

Notes for November 17, 2006

Immanuel Kant –Some General Notions

It scarcely requires mentioning how influential Immanuel Kant was, many refer to him as the greatest Western philosopher that the last several centuries has produced. Simply “google” his name to see the countless sources and references.

To grasp the subtlety and depth of his arguments in the “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals” one must have (at least) some kind of overall picture of Kant’s architecture of thought.¹ I’ll do my best here to offer what I consider to be the major aspects of this architectonic, in ‘bite-size’ chunks, so as to convey this picture.

- **The Transcendental Deduction**

Anything you read by Kant, no matter where, is going to have some passage stating something like: “what[or how] is it like...for *X to be possible?*” (For example, notice, on p.535: “How is the imperative of *morality* possible?”) This is the fundamental argument-form for Kant, and one he uses throughout to build up his philosophy (which can be thought of as an amalgamation of Rationalism and Empiricism, or at least an answer to both).

Defn1: (Transcendental Deduction-TD): Any argument that seeks to answer the question: “What are the *conditions P* to make *x possible?*”

This is a subtle maneuver which merits some explanation. By “*x*” it is meant some *case at hand*. So think of the TD as a way to ‘stepping back,’ so to speak, and looking for *general conditions for the possibility of x*. In other words, we’re *abstracting away* from a particular case *x* in a very particular manner. Consider the following example:

“In order for love between people to be possible, there must be consciousness.”

“In order for the phenomenon of contact force to occur, there must be causation.”

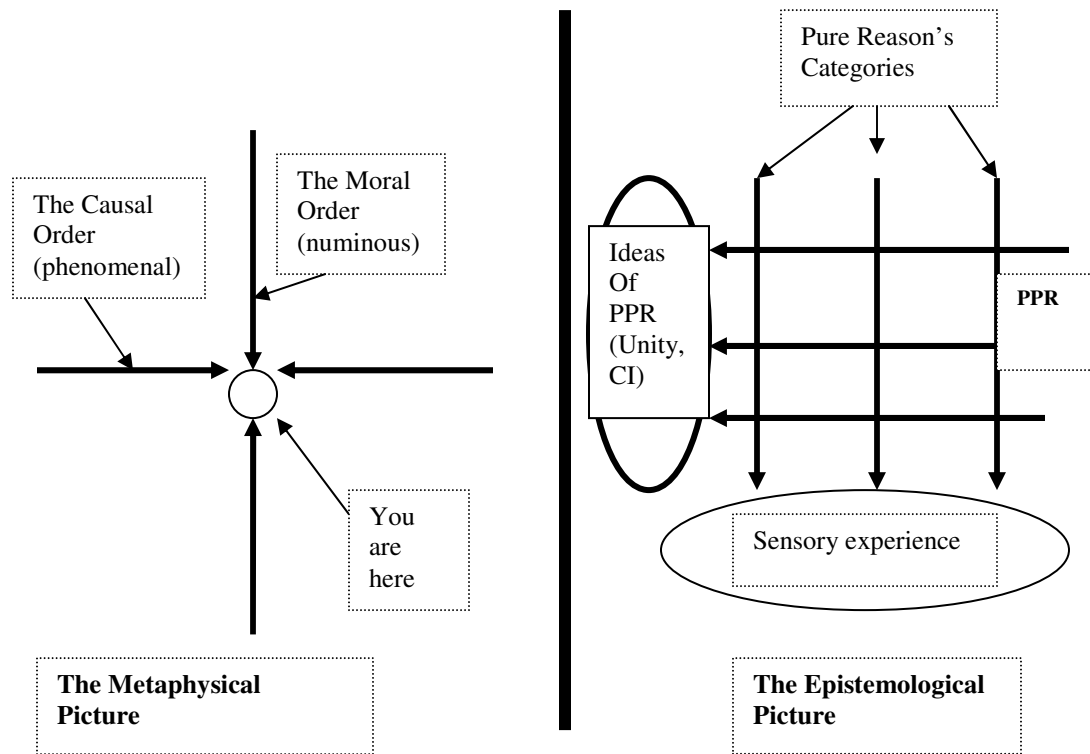
etc..

In both of these two sentences, one is listing *general conditions for the possibility of a particular case*.

