

General Remarks on Kant's Ontology

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1. Introduction: What Does "Ontology" Mean for Kant?

Good afternoon. Today I would like to share with you some reflections on Kant's ontology. The title of my talk is deliberately broad: "General Remarks on Kant's Ontology." But what does "ontology" mean for Kant?

First, it is important to understand that Kant's ontology is not a catalogue of what exists. It is not a list that includes things like chairs, atoms, mental states, or suprasensible entities like God. That would be what we might call a material ontology: an inventory of entities. For Kant, ontology is something else. He defines it as "the system of all concepts and principles of the understanding that refer to objects in general" (KrV, A845/B873). In other words, ontology is the investigation of the fundamental concepts without which nothing could be an object for us.

This is a shift in perspective. Instead of asking "what is there?" — a question that would demand a catalogue of entities — Kant asks: "what are the conditions that make it possible for something to be an object of experience?" This shift makes his ontology formal in a precise sense. It does not investigate the particular *matter* or content of what exists (this chair, that atom), but the *form* that anything must have in order to be an object for us. It is concerned with the basic structures — the rules, the framework — that underlie any possible experience of objects. In Kant's own terms, ontology is the system of concepts that refer to "objects in general," not to particular kinds of objects. Hence, it is formal because it abstracts from all specific content and focuses solely on the necessary features that make objectivity possible. However — and this is crucial — this "form" is not merely the form of *thinking* (as in formal logic), but the form of *objects as they can be known*. It is form with ontological import.

1.1 A Preliminary Distinction: Sensibility and Understanding

Before proceeding, we need a basic distinction that structures all of Kant's philosophy. Kant argues that knowledge has two fundamental sources: **sensibility** and **understanding**.

- **Sensibility** is the capacity to receive impressions. Through it, objects are *given* to us. It provides the raw material of experience: colors, sounds, textures — what Kant calls the "manifold of intuition."
- **Understanding** is the capacity to think about those impressions. Through it, objects are *thought*. It provides concepts and rules that organize the material given by sensibility.

Neither source is sufficient on its own. Without sensibility, we would have nothing to think about; without understanding, we would have only a chaotic stream of impressions, not a coherent experience of objects. As Kant famously puts it: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (KrV, A51/B75).

This distinction is essential because it shows why the categories are needed at all. Sensibility gives us a manifold — a multiplicity of impressions — but it cannot, by itself, unite them into the representation of a single object. That work of unification belongs to the understanding. And the rules that guide this unification are precisely the **categories**. Thus, the categories are the concepts through which the understanding organizes the material given by sensibility, bringing unity to the manifold. For this reason, Kant's ontology — though not a catalogue of particular entities — provides the transcendental framework for all classification. The categories are the most general structures within which any empirical classification must operate. We will return to this point at the end of the talk.

2. The Problem: From Multiplicity to Unity

Now that we have this distinction in place, let us consider the problem it reveals. Through sensibility, we receive a **multiplicity** of impressions: colors, sounds, textures, smells. This multiplicity is simply given — it is the raw material of experience. In itself, it is dispersed, a manifold, not yet connected.

Yet, despite this multiplicity, we experience **unified objects**. When I see a chair, I do not perceive isolated patches of color, separate sounds, and unrelated textures. I perceive *one*

thing that has color, that can produce sounds when touched, that has a certain texture. All these diverse impressions belong together — they are unified in the representation of a single object. Something must produce this unity. For Kant the work of unification cannot come from sensibility itself, which only receives impressions passively. It must come from the understanding — from its capacity to think and combine.

Kant calls this operation **synthesis**: an active process of the understanding that unifies the manifold into a coherent whole. Synthesis takes what is given as multiple and brings it to unity. The question is: how does this synthesis operate? Does it work arbitrarily, or does it follow rules? For Kant, synthesis is not arbitrary. It follows rules, and these rules are what he calls **categories**. But where do these rules come from? This leads us to the core of Kant's proposal: the logical grounding of ontology.

