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Critique, Not Criticism

When one encounters the word "critique," one readily thinks of a negative strategy, frequently of negative dismissal, in the spirit of "criticism." As a consequence, it is easy to miss a profound difference between "critique" and "criticism." Given the difference in what each does with respect to the phenomena that initiates them, the difference is so great that one can even speak of them as 180 degrees opposite to one another.

Criticism and Critical Thinking are Grounded in "Knowledge"

"Criticism" and "critical thinking" elevates the critic above the object of its concern. A critic is understood to be competent when s/he offers "informed criticism," rather than mere opinion, about a region of investigation. Persons who offer excellent criticism are the "geniuses" of the world because they are the informed. Because of their "critical skills," they are able to determine for us what is "mere myth" and what are "the facts."

Criticism begins as knowledgeable skepticism that doubts the evidence because "it knows better." The parria of criticism is "blind acceptance" of any and every claim over a set of phenomena. However, the attitude of criticism and critical thinking easily is elevated to arrogance as the "expert" comes to rein sovereign over a topic.

In this form of skepticism, the skeptic is driven by her/his superior knowledge to instruct the less informed about the true facts of the case or circumstances in question. In other words, criticism and critical thinking presupposes that the critic possesses the adequate knowledge and skills to determine the validity of a claim or the "truth of the matter."

To be sure, a "good" critic is able not only to determine but, more importantly, to recognize and acknowledge where knowledge is limited by pointing out what has been critically determined to be the case and what remains uncertain with respect to the facts in the case. Nonetheless, what anchors the critics claims is her/his possession of "superior knowledge with respect to the "facts" of the case in question.

Critique is Grounded in "Necessities"

Whereas "criticism" and "critical thinking" elevate the critic above the object of its concern because of the critics "knowledge" of the case in question, "critique" humbles the critic with the awareness that any and everything that we experience is a set of appearances rather than empirical facts as well as with the awareness that "knowledge" -- more appropriately, understanding of empirical facts -- involves *adding things to the phenomena in question that are not there in the phenomena*. As a consequence, understanding and action are not grounded in "knowledge" but are grounded in what the observer/agent can determine to be *necessary* for her/him to experience the phenomena in the first place. These *necessary* elements can only be

indirectly verified (if at all) by the empirical evidence that they enable us to experience. They are incapable of empirical proof or disproof precisely because they are not empirical.

Hence, "critique" involves acknowledgement that *everything depends upon just what one adds to the phenomena* when one can *never be certain that what one adds is absolutely correct*. In short, "criticism" and "critical thinking" assume that we possess knowledge with certainty whereas "critique" assumes that understanding *necessarily* requires that the individual contribute things to the activity of understanding that are exclusively accessible *only in and through the mind*, and, therefore, are incapable of being known with certainty. Those *necessary* elements that must be added to the phenomena in question are incapable of proof or disproof because proof and disproof require empirical evidence, and, by definition, those elements of understanding that must be contributed by the mind are incapable of direct verification or falsification by empirical phenomena -- only indirect verification or falsification -- because they are not directly given with the empirical phenomena.

The "Critical Idealist" who engages in the strategies of "critique" is different not only from the objective "Empiricist" who believes that we get to reality simply by opening our eyes but also from the "Critical Realist." However, the alternative here between a "Critical Idealist" and a "Critical Realist" is NOT the alternative between a subjective "Idealist" and an objective "Empiricist!"

The subjective "Idealist" (but *not* the "Critical Idealist") believes that reality is an eternal, absolute system of mental elements (call them "ideas," "essences," "universals," or "forms") that exist independent of any and all physical phenomena. This form of "Idealism" is frequently called Platonism. In fact, though, the very notion that "ideas" exist is a *non sequitur*, given that "existence" requires spatial location and, by definition, "ideas" are incapable of being physically located in space.

The objective "Empiricist" (but *not* the "Critical Realist") believes that reality is entirely physical, and all one needs in order to obtain certain knowledge is to "open one's eyes." This form of "Empiricism" is also a *non sequitur* because not only knowledge but also the more circumspect understanding that acknowledges that knowledge is by no means empirically absolute requires that mental (i.e., non-empirical) things be added to the empirical phenomena/evidence in order to understand in the first place.

Therefore, the alternative between "Critical Idealism" and "Critical Realism" is subtly and profoundly different than the alternative between "Subjective Idealism" and "Objective Empiricism." The "Critical Idealist" has been forced to acknowledge by the very process of understanding that there is more to understanding phenomena than simply "opening one's eyes." However, s/he also has been forced to acknowledge by the very process of understanding that there is more to understanding phenomena than simply "closing one's eyes" to perceive absolute "ideas" that are found, somehow, only in the mind.

The "Critical Realist," agrees with the "Critical Idealist" that there can be no certain knowledge of empirical phenomena because we do not have direct and immediate access to the world "as it is" -- rather, we only experience the world "as a set of appearances." Where the "Critical

Realist" differs from the "Critical Idealist" is that the "Critical Realist" insists that the physical world consists of an absolute, empirical order that we are capable of knowing. Mathematics constitutes the paradigm of knowledge according to the "Critical Realist."

