

## Kant's Critique of Immediacy and Constraint to Human Knowledge Reconsidered

Anthony R. Etuk, Ph.D

Department of Philosophy

University of Uyo

Akwa Ibom State

Email: etuky4real@gmail.com

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7708-9061>

### Abstract

Prominent in Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy is his critique of immediacy, which features his rejection of the myth of the given. For Kant, there is no given as such in sensible experience, but that which is given in experience, can only be known as mediated by the subject's faculty of reason. This position yields a series of epistemic problems. Outstanding among these is that of rendering an adequate account for the finite nature of the human knowledge, without the inconsistency of reverting to the myth of the given which the Kantian critique rejects. Kant identifies the solution in the object's prior existence which is prior to and independent of the subject's knowing activity. Upon critical assessment, however, this Kantian solution appears unsatisfactory and highly nettled by epistemic inadequacies and logical inconsistencies. This paper critically examines Kant's critique on immediacy and interrogates the pitfalls in his account for the finite character of human knowledge, within the context of the critique. The significance of this work lies in its demonstration of the epistemic weaknesses in Kant's position on this issue, and pointing out ways to remedy the challenge. The expository and critical analytic methods of philosophical inquiry are adopted.

**Keywords:** Kantian, Immediacy, Myth of Given, Intuition, Understanding, Constraint.

### Introduction

Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy masks a lot of controversies in epistemology. One of such, which traces to his critique of immediacy is how to adequately account for epistemic limitation in human activity of knowing, without going back to some form of the given. In his well-known *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant undertook a "critical philosophy" (Omogbe, 85), which consists of a "critical enquiry into the faculty of reason with reference to all the knowledge which it may strive to attain independently of all experience" (Stumpf, 303). An essential question he addresses is: What can we know? What is the limit of our human

knowledge? The simple answer to this, emerging from the heavy labyrinths of his thought in the work is that our knowledge is limited or constrained to the natural empirical or phenomenal world. For him, it is impossible to extend our knowledge to the noumenal world of super sensible realities of speculative metaphysics, because the mind plays an active role in constituting the features of experience and limiting the mind's access only to the empirical realm of space and time. By its very nature, the mind organizes our experiences.

By implication, we do not have direct experience of reality without the intervention of the medium of our faculty of reason. In short, there is no immediacy about the nature of our sensible experience; for there is no such thing as the "given" as such about our sensible experiences. As expressed in Michael Baur, Kant states that, "an object cannot count *as* an object of human knower, apart from the knower's own spontaneous, intelligent activity in questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging (91). But at the same time, Kant acknowledges the genuine limitation or constraint on our faculty of reason in our activity of knowing; for our intellectual contents that we contribute to the act of knowing do not stand alone, but rely on the manifold of our intuitions, that is, immediate perceptions.

This Kantian critique of immediacy tends to throw up a serious problem in epistemology, namely, that of giving an epistemological adequate account of the constrained or finite character of our human knowing activity, without reverting to some appeal to what is simply "given". Aware of this challenge, Kant himself, attempts to explain the source of the epistemic constraint in our knowing activity by referring to the pre-existence of the object of our experience. A critical examination of this solution shows that it hardly meets the demand of rational adequacy for the epistemological desideratum at issue. The aim of this paper is to expose Kant's critique of immediacy and the epistemic weaknesses in his attempted solution for the constrained character of human act of knowing, given the context of his critique of immediacy.

### **Brief Profile of Kant**

The great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, is one of the most influential philosophers in the western philosophy history. He was born in Königsberg in 1724. He studied classics, physics and philosophy at the University of Königsberg. He was heavily influenced by the Wolfian version of Leibniz's philosophy. He was also influenced by the scientific development of his time. Godfrey Ozumba says that "the scientific achievements of Newton dawn on him as astounding" (59). Kant spent eight years as a family tutor upon completing his university education, before becoming a lecturer at the same University of Königsberg in 1755. He was appointed the Chair of Philosophy in 1770 (Stumpf, 209). His comprehensive and systematic works in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics have made Kant an influential figure in modern western philosophy.