3. The Logical Origin of the Categories

Kant finds the rules of synthesis in **logic**. His insight is both simple and profound. The basic operation of the understanding is *judging*. When we think, we combine concepts into judgments. For example: "The rose is red" is a judgment; "If it rains, the ground gets wet" is also a judgment. But what does judging consist in? For Kant, to judge is precisely to **unify** representations according to certain functions. These functions are the different ways in which we can combine concepts — they are, so to speak, the basic modes of unity of our thinking.

Now, the classification of the forms of judgment goes back to Aristotle. Kant takes this classification as his starting point and asks: if judging is the fundamental act of the understanding, then these logical functions of unity should reveal something more. They are not just ways of combining concepts *among themselves*; they are also the ways in which we must combine the manifold of intuition in order to represent an **object**. In other words, the very same functions that unify concepts in a judgment, when directed to the sensible manifold given in intuition, become the rules for unifying that manifold into the representation of an object. And it is precisely these rules, considered as concepts of an object in general, that Kant calls **categories**. Thus, the categories are not invented arbitrarily. They are the logical functions of judgment themselves, but considered in their capacity to *refer to objects* — that is, as rules for synthesizing

the manifold of intuition. They are, so to speak, logic put to work in the constitution of an objective experience.

4. Formal Logic and Transcendental Logic

At this point, we need to introduce an important distinction: the distinction between **formal logic** and **transcendental logic**.

Formal logic studies the rules of thought in general, abstracting from any particular content. It tells us how to combine concepts correctly in judgments and inferences. For example, the statement "All A are B" has a certain logical form — a universal judgment — regardless of what A and B stand for. Formal logic is like grammar: it gives us the rules for forming sentences, but it does not tell us whether those sentences refer to anything real. It is empty with respect to content.

Transcendental logic, on the other hand, is concerned with the a priori concepts that refer to objects. These a priori concepts are precisely the **categories** we have been discussing. Transcendental logic asks: how is it possible that pure concepts, which do not come from experience, can apply to objects of experience? Kant's answer is that they apply because they are the very conditions that make experience possible. They do not just connect thoughts; they structure what can appear as an object.

Thus, the categories are logical concepts, but they have an **ontological power**. Formal logic tells us how to think consistently; transcendental logic tells us how objects must be structured in order to be thinkable by us. The deepest insight of Kant's proposal is captured in his own words: "The same function that gives unity to the different representations *in a judgment* also gives unity to the synthesis of different representations *in an intuition*" (KrV, A79/B104-105).

In other words, the very functions that unify concepts in a judgment are the same functions that unify the manifold of intuition into the representation of an object. This is the logical grounding of ontology.

5. The Categories as Fundamental Structures

Let us now look at the categories themselves. Kant derives them systematically from the logical functions of judgment. Here is a simplified version of the table:

Logical Form of Judgment	Corresponding Category
Universal ("All S are P")	Unity
Particular ("Some S are P")	Plurality
Singular ("This S is P")	Totality
Categorical ("S is P")	Substance
Hypothetical ("If S, then P")	Causality
Disjunctive ("S is either P or Q")	Community (interaction)

... and so on (there are twelve in total).

Now, what do these categories do? They are the rules of synthesis. They are the fundamental structures that our understanding brings to the manifold of sensations in order to produce a coherent experience of objects.

The category of substance allows us to think of something that persists while its properties change. Without it, we could not identify an object as the same over time.

The category of causality allows us to think of necessary connections between events. Without it, we would have only a succession of perceptions, not a world of causes and effects.

The category of unity allows us to think of a manifold as belonging to one object. Without it, we would have only a heap of sensations, not a unified thing.

Thus, categories are not just tools for thinking; they are the very conditions under which something can be an object for us. They are, if you like, the operating system of our experience.

