

Some Remarks on Kant's Contribution for Understanding the Nature of the Transition from Epistemology to Ontology**

Abstract

It is generally agreed that the philosophy of Kant is a turning point for modern philosophy. This corpus provides with us not only a method for analysing the nature of human knowledge in general, but also a basis upon which we find a possibility to establish ontology derived from epistemology. This paper tries to understand the principles of this possibility described in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Key Terms

Epistemology, Ontology, Logic, Transcendental, Dialectic, Understanding, Reason.

Bilgi Kuramından Varlıkbilime Geçişin Doğasını Anlamaya Dair Kant'ın Katkısı Üzerine Birtakım Değıniler

Özet

Kant'ın felsefesi genellikle modern felsefede bir dönüm noktası olarak kabul edilir. Bu külliyat, yalnızca insan bilgisinin doğasını genel olarak çözümleneceğimiz bir yöntem sunmakla kalmaz, ayrıca üzerinde bilgikuramından türeyecek bir varlıkbilim kurma olanaklılığını bulacağımız bir zemin de sağlar. Bu yazı, Kant'ın *Arı Usun Eleştirisi*'nde betimlediği bu olanaklılığın ilkelerini anlamaya çalışmaktadır.

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Bilgi Kuramı, Varlıkbilim, Mantık, Aşkınısal, Eytişim, Anlak, Us.

In the division of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which Kant calls “transcendental dialectic,” he is concerned with the nature and validity of speculative philosophy and natural theology (Kant 1998: A293/B350-A704/B732). This is supposed to be the special department of pure reason. The epistemological conclusions reached in the “transcendental aesthetic” and the “transcendental analytic” are now made the basis for a critique of the exercise of pure reason in the realm of ontology.

1. The ideas of reason

Kant distinguishes two fundamental cognitive faculties, viz. intuition and thought, and holds that both are essential to knowledge. He now distinguishes two different faculties under the head of thought, and calls them understanding and reason. The categories and the pure principles which involve them belong to understanding, and have been dealt with in the “transcendental analytic.” Kant holds that there are other concepts peculiar to reason. He calls them ideas (A312/B368). The “transcendental dialectic” is concerned with reason and its ideas, and with the a priori arguments, involving these ideas, by which speculative philosophers and natural theologians profess to prove important ontological propositions.

It must be understood that Kant is here using the words “reason” (A131/B169) and “idea” in a special technical sense. The first thing is to see what he means by them, and how he supposes reason and its ideas to be related to understanding and its categories.

The essential point seems to be this. In ordinary practical thinking and in natural science we are continually presented with certain series of terms, which we seem to be able to pursue as far as we like in thought without coming to any natural end-term or limit the two most important types of such series are the spatio-temporal and the causal. Each of these gives rise to two cases. (1a) Any extension or duration seems to be part of a larger extension or longer duration, and there seems to be no intrinsic maximum or upper limit. (1b) Any extension or duration seems to be composed of smaller extensions or shorter durations and there seems to be no intrinsic minimum or lower limit (2a) Every event seems to be the effect of some earlier event, and we seem never to reach back to any event which is a cause but not an effect. (2b) The existence of any substance seems to be intrinsically contingent. We may be able to say that it is a necessary consequence of the existence of some other substance, as e.g. the existence of a person depends on the previous existence of his parents. But the existence of these other substances is just as contingent intrinsically. We seem never to come to any substance whose existence is intrinsically necessary.

Now in ordinary life and natural science these various unending series give us no trouble. We follow each one just so far as we need for the purpose in hand, while we

recognize that it could have been followed further in the same direction if necessary. But the human mind is so constituted that it cannot help reflecting philosophically on such series, and when it does so it finds them profoundly unsatisfactory. It cannot help thinking that they must in fact be completed somehow, that they must have first and last terms, and so on. Now Kant means by "reason" that factor in our intellectual make-up which will not let us rest content with the various unending series which the understanding presents to our notice, and which tries to think of each such series as somehow ended or completed in a characteristic way. By "ideas of reason" he means the concepts of such last terms and completed wholes. Thus the notion of a first event, or the notion of the world as a completed spatio-temporal whole, is an idea of reason. So too is the notion of an event which is a cause of later events but not an effect of earlier events. So too is the notion of a perfectly simple substance with no parts. So too is the notion of a substance whose existence is intrinsically necessary.

Now not only are there such ideas. Speculative philosophers and natural theologians have tried to prove that they have actual application. It is alleged, e.g., by indeterminists that human volitions are events which have effects but are not completely determined by earlier events. Many philosophers have argued that the human soul must be a simple substance, and have tried to prove from this that it is immortal. Again, theologians regard God as an existent whose existence is intrinsically necessary; and they have put forward various arguments to prove that there must be an entity answering to this description. Thus speculative philosophy and natural theology are specially concerned with ideas of reason.