Through his massive works, Kant has had a profound impact on almost every philosophical movement that emerged after him. In his attempt to critically examine the capacity and limit of the human mind to know as well as counter the scepticism he found in David Hume, Kant wrote his famous *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), where he developed his theory of experience to answer the question of whether and how *synthetica priori* knowledge is possible, which would in turn make it possible to determine the limits of metaphysical inquiry.

With this work, he is famous for his attempt at reconciling the positions of rationalism and empiricism and for his Copernican revolution that shows that the things conform to the mind at perception and not the other way around. Kant was also an exponent of the idea that perpetual peace could be secured through universal democracy and international cooperation (Rohlf, 20). Concerning his social life, Bertrand Russell describes him as having “an outer life which was wholly academic and uneventful socially” (qtd. in McCormick, 20). Kant was a man given to diligence, punctuality, and conscientious work. Ozumba cites Madame de Stael as saying that Kant was “more punctual than the cathedral clock” (60). The encyclopedia Britannica records that Kant never married. Kant produced such a striking succession of other famous books as his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), *Principles of Metaphysics of Ethics* (1785), *Metaphysical First Principles of Natural Science* (1786), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), *Critique of Judgment* (1790), *Religion within the Bounds of Reason* (1793), and *the Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), etc. He died in Königsberg in 1804.

### **The Concept of Immediacy in Philosophy**

The idea of 'immediacy' references the condition of being immediate or an unmediated reality. Relating to time and temporal perspectives, both visual, and cognitive, immediacy as a philosophical concept essentially refers to our direct experience of an event or object bereft of any intervening medium (*Wikipedia*). The concept of 'immediacy' is, thus, often used to describe a state in which the influence of any mediating factors is absent or rendered invisible. According to Ariane Weisel, immediacy connotes a fusion of elements where the fusion itself is not simply invisible, but non-existent (1); for concerning the relation of a person or thing to another there exists no intermediary or intervening member, medium, or agent. Hence, when two things have a relationship of immediacy, they are in actual contact or direct personal relation (Weisel, 1).

Thus, by its very conception, immediacy is the negation of media and elimination of binary oppositions between two distinct entities, such as subject/object, time/space, cause/effect, artist/audience, real/abstract, and so on. Briefly stated: “While media are the mechanisms through which connections are made and meanings are understood, immediacy is the manner in which the media are abbreviated and hidden” (2). Be that as it may, there seems to be an inherent paradox here, involving the relationship of media to immediacy: While immediacy is the abridgement of media in favour of the connection between the elements that are being mediated, immediacy relies on the existence of media to further reduce the theoretical distance between those same elements. An example would be looking at a painting, losing awareness of the medium, and seeing the depiction as real. In this case, there appears to be an experience of immediacy between the subject and the object (painting). But this 'immediacy' nonetheless relies on the subject's sense of sight as a medium to diminish the dichotomy between the subject and the object! It is for this reason that the debate arising over the concept of 'immediacy' often revolves around the purity of the absence of medium of mediation.

Arising within the course of critical debates in art history, the concept of 'immediacy' has been deployed within the discourses of linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies, among many others. In philosophical discourse, however, the historical analysis of the concept of 'immediacy' can be remotely traced to Plato's conception of purity of experience in

his Dialogue, *Phaedrus*. Plato, as quoted in Moore (60), points to the meagerness of any written account, and maintains that writing alienates the speaker's word from the speaker's voice, and that, it is not possible to pass true knowledge via writing. On the other hand, however, Plato argues that true knowledge can only be passed through speech, "which is more immediate than writing, because the words emerge more directly from the speaker's mind" (261a3-262c4). For Jenna Yuzwa, Plato believes that writing will atrophy people's memory (259d), and that "written words lack the capacity to respond to or choose their reader in the way that a philosopher can with his interlocutor" (121). Hence, regarding immediacy in experience, Plato believes that face to face communication is the only way to transmit direct and immediate (unmediated) knowledge to another.

