

Kant On Awe And Meaning

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Traditionally, Anglo-American philosophers have stressed the priority of epistemology over ontology in Kant's thought, and this interpretive approach is certainly understandable given that modern philosophy is characterized by the epistemological turn, which consists in precisely this shift of emphasis. However, the move to the primacy of epistemology does not eliminate the deep and enduring concerns of ontology, in particular the sorts of concerns that we express when we inquire into the meaning of life. In this paper, I shall explore the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant from the standpoint of ontology in order to explicate the manner in which he addresses age-old concerns about the purpose and significance of our existence.

My focal point is a famous passage from the conclusion of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant begins this particular paragraph by asserting that "two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." (CPrR, p. 166) His observation here reflects the distinction between theoretical and practical reason in the critical philosophy and, along with the passage that follows it, sums up the results of the first two Critiques with respect to humanity's enduring concern with the meaning of its existence. It is my contention that Kant's morally grounded faith is an effort to respond to a deep-rooted anxiety about the existential status of humanity in modernity while remaining within the epistemological constraints imposed by the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

My paper will be divided into three parts. First, I shall pose the problem of meaning as faced by Kant. Second, I shall then consider the constraints imposed by the epistemological doctrines of the first Critique on any solution to this problem. Finally, I shall lay out Kant's own solution as presented in his various writings on morality and religion. In examining Kant's approach to questions of meaning, I shall follow an order suggested in "The Transcendental Doctrine of Method: of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There Kant declares that the interests of reason combine to form three basic questions: first, "What can I know?"; second, "What ought I to do?"; and finally, "What may I hope?"¹ My second section will be concerned with the first question, while the third part will address the last two questions.

I.

Let us begin by considering the concerns expressed by the question of the meaning of life. The passage in question suggests two different contruals of this question: one ontological and the other moral. In each case, we seek an answer that would provide us with a sense of the purpose and significance of human life, though the specifics of an appropriate response differ depending on how we construe the question. On the one hand, the question "What is the meaning of life?" can be formulated in grand ontological terms as an attempt to determine the underlying significance and purpose of human life in the cosmos, our place within the order of the universe, while on the other hand, it can be reduced to the simple moral query about how one ought to live, the day to day conduct of ordinary life. The choice of options here depends on whether meaning is seen as something immanent and thus sought within life itself or as something transcendent and sought by imbedding our existence within an overarching cosmic order. Though I have formulated these as expressing different concerns, they are not, as we shall see, unrelated to each other, quite the contrary.

At the risk of oversimplifying the diversity of views at play, let us consider a picture that would have been available to a pre-modern European Christian. First, there is a rational God who has created the universe and with whom we can enter in a personal relationship. Second, the constitution of nature is essentially teleological so that the cosmos is a hierarchically ordered system of purposes. Third, humanity plays a central role in the cosmos in that the physical universe revolves around the Earth and human nature is suspended midway between animality and divinity. Finally, all of this is accessible to us through the exercise of our reason.

We can see quite clearly in this worldview the connection between the ontological and moral formulations of the question of meaning. By providing a theoretical account of the ontological status of humanity, it also resolves the moral issues humans confront. In short, our place in the divinely-ordained cosmic order defines for us how we ought to live our lives.

For Kant, the ontological situation of humanity is considerably bleaker as this picture is no longer available to him. Three developments stand out as critical here: the abandonment in science of teleology in favor of mechanism, the Copernican revolution in astronomy, and the decline of rational theology. Modern physics as developed by Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and others decisively rejects natural teleology in favor of mechanism. Whereas final cause is simply woven into the fabric of nature in Aristotelian science, modern physics ultimately reduces explanation to efficient cause. Rather than a harmonious system of purposes in which humanity finds its home, nature is simply a lifeless machine of interlocking parts, which may ultimately have no purpose, at least none discernible by scientists. Further, the shift from the geocentric paradigm of Ptolemy to the heliocentric para-

digm of Copernicus calls into question the privileged position of humanity, for it is no longer the case that the universe revolves around the Earth and its occupants. Our planet is reduced to being just another world. Finally, Kant himself contributes to this situation as well. His devastating criticisms of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, along with those of David Hume, undermine the rational basis of religious belief that is so central to maintaining the ontological construct.

According to Kant, then, any answer to the ontological formulation of the question of meaning "begins at the place I occupy in the external world of sense, and it broadens the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude of worlds beyond worlds and systems of systems and into the limitless times of their periodic motion, their beginning and their continuance." (p. 166) As such, we look to theoretical reason, only to be deeply disappointed. When we confine ourselves to the results of science, we are left with only the rather bleak assessment that "a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an animal creature, which must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came, the matter which is for a little time provided with vital force, we know not how." (p. 166)

II.

