

**Understanding How we Come to Experience Purposive
Behavior**

**Jacob Roundtree
Colby College
6984 Mayflower Hill,
Waterville, ME 04901
USA
1-347-241-4272**

Ludwig von Mises, one of the Great 20th Century economists, famously grounded Austrian Economics on his neo-Kantian epistemological theories. Mises claimed that economics could only be established as an “a priori” science built on ‘a priori’ axioms and the logical categories of the human mind. In Kantian fashion, Mises claimed that the propositions concerning economic phenomena, which were to be discovered by this ‘a priori’stic science, could neither be confirmed nor denied by experience, because they were logically antecedent to experience as such. Mises’ epistemological basis for economics is still contested in the Austrian school and differs in significant parts from the more Aristotelean basis provided by the tradition’s founder, Karl Menger, and upheld by such famed Austrians as Murray Rothbard and Barry Smith. In this paper we attempt to outline the path from Kant’s epistemology to Mises’ epistemological and ontological theories regarding action and its relationship to thought.

Kant’s stated purpose for writing the *Critique of Pure Reason* was to establish the “a priori” basis for mathematics and the natural sciences. Kant’s strategy is typically referred to as his ‘transcendental turn’ or his ‘Copernican Revolution’. Kant sought to identify those cognitions that could be classified as “a priori” according to the criteria that they be both universally valid and strictly necessary (Kant, 137). Kant believed we could uncover those ‘a priori’ cognitions by investigating the human being’s faculties of cognition (Kant, 193).

In Section I of this paper, I will present the forms of intuition and knowledge that Kant discovered. In Section II, I will investigate whether Kant identified all of the forms of our knowledge and I will conclude that Kant’s system is silent on that which makes

possible the experience of any human action. Finally, I will argue that without recognizing the human subject as being an actor, Kant's epistemology is incapable of explaining how any human being can interpret the action of another human being.

Kant believed by removing everything belonging to the senses we could become aware of those original 'a priori' forms of knowledge (Kant, 174). After this epistemological deconstruction of a body of knowledge (experience) there was to:

remain certain original concepts and judgments that must have arisen entirely 'a priori', independently of experience. These concepts and judgments must have arisen in this way because through them we can- or at least we believe that we can- say more about the objects that appear to the sense than mere experience would teach us; and through them do assertions involve true universality and strict necessity, such as merely empirical cognition cannot supply (Kant, 137).

Kant began the First Critique by investigating the nature of time and space but in doing so he first turned to our receptors of empirical data, which are our senses. Immediate sensations or impressions are by definition not mediated through the capacities for thought. It would be absurd to assume that the senses by themselves provide all the knowledge of an object of outer sense. For one, that would assume away the brain. An example should also help to illustrate why the senses do not order appearances such that they are 'objects of thought'. Let us say that there is a teacher in the front of the classroom lecturing to 'you the student'. Your eyes and ears receive the image and sound of the teacher lecturing but the thought of the teacher lecturing is not and cannot be contained in that mere sense data. In this situation one is immediately acquainted with sounds with altering pitches and a physical body in motion. By considering these kinds of immediate facts we can determine that all that comes through the senses are spatially related:

in order for certain sensations to be related to something outside of me, i.e. to something in another place in space from that in which I find myself), thus in order for me to represent them as outside and next to one another, as not merely as different but in different places, the representation of space must already be their ground” (Kant, 175).

An immediate appearance in space, by virtue of the law of identity, cannot be anything other than that which comes through the senses at an isolated moment. But because we are able to speak not just of a still image of a teacher but one who is moving his lips from which different sounds are emanating we have to recognize time as the other form of intuition. Kant assigns space the title of “the pure form of outer sense” and assigns time the title of “the pure form of inner sense” (Kant, 189). This distinction can be traced to how the senses operate. Through our senses we only receive but do not recreate or reconsider what is given through them. The fact that we can think about the teacher talking and the teacher listening to a student ask a question, and all of those immediate points in between, is because our mind has ordered those immediate sensory appearances along a sequential series. It is because time refers only to our minds ordering of these appearances that Kant identifies it as the ‘form of our inner sense’, in that all objects of experience are ordered along a time series.

