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Kant and the Transcendence of Rationalism and Religion

This is the second of Frei's Rockwell Lectures. (For more details, see the introductory note to the previous chapter.) Frei was fascinated by Kant, and once said that he would take Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone *with him were he ever sent to a desert island.*[1] *This lecture, Frei's most substantial extant discussion of Kant, captures something of that fascination.* (CPH 1974c(ii). YDS 13–198)

INTRODUCTION

Lessing dedicated himself to the reform of religion. So did Immanuel Kant—among many other things that he did. Lessing sought a reinterpretation of religious practice, of what it was and how to go about it, insofar as religious practice was at once the broadest and the most intimate field of human endeavor—the two ends of the spectrum of human life where people were most fully human. So did Kant. He sought to articulate a philosophy of religion that did not simply analyze religious concepts but asked what were right or useful religious concepts, right or useful religious

1. *Types of Christian Theology*, 56.

practices—and how one used them properly. Much like Lessing, Kant was a reformer for practical purposes, not simply for belief theory, of traditional Protestant religion. Unlike British and French Rationalists, but like Lessing, he wanted to interpret or reinterpret Christianity.

In a nutshell, Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* was written to indicate how people might be converted; what the logic, the rationale, of conversion is; and what it means to lead one's life in the community of the converted. In the process Kant discovered among many other things that ordinary speech was inadequate to express certain facts or structures of human life, but unlike Lessing he did not have drama to help him express what conceptual descriptive language lacked. Instead he trenched, and trenched hard, upon a symbolic use of language that was to become the domain of Romantic thinkers who came after him—yet he himself did not cross the barrier that Herder crossed between two kinds of language-use, conceptual and expressive.

Like Lessing, again, he found speculative theory defective for the articulation of ultimate truth. But whereas this defect led Lessing to treat such theory qualifiedly, to apply it tenuously and ambiguously, and only in the service of pedagogy, Kant judged speculative theory altogether unfit though inevitable as an instrument for the discovery of true belief and true religious practice. And yet he could not abandon it: because it was the completion of human reason.

GOD BEFORE KANT

Kant's philosophy is frequently described as the apex of rationalist thought. He set himself the task of discovering the *limits* of human reasoning, and he came up with some very definite answers, among them that our ideating processes (he called the tracing out of this process "transcendental dialectic") exceeded our knowledge, so that there are certain ideas we are bound to form but of which we can never have any knowledge. Now these ideas, which he called the ideas of pure reason or transcendental ideas, are three in number—God, the world, and the self. It is important that before Kant these ideas had made sense in a certain way, but that for him they made sense in another way.

In a nutshell, you could say that these ideas were the topics of traditional metaphysics. Generally speaking they were either given to a kind of non-sensible apprehension or as ideas—i.e., grasped directly by the mind,

rather than the sense, or else they were *inferred* from sense data, the sensible experience from which we derive all our actual information. This was true especially of the idea of God, the ultimately real being, the intelligent mind who governs the universe. In either case the ideas were genuinely informative.

Note one detail in this way of treating the concept of God: whatever we intuit or infer, even the very highest possible reality will come to us in a certain unity. Whether or not there is a being corresponding to the notion or concept of "God," we can *think* the notion coherently. There is a certain fitness between the way we think, our conception, and the object of our thought, so that as thought-object at any rate it makes sense. Our thinking is a unitary process and hence—even with possible internal inconsistencies—the notion of God is one notion, even if it should turn out that the definable class "deity" has no members or a number of them, just as "unicorn" is one notion, and "humanity" is one notion. Perhaps one can reverse the procedure and say, just as there are unitary intellectual entities or objects, so our thinking about them takes place by means of unitary concepts. At any rate—there is a real congruence or isomorphism between ideas or thought-contents and intellection.

Now this may be either obvious, abstract, or both. I mention it because with Kant it begins to become a very questionable assumption. And thereby hangs half of our story.

