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KANT'S CATEGORICAL SCHEMATIZATION OF PERCEPTION

Abstract: For Immanuel Kant knowledge is seen to be strictly confined to the senses that find information that is later processed by the cognitive categories of human understanding. Ipso facto, we never see the objective character of things in themselves but only the representations of things in sensation. Morality, as the outstanding feature of human beings, is based on the notion of the good will and the categorical imperative, which urges us to act ethically on account of our collective being in culture.

Key words: Perception, Subjectivity, Objectivity, Sensation, Understanding, Determinism, Freedom, Causation, Time, Space

Immanuel Kant is one of the philosophers of the Romantic period whose views are still very relevant to modern philosophical discourse. In the twentieth century thinkers like Bertrand Russell accepted Kant's understanding of the perception process in which experience is grouped into various epistemological categories that the mind brings with itself. Ludwig Wittgenstein's picture theory of language is also to a large extent said to be derived from the rational Kantian model just as the views of modern American philosophers like John Searle and Daniel Dennet, both of whom accept with their own reservations the Kantian understanding of the human mind. Therefore, in order to understand the cognitive stream of modern philosophical discourse we need to refer to one of its basic sources that is to be found in Kant's transcendental aesthetics.

From today's perspective, Kant is primarily remembered for trying to reconcile "the starry heavens above and the moral law within" (Stumpf 1989:300). In other words, he tried to account for the mechanical world that emerged from Newton's scientific system which saw the phenomenal aspect of

being to be composed out of bodies in motion. In itself, a motion was said to be brought about by the principle of causation which introduced the idea of necessity into existence since all events were considered to be the effects of the causes that preceded them. However, in opposition to the deterministic understanding of existence, we have a potential for a different apprehension of causation, one that is founded upon the notion of freedom that is inherent in the human moral capacity that we find expressed in the view of a twentieth-century French thinker J.P. Sartre. In other words, according to modern existentialists like Sartre, the notion of freedom can be said to bracket the deterministic understanding of causation.

Following the views of modern biologists like Richard Dawkins, we can come to observe that determinism is closely related to the paradigmatic thinking that dominates the sciences which consider knowledge to be obtainable through sensation, i.e. by inducing from sensation laws that govern the physical world. Nevertheless, David Hume's scepticism questioned the idea of whether the sciences have the potential to discover any knowledge whatsoever, since being based on causation, which Hume considered to be habitual, they are nothing more than ways of associating events and ideas together, i.e. there are no universal and necessary connections between events. Hume's scepticism leads to the conviction that knowledge as such is at best probabilistic. W. Windelband in the classic *A History of Philosophy* (1983:476) observed:

Hume's theory of knowledge disintegrates the two fundamental conceptions about which the metaphysical movement of the seventeenth century had resolved. Substance and causality are relations between ideas, and cannot be proved or substantiated either by experience or by logical thought: they rest upon the fictitious substitution of impressions derived from reflection, for those of sensation. But with this, the ground is completely taken from under the feet of the ordinary metaphysics, and in its place appears only epistemology. The metaphysics of things gives place to a metaphysics of knowledge.

Inspired by Hume's skepticism with regard to the certainty of knowledge that was to be inductively obtainable via the senses Kant, however, did not ignore the dogmatic principles characteristic to rationalism which maintained that we can acquire knowledge about *noumena* that lie beyond sensation (e.g. the idea of God or the foundational structure of reality). Kant fluctuated in his thinking between the above-mentioned extremes and his critical philosophy was to question how knowledge is at all possible: What can reason know in itself without the appendage of sensation? How is *a priori* knowledge possible? Both questions are important for Kant. From his perspective, it is unscientific to presuppose a reality on the basis of some abstract dogmatic assumptions (e.g. God or freedom) without understanding the nature and mechanics of such a reality. In Kant's opinion, this was the major flaw of rationalism. Nevertheless, it is also unscientific to presuppose that we are incapable of knowing anything about reality without consciously understanding the processes behind the

acquisition of knowledge – a belief that emanates from Hume’s empirical scepticism. Kant’s position is that knowledge begins with reality, yet it does not arise out of it. We will, therefore, see Kant attempting to reconcile the conflicting views. Hume maintained that we cannot acquire knowledge about causation through the senses. Kant agreed with this view only to a certain extent since for him knowledge about causation derived from the intuitive categories of reason not from empirical sensations. Nevertheless, both intuitive, as well as sensational knowledge, requires and is based on experience that the subject brings with itself.

