

Andrew Curreyello's 'Continental Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction' (2005, Routledge: Oxford)

Not, perhaps, the same sense.

I.6 Kant's questions as taken up in the House of Continental

Come, let us four to dinner. I dare say

This quarrel will drink blood another day.

(*The First Part of Henry the Sixth*,
II, iv, 132-3)

In a chapter of the first *Critique* entitled "The Canon of Pure Reason," Kant claims that "All interest of my reason . . . is united" in three fundamental questions, namely:

- 1 What can I know?
- 2 What should I do?
- 3 What may I hope?

(CPR A804-5/B832-3)

In his lectures on logic, Kant adds to this list a fourth question – “What is man?” – suggesting (as we have seen Heidegger note) that, in some sense, it subsumes the other three (“At bottom all this could be reckoned to be anthropology, because the first three questions are related to the last”) (L 29). The first question is speculative; the second practical; the third both speculative and practical in that it asks what I am entitled to believe in light of my practical interests (CPR A805/B833). Just as Kant claimed in the first *Critique* to have surveyed all of the antinomies that could possibly arise in attempting to respond to the first question, so in the second *Critique* he purports to resolve the only antinomy that can arise with respect to the second question. Likewise, all conflicts concerning the third question are resolved in Kant’s third *Critique* and in his writings on rational theology, while those pertaining to the fourth (though less explicitly articulated) are addressed in his writings on philosophical anthropology.

Because Kant believed that he had resolved all of the fundamental philosophical controversies that could arise with respect to all of the fundamental philosophical questions, he would have expected that the analytic/continental division could be quickly dispatched. But if the House of Continental and the House of Analytic were simply putting forth different answers to shared Kantian questions, they would be able to recognize themselves as engaged in a common – albeit antagonistic – pursuit. Instead what has prevailed is a widespread sense of “mutual unintelligibility,” with each side failing to understand how the other could regard itself as responding to serious philosophical questions at all. This predicament suggests that rather than giving different answers to Kantian questions, the two houses have divided by modifying these questions. In fact, each of Kant’s questions presupposes an underlying dualism that analytic and continental philosophers have tried to undercut in diametrically opposed ways. As a result, they have been led to prioritize completely different questions of their own. Such, at any rate, will be the conceit guiding the rest of this book.

1 So long as the receptivity of sensibility and the spontaneity of thought are kept apart, the question “What can I know?” signifies: “What can I, insofar as I am a spontaneous thinker, know about a world that can only be given to me as appearance in space and time?” This question has two parts: first, “Can I be certain that the pure concepts of my faculty of understanding necessarily determine objects of experience?”; and second, “Do these concepts have any applicability to things in themselves?” By abandoning the transcendental ideality thesis, Kant’s successors made the second question superfluous. By undercutting the intuition/concept dichotomy, they modified the first. In tracing the two stems of human cognition back to

a primordial “spontaneous receptivity,” Nietzsche and Heidegger reduced knowledge to the aesthetic encounter with phenomena conceived not as “mere” appearances of underlying things in themselves but as disclosive manifestations of being itself. Hence Kant’s question, “What can I know?,” became subordinated to the more fundamental question: “How is truth disclosed aesthetically?” Conversely, for those who characterized cognition as a kind of “receptive spontaneity,” knowledge became identified with the logical demonstration of propositional truths. Thus in the analytic tradition, the question, “What can I know?,” became less pressing than the question, “What can be known on the basis of logical analysis alone?” Because these two questions – “How is truth disclosed aesthetically?” and “What can be known on the basis of logical analysis alone?” – derived their sense of urgency from the diametrically opposed “ordered confusions” on which they rested, neither of the two post-Kantian factions could understand why the other party’s questions seemed so important to it. For the phenomenologists, logic was just the pale distillation of the discourse in which phenomenal givenness was disclosed; while, for their analytic counterparts, givenness was at best another name for logically analyzed truth.