However, Aristotle, though a disciple of Plato, disagrees with Plato's contention here on the possibility of such immediacy within speech art or in fact, within any other art medium. For Aristotle, it is impossible to maintain absolute absence of mediation within any art form. His argument as expressed in his *Poetics*, is that all art forms are practices of imitation (*mimesis*), which requires a means or an intervening medium, for the imitation of nature (cited in Gupta, 2-3). By imitation, Aristotle means 'representation': "the poem imitates by taking an instance of human action and represents it in a new 'medium' or material, that of words" (Suman, 1). The arguments of these classical thinkers notwithstanding, the attempt to determine the character and import of immediacy, as a philosophical concept in modern philosophical discourse, finds its most distinct point of departure in the philosophy of Kant, which is our major concern in the paper.

### **Kant's Critique of Immediacy**

As expressed in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant views the human act of knowing as defined not so much by mere mental apprehension of reality, or what is commonly called the "given", but by a spontaneous activity of the mind which deploys its formal conceptual structures, to organize and restructure the object of experience to conform with its operations. In this case, "the subjective conditions of knowing necessarily include the subject's capacity to make its own contribution to the act of knowing by actively bringing about its own acts of understanding, without which there will be no intelligible content present to it in the first place" (Baur, 93). This implies that, for Kant, the "given" as such counts not as an item of knowledge, simply on account of its 'givenness' alone, but only as it is mediated by the subject's faculty of reason (thought and understanding) that is, subject's own intellectual activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting and judging reality. Kant's critique of immediacy or his rejection of 'the myth of the given', thus, basically entails a denial of the "naïve" or "pre-critical" (dogmatic) position that an object can count as an object for the human knower apart from the knower's own activity or spontaneity (Baur, 92-93).

Within this understanding, there is the emphasis by Kant on the role played by the subject in knowledge production; since, without the intellectual contributions made by the human faculty of reason (thought and understanding) as a pre-condition for all experiences intuitions as merely given would not even be intuitions of anything at all, but a "rhapsody of perceptions" or "a blind play of representations"; for as he says, "Intuitions without concepts are blind" (A51/B75). In other words, "if intuitions were not mediated to us by the activity of the

understanding, they could not even be recognized or identified as intuitions at all" (Baur, 93). Thus, epistemic commitment, resides on the subject's own faculty of reason, as opposed to mere external causal factor. In this way, Kant clearly rejects the idea of immediacy or the myth of the given in our perceptual experiences.

Sequel to this position, knowing is not just a matter of passively getting in contact with or being confronted by some contents or presence that is given to us in sensible experience, which automatically compels our intellectual assent regarding it. Instead, knowing involves much more of our exercising our epistemic commitment and responsibility regarding the issue through our faculty of reason, by applying our *a priori* conceptual structures to the manifold of experience. Knowledge is not just a matter of looking or, "confronting or being confronted with by some content that is simply given to the knower (whether of a sensible or intelligible nature)" (Lonergan, 320). Rather, it is about the human mind actively restructuring all its objects of experience, making them to appear to us in certain ways; and it is only in these ways that we can perceive them. Hence, there is no "given" as such in experience, where the mind can have an immediate or an unmediated perception of reality; for the mind is concerned only with the *form* of reality, and the categories of thought and understanding give phenomenal and logical structure to all objects of our empirical experience.