With the above in mind, we are led to the conviction that all forms of knowledge that we are exposed to is based on the judgment which in itself is a way in which a subject is configured with the object. As modern thinkers like Bertrand Russell remind us, before Kant it was believed that that the subject can be configured with the object by means of analytic and synthetic judgments. In the case of the former, the predicate was obtained by literally analyzing the subject, in other words, the predicate was deducible from the subject. Analytical judgments were considered to be true by definition and, therefore, they were regarded as universal and necessary in the sense that they provided us with a structured interpretation of the natural world. The weakness of analytical judgments was that on deeper reflection they were found to be tautologies in the sense that they did not introduce new knowledge; rather, in analytic judgments the mental work proceeded by deducing the world and its existents from the presupposed notion of the *cogito* (c.f. Cartesianism). Additionally, it cannot be unnoticed that analytical judgments are in a sense self-centred as they are said to bracket and negate any reality that lies beyond their circumference. This ‘pre-suppositional’ attitude to the world of being was expressed very clearly in the Cartesian method, which, as we have mentioned before, was tautological in nature. In other words, instead of facing the world and being it recoiled into its prejudiced intellectual presuppositions not realizing that the being of the *cogito* was only hypothetical. This prejudiced attitude to being and reality is very evidently expressed in Descartes’ *Second Meditation* (1969:171) which speaks of perception and understanding as deceptions:

But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think I am something. So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it.

In Cartesianism, all knowledge rested on the foundation of the *cogito*. What Descartes failed to observe, however, was that if the *cogito* was a part of nature and the world of being, then there was no reason to suppose that it alone stayed

static and immutable, whilst everything else underwent processes of change. Rather, it seems that the *cogito* should be considered to be historical as Heidegger (1993:231), for example, believed although he never spoke of the cogito but the *Dasein*. In one of his essays he stated that *man sustains Dasein in that he takes the Da, the clearing of Being, into 'care.'*

Returning to Kant we have to observe that the most important feature of synthetic judgments as historically conceived is that although they were considered to be contingent and particular, they did add new information to our knowledge. In other words, they were not blind tautological repetitions of the characteristics of the subject like we have witnessed in Cartesianism.

The *a priori* nature of analytical judgments implied that they were extracted from sensation and the experience of contingent events and situations. They were the foundational horizon on the face of which synthetic judgments occurred and made sense, in other words, they furnished the context for perceptions and qualifications of experience.

For Kant, however, all judgments that we make (in mathematics, natural science and metaphysics) contain both synthetic as well as analytic elements. Therefore, they should be regarded as *synthetic a priori*. The Oxford University philosopher G.J. Warnock (1964:300) observes:

- The synthetic *a priori* truths of mathematics state the conditions necessary for the occurrence of perception.
- The synthetic *a priori* truths of natural science state the conditions necessary for the occurrence of discursive thought.
- The propositions of metaphysics express certain beliefs or ideals which are practically indispensable to the employment of reason.