Kant occupies the position of a transitional thinker within the history of western philosophy, representing a synthesis of both Continental rationalism and British empiricism. Though deeply attached to the tradition of rationalist metaphysics, the epistemological doctrine he propounds in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is one of the most trenchant critiques of that very same tradition. In responding to the question "What can I know?", Kant undertakes the task of critique, the reason's self-examination in order to ascertain the source and legitimate scope of its own principles. At stake here is the ability of human reason to discern entirely on its own the true nature of reality. The explanation of these remarks requires a brief review of what are no doubt familiar doctrines from the "Transcendental Analytic" of the first *Critique*, which define the epistemological constraints he faces in addressing the question of meaning.

The central question that Kant seeks to answer in the first *Critique* is: How can reason, unaided by the senses provide us with knowledge of the independently real? Or, in more technical terms, how can synthetic judgments be known *a priori*?² It is obvious how analytic judgments can be known *a priori*, for in such judgments we are merely explicating the content of our concepts, and for this we need only the definitions of the appropriate terms and the rules of formal logic.³ But synthetic judgments are ampliative. On the one hand, what they assert cannot be justified simply by appealing to the meanings of their component terms for they pro-

vide us with substantive information that can not be gleaned from mere conceptual analysis. On the other hand, any appeal to experience is strictly forbidden here because we are concerned with judgments known *a priori*. Further, as a result of his encounter with Hume's skeptical attack on the traditional conception of causation as necessary connection, Kant recognized that the synthetic *a priori* also lies at the root of our empirical knowledge. The empirical knowledge provided by science consists of laws of necessary connection, though as Hume points out, sense experience alone presents no such connection, only the constant conjunction of two different types of events. Even our empirical knowledge, then, contains elements that must be given *a priori*. But on what basis can we establish reason's claim to provide such *a priori* knowledge?

Kant's answer here is both elegant and simple. We cannot have *a priori* knowledge of the independently real, but we can have such knowledge of that which is dependent on our own mental activity. Thus, synthetic judgments known *a priori* do not apply to things as they are in themselves, independent of our own mental activity, but to things as they appear to us, for the mind is active with respect to appearances. We construct experience with the aid of concepts provided by the understanding. Human knowledge, then, has two distinct sources: understanding provides the form of thought, while sensibility provides its matter.⁴ Rationalism focuses on the former to the exclusion of the latter, whereas the opposite is the case with empiricism. Consequently, both rationalism and empiricism fail as accounts of human knowledge for they do not take adequate account of the two sources of knowledge, understanding and sensibility, and the corresponding duality of our mental activity, that it is both active and passive, combining spontaneity and receptivity.

By arguing in this fashion, Kant provides a powerful justification for the existence of synthetic judgments known *a priori*, but he does so at the cost of restricting those judgments to appearances only. The categories require material in the form of intuition for their operation; in the absence of intuition, the categories are incapable of determining an object. The categories, then, and the principles based on them apply only to phenomena, or appearances, and not to noumena, things-in-themselves, that is, their application is restricted to the domain of possible experience, thus circumscribing the power of theoretical reason.

Reason, however, naturally seeks to transcend this limitation of its powers and in doing so generates dialectical illusions. Because it seeks what Kant terms "the unconditioned" for any conditioned events or judgment, reason is impelled by its own nature to transcend the bounds of experience, where only the conditioned can be found. In its ontological formulation, the question of meaning requires an answer in terms of the unconditioned, which is not an object of possible experience. Thus, any attempt by theoretical reason to discern the meaning of life by discover-

ing some profound significance of ours within the order of the cosmos falls into this category: an illegitimate attempt by human reason to overreach itself by transcending the limitations of experience. But this same point holds for science as well; questions of meaning, purpose, and significance fall outside the scope of scientific inquiry. As Kant states in the second Preface to the Critique of Pur Reason, he has "found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith." (CPR, p. 29, B XXX)

III.

Given the transcendent character of any possible response by theoretical reason to our ontological yearnings, Kant is forced to fall back on the resources provided by practical reason, with questions of meaning and purpose being reduced to the question of how one ought to live ("What ought I to do?"). Kant's answer here is quite straightforward, at least on the face of it: one ought to act from duty as defined by the moral law.

With regard to practical reason, there is no danger of dialectical illusion. Where the aim of theoretical reason is knowledge of the phenomenal world, the end of practical reason is action. Practical reason "deals with the grounds determining the will, which is a faculty either of bringing forth objects corresponding to conceptions or of determining itself, i.e., its causality to effect such object."⁵ Theoretical reason, as a cognitive faculty, seeks knowledge of the objects of experience. But practical reason is unconcerned with knowledge of appearances, except insofar as such knowledge is necessary for the attainment of its ends, rather it is concerned with the determination of the will, for which it needs ideas. The objective reality of those ideas is derived from the capacity of the will to be a cause of objects. Thus, "we give objective reality" to an idea, "at least in a practical context, because we regard it as the object of our will as pure rational beings."⁶ This is possible because of our freedom as rational agents. Practical reason, then, enables us to arrive at the unconditioned in the form of freedom; in fact, Kant defines "the practical" as "everything that is possible through freedom."⁷ The idea of freedom, then, is the fundamental concept of practical reason. Further, it is the ground on which Kant establishes humanity as moral agents as the final purpose of creation.

