

**KANT'S RELEVANCE FOR  
CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY**

by

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**DISCUSSION PAPER**

on

C. Ellsworth Hood's

**THE USE AND ABUSE OF MATHEMATICS:  
A KANTIAN CRITIQUE**

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What relevance, if any, does the philosophy of Immanuel Kant have for resolving contemporary philosophical issues? Are there any Kantian doctrines which could serve as the basis for adjudicating the philosophical and moral differences of the contemporary world? What hope, if any, does a Kantian approach offer for forging a global philosophy which would unify diverse cultural differences? Is such a global philosophy possible? If possible, would it be desirable? I shall argue that regardless of the answers to the last two questions there are a number of problems and inconsistencies at the heart of Kant's philosophy which render it useless for these purposes.

Kant's most fundamental assumption was that it is possible to bring about a Copernican revolution in philosophy. That is, as Professor Hood points out, instead of assuming that knowledge must conform to objects of knowledge, Kant assumed that objects of knowledge must conform to the way they are known. Kant also assumed that any characteristic found to hold for every object of knowledge must be an a priori contribution of the mind. He argued, e.g., that because we are unable to perceive anything that is not extended in space, and perception is a temporal process, space and time are not features of the world which exist independently of us but are only forms of intuition, i.e., ways in which the mind orders sensations. And he argued that any attempt to relate one object of knowledge to another necessarily involves one or more of the categories of Aristotelian logic. However, the assumptions on which Kant's arguments rest are unfounded. This can be seen by considering an analogy often used in discussions of Kant's theory of space. Suppose we were born wearing blue eyeglasses which we could not remove. Everything we perceived would then be blue. But, since we could not remove the glasses it would be impossible for us to determine whether everything was in fact blue or only

appeared that way. The point of the analogy is that it does not follow from the fact that something is a universal characteristic of objects of knowledge that it must be due to an a priori feature of the mind. Nor does it follow that we must experience objects that way. To change the analogy slightly, it does not follow that because we are wearing blue glasses that we could not at some other time, past or future, wear red glasses. But, Kant not only believed that he had proven that space is an a priori feature of the mind, he argued that it is possible for us to conceive only one space, the space of Euclidean geometry. He also seems to have believed that no alternatives to Aristotelian logic and Newtonian physics were possible. Kant's position, therefore, requires the assumption that there are a priori features of the human mind which have been and will be the same throughout all time. This goes counter to the facts of both evolution and history. It would, of course, be anachronistic to attack Kant for not having foreseen the development of modern logic, non-Euclidean geometries, and relativity and quantum physics. However, the purpose of the present symposium is to determine what promise, if any, a Kantian approach has for unifying diverse philosophical traditions and the fact that Kant assumed there were fixed a priori features of the mind would seem to make unmodified Kantianism irrelevant to serve this function. Kant's assumption that the mind can be divided into various faculties such as Reason and Understanding has also been abandoned by contemporary philosophers who speak simply of the problems involved in engaging in certain activities such as theory construction, confirmation, etc.

Kant's belief that no alternatives to Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics were possible led him to conclude that these sciences must rest on synthetic a priori judgments. The axioms of Euclidean geometry, e.g., seemed

to him to be both universal and necessary judgments established by reason alone and at the same time descriptive of the empirical world. The concepts of substance and causality assumed in Newtonian physics similarly seemed to him to be necessary presuppositions for empirical science. The belief that synthetic a priori judgments, which are both necessary and descriptive of the world, are possible, has been universally abandoned by contemporary thinkers. The prevailing opinion can perhaps be summed up in the words of Einstein: "As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality."<sup>1</sup> Kant, in fact, employed the concept of necessity in an ambiguous way. Analytic judgments were taken by him to be necessary because their denials were contradictions; but synthetic a priori judgments were said to be necessary because they were necessary conditions for engaging in certain activities. Kant's failure to distinguish these two different senses of necessity seems to be related to another problem with his position, confusion regarding the way in which an activity may be said to presuppose certain rules or principles. This confusion can be seen in the remark quoted by Professor Hood, that "natural science presupposes metaphysics of nature." If by this Kant meant that to engage in natural science one must consciously assume as true the various constitutive and regulative principles he formulated, this seems quite obviously false. The natural scientist, e.g., need not assume what Kant called the principle of reflective judgment--that we will always be able to systematize statements about the external world--but need only attempt to discover to what extent this is true. On the other hand, if Kant meant that natural science would be impossible without such a principle being true

this also seems to be false. Contemporary philosophers also reject the concept of judgment Kant employed because it involves an ambiguous merging of the psychological and the logical.