2 Just as Kant’s account of human cognition presupposed the intuition/concept dualism, so his account of moral obligation rests upon a sharp dichotomy between incentives of the will and pure practical reason. According to Kant, as finite rational agents we are all aware of a pure moral law (the “categorical imperative”) that obliges us to act “autonomously” rather than “heteronomously.” To act heteronomously is to allow one’s will to be determined by incentives of some sort, while to act autonomously is to subordinate these incentives to the dictates of pure practical reason alone. Insofar as moral autonomy involves the subsumption of objects of the will under practical rules, it is the correlate of the spontaneity of the understanding, which subsumes objects of intuition under speculative rules. Thus the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy can be thought of as the practical analogue of the speculative distinction between spontaneity and receptivity. Kant characterizes the categorical imperative as an objective practical principle to which there corresponds the *pure* (i.e., non-sensuous or “non-pathological”) incentive of “respect.” Without the feeling of respect, the categorical imperative would be inefficacious; while, without the guidance of the categorical imperative, the incentive of respect would be “blind.” Thus the dichotomy between moral incentives and moral principles is crucial to Kant’s account of the phenomenon of obligation. But just as analytic and continental philosophers have divided over whether to conceive of human cognition as spontaneous receptivity or as receptive spontaneity, so they have divided over whether to conceive of moral obligation as autonomous heteronomy or as heteronomous autonomy. By “autonomous heteronomy” I mean a conception of obligation that subordinates moral principles to moral incentives. This construal of obligation has prevailed among phenomenologists (for whom respect is the practical analogue of

givenness) and continental philosophers influenced by psychoanalysis. Instead of prioritizing the question, "What should I do?" (or "What ought I do?"), these philosophers have posed the genealogical question, "To what does the feeling of respect attest?" By contrast, analytic ethicists have conceived of obligation as "heteronomous autonomy," that is, as reducible to the responsibility to acknowledge moral principles. Hence instead of inquiring into the nature of moral incentives per se, they have been guided by the question, "What is the force of moral prescriptives?"

3 Kant's third question – "What may I hope?" – presupposes the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence. By restricting speculative reason to its immanent employment within the bounds of possible experience, Kant accorded a merely regulative status to the ideas of soul, freedom, and God. But he also argues that, from a practical point of view, reason reveals the transcendent – though inexplicable – fact of human freedom. In order to meet our obligation to pursue "the highest good," it is rationally necessary to believe not only that we are free, but that there is a God and that we have immortal souls. Thus the practical interests of reason entitle us to hope that the highest good is attainable. In the third *Critique*, Kant attempts to reconcile reason's two different vantage-points by analyzing the structure of "aesthetic" and "teleological" judgments, each of which both sustains and bridges the gap separating the immanent realm of phenomena from the transcendent realm of noumenal agents.

By abandoning Kant's transcendental ideality thesis, all of his successors were forced to give up the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence in favor of a conception of either transcendent immanence or immanent transcendence – but depending on whether they conceived of cognition as spontaneous receptivity or receptive spontaneity, they did so from either an aesthetic or a teleological point of view.⁸ Kant claims that an object judged to be beautiful serves as an immanent symbol of the transcendent, while an idea judged to be sublime serves as a reminder of the gap separating our transcendent vocation as moral agents from our immanent existence in nature. Accordingly, those for whom cognition had become spontaneous receptivity – i.e., the aesthetic disclosure of truth – were torn between a conception of immanent transcendence as beautiful sublimity and a conception of transcendent immanence as sublime beauty. In Chapter 3, I associate these alternatives with, respectively, "critical theory" and "hermeneutics."

As Kant formulates it, the question, "What may I hope?", is eschatological in the sense that it is oriented toward the attainability of the highest good in a future life. But in the second essay of *The Conflict of the Faculties* (*Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 1798), he articulates an historical variant of the hope question, namely, "Is the human race constantly progressing?" (COF 297). This question concerns not the personal destiny of individuals in a future life but the collective destiny of the human species in the future course of its history. By problematizing the dichotomy between beauty and

sublimity, Kant's continental successors have not only made it difficult to separate the eschatological and historical dimensions of hope to which works of art bear witness; they have also made it necessary to face the problem of whether art permits us to hope at all. To capture these two aspects of their shared concern, I have ascribed a common question to both critical theorists and hermeneuticians, namely, "Must we despair, or may we still hope?"

Analytic philosophers, for whom not the disclosure of phenomena but logically demonstrable truth had become the proper object of receptive spontaneity, could largely ignore the aesthetic dimension of the problem of immanence and transcendence in favor of its teleological dimension. The point of Kant's critique of teleological judgment is to ask whether "objectively purposive" natural phenomena can be exhaustively understood from the standpoint of natural science alone. Analytic philosophers have followed Kant in raising this question, though in the wake of Darwin they have been less interested in the ontological status of "organized beings" in general than in that of human beings as purposive agents.⁹ Having done away with the phenomena/noumena dichotomy, they too have the option of thinking in terms of transcendent immanence or immanent transcendence. In the analytic context, I take this to be the difference not between beauty and sublimity but between scientifically ascertainable facts and metaphysical problems. Thus Kant's question, "What may I hope?", gives way to the seemingly more pedestrian question, "Are metaphysical questions still meaningful?"