Nonetheless, whereas admittedly the power of mathematics for understanding the physical world is astonishing, it can never provide absolute understanding because mathematics is a symbol system that is not found "naturally" in phenomena but must be *added to the phenomena*. We don't get "one" or "two," much less "zero," simply by opening our eyes. The insistence that the physical world *must conform to the laws and logic of mathematics* is a *dogmatic claim*, not an empirical claim. We don't and cannot ever know that mathematics applies to all circumstances at all times. What we have come to understand is that, the more we are able to apply mathematical symbols in the form of universal laws to the empirical phenomena, the more we appear (!) to be able to understand, but even that mathematical understanding is subject to revision ...

What distinguishes the Critical Idealist from the Critical Realist is that the latter insists that the world *must conform to a set of absolute ideas* whereas the former insists that understanding *must conform to a set of necessary but unprovable ideas* if we are to understand it. The difference here couldn't be greater although it is flagged only by the word "necessary."

Cassirer and Symbolic Systems

What do we call those elements of understanding that must be *added to the phenomena for understanding* if these "necessary" elements for understanding cannot be demonstrated to *exist independent of the world of appearances to which they apply* and if the "necessary" elements for understanding cannot be proved/disproved by the empirical evidence to which they must be applied? Clearly, they "go beyond" the merely empirical phenomena, but, given that we encounter them only in relationship to a world of physical phenomena, we are incapable of proving/disproving that they actually *exist* independent of the world of phenomena that we experience. As we observed above, the very notion of "existence" requires spatial location, so that any insistence on the part of "Subjective Idealism" that they *must exist independent of the world of phenomena* is as much a dogmatic claim as that of the "Objective Empiricist" who insists that the physical world *must be entirely reducing let to empirical perception*.

"Critical Idealism" speaks of these elements as "transcendental." This is potentially mis-leading because "transcendental" is most readily associated with "Subjective Idealism" to apply to elements of experience that absolutely "go beyond" the physical world. "Critical Idealism" employs the term "transcendental" to apply merely to those non-empirical elements of experience that are *necessary for us to experience and understand the empirical world in the manner that we do understand*. It would never occur to us to seek out "transcendental" *necessities* were we not to experience a world/universe of phenomena both physical and mental as a ceaseless flow of appearances that we appear to be able to understand.

"Critical Idealism's" task is to identify those *necessary transcendental elements of experience* that are the condition of possibility for us to experience the world as we do. The first task of "Critical Idealism" is to determine what is *necessary* for us to understand (!) physical phenomena. These include what Ernst Cassirer called "symbol systems" that allow humanity to

understand and engage the world to a degree incapable for other species who understand and engage the world primarily by mere instincts. It is because humanity is able to insert symbols into the midst of the binary stimulus-response structure of perception that it shares with other species that humanity is not only capable of understanding and acting on the basis of instinct but also with conscious intentionality.

This task of understanding physical phenomena is called "theoretical reason." It involves everything from an entire system of categories (not just isolated ideas) that includes mathematics as well as our ability to experience the "space" and "time" in which events occur. We experience the appearances of physical objects as located "in" space and the appearances of events occurring "in" time, but we don't and cannot experience "pure" space and time themselves. NOTE: The notion "pure" here refers to the absence of empirical phenomena. It does not refer to "superior" or "absolute." Not only does no other species concern itself with the identification of these "pure," *necessary, transcendental elements* for understanding experience, but also no other species (as far as we can determine) can look at the sun and insist that it is standing still and that we are rotating on the surface of the earth at a speed of some 1,000 miles/hour. "Critical Idealism" investigates these *necessary* elements of our capacity of "theoretical reason" that are transcendental and inaccessible to the senses.

Beyond Theoretical to Aesthetics and Practical Reason

As with theoretical reason, the reader can look to other blog entries for a more developed grasp of the significance of humanity's experience of aesthetics that are not limited to "the arts" but involve general capacities of perception generally as well as the experience of "beauty" and the "mathematical" and "dynamical" sublime. Here it is important to underscore that there is more to "Critical Idealism" than the theoretical reason that is concerned with understanding physical phenomena. Humanity does not merely understand its world; it can consciously change it.

There is a set of transcendental, "pure," *necessary* capacities that make this conscious transformation of the world possible. They include "creative" or "autonomous" freedom, that is, the ability to consciously initiate a sequence of events that nature on its own could never accomplish. As with all "pure" and *necessary, transcendental* elements, we are incapable of proving or disproving that we possess this "autonomous" freedom, but we couldn't experience ourselves as capable of doing what we do without assuming that we possess "autonomous" freedom. It is because of these transcendental capacities that we are able to hold ourselves morally accountable for what we do with these capacities even if we don't hold ourselves accountable. We don't hold other species or expect other species to hold themselves morally responsible for what they do. One can even go so far to say that this set of capacities is what makes it possible for us to be more than animals. In short, we are a moral species not because we act morally but because we can act morally, that is, we can do the right thing because it is right and not act exclusively on the basis of self- or corporate interests.

Critical Idealism reminds us because it cannot force anyone to be moral. Critical Idealism can only issue a challenge: Why be less than human? The answer we give depends upon our ability to distinguish between "critique" and "criticism."