### **Kant on the Constraint to Knowing and the Problem Raised**

Kant's critique of immediacy or myth of the given, may seem problem-free at first value. But a more critical assessment of it yields a serious epistemic problem. This problem relates to the way the epistemic limitation in human knowing can be adequately explained, while at the same time, holding onto his rejection of the given in his critique. Perhaps, we can quizzically pose the problem thus: If human knowing necessarily involves subjecting what is given in experience to our categories of thought and understanding which give phenomenal and logical structure to our objects of experience how then can we explain the finite or limited nature of our act of knowing (i.e., limited by what is other than it), without falling back into the myth of the given? To be sure, Kant himself, acknowledges of the limitation of the human activity of knowing or understanding; for unlike God's infinite understanding, which is fully creative, we are not responsible for every aspect of the objects that we know, since we are not in possession of an original "original intuition" (*intuitus originarius*) (Kant, B72). It is fully obvious that the human activity in knowing objects differs from the activity of creating the objects known (A92/B125). It is for this reason that, for Kant, the intellectual conceptual scheme or contents that we contribute in the act of knowing do not stand on their own in case of knowledge production. His oft-quoted expression for this in the work is that, "thoughts without contents are empty" (A51/B75). By implication, our intellectual activity is limited and constrained in some way. But how is such constraint or limitation to be construed or explained? Kant does not believe that such limitation could not be accounted for simply in terms of what is immediately given on the level of sensible contents or given; since, for him, any intuition or sensible content or givenness, does not even count as such just because of its sensible givenness, but only because it is mediated by the subject's conceptual categories or logical structures of thought and understanding.



Now, the problem confronting Kant here, is how the epistemic limitation or constraint of our activity of knowing could be accounted for, without reference to some form of given, which he rejects in his critique of immediacy. As cited in Baur, Kant's solution to this problem is that "the subject's activity in knowing is limited or constrained by and dependent on objects that somehow pre-exist or exist independently of the subject's spontaneous activity in coming to know them" (97). It is of this that Kant refers when he states that, our intuition is sensible, not intellectual, which means that, it is dependent on the existence of the object (B72); and again, he submits that, "the manifold for intuition must already be given prior to the synthesis of the understanding and independent from it" (B145). Furthermore, Kant avers that the categories of the understanding, "are not conditions under which objects can be given in intuition, and it is quite possible therefore that objects should appear to us without any necessary reference to the functions of the understanding" (cited in Bode, 141). The main point in Kant's solution to the finite character of human knowing (as exposed above), is that it is the object's prior existence which is equally independent of the subject's knowing activity in coming to know them that guarantees the limitation and constraint of the subject's knowing activity. And based on such pre-existence of the objects, which pre-exists the finite subject's activity of knowing them, they cannot be known by the subject as they are in their pre-given state. In other words, they cannot be known; for they are unknowable things-in-themselves (noumena), because their existence is prior to and independent of the subject's knowing activity in coming to know them. Hence, reality for Kant, is unknowable to the human mind. Or, rather, as far as reality is concerned, the human mind is limited and constrained from knowing it.

From Kant's solution, backed up by these statements, it cannot be denied that the idea of some kind of reality, may be given in intuition without the functions of the understanding. If this is the case, then there is a serious problem of logical consistency, as this goes against the grain of his argument in his critique of immediacy, which rejects the possibility of any given as such, without the mediation of our faculty of thought and understanding! Let us elaborate more on this for a better appreciation of the problem.

### A CRITIQUE OF KANT'S SOLUTION

A critical assessment of the above argument by Kant for the source of the constraint to human knowing shows a fundamental epistemic weakness and contradiction in thought, which deserves due attention. Kant's argument is not only sufficiently unrealistic, the contradiction and the fallacy of begging the question are so painfully evident in his thought. It shows that Kant has failed to live up to his own critique of immediacy. This is true because, fidelity to his own critique of immediacy would not admit of Kant's concept of the supposedly pre-existence of objects, insofar as such objects pre-exist the subject's activity in knowing them. And thus, such pre-existing objects are said to be known to exist *apart* from the Kantian very condition (as expressed in his critique of immediacy) of their playing any epistemic role at all in the subject's knowing activity. And more importantly, they cannot play the limiting role to our human knowing.

