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Critical Idealism: History, Scripture, and Social Responsibility

The linguistic formulation “*transcendental consciousness*” appears to privilege the non- or a-historical and metaphysical over any and all historical particularity. When one adds to such terminology the recognition that sense perception is exclusively of appearances and not of things-in-themselves, one could easily arrive at the conclusion that historical particularity is secondary to transcendental consciousness since whatever is historical is *mere appearance*. The final apparent dismissal of the historical seems to be implicit in the Copernican Turn away from *external content* to internal conditions of possibility and capacities. Given the shift away from consequences to internal conditions and capacities, the physical world of appearances and the historical apparently have no significant role to play in Critical Idealism.

Furthermore, Critical Idealism’s dismissal of any attempts to treat scripture as a source of revelation either for making claims to know absolute the divine will or for heteronomous moral principles that we *must* use to guide our decisions suggests that scriptures are insignificant for transcendental consciousness.

Finally, if the focus of one’s moral status consists in concentrating on the self-legislation of the moral principle to govern one’s actions *and not on the concrete consequences of that action*, it appears that Critical Idealism constitutes a total dismissal of social responsibility.

In light of what is so obvious, it is worthwhile to examine these conclusions for their accuracy because the obvious is deceiving. The least that one would need to do would be to ask whether the implicit dualism presupposed by the dismissal of these three regions of experience is accurately applied to Critical Idealism. Does Critical Realism succumb to some kind of Leibnizian division of experience into a dualistic pre-stabilized harmony between mind and matter? Is there an ugly ditch between the “accidental truths” of history and the “necessary truths” of reason as Lessing formulated the dualistic world view?

Common to these three dismissals of Critical Idealism based on the terminology of transcendental consciousness and historical particularity, autonomous morality and heteronomous revelation, and the categorical as opposed to the hypothetical, is the erroneous strategy that assumes that one knows what the terminology means without examining it in light of the shift in focus from knowledge about contents and empirical causal explanations to the illumination of necessary conditions of possibility and capacities. Within a subject – object framework, one talks about a knowing subject and a known object. By default there is a dualism if not an outright gap between the subject and object, and one must invoke some kind of transcending unity (e.g., Aristotelian notion of substance, Aquinas’/Rahner’s notion of “is,” or

Heidegger's notion of possibilities) in order to connect the two (Cartesian) dimensions. In short, what one has to connect are two kinds of contents, the dualism of mind and body.

Obviously, it seems, when Kant talks about a transcendently knowing subject, he has to be working within a dualistic subject – object framework. The suspicion appears to be confirmed by Kant himself when he insists upon using the term “metaphysics.” This suggests by definition that what “goes beyond” the physical is somehow distinct and detached from the physical. Yet, Kant challenges us to think differently: “The legislation (*Gesetzgebung*) of human reason (philosophy) has two objects, nature and freedom, and therefore contains not only the law of nature, but also the moral law *presenting them at first in two distinct systems, but ultimately in one single philosophical system*. The philosophy of nature deals with all *that is*, the philosophy of morals with that which *ought to be*.” (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 868). If we approach Critical Idealism with the conviction that he *must* be talking about a subject – object dualism, then either Kant or we are confused by the following claim of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*:

All philosophy insofar as it is based on grounds of experience can be called *empirical*; but insofar as it sets forth its teachings simply from a priori principles it can be called *pure* philosophy. When the latter is merely formal it is called *logic*; but if it is limited to determinate objects of the understanding it is called *metaphysics*.

“In this way there arises the idea of a twofold metaphysics, a *metaphysics of nature* and a *metaphysics of morals*. Physics will therefore have its empirical part but it will also have a rational part; so too will ethics, though here the empirical part might be given the special name *practical anthropology*, while the rational part might properly be called *morals*.” (*Groundwork*, 1-2)

It is far more likely that we are confused and not Kant:

“All true metaphysics is derived from the essence of the capacity of thought, and by no means for that reason invented because it is not borrowed from experience, but [rather, metaphysics] contains the pure activities of thought, inclusive of a priori concepts and principles; [and] this [thought] brings the multiplicities of empirical representations first and foremost into a lawful combination in order that it can be empirical knowledge (i.e., experience).” (author's translation) (*Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft* [Weischedel ed.], 17)

Clearly he is distinguishing between elements, but are they dualistic (i.e., separate)? If they are not dualistic, how can one think two and it still be one? The first step must be to get beyond the Cartesian two substances notion of mind and matter. How? Is it not obvious that there is a physical world that is perceptible, material, divisible, and, hence, measurable in contrast to a mental world that is imperceptible, immaterial, indivisible, and, hence, immeasurable? We *must* be talking about two different substances!