KANT AND REASON

Kant wanted to investigate our reasoning capacity with extreme rigor. He was a rationalist par excellence. First, against certain skeptics about reason he wanted to show in what the *possibility* of reasoning consisted. That is to say, unlike David Hume he believed that if your philosophy failed to explain the reliability of scientific procedure, especially the reliability of the law of cause and effect, it was so much the worse not for science but for your philosophy. Science worked, it was an actual (though not limitlessly applicable) use of explanation. The proper exercise of philosophizing is to explain the possibility from the actuality, i.e., to give an account of the necessary capacity to reason that will account for its actuality rather than explain why it doesn't really work as well as it seems, why science isn't really reliable.

If the first task of philosophy is to show the possibility, the second is to show the *limits* of the same kind of reasoning, i.e., that kind of which science and common sense are paradigm cases, the kind of reasoning that helps provide you with informative and reliable knowledge of the external world, including your own and others' psycho-physical organisms. Kant called this kind of reasoning "understanding," and wanted to pinpoint the limits of its applicability or capacity.

KANT AND MORAL ACTION

In the third place he wanted to investigate the various different *uses* we make of our reasoning capacity, and which of them are so basic that we cannot explain them as functions of another use of what was for him admittedly the same reasoning capacity. He came up with two or three irreducibly different, though not necessarily unlinked, forms of reason. The concept of "judgment" is the link between the various uses.

Kant thought that there are three powers or "faculties" of the mind of distinctively human being. The first is the *cognitive*, which is the instrument for gaining informative knowledge of the natural world. The second is the faculty or power of *feeling* pleasure or displeasure, the third that of *desire*. *Reason*, i.e., critical analysis, must be brought to bear on all three of these capacities, what their proper arenas are, and how to order each both internally and with regard to the other two.

The first of them allows us, as we have said, to know the natural world, its order, an order in which all data of experience are linked by natural, necessary causes. The second one is less important for our purposes. The capacity to feel pleasure and displeasure can be rationally analyzed into the power to make judgments of an aesthetic sort—when we organize our feelings under the principles of the beautiful and the sublime—and the power to make judgments of purposiveness, as when we think of nature as unified through an intelligence that is the ground of its empirical laws.

The third capacity is very important to Kant himself. The capacity of desire can be rationally analyzed into the power of natural inclination to quest after happiness, but here one encounters a universal principle of morality that legislates that while happiness is a perfectly natural desire it has to be adjusted to another and greater principle, that of virtue. Human beings have the capacity to do their duty, and to do one's duty is to be truly free and virtuous. We are not enslaved to our natural desires.

In other words, our desires and our moral capacity force us to live in a domain where our reasoning is employed in a way wholly different from its employment in the natural sense-data world. In that world, the self itself becomes one of the sense data behaving in accordance with the laws of natural causality. About the self-in-the-natural-world, Kant has some interesting things to say, among them that we have no knowledge, within our experience of the natural world, of a permanent, unified ego underneath the changing, diversified consciousness that we are within this world. The point is now that what we cannot *know* in the context of our experience of the natural world we must *assume* because we are bound to *enact* it in the world of desire and duty.

We are here in a totally different world of discourse, in the domain of a totally different functioning of our rational capacities. For whereas in the natural world the self is likely to be completely determined by natural necessity, in the domain of moral discourse and behavior, we are bound to be free, even though there is no natural explanation for it. Kant did not believe that you could demonstrate a metaphysically arranged gap or element of indeterminacy or randomness in the behavior pattern of selves as beings in nature that would allow you to infer that they are free. As for the status vis-à-vis nature of the self, the thinking subject or substantial soul, he reiterated again and again that it was a necessary presupposition—"transcendental unity of apperception"—"I think"—but could not become an object of informative knowledge at all. Combine that belief with his further argument that you can prove both that everything happens in accordance with the laws of nature, and its antithesis, that some things in the world come about by free causation or spontaneously, and it is obvious that the free soul is nothing more than a confused question in the rational analysis of what we can informatively know about the natural world in which we are ingredient. Kant separates discourse or the use of reason about the self in the world of sensible experience totally and completely from the use of reasoning about the self in the supersensible world, the world of moral action, where there is a law of our own being that commands us unconditionally to do our duty.

