$ " which cannot be adequately explained through empirical means. Secondly, the foundational basis for mutual understanding like verbal communication similarly defies complete empirical explanation. These transcendent forms of cognition, termed "transcendental" elements by Kant, have their most basic sensory form in time and space—the innate way humans perceive the world.

Kant therefore argues that we are born with an innate synthetic judgment—a cognitive capacity that possesses both universality and necessity, independent of empirical verification. This foundational judgment allows humans to grasp mathematical theorems, demonstrating that knowledge inherently exists through such universal necessity. To refine this epistemological framework, Kant distinguishes between pure reason (applying categories to phenomena) and practical reason (applying categories to noumena). At the ontological level, humans are born with the ability to perceive the world in space-time, utilizing four major categories: quantity, quality, relation, and modality, which can be further divided into twelve specific categories for analyzing phenomena. The cognitive process of pure reason fundamentally involves organizing these a priori categories to comprehend phenomena. Thus, Kant's epistemological system can be summarized as: perceiving phenomena through sensory forms, analyzing them via the twelve categories of understanding, ultimately forming comprehensible knowledge.

4 Conclusion

From Descartes "I think" to Kant's groundbreaking worldview, we observe the dual-dimensional conflict between empiricism and rationalism in modern Western philosophy, along with the logical progression of critical philosophy driving epistemological development. The Kantian breakthrough provided revolutionary solutions for the dual impasse of empiricism and rationalism triggered by the a priori dilemma in Descartes' dualistic definition of reason. What I interpret as the "breakthrough" in modern philosophy is the elevation of reason from a tool for understanding the world to a creator of meaning. As Kant's understanding of the world deepened, his critical philosophical framework gradually became mired in agnosticism. Neither Descartes nor Kant fully resolved the epistemological fractures of dualism, struggling within the confines of transcendental rationality to seek solutions. This ultimately left the subject-object dichotomy unresolved, with their reconciliation path remaining a compromise theoretical presupposition.

Hegel posited that "free thought is the rejection of unexamined premises." While Kant recognized the need to test human cognitive capacities before seeking knowledge—meaning that the very forms of thinking must be scrutinized as objects of study—he failed to recognize that examining these forms constitutes a cognitive process itself. Hegel argued that scrutinizing thinking forms entails their self-examination, where they must define their own boundaries and reveal inherent flaws. This self-driven process of development should not be imposed externally on cognitive categories, but rather be intrinsic to the categories themselves.

The limitation of critical philosophy lies in Kant's failure to examine the content and interrelations of cognitive categories themselves. Instead, he directly states that "they are either subjective or objective," thereby reversing the principle of "knowledge conforming to things" into "things conforming to knowledge." Li Zehou remarked: "The 'thing-in-itself' doctrine constitutes the core of Kant's entire philosophical system, permeating his entire philosophical framework." Taking this concept as an example, 'thing-in-itself' refers to existence beyond cognition—absolute and utterly unknowable—that serves as the foundation of phenomena. While Kant acknowledges the existence of things-in-themselves as objective reality, he rigorously confines them to realms beyond human comprehension. This dualistic

division gradually imbues his philosophical system with agnostic characteristics at the epistemological level. In explaining the cognitive process, Kant proposes a progressive structure from sensory perception through understanding to rational cognition. Since intellectual understanding must be grounded in sensory experience, this dependency inherently restricts human knowledge within the phenomenal world. Consequently, our acquired knowledge remains limited to interpretations of how things manifest, rather than achieving complete comprehension of their intrinsic nature. Such understanding is fundamentally incomplete and lacks ultimate unity.

In summary, Kant proposed the turn to practical reason as a solution to epistemological limitations. While theoretical reason cannot comprehend things-in-themselves, humanity must establish three rational concepts—soul, cosmos, and God—in the practical realm to serve as the transcendental foundation for moral principles, driven by the need to achieve ethical purposes. This transition from epistemology to ethics reflects Kant's philosophical endeavor to establish a dialectical unity between theoretical and practical reason.

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