Yet we are better served by the metaphor of two sides of the same coin rather than two substances. Our experience consists of appearances and order. To be sure, things like the order of extension (length, width, height, and depth) are given in the senses, but the measurement

system (inches or centimeters) of extension is something we must add to our perception. As ordered as the appearances seem to be, their order with respect to laws is not given with the appearances. The Copernican Revolution teaches us that the order of nature is invisible (the solar system conforms to an order that is contradicted by the senses). Yet, the invisible dimension/order of nature's laws is neither something that we can capriciously invent nor is it something that we perceive just by opening our eyes. The predictable order (laws) of nature is something that we must *add to* the phenomena. In short, we do not create either nature or its laws, but we do add an *a priori* synthetic order that we, in turn, use to *make sense of* and to transform nature. Order is the invisible other side to the coin of perceptible experience. It is not a substance of its own that is somehow separate from the appearances. To the extent, though, that there is an imperceptible order governing nature, it is appropriate for us to use the metaphor of two sides to one coin. Here *metaphysical* does not mean *beyond the physical* so much as *along with the physical*.

Transcendental Consciousness and History

There is a reading (for example by Otto Willareth, *Die Lehre vom Vuel bei Leibniz, seiner Schule in Deutschland und bei Kant* [Strassburg, 1898]) of the Enlightenment generally and of Kant in particular that there was no full appreciation of history until we get to Herder, Kant's student. The thesis of Karl Wolff's *Schillers Theodizee bis zum Beginn der Kantischen Studien mit einer Einleitung über das Theodizee-Problem in der Philosophie und Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1909) is that Lessing is the first comprehensive and insightful conception of an ever so slowly, yet certain, spiritual development of humanity, but the most thorough and enthusiastic proclamation of this thought was Herder's contribution. Josef Kremer in *Das Problem der Theodizee in der Philosophie und Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Kant und Schiller* (Berlin, 1909), 207f, agrees with Wolff. Lessing's famous ring parable in *Nathan the Wise* is taken to be the crucial correction to Kant's conception of religion since Lessing made the entire past and future history of the species wrestling with the moral consequences of its theological revelations the framework for evaluation criterion of the *true* religion. We must wait a much much later date in history before we will be able to determine which tradition has proven itself in fact to be the "true" religion by what it has accomplished ethically. The fact that Kant's moral theory eliminates a focus on consequences (what Kremer calls the teleological), in Kremer's judgment, means that history has no meaning for him.

Critical Idealism, however, does not view history as a documentation of the objectively "factual and particular" — without for a moment truncating the temporal character of experience. Again, we have a reversal of the spy glass: the key to history is not its factual content (consequences) but the human conditions of possibility and capacities that make temporal experience so significant. History is not viewed merely as an open-ended chain of events from the past through the present into the indefinite future. However, both the past and the future are as significant, if not more so, to Critical Idealism as they are to the factual historian.

There is no experience that we can have that is separable from the temporal and spatial. Yet it is not the temporal and spatial aspects of life alone that are significant for life. Significance (understanding) involves *adding something to* the temporal and spatial, which in their strict sense (as *pure intuitions*) are already something that the individual must *add to* appearances since we

don't experience either the "time" or the "space" themselves in which events occur. History, then, is not something exclusively empirical as if objectivity was something one has by opening one's eyes. Therefore, the significance of history is not "what actually happened" or "what will actually happen." The factual is merely the tip of the iceberg of history. Yet, history is also more than Heidegger's or Paul Natorp's (or, for that matter, Aristotle's *hyle* according to Heinz Happ) temporal project of past, future, present possibilities concealed by factuality. Kant would agree with Heidegger that there is no "world" or "time" without "Dasein." This claim does not mean that humanity creates the world or time. It means that no other species experiences the concealed dimension of "what is" as we do, and to do it we must *add elements that are imperceptible. History is a capacity, not a mere content.* It is not something that happens to us, but it is something, as well, that we do.