This Kantian account, thus, inhabits an epistemic and a logical contradiction, for apart from being taken up in the subject's way of knowing, such pre-existing objects can play no limiting role for the subject. A further explanation of this would be that, Kant's immediacy would

require, as Baur remarks that, “pre-existing objects can only play a limiting or constraining role for the subject that comes to know them in so far as they are taken up into that subject's very own very own activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting and judging” (Baur, 98). Thus, if Kant were true to and consistent with the demands of his own critique of immediacy, not only would there have been no room for such pre-existing objects that exist *apart* from and independent of the subject's coming to know them, he would have also acknowledged that such supposedly pre-existing objects, merely in so far as they pre-exist the subject's activity in knowing them, could not constitute the epistemic constraint to our human activity of knowing them. This way of arguing violates the rule of logical consistency in argument, because, to the extent that Kant seeks to explain the source of constraint to human knowing, by reference to the pre-existence of objects of our experience that serves as a constraint to the subjects apart from the mediation of the subject's own categories of thought and understanding, he back tracks and contradicts his own critique of immediacy, and eventually commits himself again the myth of the given! The critical question thus, is: How can an unmediated given (thing-in-itself), in the light of Kant's critique of immediacy, play an epistemic role for the subject whose knowing is allegedly limited by such a given.

Again, seeking to account, as Kant does, for the constraint that characterizes our act of knowing, by appealing to an alleged fact that there is some pre-existing reality that is simply given, prior to and independent of our act of knowing them, is simply begging the question at hand. It begs the question because it takes for granted just what Kant was supposed to prove in his argument. With his critique of immediacy, Kant aimed ultimately at showing constrained character of our knowing activity and the source of that constraint. But his reliance on an illicit premise from the point of view of his own critique of immediacy would lead him to a rather peculiar conclusion, which simply begs the question at issue.

According to the illicit premise, the objects that guarantee that our activity in knowing is constrained and finite must exist prior to, and independent of, our activity in coming to know them; hence they cannot be known by us since they are in their *pre-given* state. Now, in the present epistemological context, if there is no unmediated given as Kant's critique of immediacy clearly shows, how then would the pre-existent, prior to and independent of this mediation, constitute the constraint to our knowing activity, without his indirect acknowledgement of the reality of such a given? To say at the outset that there is some pre-existing reality prior to and independent of our own activity in knowing, is, as Baur affirms, “to say that *I know* there is some pre-existing reality prior to and independent of my own activity in knowing” (Baur, 100). With this sort of argument, Kant is simply acknowledging the reality of such an unmediated “given”; and for that reason, his argument clearly begs the question as it is valueless in convincing us of the truth of the conclusion regarding the source of constraint to our human knowing. Here, Kant simply takes for granted just what he was supposed to prove, which eventually is left unproven. In the context of Kant's critique of immediacy and rejection of the given, it is unsatisfactory and a mere gratuitous assumption to assert the presence of pre-existing objects independent of our activity of knowing them, as responsible for the constraint in our act of knowing. By so doing, Kant has failed to offer an adequate account for the finitude of our human knowing as constrained by that which is genuinely other than it, yet without appealing to the myth of the given.

## CONCLUSION

Kant's critique of immediacy takes up a critical concern for nature and limit of our perception, with the aim of particularly justifying the constraint character of our human knowing activity. The tenor of his argument concerning this is that no given, determinate content can count as a given, determinate content for the subject that knows it, unless such content is mediated by the subject's faculty of reason or understanding. In other words, there is no immediacy or any room for an unmediated experience of reality whatsoever, not taken up and represented in line with the subject's faculty of thought and understanding. But, Kant, regrettably contradicts himself and begs the question at issue as it concerns the source of our finite and constrained human knowing, which his critique of immediacy clearly shows. This much is obvious in his reference to the pre-existing objects that are simply given, prior to and independent of the act of our knowing them, and serve as constraint to our act of knowing apart from the mediation of our own faculty of thought and understanding.

This claim by Kant runs afoul with and contrary to his own critique of immediacy and is simply begging the question at hand. As a consequential relief, what appears an essential epistemological duty for Kant to do in this context of his critique of immediacy, in order to present a more rationally satisfying ground for the epistemic constraint to our human knowing, is to embrace a transcendental *a priori* ground, which accommodates the necessity of the not-self or some otherness, without making reality to become a necessary projection of the subject's own self in its activity of knowing, seen as the totality of all there is in reality.

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