4 Last but not least, Kant's enigmatic fourth question presupposes the dichotomy between the empirical and transcendental dimensions of human experience. My contention here is that continental philosophers have rejected this dichotomy in favor of a conception of human existence as empirically transcendental, and that analytic philosophers have instead opted for a conception of human existence as transcendently empirical. By the former I mean the view that there is an important sense in which the natural world depends upon us; by the latter, the view that there is no feature of human existence that cannot be reduced to a manifestation of a nature that would continue to exist whether we were in it or not. But at issue is more than just two competing answers to Kant's question, "What is man?" By undoing the transcendental/empirical dichotomy, both continental and analytic philosophers have abandoned Kant's conception of philosophy as a strictly transcendental enterprise in favor of some other conception of philosophical methodology. In the House of Continental, this other conception is philosophical humanism; in the House of Analytic, philosophical naturalism. Both traditions have found themselves enmeshed in debates about the exact nature of these methodological commitments. In the continental tradition, it has especially been the existentialists and their critics who have raised the question, "What is the meaning of philosophical humanism?", while on the analytic side it has been the philosophers of science who have asked, "What is the meaning of philosophical naturalism?"

Such, in highly schematic form, are the different questions that I take to

divide the two houses. After focusing on the continental variants in Chapters 1–4, I will briefly return to their analytic counterparts in Chapter 5. This will give me an opportunity to take up a fifth question also touched on by Kant, namely, “What is philosophizing good for and what is its ultimate end?” (L 27). As Jacques Derrida has noted, Kant’s influence on the self-conception of professional philosophers runs so deep that it is difficult to question our Kantian inheritance:

For many of “us” (“us”: the majority of my supposed readers and myself), the authority of Kantian discourse has inscribed its virtues of legitimation to such a depth in our philosophical training, culture, and constitution that we have difficulty performing the imaginary variation that would allow us to “figure” a different one.

(WAOP 49)

By going back to Kant’s conception of the cosmopolitan ideal of the philosopher, I hope to be able to disturb both analytic and continental appropriations of the Kantian legacy.

Each of the narratives that I present aims at perspicuousness rather than truth per se. By “perspicuousness” I mean something like what John McCumber calls “Nobility”: “the excellence of narrative linkage” (TTTD 146). A system of notation is said to be “perspicuous” when it visually captures the relations that it is intended to represent. Through the art of the segue, I hope to make perspicuous how four different continental trajectories are related to an originating Kantian provocation. As already indicated, I associate the four problematics I have identified – though not exclusively – with (1) phenomenology, (2) psychoanalysis, (3) critical theory and hermeneutics, and (4) existentialism. Unlike the monolithic term “continental philosophy,” these rubrics are indigenous to the historical trajectories that I am attempting to reconstruct. By situating them with respect to Kant’s four questions, I hope to be able to identify the various “points of heresy”¹⁰ that continue to divide those who insist upon sporting either a white philosophical rose or a red. That task I leave for Chapter 5, where I will also attempt to “demarkate” the analytic/continental division in McCumber’s sense of opening it up to an unforeseeable philosophical future.

Perhaps I should make explicit the fact that in no sense do I claim completeness for this project (“Can this cockpit hold/The vasty fields of France?” [*The Life of Henry the Fifth*, Prologue, 11–12]). Since my topic is in large part an Anglo-American disciplinary formation, I have focused on European thinkers whose work has figured prominently in English-speaking academic forums. Not only are there many “continental” philosophers who do not appear in these pages at all, but those who do make an appearance are portrayed rather perfunctorily. In associating a particular philosopher with one or another of the four questions I have identified, I do not mean to imply that he or she has nothing interesting to say about the others. Finally, I

regret that for reasons of space, I have been unable to address any of the secondary literature, and that the narratives I present, though roughly chronological, are only thinly historical. Like Shakespeare’s apologetic chorus, I can only entreat the reader to “sit and see,/Minding true things by what their mock’ries be” (IV, Chorus, 52–3).