It was because Kant believed that he discovered principles presupposed in all our thinking about the world that he proclaimed he had formulated a transcendental metaphysics which describes how human beings must experience the world. By distinguishing between things as experienced by us, as opposed to things in themselves, he thought that he had replaced dogmatic metaphysics, which illicitly claimed to give us certain knowledge about the world independent of us, with his own "critical philosophy" which could give us certain knowledge because it dealt only with how we experience the world. However, viewed from the perspective of the present, Kant's claim to have described how human beings must experience the world appears as dogmatic as the rationalistic metaphysics he rejected. Indeed, although Kant rejected rationalistic metaphysics, the spirit which motivated his philosophy was the same quest for certainty that motivated the rationalists. Kant continually disparaged knowledge that fell short of certainty. He believed, e.g., that "nothing could be more absurd in a system of metaphysics, a philosophy of pure reason, than wanting to base judgments on probability and conjecture.... Only in empirical natural science can conjectures be permitted by means of induction and analogy...."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Kant claims to have obtained this certainty. No philosopher today would dare boast about his or her work, as Kant does about the Critique of Pure Reason, that in it: "I venture to assert that there is not a single metaphysical problem which has not been solved or for the solution of which the key at least has not been supplied."<sup>3</sup> It is, therefore, not only specific doctrines of Kant's philosophy which are incompatible with contemporary thought, but the

hopes behind it as well.

Despite Kant's assertion that metaphysics should not be based on analogy much of the critical philosophy rests on metaphors and analogies. For example, the claim that knowledge can be analyzed into form and content is a metaphor. And analogy plays a crucial role in another central conception of Kantian metaphysics, the idea of a noumenon. It follows from Kant's view that objects of knowledge must conform to the way we know them, that we can never know things in themselves. Kant speaks of a thing in itself as a noumenon. As Stephen Korner has pointed out when Kant first introduces the term 'noumenon' he uses it to refer to merely the property of not being an object of experience or a phenomenon. Korner further points out that defined this way the concept of a noumenon is similar to the concept of the non-colored, except it is possible for us to experience something that is non-colored, e.g., a pain, while a noumenon is defined as something we can never experience. Indeed, defined this way it is not clear exactly what one might mean in speaking of a noumenon as a thing. It is equally unclear what warrant one might have for speaking in the plural of things in themselves or noumena. However, Kant not only used the plural term 'noumena', he went on to identify such entities as noumenal selves which he claimed must be conceived of as enjoying complete freedom since they are entirely outside the causal order of nature. Conceived as a part of nature human beings are totally determined in their actions. But conceived as noumenal selves they are totally rational, moral, beings who act from respect for law rather than natural desires. How the decisions of such unknowable selves can bring about actions in the empirical world is left unexplained. Nevertheless, Kant's moral theory and philosophy of religion are built on the quicksand of the concept of noumena.

As Professor Hood points out Kant believed that Reason gives birth to some ideas which, unlike the ideas of mathematics and physics, are "too rich in content to be given in intuition." And as Professor Hood further points out, Kant thought that it was the task of philosophy to relate all knowledge to the aims of human reason, i.e., to attempt to work out a philosophical system in which all the aspirations of rationality are satisfied. Thus just as Kant argued that the fact that matter is viewed in a strictly quantitative way in Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics does not mean that one may not also interpret it as dynamic in character, the fact that nature and human actions viewed scientifically are totally determined by causal laws does not mean that one may not also view them as if they also conform to some purpose of a divine being, understood as having noumenal existence. Practical Reason, for example, may be interpreted as given to us by nature so that we can be self-directing moral agents, and history may be conceived of as embodying purposes greater than those of humans. In putting forth such ideas Kant looked upon himself as supplementing rather than contradicting science. I do not think this is true but do not have the space to develop the point here.

More important for assessing the relevance of Kant's philosophy for the present is his distinction between constitutive principles which he believed are presupposed in every act of knowledge and regulative principles which are merely rules or principles assumed for the purposes of introducing order into our ideas and making thought and action consistent. This distinction is important because in discussing the latter rules Kant did not claim the dogmatic certainty be claimed for his analysis of constitutive principles, and because treating all principles of thought as regulative rules would bring Kant close to the non-dogmatic position of a thinker such as

C. I. Lewis who was greatly influenced by Kant but whose thought is free of the defects mentioned above. Emphasis on the regulative role of Reason might have brought Kant to see that the concept of intelligent behavior is as important as that of Reason conceived of as the capacity to recognize contradictions and systematize knowledge. Emphasis on human beings as not merely thinkers but agents in the world might also have brought Kant to see, as the existentialists have taught us, that concern is as basic a mode of experiencing the world as causality. Finally, had he stressed the capacity of humans to suffer, as much as he stressed the need for rules, he might have come to see that universalization is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for moral action and that respect for persons must be grounded as much on their capacity to suffer as on their ability to reason. I say Kant might have come to believe the foregoing, not because I think it was historically possible for him to have done so, but because those who have come to think in these ways were greatly influenced by Kant. Although Kant did not succeed in freeing himself from dogmatism and parochialism there are still many things we can learn from his attempt that may help us in ours.



Notes

1. Quoted by Carl G. Hempel in "Geometry and Empirical Science," *American Mathematical Monthly*, 52, 1945. Reprinted in Feigl, Herbert and Sellars, Wilfred, eds., Readings in Philosophical Analysis (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), p. 249.
2. Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, Lewis W. Beck, trans. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1951), p. 118.
3. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, abridged edition, Norman Kemp Smith, trans. (London: Macmillan, 1934), p. 8.