¹ Keep in mind, this is a very general overview. There is literally a huge intellectual industry of Kant and Kantian studies, with their various and sundry camps of Kant scholars. For a smattering, see, for example, pp 545-543 of this text, as all the contemporary philosophers are applying some aspect of what they understand as Kantian ethics

- **The Basic Metaphysical and Epistemological Picture for Kant**

Kant wrote three Critiques (*Critique of Pure Reason – CPR*, *Critique of Practical Reason – CPrR*, *Critique of Judgement – CJ*), as well as many pamphlets and smaller papers, in which he sought to give grounding for his epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics, respectively. Without giving the lengthy story of how he uses the TD to construct his first two critiques, one could think of the Kantian metaphysical and epistemological picture in the following simple terms:



PPR: “Pure Practical Reason”: the faculty of *judging*
 PR: “Pure reason:” the faculty of *cognizing*

- In the **Epistemological Picture** we have *Pure Practical Reason (PPR*, what is also responsible for the *moral will*) whose ‘movement’ or ‘direction of activity’ in making *judgements* is *aimed* towards its *Ideas*. **The Ideas of Pure Practical Reason should not be construed as “thoughts;” they are, rather, organizing (or regulative) principles that act as constraints, or necessary conditions, for making judgements possible.** The Ideas of PPR include: the (presupposed) *unity* of the world or cosmos, and the *Categorical Imperative*. Such *ideas* function as *regulative guidelines*² for PPR’s *activity*, which, in turn, is *constituted* by acts of

² Think of them like *asymptotes*.

judgments. In other words, moral judgments occur in such a manner that are *regulated* (not *constituted*) by the idea of the *unity of the world*, as well as by the Categorical Imperative.

Simultaneously, we have the ‘movement’ of *pure reason*, which is *constituted by acts of concept-formation*, to the realm (or “manifold”) of *sensory experience*. We *experience phenomena only through the categories of pure reason*, which are: Time, Space, Quantity, Quality, Number, Causality. That is to say, pure reason is *not* a ‘blank slate,’ onto which ‘experience writes’ (as envisioned by John Locke), but is, rather, a ‘blank sheet of graph paper.’ The Categories are ‘*hard-wired*’, if you will, into pure reason. In this sense, according to Kant, the whole notion of ‘sense-data’ is wrongheaded. We *do not ever* experience sensory information in some raw form like that. Rather, by the time sensory information is delivered to pure reason, or rather, as pure reason *imposes itself* onto the realm of sense, what we *experience* are *phenomena*. Phenomena are *appearances* that, if you will, are constituted by pure reason’s categories. In this sense, Time, Space, Quality, Quantity, Number, Causality *do not exist ‘out there’* in a passive sense, but rather *exist within pure reason’s activity*, and act as *conditions making phenomena* (i.e., what is experienced) *possible*.

So, in a nutshell, one could think of our moment-to-moment thinking activity as being the ‘interference’ between the pure reason, giving us concepts about phenomena (*facts*), while the pure practical reason gives us judgments about *values*. Pure reason is regulated by sensory experience, pure practical reason is regulated by the Categorical Imperative, etc.

- Accompanying the **Epistemological Picture** is the **Metaphysical Picture**. According to Kant, two “orders” *thrust themselves upon us*: “the causal order without, and the moral order within.” The causal order is what gives rise to *phenomena*, i.e., causality is what makes phenomena possible. Phenomena are *comprehensible* to pure reason. The moral order, on the other hand, is *numinous*: that is to say, reason can *apprehend* its nature, but never *comprehend* it. This is part of Kant’s more general metaphysical picture, which, among other things, is a rebuttal to the empirical skepticism of Berkeley and Hume. For Kant, what makes *phenomena possible*, is the underlying *Ding-an-Sich*, or ‘thing-in-itself.’ So he is postulating in the existence of an external world, filled with other selves and other objects. Such objects and other selves, *in and of themselves*, are *numinous*. That is to say, for example, my reason cannot ever access an object in and of itself, it can only access its *appearance*, how it appears to me through its empirical properties. Similarly, I cannot access other human beings in-and-of-themselves, I only have rational access to the *way they appear to me*. Nevertheless, it *false* to conclude (a’ la Berkeley and Hume) that there are *only appearances!* Rather, things-in-themselves *make appearances (phenomena) possible!* Think of the thing-in-itself, as analogous to Locke’s notion of *substance* (Recall previous notes)

For example, the fact that other selves *must exist* as agents-in-themselves (for me to *experience* them through their *appearance*) warrants the second and third formulation of the Categorical Imperative, which states that other persons must be treated as having infinite dignity, and, moreover, must be treated as ends, never as means. For Kant, the *sublime* arises from the *sense of awe* at the moral order: “There are two great mysteries, the starry heavens without [the causal order] and the moral order within.” (to paraphrase, from Kant’s *Critiques*.)

