

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

When Kant appeared on the scene, he found himself confronted by a confusing array of philosophical schools. Romanticism, skepticism, rationalism, idealism, empiricism ... all were flourishing within their own spheres. (Hegel's writings emerged when Kant was near the end of his career, so had virtually no influence on him.) Although scholars frequently portray Kantian philosophy as an attempt to meld rationalism and empiricism, Kant himself freely acknowledged the influence of Rousseau:

I am myself by inclination a seeker after truth. I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge and an eager restlessness to advance in it, as well as satisfaction in every acquisition. There was a time when I believed that this alone could constitute the honor of mankind, and I despised the rabble who know nothing. Rousseau set me right. This blind preference disappeared; I learned to respect men, and I would find myself far more useless than the common workingman if I did not believe that this consideration could confer value to all others to establish the rights of mankind. (Comments included in his copy of notes published posthumously as Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime.)

I may be naïve, but it appears to me that this transformation had a powerful influence on Kant's thinking about morals. (It also seems to pose problems for critics who maintain that Kant lived in an ivory tower, where the emotions and perceptions of common people on the street had no place.) Consider the following quotes. First, Rousseau in *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*:

It is a grand and beautiful sight to see man emerge somehow from nothing by his own efforts; dissipate, by the light of his reason, the shadows in which nature had enveloped him; rise above himself; soar by means of his mind into the heavenly regions; traverse, like the sun, the vast expanse of the universe with giant steps; and, what is even grander and more difficult, return to himself in order to study man and know his nature, his duties, and his end.

Now, Kant's definition of enlightenment in his essay, *What is Enlightenment?*:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another

In *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent*, Kant continued:

[Mankind] should not be led by instinct, nor be provided for and instructed by ready-made knowledge; instead, he should produce everything for himself.

In Kant's view, the essential core of any legitimate religion was not Divine mandate or ritualistic duty. Rather, it was pure morality. Echoing Aristotle (moral men do moral deeds), Kant asserted that living piously in response to religious duty or some other external constraint did not constitute morality. True morality could only come from within – from an intrinsic conviction that certain things were right and other things were wrong.

Moral conviction in Kant's view was not learned or otherwise acquired. It dwelt within mankind *a priori* and imposed itself so profoundly on the conscience that it became a moral imperative. In order to form the basis for true religion, this moral drive must be absolute and unswerving – it must be a *categorical imperative*. Kant's categorical imperative would compel us to “act as if the maxim of our action were to become by our will a universal law of nature.” (*Practical Reason*) I find it amusing to note that the existentialist Sartre made it clear that he rejected most things Kantian, yet adopted a very similar view of appropriate conduct.

The tempering caveat that Kant added to his categorical imperative was that, regardless of how beneficial an action might be to the majority, it could not be moral if it resulted in harm to a minority, no matter how unpopular or disenfranchised that minority might be. This is the part of Kant's moral thought that seems to me to be a reflection of his encounter with Rousseau.

So, does all of this mean that scholars are mistaken when they describe Kant's philosophy as an attempt to reconcile rationalism and empiricism? Not at all. He saw some validity in both schools of thought, but also found flaws in both. His conclusion that it is the representation that makes the object possible and not the object that makes the representation possible was perhaps his most revolutionary contribution to philosophy.

Translating this obscure conclusion requires a better mind than my own, but I will offer my overly simplistic version. First, in deference to the empiricist, he acknowledges that we can obtain knowledge by exercising our senses (objects are “immanent in our experience”). However, he rebels at Berkley's contention that the existence of things depends on our experiencing them (the *immaterialism* or *empirical idealism* that Nicole discussed so capably).

He submitted a concept that he called empirical realism, which granted the value of sensory experience, but also asserted the existence of “things-in-themselves.” We experience things and ascribe meaning to them as phenomena, but they also exist independently as pneumena (or neumena). This seems to look back to Plato and forward to the debate between Husserl and Heidegger.

One of the seminal premises that Kant presented was that empirical data (phenomena) were meaningless without an intellectual context for interpreting them. If we were simply blank, passive receptors, then sensory input would flow into us randomly and align themselves just as randomly in our minds. Kant saw the flaw in that sort of philosophy and asserted that we must have intrinsic vehicles for ordering and interpreting those sensory stimuli. He contended that those faculties resided in us *a priori*, enabling us to process empirical data. (The Christian philosopher and apologist Cornelius Van Til followed a similar path with his *presuppositionalism*.)

This empirical realism formed the basis for Kant’s approach to science. Beginning with the first phenomena that we observe and process via the intrinsic, *a priori* faculties of our minds, we develop rational, scientific thought. We start with one observation, process and categorize it, and then use it as the foundation for our next observation. Kant says this process involves conditioned principles because each new conclusion is conditioned on previous verifiable experience.

However, Kant could not accept a purely empirical world. Among other things, it excluded three components (“Ideas of reason”) that he was convinced were foundational: God, freedom and immortality. He accounted for them through a concession to rationalist thought by way of a concept that he called transcendental idealism. He thus opened the way to things that existed *in spite of* our inability to experience them empirically. Unlike pure rationalism, though, Kant concluded that, although one could conceive of these things intellectually, one could neither define nor quantify them intellectually.

As empirical realism was to Kantian science, so transcendental idealism was to Kantian religion and ethics. On the empirical side, Kant posited things that existed both as phenomena (things observed) and pneumena (things as they are). On the transcendental side, he posited things that were only pneumena, but that were essential to a phenomenological world. Our grasp of these transcendental things depended, not on the conditioned principles of science, but on

unconditioned principles. One could not start with a known quantity and build up a rational understanding of God or freedom or immortality. Those things exist independent of belief or experience or thought (much like the concept of *Yahweh*, the self-existent One).

One of the really intriguing features of Kant's empirical realism and transcendental idealism relates to determinism and free will. On the scientific side, Kant believed in determinism because of his concept of conditioned principles. On the moral and religious side, he believed in free will because of his concept of unconditioned principles. (While the categorical imperative represented Kant's moral ideal, he recognized mankind's ability to choose actions that they knew could not serve as universal moral norms.)

Although this is a totally inadequate treatment of Kant's philosophy, I am going to end it here ... lest I say more and confirm the reader's suspicion that I don't know what I'm talking about. At the very least, I trust that this discussion will encourage further investigation and pave the way to a little better understanding of the Enlightenment and of the factors that paved the way for American Transcendentalism.

The full text of this paper appears at the link below, along with all of Nicole's notes and two very detailed academic discussions of Kantian philosophy:

http://www.alphasolutionsgrp.com/truth_forum.htm