Notes

- 1 Cf. BW 103, where Heidegger’s statement is rendered “The nothing itself nihilates.”
- 2 Cf. J. Alberto Coffa’s *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap: To the Vienna Station* and Robert Hanna’s *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy*, two comparable books which offer contrasting assessments of early analytic reactions against Kant.
- 3 Kant characterizes the relationship between a husband (the *de facto* ruler in a marriage) and his wife (the nominal monarch) in precisely these terms (AFPPV 172–3).
- 4 Kant, *Philosophical Correspondence*, p. 252.
- 5 Armstrong, *The Mind/Body Problem*, p. 10.
- 6 It should be noted that Kant explicitly rejects the “common root” hypothesis: “Understanding and sensibility . . . join together spontaneously . . . as intimately as if one had its source in the other, or both originated from a common root. But this cannot be – at least we cannot conceive how heterogeneous things could sprout from one and the same root” (AFPPV 53).
- 7 Cf. Daniel Price’s “Against the Mutual Intelligibility of Analytic and Continental Philosophy,” in which Heidegger’s conception of an event is contrasted with that of Davidson.
- 8 In the phenomenological tradition, the difference between transcendent immanence and immanent transcendence is exemplified, respectively, in Husserl’s conception of the ego as a “transcendence *within* immanence” and Sartre’s conception of the ego as constituted outside consciousness.
- 9 Strictly speaking, there is nothing in the Darwinian theory of evolution that contradicts Kant’s *reflective* ascription of objective purposiveness to natural organisms, because, he argues, such a view is compatible with the fact that it is always possible to provide mechanistic explanations for any seemingly purposive natural phenomena.
- 10 I borrow this expression from Foucault, for whom points of heresy are symptomatic of deeper “epistemic” conditions (OT 182). Much of what I will have to say in Chapter 5 about the analytic/continental division is prefigured in Foucault’s account of the struggle in modernity between “critique” and “commentary” (OT 81; cf. 207).

notion has application. But about any notion, such as cause or substance, which has not been reached in that way, the following question arises. What reason is there to think that it applies to anything? How do we know that it is not a mere fiction? We know that many empirical notions which we construct, e.g. that of a mermaid or a dragon, are fictitious. How can we be sure that all *a priori* notions, such as cause and substance, are not, so to speak, innate fictions or 'idols of the tribe' as Bacon might have said? This is one of the questions which greatly troubled Kant.

(2) There is also another question. There are certain universal judgments which involve these notions and are not merely analytic; e.g. 'Every event has a cause', 'All changes are merely changes in the states of permanent substance', 'No substance can come into or go out of existence', and so on. Men claim to *know* these propositions. What right have we to feel so certain of such very sweeping statements?

(3) Now Kant's answer to both these questions involves the second sense of *a priori*, viz. that which make an *a priori* notion be the notion of a characteristic imposed by the mind in a process of synthesis. For it is roughly as follows. We can be sure that *a priori* notions are not mere fictions if and only if they be notions of characteristics which our minds impose on all objects that they perceive. This view at once guarantees that these notions have application and limits the range of their application. It ensures that they shall apply to all perceptible objects, and at the same time it shows that we have no reason to believe that they will apply beyond the range of possible sense-perception. I am not going to criticise this theory or to go into further details about it at present. It suffices to say here that it is a characteristic doctrine of Kant's, and that it explains the connexion between the various senses in which he uses the term '*a priori*'.

3 The Copernican revolution

We can now understand what Kant means when he claims to have made a revolution in philosophy like that which Copernicus made in astronomy. The analogy is as follows. The apparent movements of the planets in the sky are extraordinarily complex; each planet appears not to move in any simple curve, and certain planets seem to move sometimes in one direction, sometimes to stand still, and sometimes to move in the opposite direction. Up to Copernicus's time it was commonly assumed that the earth did not itself move; and, so long as this was assumed, no simplification or unification could be made in the movements of the planets. But Copernicus suggested that the earth is also moving, and that the apparent movements of the planets are compounded out of their own proper movements and the movements of the observer who is carried with the earth. It was then found that all the appearances could be

C.D. Broad. Kant: An Introduction, (1979, CUP, Cambridge)

4 Transcendental arguments

Kant makes great use of transcendental arguments, and considers that he introduced this kind of argument into philosophy. But so far as I am aware he nowhere explicitly discusses the notion of transcendental arguments. So far as I can see, the following are the characteristics of a transcendental argument. (1) One premiss always is, not merely that a certain proposition is true, but also that it is *known* to be true. E.g. in his transcendental arguments about geometry Kant's premiss is not simply that two straight lines *cannot* enclose a space, but that we *know* that they cannot. Of course the latter proposition entails the former, but the former does not entail the latter. This suffices to distinguish a transcendental argument about geometry from an ordinary geometrical argument. Even if geometers do in fact know that two straight lines cannot enclose a space, they never use the fact that they know this as a premiss in their arguments. Their premiss is the fact about two straight lines and not the fact that they know this fact. (2) The next step is to ask: How can we know such propositions? What conditions must be fulfilled if such knowledge is to be possible? (3) The third stage is to argue forward from the conditions that have been dis-

covered **second stage**. And here it seems to me that two different cases arise, one of which is illustrated by Kant's arguments about geometry and the other of which is illustrated by his proofs of the law of causation and of the permanence of substance.