As it was mentioned before, judgments of this sort were, however, based on a certain misconception, which presupposed that the nature of the subject was constant and immutable. In this respect, Kant's thinking proved to be partially unscientific, for it extracted the human subject from the world in which it existed, a world that was governed by processes of change and movement brought about by causation. Kant's Copernican Revolution consisted in the fact that he believed that the mind was not just a passive receiver of objects that fell into its cognitive environment, rather, it was believed to be responsible for providing the intuitive capacities for perceiving the objects in the first place. Therefore, Kant (1965:263) held that all experience is synthetic *a priori*, it is phenomenal, as it is composed out of the extrinsic qualities of the object as well as the intrinsic (subjective) aspects of the mind, i.e. the cognitive categories of understanding that were said to process the information that they received from the senses:

the categories require, in addition to the pure concept of understanding, determinations of their application to sensibility in general. Apart from such application they are not concepts through which an object is known and distinguished from others, but only so many modes of thinking an object for possible intuitions, and of giving it meaning, under the requisite further conditions, in conformity with some function of the understanding, that is, of defining it. But they cannot themselves be defined [...] The pure categories are nothing but representations of things in general, so far as the manifold of their intuition must be thought through one or other of these logical functions.

Knowledge, therefore, proceeded through a process of unfolding. It was first “caught” by the apparatus of sensation, whose foundation was time and space. This leads us to a form of ultra subjectivism, for time and space are not objective qualities of experience; rather, they emanate from the nature of the subject. Being a subject means having the intuition of space and time. This is a phenomenon that we can consider to be the first stage of the disclosure of knowledge. The second is linked with the notion of the categories that are the forms of intuition characteristic to understanding (just as space and time are the intuitive forms of sensation). From the Kantian model knowledge as such is reducible to the intuitive abilities of the subject that outlines experiences against the *a priori* forms of intuition characteristic to sensation and understanding. In other words, the mind is incapable of discovering anything beyond the perspective of subjectivity and, therefore, knowledge is always phenomenal and never purely objective (of the *Ding an Sich*), since it is always filtered through the medium of subjectivity.

On account of its synthetic abilities, the mind is able to organize phenomenal experiences into coherent forms of knowledge encapsulated in time, space and the categories. Subsequently, the same forms of synthesis are applied to the unity of the subject which corresponds to the notion of the fixed and cemented self. Thus it is impossible to experience the objectivity of the self just as it is impossible to experience the objectivity of objects in terms of the *noumena*, Kant (1965:558) says:

The soul in itself could not be known through... assumed predicates, not even if we regarded them as absolutely valid in respect of it. For they constitute a mere idea which cannot be represented in concreto. Nothing but advantage can result from the psychological idea thus conceived, if only we take heed that it is not viewed as more than a mere idea, and that it is therefore taken as valid only relatively to the systematic employment of reason in determining the appearances of our soul.

In other words, our knowledge of the outside world as well as of ourselves is strictly descriptive and the subject is the centre to which the radii of perception lead, yet in itself, its existence can only be presupposed. Therefore, since experience involves the simultaneous unity of phenomena and the self, there must be an agent that organizes perceptions in time and space. Nevertheless, the agent itself is not a fixed entity but rather a flow of experience that the modern

American philosopher and one of the founders of pragmatism – William James – called the stream of consciousness.

The ideas of the self and the world possess a regulative nature. In themselves, they are nothing more than the effect of the unification of experience in the subject. In other words, the ideas are not the intuitive forms of the subject but rather pure constructs of reason whose one and only purpose is the unification of experience. The synthesis of psychological life is what happens in the notion of the self. The idea of the world, on the other hand, is the effect of the totalization of (natural) events just like the self is the effect of the totalization of psychological states. Lastly, the idea of God also functions as the totalizing principle in application to both the psychological sphere as well as to the material world of nature. Thus God seems to be understood as the ultimate cause as well as a *Demiurge* who is responsible for the organisation of the world. Nevertheless, God still remains only an idea of reason, for it is one thing to be a demiurgic force that organizes a world that is already there and it is something completely different to bring that world into being *ex nihilo*. This only means that God as the fountain of being remains a transcendental idea of reason. Kant (2002:25) commented on the issue in the following way:

No one is good (the archetype of good) except the one God (whom you do not see). But where do we get the concept of God as the highest good? Solely from the idea that reason projects a priori of moral perfection and connects inseparably with the concept of a free will.