6. The "Object in General" (das Objekt überhaupt)

Now we come to a crucial concept in Kant's ontology: the **object in general** (das Objekt überhaupt). This is not any particular object, such as a chair or an atom. It is, rather, the purely formal concept of an object: the concept of something *in which* a manifold can be united according to the categories. In Kant's own words, it is "that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united" (KrV, B137).

The object in general is, so to speak, the **very idea of objectivity**: the concept of a "something = (x)" that stands as the correlate of all our representations. It has no specific content — no particular matter — but it refers necessarily to the possibility of a manifold that could be unified. It is the concept of an object *as such*, prior to any determination of what kind of object it might be.

This concept is central to Kant's ontology because it shows that objectivity is not a property that things have independently of us. Rather, to be an object means to stand under the rules of synthesis provided by the categories. The object in general is the formal correlate of those rules: it is what we think when we think in something that can be experienced. So, the categories converge in this notion: they are the rules, and the object in general is their formal result.

7. The Hylomorphic Constitution of the Object

We have been considering the object in general — the purely formal concept of an object. But how does this formal structure relate to the concrete objects we actually encounter? To answer this, we need to examine how, for Kant, an empirical object is constituted. And this brings us to a classical distinction that Kant transforms: the distinction between **matter** (hyle) and **form** (morphe).

In Aristotle, the form is the essence of a thing, and it is in the thing itself. Kant transforms this idea.

For Kant, the matter of experience is what is given: the manifold of sensations. This matter is passive; it is received. The form, on the other hand, is actively produced by the understanding through the categories. The empirical object is the combination of matter and form.

Without matter, categories would have nothing to organize; they would be empty. Without the categories, the manifold would be a chaotic flux, not an object at all. The object is always a composite of what is given (matter) and what is added by the understanding (form). This is the hylomorphic constitution of the object.

It is important to note that this does not mean that we invent reality. It means that the reality we can know is always already structured by our cognitive apparatus. The categories do not tell us what things are in themselves; they tell us what things must be like to be objects for us.

8. A Note on Classification

We are now in a position to address a question that may have arisen earlier. If Kant's ontology is not a catalogue of what exists, does it have anything to do with classification — with organizing objects into kinds?

The answer is yes, but at a different level. The categories do not tell us what specific kinds of objects exist (chairs, atoms, ecosystems). That is a task for empirical investigation. However, the categories provide what Kant calls a **transcendental framework**. This means they are not discovered through experience; rather, they are the necessary conditions *without which* experience would not be possible at all. And this framework is precisely what makes any classification possible.

Why? Because the categories tell us what it means for something to be an object in the first place, and therefore what basic features any object must have to be classifiable. When we classify objects empirically — when we group them into species, genera, or types — we already presuppose that they are substances with properties, that they stand in causal relations, that they can be counted as unities, and so on. These are not empirical findings; they are the necessary conditions for any empirical classification to be possible at all. They are, in Kant's sense, transcendental conditions.

Thus, far from eliminating classification, Kant's ontology articulates the conditions under which any classification is possible. It tells us not what the specific classes are, but what it means for anything to belong to a class at all: to be an object constituted according to the categories, and therefore a unity that can be identified and compared.

9. Conclusion

Let me conclude by summarizing what we have seen. Kant offers an ontology that is:

- **Formal:** it is concerned not with a catalogue of entities, but with the conditions under which anything can be an object for us. It investigates the structures that make objectivity possible.
- **Logically grounded:** the categories — the fundamental rules of synthesis — are derived from the logical functions of judgment. Ontology finds its basis in logic.

- **Centered on the object in general:** the purely formal concept of an object, the "something = x" that stands as the correlate of synthesis, and that expresses the minimal structure anything must have to be an object.
- **Hylomorphic:** empirical objects are always a composite of matter — what is given in sensation — and form — provided by the understanding through the categories.

These four features characterize Kant's rethinking of ontology. They show that for Kant, the question of being is inseparable from the question of how we can know and experience objects. Ontology is not a description of a world in itself, but an analysis of the structures that make a world accessible to us.

Thank you very much for your attention.