(a) Sometimes the premiss takes the following form: 'I know that so-and-so is true in *some* sense and within a *certain* range of application; but I don't know precisely in *what* sense or within *what* range of application it is true.' In that case the object of the transcendental argument is simply to determine the sense and the limits in which the original propositions can be known to be true. This is the case that arises over geometry. Kant took it for granted that we know that the propositions of Euclidean geometry are true, in some sense, always and everywhere. He then argued that we could know this if and only if the spatial characteristics of perceived objects are supplied by the mind which perceives them. And then he argued from this that we can know such propositions *only* if we interpret 'always and everywhere' to mean 'in the case of all objects of possible human sense-perception'.

(b) The second form of transcendental argument is used where the proposition to be proved is one which not everyone would admit to be known to be true in *any* sense or within *any* range of application. E.g. in arguing with Hume about causation, it is useless to take as one's premiss that the law of causation is known to be true in some sense and within some range of application. For, even if this be so in fact, Hume would not have admitted it. Here Kant takes some other proposition which is admittedly known to be true. E.g. a man who would not admit that we know that every event has a cause might yet admit that we know that every event can be dated in a single temporal series. This is in fact one of the premisses which Kant takes in his proof of the law of causation. The transcendental argument then runs as follows. We first try to prove that unless certain conditions were fulfilled we could not know that every event can be dated in a single temporal order. And then we try to prove that if these conditions be fulfilled the law of causation must be true with a certain definite interpretation of it and within a certain assigned range of application.

We can now sum up the general features of all transcendental arguments. They all start with the premiss that a certain proposition is known to be true in some sense or other and within some range of application. They then try to determine what conditions must be fulfilled if such knowledge is to be possible. They then use these conditions as the basis of an argument, either to determine the precise meaning and limitations of the original proposition, or to prove that a certain other proposition must be true and to determine its precise meaning and range of application. It will be noticed that the first step of a transcendental argument is regressive; it argues from a fact to its conditions. Now such an argument can hardly be

completely conclusive. We cannot be sure that the conditions which we have thought of are the only ones that could possibly explain the facts. So the conclusion of a transcendental argument cannot be more than very highly probable. A fallacy to which all such arguments are liable is the following. When we think that a certain bit of knowledge would be possible only under certain conditions this may be because we are making some tacit assumption about the way in which the mind works. This assumption might not be plausible if we explicitly recognised it. And, even if it be plausible, it may not be true. If we gave up this assumption, we might find that the facts could be explained in several alternative ways. Now Kant does apparently make two general assumptions, one explicit and the other implicit, about the mind; and both are open to question. The explicit assumption is that the ultimate data of sense must be simple isolated atoms. The mind cannot *know* any complex whole unless it has *synthesised* or *built up* this complex whole out of originally simple and isolated elements. This is a very large assumption, and it should not be accepted without discussion. The second and tacit assumption is that the ultimate data of sense are mind-dependent, and indeed are states of the mind which senses them. For Kant there is no distinction between sensations and *sensa*. This again is open to question. There is one other criticism to be made. What Kant claims to prove by his transcendental arguments is that certain propositions, such as the law of causation and the persistence of substance, are *true* with the interpretation and within the range of application which he gives them. But it is doubtful whether his arguments could prove more than that all human beings must *believe* them to be true, or must *act as if* they believed them to be true. And, if this is all that he has really proved, he has not answered Hume, though he has no doubt gone a good deal beyond Hume. For Hume admitted and asserted that in practice we cannot help acting as if we believed the law of causation to be true. What Kant would have added to Hume would be that no experience in the least like ours would be possible unless we did act in this way. This, if true, is important; but it is a supplement to Hume and not an answer to him.

The sum up. I do not think that there is any logical objection to transcendental arguments as such, provided we recognise that their conclusions are only probable. But we are liable to think that their conclusions are more probable than they really are, because we have made tacit assumptions about the mind and its ways of acting. And we are liable to think that they prove that 'x must be true' when they really prove only that x must be believed in practice by all human beings to be true. I do not think that any of Kant's own transcendental arguments escapes these two criticisms; though it remains quite possible that transcendental arguments could be discovered which were not open to either of them.

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