On account of the fact that the ideas transcend sensation they can never be elements of human knowledge, since we do not have decisive ways of measuring them. Whenever we try to do so we fall into antinomies, i.e. *mutually contradictory propositions each of which can apparently be proved*. (Russell 1972:708) In other words, the antinomies point to the contradictory nature of understanding. However, the existence of science is possible, as the material of sensation is organized in similar ways by the mental predispositions characteristic to all human beings. Although the antinomies point to the dead ends of understanding, they also prove that there must be maintained a division between the phenomenal and the noumenal world, i.e. the phenomenal world is only appearance that is why such antinomies exist in the first place. On account of the limits of experience Kant rejects the ontological, cosmological and teleological understanding of God. The ontological argument is tautological and automatically implants the predicate of existence in the mere thought of the *ens perfectissimum*. In this way it confuses the noumenal with the phenomenal. The cosmological argument (because I exist there must exist a necessary being), on the other hand, makes the mistake of extending the law of causation to the transcendental realm where it is invalid. Lastly, the teleological argument, which starts with the premise that the world possesses a design and, therefore, there

must exist an entity that created it points only to the existence of a being that organized the world into a mechanical design, however, this entity did not create the world in the Biblical sense of creation (in other words, the Platonic *Demiurge*).

From the theoretical aspect of pure reason the world presents itself as a computational mechanism that is bound by causation which in itself provides the necessary links between events and beings. It would seem, therefore, that a universe so construed would not allow for the existence of freedom that could obviously breach its deterministic structure. If so, then human existence is predetermined by external causes and human beings, therefore, are slave to the same natural processes as everything else. This is a view that is being advocated by modern biologists like Richard Dawkins who see human existence as predetermined by evolutionary causes. Kant, however, wanted to save the human subject from slavery. For this reason he separated the phenomenal character of being that functioned under deterministic laws from the noumenal one whose essence was freedom. The division that Kant introduced seemed to be a necessary one; in itself it was forced out by metaphysical approaches to being that separated the human subject from the environing world of phenomenal nature. Although we do not have access to the noumena, we are yet in a position to think about them as being noumena, therefore, we can direct our actions towards phenomena that were caused by noumena and this in turn is the origin of morality. Therefore, although we cannot know that we are free, we can at least think of the idea of freedom. The twentieth-century philosopher Philip J. Neujahr (1995:116) makes the following observation:

...“persons in themselves are free” is analyzed similarly to “things in themselves are non-spatial. If you think that a person (like all persons) is in fact subject to causal necessity, and if in thinking about this person you “consider” him apart from his causal determination, you will find that as so “considered” this person is not causally determined and hence is transcendentally free.

Taking the above into account we have to realize that the emergence of morality is based on establishing universal types of conduct not obtainable via empirical observations of various types of behavior, since our job is not only to classify human conduct into different behavioural types but establish universal norms for human conduct as such. Moral judgments were understood by Kant on the same basis as scientific ones with the exception that scientific judgments were said to ebb out of causation, whereas morality was believed to spring from the a-causal principle of freedom. However, our knowledge of causation and freedom is similar, as both science and morality derive from reason and not from the forms of intuition that translate themselves through sensation and understanding. Pure reason introduces the idea of causation and applies it to the phenomenal world, whereas practical reason implants the notion of “the ought” in our existence

through the notion of obligation. Warnock (1964:307) thinks that the *moral 'ought' seems to be felt as being absolute and unconditional*. In other words, both science and morality start with an individual datum (concept) and later move beyond it by finding universal laws that govern the existence of both phenomena and noumena.

