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Presented at St. Anne's College, Oxford
July 16, 2014

DIVINE INTERVENTION: UNDENIABLE, BUT WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

Douglas R McGaughey
Willamette University
Salem, Oregon 97301

Abstract

Denial of divine intervention in the physical order oversteps the limits to human reason as does its affirmation. Kant's discussion of miracles acknowledges that it is impossible to prove or disprove a miracle not only, as Hume maintained, because the empirical evidence is too limited and by definition denies duplication but also because the judgment whether or not a miracle has occurred is an *a priori* synthetic judgment of cause that, as with all causal explanations, the observer *must add to* the phenomena. We can determine a cause only in reflecting judgment stimulated by its effects, and the appropriateness of our determination *hinges on the consequences* for the totality of our experience and understanding. When it comes to the "domain" of theoretical reason, those consequences have to do with the causal explanation fitting into a coherent totality of physical laws. Here, a miracle by definition is suspect (even if unprovable) because it claims to be an exception to physical law. More destructive is the consequence for the "domain" of practical reason. Miracles would shift humanity's focus from "doing the right thing because it is right" to "obsequious pursuit of divine favor" out of mere self-interest.

Multiple Appearances Plus Metaphysics in a Non-Metaphysical Sense

Our experience is one of appearances. What gives experience its "unity" is that experience of whatever kind is a flow of appearances. Were there to be no appearances, there would be no experience, and there would be no need for us to seek understanding. Understanding is the understanding of appearances. However, with respect to the clarity and distinctness of appearances there is a spectrum from unpredictable "chaos" (dreams) to mechanical "certainty" (physical events to the extent governed by laws). In short, the spectrum does not consist in a

difference in kind of objects (the entire spectrum consists of appearances) but in the degree to which we are able to discern (or not discern) a predictable pattern “behind” the appearances.

When it comes to thought (conscious judgment about appearances), we encounter another spectrum. It appears that there are conscious beings who judge exclusively (or almost exclusively) on the basis of pre-programed instincts.

Human consciousness is profoundly different in degree, not kind, in this respect. In short, humanity’s instincts are lousy, but it compensates by employing “symbols” that it inserts into the midst of the stimulus-response structure that is shared with other conscious species.¹ These symbols allow, even sometimes require, that we *deny our senses*. The sun is not moving! Unlike other species, these symbols are not part of an instinctual repertoire; rather, they must be learned. In short, they are “meta-”physical in the non-metaphysical sense of their being *added to* phenomena by the individual in *a priori* synthetic judgments.

Humanity’s acquisition and employment of symbols profoundly transforms its experience of appearances. Humanity does not stop with mere understanding. Once it has made the connection between its appearances and symbol systems, humanity can employ the symbol systems to change the appearances. We experience ourselves as possessing an autonomous freedom *above nature* that makes it possible for us to transform nature. This is creative freedom, not mere choice.

Symbols and Causal Explanations: Additions to Appearances

1. See Chapter 2, “A Clue to the Nature of Man,” in Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, reprint, 1944 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962). Cassirer is drawing on the work of Johannes Uexküll. See Jakob von Uexküll, “A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds,” in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept* (New York, N.Y.: International Universities Press, Inc., 1957), 5–80.

Without needing here to identify all that humanity “adds to” phenomena in order to understand and to transform its world, it is important for any discussion of divine intervention to identify the status of causal explanations.

We experience only the appearances (the effects) of causes, not the causes themselves. A causal explanation is “objective” not because we can prove it (or disprove it) by perceptible data but because it fits into our grasp of an ever-expanding coherent, system of order (e.g., conceptual scheme and/or physical laws) that we discern as governing the phenomena. *If we reject the reality of such a lawful order, we essentially are shooting ourselves in the head because we would be rejecting the very possibility of understanding in experience.*

However, in addition to the physical world, there is another domain² (i.e., causal order) of experience that is governed by laws. There is an assumption here in this domain just as with the physical domain: where there is order in experience, there is a lawful, causal order. This is the lesson to be drawn from dreams. They are clear and distinct but have no lawful order.³

However, what are the appearances that suggest that we possess a causal capacity *not separate* from the physical world but *to a degree independent (autonomous) of it* (i.e., creative freedom)?

Kant speaks of three “ideas of reason” (B 390 f.) that are *necessary assumptions* for us to experience the world as we do: God (as *ultimate* origin); the soul as enduring identity; and autonomous freedom in conformity with physical causality. These are “pure” ideas of reason because they are inaccessible to the senses yet are necessary for us to experience appearances as we do. They are “pure,” then, precisely because they are not facts. He explicitly calls these

2. Immanuel Kant speaks of two domains: the physical world and autonomous, creative freedom. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 61–62.