By stripping away all of the empirical content of our teacher example we have established space and time as pure forms of INTUITION , but we have much left to explain. For example, how do we recognize our impression of the sound waves we perceive are emanating from the mouth of the teacher, as opposed to emanating from the walls or simply being present in the room somehow? Our senses cannot answer that question, nor can it answer how we distinguish the teacher from the wall behind him. Nor

do the answer to those questions accord merely with the pure forms of intuition of space or time. To use **Kant's terminology** All that we receive through our senses comes in as a “manifold of appearances”. That we can state that the teacher is a single body that is distinct from the wall behind him and that those sounds we hear are emanating from his mouth, presumes that, somehow, we are able to combine these disparate sensations into one experience.

For Kant, experience implies that the manifold of appearances has been combined into an orderly whole. Therefore, Kant argued that when we remove everything empirical from an experience we would be left with the rules that order the disparate appearances that we receive through the senses. “Categories are concepts that prescribe laws ‘a priori’ to appearances, thus to nature as the sum total of all appearances” (Kant, 263) and “concepts are.....grounded on the spontaneity of thinking, as sensible intuitions are grounded on the receptivity of impressions” (Kant, 205). By “spontaneity of thinking” Kant is referring to the understanding, which “is, generally speaking, the faculty of cognitions” (Kant, 249). Therefore, Kant identified the ‘a priori’ forms of thought as the pure concepts of the understanding or the categories of the understanding. He believed we could discover these categories by analyzing all of the possible kinds of judgments that the understanding can make (Kant, 212). He concluded that there are twelve possible judgments we can make about any object and a corresponding twelve categories under which we could order the manifold into an apprehensible experience. The feature of experience that makes it apprehensible is the fact that it can be presented to a single “self-consciousness” (Kant, 250).

The need for this manifold to be presented to a single self-consciousness is due to the fact that an experience is the possession of the subject (Kant, 253). Kant's strong case for this idea is that all objects of experience are merely representations because as thoughts they cannot be the actual objects of appearance. To suggest that a subject was directly acquainted with objects of appearance would be absurd, for it would suggest that contained in our mind were tangible objects that were received through the senses. And since all objects of experience are merely representations of mine, it must be the case that they all refer to me under the condition that "I think" them. As Kant put it:

all my representations in any given intuition must stand under the condition under which alone I can ascribe them to the identical self as my representations, and thus can grasp them..... through the general expression I think (Kant, 249-50)

From this fundamental fact about human beings qua experiential beings it follows that the 'manifold of appearances' was combined in such a way as to make it presentable to the single self-consciousness as a unified experience.

Kant postulated that this combination must be possible prior to any experience; otherwise our experience would not be combined in the law-governed manner that it appears to us. And without these laws there would not be the order that experience presupposes and thus we would have no experience just the reception of disparate appearances (Kant, 200).

The Transcendental Deduction provides us with a seemingly undeniable justification, for why we can judge the teacher to be a single body amongst a multitude of other bodies (i.e., the classroom walls, 'you the student, etc.). We can also understand the

occurrence of the sound waves that we receive through our ears as being causally linked to the movement of the teacher's mouth. Although such a linkage of our audio and visual impressions of the teacher is not pure, because it relates to empirical data, what we are made aware of is that the category of causality makes possible the linking of these seemingly disparate sensible intuitions (i.e. the audio and the visual). In other words, by stripping away the empirical data from our example we are made aware that the necessary linking of appearances requires the laws of thought (the categories).