This is not to deny, then, what David Carr calls the "exclusive club of facts." We cannot change the facts, but we can (and frequently, must) change our understanding and the significance of the facts for our lives as individuals and as communities. The original recording of the facts, which is always perspectival, and the influence of memory on the facts together make it impossible for the facts, which are after all appearances, to determine objectivity on their own. In short, both the past and the future (not to overlook the present) take us to the highest of human capacities and our responsibility for them. Above all, history is a product of *human creativity*, and, as a consequence, it must be exercised with all of the reflective *and critical* skills at our disposal that we don't abnegate on our responsibility.

It is not simply objectivity with respect to the past that requires our creativity (seeing things that aren't there in the mere facts). It is also the future that requires our creativity. When it comes to the future, we are not only creatively constructing a world of facts, but we are also cooperating with others in the transformation of the world. Both activities are grounded in the dignity of each individual, and they involve moral accountability that takes us above the civic law, which we can legally misuse, to the moral law that is the condition of possibility for true justice. We will return to this theme when we talk about our social responsibility.

Here, we are concerned with history as "the past" and not history as "the future past." Lessing's use of history is concerned with the future that will become past and allows us to measure the consequences of traditions. History, though, burdens us as the "past" that we take as the guide to our present. Is history a guide because of its objectivity and/or because our community/tradition is defined by its past as a set of objective facts that separates communities and traditions? Of course not! Critical Idealism reminds us that objectivity is the product of a creative activity that only humanity (as far as we know) can accomplish. As such, objectivity is no more the "obvious facts" than it is "illusory fiction." We are neither slaves to the facts nor are we able to bend history according to a capricious individual or communal narrative (as much as it has been tried). As with perception generally, so too with past history: there would be no "seeing things that are not there" without our being confronted with appearances to which we must respond. The temptation is to want to view the appearances as absolute and to forget that their objectivity requires that the observer(s) add something to them. History is and will always be an open-ended project of *re-membering* the appearances as we continually see new things that we hadn't and couldn't see in the appearances before.

History is no more than a set of factual, particularities than practical reason is reducible to particular consequences. Both history and morality involve “seeing things” and the application of capacities that are by no means separable from the particularities but also not reducible to them.

The conditions that make history an open-endedness (so clearly seen by Kierkegaard), because we *must necessarily* see things that are not there in the particulars, have profound implications for those who insist that scriptures are objective, factual history. The implications of factual particularities are not only devastating for whatever value scriptures might have for us, they are also devastating when it comes to understanding the *pure* religion (practical reason) at the core of the human because it is concerned with our highest capacities.

Transcendental Consciousness and Scripture

Scriptures are not a set of answers but a mine field of volatile questions that require each individual to provide her/his creative answers not from the text but from out of the raw materials of her/his own life. In other words, scriptures no fetish whose physical presence is some kind of protection or whose memorization is going to determine for one what one must do in any given situation. Such a fetish, Kant proposes, is valuable particularly for those who don't read it. (*Religion* [Cambridge, ed.], 116)

Nonetheless, Critical Idealism values the scriptures since there is a *natural* (not a necessary) need to demand “something that *the senses can hold on to*, som confirmation from experience ...” (*Religion* [*Ibid.*], 118) in all traditions. Yet, the value of scripture is not the contingency of its historical revelation but that it is of value “since ... the moral improvement of human beings ... constitutes the true end of all religion of reason, it [moral improvement] will also contain the supreme principle of all scriptural exegesis.” (*Ibid.*, 119-120) Kant defends the confidence that there is only one scripture for any particular tradition “... since ... given the present situation of human insight, some new revelation ushered in through new miracles can hardly be expected, the most reasonable and ... fairest thing to do, once a book is already in place, is to use it from then on as the basis of ecclesiastical instruction.” (*Ibid.*, 136) However, Kant is entirely clear that “... true religion is not to be placed in the knowledge or the profession of what God does or has done for our salvation, but in what we must do to become worthy of it; and this can never be anything but what possesses an unquestionably *unconditional* value ..., and every human being can ... be fully certain of its necessity without the slightest scriptural learning.” (*Ibid.*, 136)

“Every faith which, as historical, bases itself on books, needs for guarantee a *learned public* in which it can be controlled ... through writers who were the contemporaries of the faith's first propagators yet in no way suspect of special collusion with them, and whose connection with our present authors has remained unbroken. The pure faith of reason, on the contrary, does not need any such documentation but is its own proof.” (*Ibid.*, 133-134)

Scriptures are valuable because they can (!) provide an initial engagement of *pure* religion, that is, participation in the invisible Kingdom of God that consists of the Kingdom of Ends (both ends as moral principles and ends as persons who are never mere means) in which the community encourages one another to do the right thing because it is right and not for mere

personal interest. In other words, Critical Idealism values scriptures as a singular event not in need of duplication or supplementation since its/their function is not to provide through the senses (reading) unequivocal objective truths but to remind us that religion has to do with our highest (internal) capacities.