- **Some Uniquely Kantian Logical Notions**

Notice (page 534) he writes: “So far as willing is concerned, this proposition is *analytic*...” Later, (page 535) he writes: “[W]ith this categorical imperative...we have here a *synthetic a priori...proposition*.” What is he talking about?

Definition 2 (Analytic/Synthetic propositions): A proposition ³ is (i) *analytic* if the meaning contained in the predicate (P) equals the meaning contained in the subject (S), i.e., meaning(S) = meaning(P). A proposition is (ii) *synthetic* if the meaning contained in the predicate (P) *exceeds* the meaning contained in the subject (S), i.e., meaning(S) < meaning(P).

For example, the statement: “A bachelor is an unmarried male” is *analytic*. The meaning in the predicate (‘unmarried male’) is the same as the meaning in the subject (‘bachelor’.) Most definitions are analytic in this sense. On the other hand, the statement, “Carol is wearing brown suede shoes today.” The predicate is giving more information about Carol, i.e., there’s no way I could infer from my understanding of Carol (assuming it refers to a definite “Carol” I know) alone that she is wearing brown suede shoes today.

Now you’re probably thinking: Isn’t ‘analytic/synthetic’ just another way of saying ‘a priori / a posteriori?’⁴ After all, synthetic (at least in the example given above) and a posteriori seem to involve *experience* in some essential way. Well Kant didn’t think so! This is the uniquely logical Kantian notion:

There can be *a priori synthetic statements*.

In other words, there can be statements whose truth value do *not* depend on experience (except, insofar as one learns the meaning of their terms), *nevertheless their predicate has more meaning than their subject*. For Kant, physical laws, mathematical statements, and moral principles like the Categorical Imperative were all examples of synthetic a priori statements.

Let’s take a simple example from math: “ $1 + 1 = 2$ ” is *synthetic*, in the sense that I’ve synthesized the subject (concepts “1,” “+”) to *create new information* (“ $=2$.”)

³ Here he means a Categorical Form. Recall: The A-form: “All S are P”, the E-form: “No S are P,” the I-form “Some S are P,” and the O-form: “Some S are not P.”

⁴ Recall previous notes for their definition

Or consider an example from physics (a simple version of Newton's Second Law⁵): " $F = ma$ " The predicate: "mass \times acceleration" gives *new information* about the concept *force*. But the statement is still a priori, since it's a mathematical equation. (I need experience *only* to gather the meaning of concepts like force, mass, acceleration.)

So the Categorical Imperative is synthetic a priori. It's a priori because it's an idea of practical reason, i.e., a guideline for making moral judgments, *whose nature is not found in experience*. Recall the metaphysical picture above. The moral order is numinous, according to Kant, it thrusts itself upon our faculty of conscience and moral will, but we do not *find* such an order in the space-time causal manifold of experience. We will never find (numinous) *value* in our (cognitively experienced) world of *fact*. But that does not mean that values do not impose themselves upon us and comprise the very heart of the human condition, i.e., what makes us all human beings. We apprehend their nature without comprehending them, from the standpoint of pure reason. But from the standpoint of PPR (Pure Practical Reason) we can adopt the Categorical Imperative and create *new* judgments, and add, therefore, *novelty* in our moral lives, as moral agents:

"We need not now wonder, when we look back upon all previous efforts that have been made to discover the principle of morality, why they have one and all been bound to fail. Their authors saw man as tied to laws by his duty, but it never occurred to them that he is subject only to *laws which are made by himself*, [synthetic] and yet are *universal*. [based on their a-priority]" (540)

The Four Dilemmas

Kant discusses a thought-experiment involving four different scenarios, in which an agent is faced with a dilemma (536). It's important to understand in these discussions that Kant is simply trying to illustrate how one can 'test' one's moral will (pure practical reasoning) against one's 'skill' (practical reasoning based on inclinations and incentives.) For Kant, a truly moral will springs from *duty*, whose maxims (prescriptions) obey the Categorical Imperative (CI) *as a necessary condition only*. In other words, if your maxim, or prescription for action *p* is *moral*, then it must pass the CI. The CI *regulates*, but does not *constitute* the moral will. (The CI is *not* a sufficiency condition for morality, i.e., Kant does *not* say that 'if *p* passes the CI, then *p* is exemplary of the moral will. In this sense, it's important to understand that Kant wasn't so much interested in the *content* of morality, rather in the *form* of moral reasoning.)