This is a law of the whole field of moral action, and thus a law of our own being insofar as we are part of that field. Thus it is a law at once given to us—we as it were enter into it every time we make a choice, whenever we act morally—but also a law we give to ourselves. To say we are free is to say we are unconditionally bound to obey the moral law as one we give to ourselves. This law assumes the form of an absolute imperative. We are

bound to obey it, even if in fact we never do, because it is the law of our own being. The total unity of *Wille* and *Willkür*, of rational law and unbound spontaneity: a long tradition, but the latter now reaches for dominance in a way that has perhaps few precedents. If we are to be free, the imperative must come to us detached from our desire with its end- or goal-oriented quest. The imperative must not say to us, "If you want to achieve such-and-such you must do so-and-so." It must say to us unconditionally, "Thou oughtst," and with that "ought" goes the morally logical implication that an ought given to us by ourselves rather than by eternal authority is one we not only must but can follow. The person may be perfectly right who said that there is no such thing as a good conscience, that having a conscience at all is to have a bad conscience; Kant would not necessarily object to that. But he would think it absurd to use "conscience" in a way that would speak of it as unfree or enslaved. No matter how close to strangulation of our freedom, to be human is to have a vestige of it, because that is our inalienable nature, our moral definition.

Virtue then is not the right form of the automatic pursuit of happiness or sound aims, but obedience to duty, acting from good intention or conscience. The singularity and greatness of humanity is that the good person can detach himself from that quest as a functioning moral agent, even though in itself, in its proper place, there is nothing wrong with the desire for happiness. Moreover, the voice of duty, the categorial imperative is never the form our desire takes. In that case we would not be free but simply follow our natural determination when we obey conscience. Virtue, doing one's duty for duty's sake, is freedom from determination only when it is heterogeneous from desire. Thus, there is a distance in principle, though not necessarily enmity, between will and inclination, between obedience to the moral law and the actual content of desire.

THE UNITY OF THE MORAL UNIVERSE

One is forced to ask the questions: If the domain of moral discourse, the moral use of reasoning, is to have any unity at all, have we not to think of this unity as overcoming the tension or heterogeneity of two opposites:

1) the heterogeneity in principle between conscience and desire; and

2) between virtue and happiness?

If not, isn't the universe of moral discourse at loggerheads with itself and thus morally absurd? Now, many thinkers after Kant were content to say, yes that would indeed be to affirm the irrationality of morality in the world of discourse about human action, and that is *in fact* the way it is—irrational.

Not so Kant: he said that the unadjusted heterogeneity between conscience and desire, virtue and happiness, would indeed make the moral universe irrational, but whenever we act morally we act in the rational moral faith (not in the knowledge) that there is a unitary, rational, and not absurd moral domain—even when as observers or analysts we don't believe any such thing. Moral intention/action has its own logic, its own rationale, as to what kind of universe it inhabits.

In that universe the harmony between conscience and desire, virtue and happiness, is implemented in an unending progress toward the ideal condition, fulfilled in what Kant calls a postulate of practical reason, immortality, and in a being in whom the harmony of happiness with virtue/morality is grounded—God, the Holy Will.

We observe that morality does not presuppose religion: people do not need the idea of God to recognize their duty; and the ultimate motive of moral action is duty for duty's sake, not obedience to the commands of God.[2] But we also observe that morality inevitably leads to religion, because that is the only way in which the moral and natural orders can be harmonized, the moral law harmonized with the actually existing hum-drum, not to say corrupt world of everyday events and limitations.