An example: the Christian gospels are not valuable for the historical accuracy of the details at the end of the life of Jesus. Rather, the Christian gospels are valuable for their (ambiguous) portrayal of Jesus as an ethical teacher (in the Weberian notion of an “ideal type”). In other words, the Christian gospels don’t provide us with a road-map of specifics for the cultivation of our moral capacity, but they do provide a most profound example of the significance of practical reason over theoretical reason that must be cultivated and exercised by the individual, not be mere emulation of other perfect examples.

However, scriptures are damaging when they are used for a religious attitude concerned with currying divine favor (*Gunstbewerbung*), which for Kant is not religion at all but a *cult* that, unlike religion, only has value as a *means*. To the extent that scriptures are used to encourage a literal anthropomorphism (much less an anthropomorphic sentimentality), they have little, if any, value for the moral improvement of humanity since one is, in such a cult, more concerned with obtaining divine favor than one is with doing the right thing.

Kant employs on at least four occasions the example of the story of Abraham and Isaac to make the point that something is not right because it is found in the scriptures. Rather, something is right because it is right, and if it happens to be in the scriptures that is secondary to its truth, not the condition for its being true. Not even a miraculous revelation can make something that is wrong right: “... that I should not kill my good son is completely certain; but that you are God because you appear to me [to be so] is not something certain, and it cannot be certain even when your voice blasts out of (the visible) heaven.” (Author’s translation) (*Streit der Fakultäten* [Weischedel ed.], 33*)

Were there to be such a voice, one would have to test its objectivity on the basis of criteria that one cannot hear, and the criteria would have to include the question: what are the consequences of such a voice for the exercise of the moral capacity of practical reason (i.e., for *pure* religion)? The most obvious consequence would be to transform our moral obligation into attempts to encourage divine pleasure and to win divine favor. If such would be the case, then our understanding of religion would undermine the very religion that we know is *necessary*.

In Section IV of *Religion* Kant speaks of the Christian religion as an example of a “learned religion.” He proposes that we must distinguish between a “pure *rational faith* and ... [a]revealed faith (*fides statuaris*). The first ... [is] faith freely accepted by everyone (*fides elicitis*), the second as a commanded faith (*fides imperata*).” (*Religion* [Cambridge ed.], 160) He then proceeds to distinguish between the Christian *religion* and the Christian *faith*. The former is grounded in mere concepts of reason, the latter is made the foundation of a church. Service in such a church can take two forms: a service “rendered to the church in accordance with its historical faith;” or a service in accordance with “the practical and moral faith of reason.” (*Ibid.*, 161) Speaking of the importance, then, of Christianity as a “learned religion,” Kant suggests:

“In Christian revealed doctrine . . . , we cannot by any means begin with an *unconditional faith* in revealed propositions (of themselves hidden to reason) and then have erudite cognition follow behind, somewhat like a mere defense against an enemy attacking the rear train; for then the Christian faith would not just be *fides imperata* but *fides servilis* as well. Hence it must always be taught at least as *fides historica elicita*, i.e., *erudition* would have to constitute in it, as a revealed doctrine of faith, not the rearguard but the vanguard, the small number of scriptural scholars . . . , who . . . cannot . . . dispense with profane learning, dragging behind them the long train of the unlearned (the laity) who are on their own uninformed about Scripture . . .” (*Ibid.*, 161)

In other words, *pure* religion has a place in biblical scholarship and in an institution church but as *religion* and not as a *cult*. Although as a Philosophical Theologian (Kant’s self-title in the first preface to *Religion*), Kant is concerned with the *a priori* conditions of possibility and capacities that make moral improvement (*pure* religion) *necessary*. He only rarely invokes examples of biblical scholarship even when he was thoroughly familiar with Reimarus, Lessing, and the Neologians (e.g., Johann Salomo Semler), the progressive biblical scholars of the 19th century. However, his comments in *Religion* on the need for a “learned religion” makes clear that he valued such critical biblical scholarship although it, in itself, is in the service of *pure* religion; it doesn’t ground *pure* religion.