3. See *Prolegomena To Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant (Indianapolis, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1783), 34, and “Metaphysik Mrongovius,” in *Kant’s Vorlesungen von der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1983), 860–61.

ideas “regulative” ideas (assumptions) because they refer to things that are beyond our ability to experience in appearances (given the limits to reason). We are incapable of proving (or disproving) these regulative ideas precisely because a proof would require empirical evidence.

Nonetheless, in the second critique, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant speaks of autonomous freedom as the one “fact of reason,⁴” which, of course, is a contradiction. Kant writes of freedom:

The concept of freedom ... constitutes the foundation stone of the entire structure of a system of pure, even of speculative reason, and all other concepts ... that as mere ideas have no bearing to this [freedom], are connected to it and obtain with and through it existence and objective reality ... However, of all the ideas of speculative reason, freedom is also the only one of which we know its possibility *a priori* without actually perceiving it because it is the condition of the moral law, which we know.⁵ [author’s translation]

In the footnote here Kant writes: „... freedom [is] ... the *ratio essendi* of the moral law; however, the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom.“ [author’s translation] In the ‘Remarks’ to §6 in the same text, Kant writes: „He [the individual] judges ... that he can do something because he is conscious that he should, and [he] recognizes within himself freedom, which without the moral law would remain unknown to him.⁶” [author’s translation]

There are clearly two conundrums here: 1) We are incapable of proving/disproving that we are autonomously free, above nature because causalities are incapable of proof/disproof, but autonomy is a necessary assumption for us to understand our experience -- without it we are merely mechanical toys or marionettes, Kant reminds us.⁷ 2) Unlike the physical law that is heteronomously imposed upon us, the moral law is only compatible with autonomous freedom if it

4. See *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1974), 36–37.

5. *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 3–4 *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1974), 3–4

6. See as well Otfried Höffe, *Kants Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. Eine Philosophie der Freiheit* (München: C. H. Beck, 2012), 151–52.

7. See *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 117, 169.

is self-legislated. In other words, our very freedom makes it possible (and necessary) that we can ignore the moral law. Were we incapable of ignoring the moral law, then we would necessarily be either “good” or “evil,” which would contradict our autonomy. In short, we are moral beings not because we *must be*, but we are moral beings because *we can be* (and we appear to be the only species that can be). This status is what allows Kant to speak of humanity as “the final end of nature,⁸” not as sovereign exploiter of nature and/or one another for personal, or species self-interest but as the only species capable of taking moral responsibility for its actions.

God and Causal Orders

Nonetheless, humanity is profoundly limited both with respect to its capacities to understand and create but also with respect to its understanding beyond appearances. Yet, Kant pointed out already in 1775 in his *Lectures on Morality* that our capacity to change nature (i.e., our *autonomy above nature*) in principle gives us the power to destroy nature.⁹

It would seem, at least, that an important part of our self-understanding ought to involve, then, acknowledgement of our limits and our danger. There is no philosophical theologian who was more careful with respect to acknowledging limits than Kant. The limits to reason are a central theme of his entire corpus, and he particularly underscored those limits in the cornerstone work devoted to religion: *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

To the individual unfamiliar with Kant, it is easy to take this title as an objective genitive: Reason’s limits as an objective genitive would consist in religion’s being “forced within” or “limited to” reason. However, Kant is speaking of a subjective genitive: reason’s limits rein in its certainties not only about God but about the self and world.

8. See *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 301f, and Höffe, “23. Das Moralwesen Mensch als Endzweck” in *Philosophie der Freiheit*, 427–38.

9. See *Vorlesung zur Moralphilosophie*, (1774/1775), ed. Werner Stark and Manfred Kühn (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 180.

Kant's famous aphorisms in the *Critique of Pure Reason* are not accidentally: 1) "I had to destroy knowledge in order to make room for faith" (b xxx); and 2) "Thoughts without content [appearances] are empty, intuitions [perception of appearances] without concepts are blind" (B 75). There is little faith and a lot of blindness in the world, it appears!

"God" is a regulative idea (an assumption) of that Noumenon that is a set of necessary conditions for us as noumena to experience phenomena. Given our limits, we are incapable of proving or disproving intentionality "behind" experience generally¹⁰ much less with respect to the ultimate origin of phenomena. God is an ultimate causality, and, as we have seen, causes are incapable of proof or disproof.