Let us stress once more that the "world" we have been speaking about is the environment or nexus in which moral agents are drawn together by their acts. It is well to remember that "world" here has to an extent the meaning of "life world," to borrow a famous term of Husserl's. Not only is it not the natural world, it is not even the world of the agent as his actions become ingredient in public consequences. One really has to speak here of an ideal world of pure motives and pure thoughts and decisions in interpersonal affairs, if one talks of the agent's world in Kant's thought. The reason for stressing the fact is that Kant, when talking about freedom, has an extremely limited field in mind, both in terms of action and in terms of human knowledge. His suggestion is that the *agent*-self, the noumenal self, is never an object of observation or knowledge. The self observed and known, whether by ourselves or another, is always the self already entered into a network of external relations, and therefore of imperfection. The

2. Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 2.135.

agent's self-knowledge and knowledge of others as pure agent selves is not so much private as virtually nonexistent. And indeed, then, moral agency is not really ever an instance of the use of reason as understanding, but reason as action, as inward action and decision. How this comes about and what are its implications are topics we turn to now.

THE TRANSCENDENTAL IDEAS

We spoke of the *possibility*, the *limits* and the *uses* of rational capacities. Let us turn back to the use of reason as understanding or informative knowledge. Kant's great revolution in epistemology involved a very simple step: he purchased certainty of knowledge at the price of certainty of the status of the object of knowledge. All human knowledge involves the input of sensible or perceptual content and the form imprinted on it by the human intellect. All knowledge then is indirect, we never have the object of knowledge *directly* at hand to grasp. His successors nagged that fact to and fro bitterly seeking for some one instance of certain knowledge that is direct to the spontaneously ordering intellect. Some of them claimed that self-knowledge is an instance of that sort, viz., not that of the empirically given self but of the noumenal self that is not individuated because individuation is the result of embodiment and sense experience, i.e., ingredience in phenomena. Thus the one certain and direct grasp that knowledge has is for Fichte not the self but selfhood, pure agency (in Kant's terms) logically prior to a specific self. That notion practically boggles the mind, but it could be—if certain limitations are removed—a consequence of Kant's soberest thoughts.

Again, recall that the *fact* of informative knowledge is utterly dependent for Kant on something being presented to the senses and the intellect. But the orderly, reliable shape of that knowledge is due to the intellect's forms of sensibility and understanding, the forms of space and time on the one hand, and categories of the understanding—quantity, quality, relation, and modality, under which all empirically given contents must be arranged. These forms and categories are certain and universal, we can rely on their always being appropriate and gaining us a common, public world of observation. But they are not derived from the observed world. They are logically independent of it. They are *a priori* conditions of all experience.

They work well when applied to empirical contents. But the human mind is more ambitious than that and seeks to apply them so as to unify all

knowledge. Hence it inevitably creates the three unifying transcendental ideas (self, world, and God), which are *neither* given as empirical data *nor* yet directly presented, like empirical data but non-sensibly and therefore purely intellectually, to the intellect. Their status is therefore that they are really *heuristic ideals for completing human knowledge and rounding it off in a perfect but absolutely impossible way*. Their status is neither empirical, nor transcendent (Wolff!) but *transcendental*.

For the human knower cognitive form is transcendental, it has nothing to do with experience, it is an *a priori* structure of universal and completely rational categories. The human intellect employs these transcendental structures spontaneously. Kant does not believe in the passivity of the intellect before the senses, as the British empiricists did. But the intellect cannot provide its own material, hence is bound to piecemeal operation. It can never complete its knowledge, it can never see why any instance of informative knowledge should be *here* and *now*, or how it fits into a total complex of given things. In short there cannot be a deductive system of a positive knowledge of the world. But there *can* be a system of the coherence of rational operations, their possibility, limits, and uses, provided these are never confused with what we discover in the world, provided the reasoner, the transcendental self, is never confused with the world of data, not even with himself within that world. Knower and known, subject and object, perspective and content can never be systematically unified; to think a thing is never the same as for that thing to be, even in the case of the self; they belong together, but they can never be shown to be the same thing, either by putting self and objects into the same empirical scheme, or by transferring objects into the self's transcendental status.