Recall the CI: "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a Universal Law of Nature." (536) This is distinguished from a *hypothetical imperative*, (HI) which lies in the domain of skill, not will. The HI bases itself on incentives, and

⁵ A more general version states that the *vector sum of all forces acting on a body* equals the product of its mass with its acceleration vector, located at the body's center of mass.

inclinations of the agent. “Hypothetical imperatives declare a possible action to be practically necessary as a means to the attainment of something else that one wills...**A categorical imperative [on the other hand]...represent[s] an action as objectively necessary in itself apart from its relation to a further end.**” (532) Incentives, inclinations, etc., comprise the activity of skill, and are regulated by the hypothetical imperative. No matter how beneficial and noble in content (or conversely how destructive and base) such skill-based practical activity should *not* be confused with the *moral will*. Following one’s *conscience, insofar as it conforms to the CI as a necessary condition or constraint*, is acting on the basis of the moral will, and should be understood as ‘following one’s duty for duty’s sake.’ The *consequences* of following one’s duty, whether beneficial to the agent or harmful, are irrelevant.

1. “Keep on keeping on” seems to be the maxim here. A suicidal person, nevertheless possessing clear reason and judgment, may out of “self-love” end his or her life, since he or she has become wholly dispirited and unmotivated to live. One may even argue, that in such a situation he or she has a *duty* or ‘right’ based on “self-love” here (to commit suicide). But elevating such a maxim to a “universal law of nature” would render it self-contradictory, as it’s equivalent to saying that humanity as a whole should annihilate itself. Hence the maxim doesn’t pass the CI, so it cannot be considered a moral act. “Keep on keeping on,” so to speak, *can*, since such a maxim would lead to no contradiction when elevated to a universal law.
2. “Don’t break promises.” A debtor needs money to survive, and is faced with the possibility of borrowing money in full cognizance that he is unable to pay the ensuing debt. To follow the moral will, the debtor should refrain from borrowing the money, regardless how harmful the consequences. “Don’t break promises” passes the CI, whereas reneging on a debt clearly does not.
3. “Don’t bury your talents.” A man who is already satisfied with life, and possesses all material comforts, is nagged by the thought of developing a particular talent. There’s no practical incentive for him to do so. Nevertheless, should he choose to develop his talents, he is engaged truly moral activity, since ‘don’t bury your talents’ passes the CI.
4. “Being charitable” Here, Kant introduces a subtlety. Someone wealthy and comfortable is faced with a choice to make a contribution to someone (or some people) who is (are) suffering great hardship. Kant admits that behaving callously doesn’t produce a contradiction when elevated to a universal law, nevertheless:

It is impossible to **will** that such a principle [of being uncharitable] should hold everywhere as a law of nature. For a will when decided in this way would be at variance with itself, since many a situation might arise in which the man needed love and sympathy from others, and in which, by such a law of nature sprung from his

own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the help he wants for himself. (537)

In other words, what Kant is saying here, is that although when elevated to a form of a universal law, being uncharitable is *not* (logically) self-contradictory, nevertheless it is *practically impossible* to carry out. (Conversely, the Golden Rule passes the CI and can be practically implemented.)

- **Problems and Concerns**

Certainly one can ‘stand in awe’ of this brilliant and sublime philosophy. But in the lived world of ethics, aside from critiquing the Categorical Imperative for its internal consistency (as you’ll read in Professor Odell’s upcoming handout) one is also nagged by problems in terms of their ‘external’ application. For one might ask:

1. Can such a clean distinction be made between skill and will (i.e., practical reason versus pure practical) reason?
2. Apart from being persuaded by his suicidal person who stoically continues ‘for duty’s sake,’ obeying principle only, one can still ask whether or not it’s possible to ignore emotive content? Certainly Hume didn’t think so! (For Hume, ‘passions’ are what *motivate* ethical behavior in the first place.) More to the point, are ‘inclinations’ really so private and subjective, or are they rather more public and relational? (Consider communities of moral agents as relating to one another in terms of *intersubjectivity*.)