Section II:

When we remove all of the empirical content from our example we are left with a physical body from which sounds are emanating. However, the most important aspect of this experience is not observable. Your concept of a teacher conveying information to 'you the student', by way of his lecture, cannot be mere sensible data. Moreover, 'Kant's Understanding' cannot process the empirical data of our example, according merely to its categories. That is because the categories only relate to sensible data as Kant himself admits numerous times in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*. Consider the following argument, advanced by Kant:

all intuition that is possible for us is sensible, thus for us thinking of an object in general through a pure concept of the understanding can become cognition only insofar as this concept is related to objects of the sense (Kant, 254).

Consequently, the understanding can only offer to the self-consciousness "synthesized" physical descriptions of appearances. Terry Pinkard, in a defense of Fichte, points out that "signing a check, hitting a home run, making an assertion, are all other

examples of normative activities that cannot be captured in a purely physical or naturalistic description of them” (Pinkard, 113). We are left with one of two options. Either ‘you the student’ do not actually experience the teacher lecturing, because the understanding is incapable of yielding such cognition; or ‘you the student’ accept that you are actually experiencing the teacher lecturing. We must choose the latter option if we are to save human experience, which forces us to uncover the “condition for the possibility of experiencing” the teacher lecturing to ‘you the student’.

When we strip away the contingent empirical matter, we are left with a body undergoing alterations in time with sounds emanating from the body. More importantly we are aware that this body’s behavior is conveying information to ‘you the student’. But it is not the case that this conveying of information merely happened as a result of the teacher’s bodily behavior. In fact, we can say that the teacher wanted the conveying of information to ‘you the student’ to happen. But it is not merely because the teacher wished for information to be conveyed that it was. Rather the teacher affected his bodily behavior in order to bring about the end of conveying information to you the student. When we consider these facts in a more fundamental manner, **its clear** that the teacher employed **a means** (lecturing) **to attain an end** (conveying information). We can define the experience of an agent employing means to attain ends as an action. If by definition an action is “the employment of means for the attainment of end,” then all experiences of action would contain the form that a means was employed to attain an end (Mises, 13). For example, the baseball player has the goal of hitting a home run (his end) and so he proceeds to swing his bat when the ball comes across the plate (his means). One could consider all events that are typically considered actions and one would never find an

instance of an action where means were not employed to attain a given end. One could not even conceive of an action without either of these two essential features of the experience of any action.

We must again follow Kant's lead in determining how these concepts relate to the subject's faculty for cognizing the experience of an action:

"If one sets a faculty of cognition into play, then on various occasions different concepts will become prominent that will make this faculty known and that can be collected in a more or less exhaustive treatise depending on whether they have been observed for a longer time or with greater acuteness" (Kant, 204).

Thankfully, for our efforts, Ludwig von Mises constructed such a treatise and in it he famously articulated the only way by which a human being could possibly understand another human being's purposive behavior. Hans-Hoppe, the great Misesian scholar formulated Mises' discovery as follows:

that one is able to interpret observations in terms of such categories requires that one already knows what it means to act. No one who is not an actor could ever understand them, as they are not "given," ready to be observed, but observational experience is cast in these terms as it is construed by an actor (Hoppe, 5).

Mises combined this idea with what he called the axiom of action "i.e. the proposition that all humans act, that they display intentional behavior" (Hoppe, 4). And as Hoppe points out:

this axiom is not derived from observation, there are only bodily movements to be observed but no such thing as actions, but stems instead from reflective understanding.

And this understanding is indeed of a self-evident proposition. For its truth cannot be denied, since the denial would itself have to be categorized as an action (Hoppe, 4)

This seemingly trivial proposition that all humans act, also establishes that all humans know what it means to act. Thus, the 'action axiom' offers a plausible explanation for why any human being can understand the purposive behavior of another human being.