Divine Intervention:

What Matters are the Consequences for our Necessary Capacities

Karl Barth accused Kant of elevating human reason above God.¹¹ It is a classic example of reading "within the limits of reason" as an objective rather than a subjective genitive. Critical Idealism places no constraints on God. Rather, Critical Idealism insists upon *our remaining within our limits* when it comes to our making judgments about our experience generally and, especially, when it comes to making claims about realities beyond our limits. Otherwise, we divinize ourselves and assume an omniscient knowledge that is far beyond our capacity.¹² History demonstrates how destructive humanity easily becomes when it assumes ownership of the divine throne.

10. See *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 250–51.

11. See Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert. Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte*, 5th ed. (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985), 40, 53–56, 85–86, 100.

12. See for example *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1974), 307, 311, and 355–56.

One way that we storm the throne of God is when we assert that God intervenes in the physical world or in our personal lives. This judgment, however, is not saying that God *does not* intervene. Rather, it is a statement with respect to our limits. Nonetheless, we must assume both the Noumenon and our personal noumenon as necessary for us to experience and understand within our limits.

However, there is something more dangerous in play with the theme of divine intervention than our violating of our own limits. Were we to know that the Noumenon as an infinite, categorical causality could trump physical causality and autonomous freedom, then all understanding of nature and our assumption of moral responsibility for our autonomous freedom collapses.

The destructive consequences are at least threefold: 1) it introduces a capriciousness to the physical order because the physical order would not adhere to its physical laws; and, 2) as a consequence, we are discouraged not only from seeking out the physical law that governed the event but also the nature of the miraculous encourages us to fold our hands and wait for the miracle; and, finally, 3) precisely because the miracle is beyond our control or effort, the miraculous undermines moral effort by appealing to a heteronomous power over against the human whom we would want to please in order to obtain the grace of the miraculous.

In other words, the miraculous not only undermines our efforts to understand the physical order, but it also turns morality into merely an activity of personal interest. We would engage in moral effort not because it is the right thing to do but because it is pleasing to God and/or to others. Morality becomes the pursuit of favor and honor. Although this does elevate humanity above animality into a pursuit of honor, it does not encourage the exercise of our highest moral capacity (what Kant calls “personality,” i.e., autonomous self-legislation of the moral law not because the

law serves my interest but because the moral law is right--even to the point of requiring that I sacrifice my self-interest).¹³

Where our speculations become untethered to appearances and either plunge into the depths of the empirical to claim that we know “the way things really are” or where our speculations soar beyond our noumenal limits to make metaphysical claims about the Noumenon or “absolute ideas” (e.g., Rationalism), there we *violate our limits* and destroy the very conditions that are necessary for us to understand and act responsibly in the first place. Both mechanical causality and divine teleology trap us in determinism.

In short, storming the throne of God undermines the very moral capacity that requires us to view humanity as the “final end of nature.” Though again, this is no substitution of humanity for God. Quite the opposite: the claim to know that God intervenes or does not intervene in nature and our personal lives constitutes the actual substitution of humanity for God!

Not an External Narrative but an Internal Capacity Makes us a Religious Species

In the spirit of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Kant no more rejected religious scriptures than he elevated humanity above God. To be sure, what the Bible says is not true because it is in the Bible, but what is true in the Bible is true because it is true independent of the Bible. Scriptures Lessing pointed out,¹⁴ however, can save us time when it comes to discovering our role as moral beings in the world.

Given that we don't understand “naturally” by instinct but must acquire symbol systems, we can shorten the duration of our educational process by turning to symbolic mediations of

13. For Kant's discussion of the distinctions among animality, humanity, and personality, see *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ed. and trans. Allan Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 50–52.

14. See §4 of Lessing's *The Education of the Human Race* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896).

experience that have proved valuable for communities. As with all understanding, though, it is what *we bring to the scriptures*, which, of course, are only appearances, that shapes what we *read out of the scriptures*. Precisely because we can neither prove nor disprove the claim that God can and/or does intervene in the natural order, we best hold onto those elements in our limited understanding that are necessary (!) rather than undermine even necessities by our desire to satisfy our self-interests: we best hold onto what illuminates and encourages our moral capacities. To be sure, this places us in what Kant calls in the *Groundwork of a Metaphysics of Morals* a “precarious position:”

which is to be firm even though there is nothing in heaven or on earth from which it depends, or on which it is based. Here ... [philosophical theology] is to manifest its purity as sustainer of its own laws, not as herald of laws that an implanted sense or who knows what tutelary nature whispers to it, all of which -- though they may always be better than nothing at all -- can still never yield basic principles that reason dictates and that must have their source entirely and completely a priori and, at the same time, must have their commanding authority from this: that they expect nothing from the inclination of human beings but everything from the supremacy of the law and the respect owed to it or, failing this, condemn the human being to contempt for himself and inner abhorrence.¹⁵”

15. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 35.

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