GOD

Kant then is in the situation of having to have a concept of God but interestingly enough having to claim that this concept of God performs a purely regulative function for thinking, providing the ideal of an absolutely unconditioned unity, but having to insist also that this thought has no bearing on reality one way or the other. The reality of God is not subject to proof.

We cannot deal with Kant's treatment of the traditional proofs for the existence of God, but there is an interesting observation to be made: though Kant thinks that one cannot *prove* that an absolutely necessary being (in contrast to all of us who exist contingently) exists, though Kant thinks one

cannot *prove* that a most real being exists, though Kant thinks one cannot *prove* that there is a first cause of all that is, and that he is not only the intelligent and wise world author but its moral governor as well, he has no doubt whatsoever that these are the appropriate *conceptions* of God—whether he exists or not.

But the point now is to recall that the determinate or in-formed object was only one side of the correlation of subject and object in the situation of informative knowledge. The other side, irreducibly other, was the spontaneous, form-bestowing, or determining subject. This subject, because it can by definition never make the transition to the conditions of appearance whether as knower or as agent, but must remain inscrutably transcendental and spontaneous, is itself never given, never determinate, but always *determining*. Identity as an intellectual subject can never become one of the "determinate attributes" characterizing the concept of God as unconditioned determinateness qualifying an object.

It is well at this point to recall our early point that before Kant, when spontaneous ideation was thought to mesh perfectly with informative metaphysical concept, it was thought that the concepts could be grasped by the intellect coherently, and therefore in unitary form. What has happened in Kant is that this unity is gone. We have no warrant for conceiving in one unitary notion the activity of thinking and the absolutely determinate content of thought.

We cannot even draw an analogy in this respect speculatively from ourselves to God, because Kant has made it absolutely clear that the unity of the empirical self with the noumenal self can never be given in experience. Thus, then, God, in whom this heterogeneity between determinate objectivity and indeterminate, spontaneous subjectivity is raised to the absolute degree, must be grasped in two concepts between which there can be no unity: he is the unconditioned ground of all intellectual moral and physical structure, and he is equally the ground of all spontaneous intellectual activity.

Kant is fascinated by some of this speculative play: there is no indication that he ever said that some of this is invalid as a concept, because one part cannot be combined with the other.

1) He didn't stress the spontaneous side—though there are indications that it was fascinating and threatening.

2) He didn't really have to worry because conception and reality were far enough apart that he could select where he wanted to join them, and this turned out to be only in the moral realm.

3) He had a *critical* system, not a *metaphysical* one. That is to say, when you traced out necessary ideal projections of human thought, you didn't deal with the unity of reality, but only with the unity of conception. You could not show the unity of reality. Hence Kant *did not have to* do so. Given his proclamation of the limitations of human reason, he could claim that you need two aspects, contrary or at least unadjusted, in the notion of God, just as you could not show that perceptual content and conceptual form had a systematic unitary explanation or ground in which they inhered in a manner transparent to human reason.

Nonetheless, Kant had skirted an abyss, especially in the form that the conception of God as subject takes in the first critique: intellectual intuition, which, he says, we cannot even conceive because we are absolutely confined to sensible intuition. But we can think why we cannot think it. The absolute meshing of receptiveness with spontaneity, the embrace of the former by the latter, is mesmerizing. Where to know is to determine totally, to intuit is to intuit intellectually, i.e., spontaneously, so that in knowing what you know is not only immediately present but the act of thinking the object is identical with determining its shape![3]

3. [The manuscript then degenerates into a collection of notes, and finishes half way down the page: "1801 'Intellectual intuition' (humanity included in Godhood); (1) Which shall overcome which concept? Not much question—Subject tends to embrace object; the objective descriptions of God are symbols of God as subject; (2) New language needed, new conception; (2) [sic] "Faustianism": human beings as virtually unlimited creators of their own world, especially their cultural world, out of that which they find "accidentally" given to them. The merging of divine and human in intelligent creativity; (3) It was the dry rationalist who had skirted, come close to the abyss beyond rationalism. Symbolism and Religious Conception in Religion Within Limits."]