Section III:

Hoppe and Mises were not convinced that the action axiom merely explained how humans could make normative claims. They believed this axiom informed us that there was another Kantian category that was in fact the grounding of all the categories of the mind and the forms of intuition. In other words for the Misesians our existence as actors, is the fundamental basis for why we have any experience at all. Mises and Hoppe's recognition that the action axiom was the ultimate ground for a Kantian epistemology is doubly important because it solves two great weaknesses of Kant's system.

The first weakness is the inability to explain why we can judge human action. The second weakness that the Misesian account of action resolves is the inability for Kant's epistemology to explain the necessity of experience.

We have already exposed the former weakness, so we will now turn to how the Misesians resolved Kant's second weakness. I will begin by explaining why Kant's epistemology fails to explain the necessity of experience and why such an inability leaves

his epistemology incomplete. I will argue that the Misesians complete Kant's system by grounding all experience on the category of action.

Kant grounds his epistemology on the Transcendental Unity of Apperception which is essentially the fact that since all of a subject's objects of experience can be accompanied by the 'I think' then all of a human being's experience must be possessed by a single self. However, Kant's epistemology does not inform us as to why we need to think. Without having established the necessity for why the human subject thinks, Kant has violated the criteria he laid down for identifying "a priori" cognitions. According to Kant an "a priori" cognition must be both universally valid and must be strictly necessary.

The fact that one thinks' is undeniably universally valid for any subject, otherwise he would not be a subject. However, by merely considering the fact that we think we are not immediately made aware of why we think.

I will now argue that it is through understanding the nature of all sentient beings that we can discover why humans need to think. Purposive behavior implies that some end is sought after. Mises argues that it is a sense of uneasiness that gives rise to the felt need for a better state of affairs, which is always the impetus for action. However, since this sense of unease is experienced by the agent and inspires in him a desire for a higher state of affairs he must also expect that "purposeful behavior has the power to remove or at least to alleviate the felt uneasiness" (Mises, 14). Such an expectation is only possible if the agent knows what will alleviate the uneasiness and if he knows how to employ this means of alleviation.

From this activist point of view “knowledge is a tool of action. Its function is to advise man how to proceed in his endeavors to remove uneasiness” (Mises,).

In the Kantian sense we can say that thinking is the necessary condition for the possibility of action, as such. Thinking can only inform purposive behavior for reflexive behavior by definition is not informed by thoughts. Since human beings are nothing more than matter engaged in purposive and reflexive behavior then thinking is only necessitated by our nature as actors. Even seeking out knowledge for its own sake is an action. As Mises argues,

To live in a universe whose final and real structure one is not familiar with creates in itself a feeling of anxiety. To remove this anguish and to give men certainty about the last things has been from the earliest days the solicitude of religion and metaphysics. Later the philosophy of the Enlightenment and its affiliated schools promised that the natural sciences would solve all the problems involved. Seen from this angle, the pure search for knowledge, not motivated by the desire to improve the external conditions of life, is also action, i.e., an effort to attain a more desirable state of affairs.

We began this final portion of the paper seeking out why thinking is strictly necessary. We have discovered that just as the category of causality is strictly necessary for us to have any experience at all so is the Transcendental Unity of Apperception strictly necessary for us to be able undertake any action.

If human beings were incapable of thinking or knowing things, then we would be unable to act, and if we were unable to act we would not be human. Therefore, our ability to think must derive its necessity from our nature as actors.

Conclusion:

Kant believed that by stripping away all of the empirical matter from a given cognition there would remain certain necessary and universally valid forms of

knowledge. We proceeded along his well-worn path and all along could not help but confirm his proofs. However, the inability of Kantian Categories or Pure Intuitions to explain how we can have an experience of human efforts greatly weakens Kant's nearly impenetrable system. Mises and Hoppe argue that by grounding human experience in the 'category of action', much of Kant's essential insights can be salvaged. Hoppe's paper, *Economic Science and the Austrian Method*, offers an elucidation of a praxeological epistemology, as he understands it, that redefines the Kantian forms of intuition and categories of thought as arising from the human being's nature as an actor.

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