A final purpose is defined as "a purpose that requires no other purpose as a condition of its possibility."⁸ Since it depends on no other condition, a final purpose is unconditioned. But within nature, the unconditioned is nowhere to be found, for here we are confronted only with an unending series of conditions. The final purpose of creation, then, must not be sought "within nature at all;" it is transcendent. Now only rational agents as noumena fit this description:

Now in this world of ours there is only one kind of being with a causality that is teleological, i.e., directed to purposes, but also so constituted that the law in terms of which these beings must determine their purposes is presented as unconditioned and independent of conditions in nature and yet necessarily in itself. That being is man, but man considered as noumenon. Man is the only natural being in whom we can recognize, as part of his own constitution, a supersensible ability (freedom), and even recognize the law and the object of this causality, the object that this being can set before itself as its highest purpose (the highest good in the world).⁹

As moral beings, rational beings under moral laws, humans serve no other purpose.

Without such beings, Kant argues, the world would lack all value. If there were no rational beings in the world, there would exist no entity that could imbue the world with value. Thus, the existence of the world and everything in it would be without value. Further, if there were only instrumentally rational beings, the world would also lack value, for there would be no final point of attachment for "the chain of mutually subordinated purposes." Under such conditions, this chain would remain forever incomplete. It is, then, the power of desire determined by laws of freedom, i.e., practical principles, that gives human existence absolute value. This argument is similar to Aristotle's reasoning in Book I, Chapter 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* with regard to the highest good, though Kant lacks the antiquated teleological underpinnings provided by the Aristotelian science.

There is a parallel here with the power of theoretical reason. In a famous passage from the first critique, Kant declares that the mind is the law-giver to nature; similarly, it is also the value-giver. Further, Kant's reliance on practical reason here provides for a moral resolution of the concerns associated with the ontological formulation. Kant finds that practical reason is able to provide us with postulates of faith and a telos sufficient to allay our existential anxieties (thereby answering the question "What may I hope?"). We are rationally entitled to believe in the postulates of God and immortality on the basis of practical reason, though we cannot claim knowledge of them.

Hope and faith are given a moral orientation and grounding that redefines religious notions of reverence, piety, devotion, and the Kingdom of God, shifting them away from exterior matters of creed and interiorizing them in the form of the moral law, good will, and the *summum bonum*. By this means, Kant also seeks to defuse sectarian religious conflict through the projected ideal of the moral unity of humanity. Instead of the ontological defining the moral, as with our previous con-

struct, the moral defines the ontological. Further, by embedding one's individual existence in a larger socio-historical process, this "practical" reorientation addresses our existential anxieties by directing our attention to the moral practice and potential of our lives. In contrast to modern science, then, morality "infinitely raises my worth as that of an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals a life independent of all animality and even of the whole world of sense – at least so far as it may be inferred from the purposive destination assigned to my existence by this law, a destination which is not restricted to the conditions and limits of this life but reaches into the infinite." (p. 166)

Notes

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), p. 635.
2. Kant first posed this question in a letter written to his friend Marcus Herz after the *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770, in which he had espoused the view that such knowledge was possible. "In my dissertation, I was content to explain the nature of intellectual representations in a merely negative way, namely, to state that they were not modifications of the soul brought about by the object. However, I silently passed over the further question of how a representation that refers to an object without being in any way affected by it can be possible. I had said: The sensuous representations present things as they appear, the intellectual present them as they are. But by what means are these things given to us, if not by the way in which they affect us? And if such intellectual representations depend on our inner activity, whence comes the agreement that they are supposed to have with objects – objects that are nevertheless not possibly produced thereby? And the axioms of pure reason concerning these objects, since the agreement has not been reached with the aid of experience?" Immanuel Kant, *Philosophical Correspondence 1759-99*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 72.
3. Kant defines the analytic/synthetic distinction in terms of judgments that involve only subjects and predicates. My description of the distinction is more expansive than this and includes judgments that are not in strict subject/predicate form.
4. The picture is a bit more complicated than this. The mind also provides the form of sensibility, space and time or the pure forms of intuition, which is the source of mathematics.
5. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 16.
6. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 45.
7. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 632.
8. *Critique of Judgment*, p. 322.
9. *Critique of Judgment*, p. 323.