Now we know that no agreement has been reached on these subjects; so we may suspect that there is something wrong somewhere. Moreover, there is the following interesting fact to be noticed. If we compare and contrast mathematics, natural science, and speculative philosophy, we notice two things. (1) No one in his senses doubts that the principles and methods of mathematics are sound, that its results are certain, and that it continually advances. No one seriously doubts that the principles and methods of natural science are sound, that its results are at least highly probable and are corrigible if mistaken in detail, and that it continually advances. But there are no agreed results, and there is no steady advance in speculative philosophy and theology. (2) Yet speculative philosophy and theology use the same concepts and the same a priori principles as mathematics and natural science. They use the notions of space and time, cause and substance, and such principles as the permanence of substance and the law of universal causation. It is therefore very important to discover and to state clearly the limits within which these concepts and principles are valid and fruitful, and outside which they have no valid use.

Kant claims to have done this in the "transcendental aesthetic" and the "transcendental analytic." For he claims to have shown there that space, time, and the categories and the principles which involve them, cannot from their very nature be significantly used outside the range of possible human sense-perception. But he is not content with this. He is quite certain that the fallacies into which speculative philosophers and natural theologians have fallen are not simply chance mistakes which they might have avoided if they had been cleverer or luckier. They are intrinsic to the nature of the human mind. It is natural to any intelligent man to speculate on these

topics, and, if he does so, to use arguments of this kind about them. Moreover there are negative as well as positive ontologists, and Kant holds that their arguments are no less fallacious. There are persons who claim to prove a priori that the world cannot have a beginning in time or be limited in space (A426/B454). There are persons who claim to prove that there cannot be simple substances (A434/B462), that the soul must come to an end with the death of the body (A445/B473), that there cannot be incompletely determined volitions, and that no such entity as the God of natural theology is possible (A452/B480). According to Kant their arguments are as baseless as those of their opponents and for the same reasons.

Now Kant always assumes as evident that men could not have a cognitive faculty, with characteristic innate equipment, which served no useful purpose at all and was incapable of leading to anything but fallacies. He takes it for granted that there must be a right and a wrong use for the ideas of reason. He therefore devotes himself in the "transcendental dialectic" to a two-fold task. One is to show in detail that the use made of the ideas of reason by speculative philosophers and natural theologians, and by those who attempt to reach opposite conclusions by similar a priori arguments, is mistaken. The other is to discover and to state the right use of the ideas of reason in human thinking.

2. The problems of speculative philosophy

Owing to Kant's passion for taking the divisions of formal logic as a clue to the divisions of transcendental philosophy, there is a good deal of artificiality in the arrangement of the material in the "transcendental dialectic." It seems to me that in some cases what is essentially the same problem is discussed several times under different headings. The arguments for and against the proposition that there is an intrinsically necessary existent on which the existence of everything else depends are discussed twice over. For I cannot see any real difference between the fourth antinomy and the cosmological argument for the existence of God. However, the essential points are these.

(1) On Kant's view, the misuse of the ideas of reason leads to three bogus a priori sciences, which he calls rational cosmology (A408/B435), rational psychology (A343/B401), and speculative theology (A814/B842). Rational cosmology claims to prove a priori that the world did or that it did not have a beginning, that it is or that it is not limited in extent, that it is or that it is not composed of simple substances. Rational psychology claims to prove a priori that the human soul is a simple substance, that it survives the death of the body, and so on. Speculative theology claims to prove a priori, without using specifically ethical or religious premisses and without appealing to any alleged divine revelation, that there is a being which exists of necessity and that the existence of everything else is derived from it.

(2) According to Kant one of the ideas of reason, viz. the idea of freedom, is in a quite peculiar position (A3/B7). In the *Critique of Pure Reason* we are given the a priori arguments for complete determinism and the a priori arguments for free will. But the solution offered by Kant is that both conclusions may be true. The same person may be completely determined in all his actions when considered as a phenomenon, but may be

undetermined when considered as a noumenon. Now in his ethical works Kant takes in the additional premiss, which seems to him obvious, that a man is a moral agent, subject to obligations, and responsible for his deliberate actions. He argues that this entails that a man is free as regards his noumenal self, though completely determined as regards his phenomenal self. So we can conclude that the idea of freedom certainly does apply within the world of noumena.

(3) As regards rational cosmology the results of Kant's discussion are purely destructive, and they are not supplemented by anything positive in the two later *Critiques*. The only positive feature is this. Kant tries to explain the useful part which is played in human thought by the proper use of these ideas of reason which lead to the fallacies of rational cosmology when misused.

(4) As regards rational psychology the results of the discussion in the "transcendental dialectic" are again purely destructive. And the same can be said of speculative theology. Kant never went back on the conclusion that all such arguments for the simplicity and immortality of the soul or for the existence of God are simply fallacious. But he also concluded that any arguments of the same type against the simplicity or immortality of the soul or against the existence of God are equally fallacious. The a priori arguments for and against simply prove nothing and leave an open field. Now in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant argues that, when certain ethical facts are taken into account as premisses, we have positive grounds for accepting the immortality of the soul and the existence of God (Kant 1999: 238-246). In the *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 2000: 231-346), which is largely concerned with the nature and validity of the notion of teleology, the question of the argument from design is reverted to and discussed at a considerably deeper level than in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

(5) The discussion of the soul in the "transcendental dialectic" must be taken along with Kant's many statements about the self in other parts of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as well as with his doctrine in the ethical works. It is a very complicated story indeed, and of very doubtful consistency.

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