It follows from the above that morality is the reverse side of rationality, or to put it differently, it is the active counterpart of reason that provides the motivation for action. Morality is, therefore, rationality under the sway of obligation:

...all moral concepts have their seat and origin fully a priori in reason, and this as much in the most common human reason as in that reason which is in highest measure speculative; that these concepts cannot be abstracted from any empirical, and therefore mere contingent, cognition; that their dignity lies precisely in this purity of their origin, so that they serve us as supreme practical principles. (Kant 2002:28)

Moral models are *a priori* to the same extent as time, space and the categories because of the universalism and necessity that is characteristic to them. This means that morality obliges us to act universally. In other words, we are to act in such a way as we would want others to act. The link between “me” and the “other” is provided by rationality. Therefore, when we think about our actions we should automatically assume what others should do not only at a particular moment but always, since others also participate in the idea of rationality. Therefore, the purpose of morality is to find universal modes of conduct that could be applied on a universal scale to human behavior as such.

According to Kant all moral actions that are good derive from the good will which alone remains the unqualifiable aspect of goodness. All other forms of the good remain nothing more than qualifications. The good will, therefore, plays the role of an ideal in morality. To be truly moral we should act for the sake of being moral, therefore, out of duty and not on account of some self interest. Morality, therefore, dwells in the autonomous will that motivates us to act morally. The autonomous will in contrast to the heteronomous one which acts only in response to existential desires is not governed by egoistic inclinations.

It goes without saying that morality is closely connected with the feeling of obligation. In other words, we find ourselves under the imperative to act in a certain way. However, not all imperatives are universal or moral. S.E Stumpf (1989:316) thinks that there are technical imperatives that make us aware of the necessary know-how (if I want to build a house I must know where and how to build it, using which materials, yet it is not absolutely necessary for me to do so). Prudential imperatives, on the other hand, tell us how to act if we want to achieve certain existential goals. Both imperatives are hypothetical, since they matter to us only after we put ourselves in certain situations in which they seem necessary. It is only the categorical imperative that puts all human beings under

the obligation of acting in a universally moral way. The categorical nature of the imperative is underscored by the fact that it applies to everyone and it dictates universal forms of conduct. It tells us, as Kant (2002:37) puts it, to *act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.*” Realizing that moral virtuous are considered to be the *summum bonum* in which there is a union between virtue and happiness is not always connected with achieving a state of happiness. Acting morally for Kant is not necessarily linked with happiness but rather with committing oneself to what is right. Kant assumed that we are immortal, since there is implanted in us the thirst for the ideal that we cannot achieve in phenomenal existence. Therefore, he assumed that there is a continuation of our being beyond phenomenality where these ideals can be fulfilled. Thus freedom and immortality are the foundational building blocks of morality as a system. The reconciliation of virtue and happiness happens in the idea of God, who is the cause of the natural world, yet as such a cause he remains separate from it. Happiness should be understood through the perspective of volitional power, since we consider ourselves happy when we find things functioning in accordance with our individual will. However, human beings are not the creators of the universe and the world does not have to function according to their will. Therefore, we need to assume a universal will to which all existence and existents conform.

As we can see, Kant’s thinking sought to interpret nature through the prism of uniformity. In other words, all experiences and human actions were believed to be codified in universal laws according to certain rules. With art and aesthetics the case is, however, quite different, since there are no universal rules that can be applied to the understanding of beauty. The phenomenon of beauty is a purely subjective experience of pleasure, since beauty is understood as a phenomenon that provides us with pleasure. Kant (1952) maintained that the *beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, pleases universally.* Nevertheless, although beauty is a subjective experience we do presuppose that what is beautiful for us is also such for others on the basis of the standard of taste. The subjectivism of the experience of beauty transpires from the idea that the aesthetic object is that which is at least supposed to offer pleasure which by definition does not reside in the object but in the subject that is perceiving the work of art.

Concluding what we have learned is that for Kant knowledge is seen to be strictly confined to the senses that find information that is later processed by the cognitive categories of understanding. The senses are the starting point of human understanding. We never see the objective character of things in themselves but only their representations in sensation. Morality, on the other hand, is based on the notion of the good will and the categorical imperative, which urges us to act in an ethically universal way. All this stands in contrast to art that basically defamiliarizes experiences and its essence is reducible to the idea that it expresses purposiveness without a purpose.

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