An imperial and servile faith turns its biblical scholars into a privileged caste since only they possess the skills and training to *properly* understand the text for the laity. However, to the extent that even critical scholars approach the text as establishing the historical foundation for faith, they, too, are self-serving and misrepresenting their guild. One does not have to be a biblical scholar to be a Christian or a member of any other historical religion. Regardless of the historical accidents of one’s faith tradition, one can be a practitioner of *pure* religion because it is grounded not in *external* texts, institutions, rituals, and hierarchies, but on *internal* conditions and capacities. One *does* have to understand that our personal creativity is what places morality at the very core of our being, and one *does* need a community to encourage one to act on the basis of self-legislated moral principles because they are right. However, this is not a church of heteronomous morality that imposes some revealed moral law onto the believer. In fact, we must remember that there are two sets of “Ten Commandments” in the Hebrew Scriptures (Exodus 20 and Exodus 34), and that alone confirms that it is not the text that adjudicates faith or is the exhaustive source of the moral principles to govern the pursuit of moral improvement that is *pure* religion.

Transcendental Consciousness and Social Justice

Since Critical Idealism shifts the moral focus from concern with external consequences to concern for the self-legislation of moral principles, it might appear that Critical Idealism is not concerned with social justice. Like the errors in the claims that Critical Idealism dismisses any relevance for history and rejects outright scripture as a fetish revelation, this allegation that Critical idealism is unconcerned with social justice is completely erroneous.

Perhaps the clearest formulation of Kant’s concern about our social responsibilities is found in his oft repeated example for illustrating each of the three modes of the categorical imperative in

Section II of the *Grundlegung* of the four duties that are owed to ourselves and to others. Two are outright prohibitions: 1) do not commit suicide out of desperation; and 2) do not lie; whereas two are commands: 3) cultivate one's talents; and 4) respond to the suffering of others.

The ground for such duties is not external consequences but our internal creative freedom. Suicide is the use of one's creative freedom to destroy itself, the ultimate contradiction of our highest capacity. Lying involves a self-contradiction that makes one not able to trust one's own self. The cultivation of one's talents is possible only because one is creatively free and not blindly determined by physical laws. Finally, responding to the suffering of others is grounded in the dignity of the other.

Unlike commodities of exchange for which one thing can be substituted for something else as a means of determining worth, the individual cannot exchange her/his creative freedom for anything else. This is a capacity that is sacrosanct, not because we are declared in the "image of God" by the text but because this extraordinary capacity distinguishes us to such a degree from all other species of which we are aware that one can appropriately speak of this capacity of creative freedom as the "end or goal of creation." Note: this "end of creation" does not give us sovereignty to do with nature what we will. It is a capacity that is inseparable from the only order that can accompany this form of efficient causality: a self-legislated moral order as well as profoundly inseparable from the material conditions that make it possible. For this latter reason, Critical Idealism insists that our search for explanations in experience should always exhaust the option of an account based on physical laws since all transcendental consciousness that we can experience presupposes the physical order.

It is the dignity (not the worth, which is determined by exchange) of the individual as a creative agent that is the anchor of all efforts at social justice. Furthermore, the civic law cannot guarantee justice because there is no "external" law that cannot be manipulated for personal interest. Even the civic law is subordinate to the moral law, and the only thing that separates us all from barbarism is our own personal moral compass within and our ability to encourage one another to heed that moral compass within each individual.

Yet, social justice, history, and pure religion all converge in Kant's moral theory when he shifts the focus of moral improvement from an exercise merely of the individual to an open-ended process devoted to the improvement of the species. In the "Conflict with the Law Faculty," Kant proposes that Critical Idealism has the ability to prophesy the future. As we would now expect, he does not mean that the Critical Idealist knows in advance what is to happen with respect to the particularities of future events. Rather, Kant's focus is on human capacities. Given what we know about the dignity of the individual and her/his creative, hence moral, capacities, Kant prophesies that the future will not be able to suppress the irrepressible creative spirit of individuals and the community. Any and all unjust social systems that attempt to suppress that spirit will eventually lose their own legitimacy if not outright their power. This is no utopian vision that sees the eventual establishment of a community of nations all grounded on the dignity and self-respect of their citizenries. It is, however, a prophecy that the demand for reform will always surface wherever oppression raises its ugly head.