

An Enquiry Into the Fertility of Kant's Moral Theory

Can it Produce a Metaphysics?

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This paper serves as an enquiry into whether or not a theory of metaphysics can grow from the ground laid in Immanuel Kant's moral theory. First, a discussion of metaphysics will ensue, followed by an explication of the main task of his transcendental philosophy. Moving from this, the limiting of this enquiry to Kant's moral theory alone will be explained, followed by the three ways in which one might seek to find metaphysical possibilities in his ethics, explicitly, implicitly, and perhaps, metaphorically. The paper will conclude by arguing that a theory of metaphysics within the framework of Kant's philosophy would require a fundamental paradigmatic shift but is a task worthy of undertaking.

Kant attributes David Hume, the well-known Scottish philosopher, with uncovering some of the logical problems of the study of metaphysics in his famous exposition on the invalidity of cause and effect.¹ Despite this fact, Kant nevertheless calls metaphysics a “natural disposition” of human reason insofar as it is by this reason that man is driven to ask questions “that cannot be answered by an experiential use of reason...”² In this way, human reason is regarded by Kant as always seeking to know what is beyond itself. Metaphysical questions, therefore, are practically inevitable in Kant's view. At least, “a certain sort of metaphysics has actually been present in *all* human beings as soon as reason has extended itself to speculation in them...”³

Kant determines that reason, if not able to answer metaphysical questions *per se*, ought at least to be able to determine its own capacity, which is to deal with those questions “that spring entirely from its own womb [that is, the “womb” of reason].”⁴

However, whether human reason can delineate the limits of itself seems to be a metaphysical question insofar as a limit cannot be known in relation to itself but only in relation to another. One might ask whether all that is *outside* the realm of human reason is, by definition, metaphysical. Can someone say only one thing about what is outside the limits of human reason,

namely: That which human reason is not and cannot comprehend? Kant calls this realm *noumenal*. For this reason, he says that the previous efforts of metaphysicians have been erroneous in that they are merely “groping” for answers.⁵

For what were these metaphysicians groping, as it were? It seems, according to Kant, that in human cognition judgments are made often without justification through a priori reasoning, that is those judgments which are unjustified under the principle of contradiction, nor through a posteriori reasoning, that is justification under the principle of experience. The substance of these judgments, which are called *synthetic a priori judgments*, constitutes metaphysics and the role of transcendental philosophy is to make lucid the possibilities for these judgments.⁶

The metaphysical questions to which Kant refers are categorized under the following disciplines: ontology [the study of being, of space and time], cosmology [the study of the nature of the world, bodies, and substance], psychology [the study of the nature of the soul, judgment, reason, sense, freedom, and immortality], and natural theology [the study of the supernatural and miracles]. Kant in his lectures on metaphysics given at the Albertus University in Königsberg used Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics* as the textbook in his courses. In his “Introduction to Metaphysics,” Kant stated:

We consider here (in metaphysics) not things as they are connected as grounds and consequences [that is not as a priori and a posteriori reasoning], but rather cognitions, which also have a descent like human beings or other things.⁷

Even so, Hume was right, according to Kant, insofar as he demonstrated the lack of proof for the seeming connection between a certain cause and a certain effect. For example, concerning cause and effect, that the phenomenon is practically universal in the human experience, Kant was

led to question further and ask: What are the conditions for the possibility of causation as a universal phenomenon?⁸

Kant reasoned that the conditions for these possibilities are immanent, that is, transcendent in rational beings, and therefore the phenomena of human experience are explained thereby.

The difficulty one faces with such a few is that all phenomena, that is, all that appears in one's view of the world and oneself, are totally subjective. There is no possibility, therefore, for one to step outside of oneself, as it were, and see things objectively, as they really are. Things as they really, things in themselves, are the source of appearances, or phenomenon and are called, by Kant, noumena. The noumenal are, therefore, outside of the realm of human understanding. Discussions about the noumenal, as such, constitute the metaphysical. Therefore, within Kant's transcendental philosophy of reason, as explicated in his masterwork *Critique of Pure Reason*, metaphysical questions are impossible.

However, Kant's moral theory, that is, his questions about the possibilities of ethical judgment and moral judgment, seem to be able to take human reasoning further.

In postulating his moral theory, Kant reasons that the possibilities for what seem to be universal moral judgments, for example, that acts such as murder, stealing, and lying are universally considered immoral, are explained by an immanent, that is, transcendent imperative imposed on oneself by oneself. This imperative, known as the categorical imperative, demands one to do the duty of oneself without reference to consequence but only in accordance with the principle: “[A]ct as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law,”⁹ that is, “act on a maxim which can also hold as a universal law. – Any maxim that does not so qualify is contrary to morals.”¹⁰

This principle of the will, of morality, of judgment and choice, introduces two seemingly contradictory principles, namely, that one is able to both create law and is, nevertheless, subject to law.

In analyzing Kant's moral theory, which came after his rational theory of transcendental philosophy, some, like the controversial but brilliant post-modern philosopher, Martin Heidegger, have written unabashedly that Kant was doing metaphysics. He judges that in taking a step onto the ground of differentiating between the noumenal and phenomenal, Kant "falls back from the ground" which he laid because the perspective from which these realms can be examined is only possible subjectively. From this point of view, in the words of Martin Heidegger, Kant "undermines the floor upon which he initially placed the *Critique*."¹¹ However, the argument has been made¹² that Kant emphasized the noumena not in the *positive* sense, that is, in saying something about a particular object of "non-sensible intuition" but rather in the *negative* sense, that is, "by a noumenon we understand a thing insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition..."¹³

By working with the ground Kant laid in his moral theory, the intention is to avoid the immediate difficulty one encounters from the perspective of his theory of pure reason: namely, "the subjectivity of the subject."¹⁴ If all one knows of experience is appearance, that is, phenomena, then the most one can say about the appearance is that its source lies in a thing other than itself, that is, the noumena.

While this perhaps saves Kant from some criticism, for the purposes of this paper, understanding things in themselves in *only* the negative sense simply will not do. If there are metaphysical claims to be made about human nature, to be gleaned from Kant's philosophy, they

will be made in order to positively say something about the nature of humanity. It is from the perspective of Kant's moral theory that this task of metaphysics seems more conceivable.

Back to the contradiction – there does seem to be an opening for this metaphysical task in the solution posited by Kant regarding man as both utterly free and yet determined. Kant states the problem simply:

There is a conflict between natural necessity and freedom in the causality of events in the world. It [is] resolved by showing that there is no true conflict if the events and even the world in which they occur are regarded merely as appearances...but with respect to the same event, insofar as the acting person regards himself at the same time as *noumenon* (as pure intelligence, in his existence that cannot be temporally determined), he can contain a determining ground of that causality in accordance with laws of nature which is itself free from all laws of nature.¹⁵

Kant acknowledged in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that this move toward two standpoints fell within the realm of speculative philosophy but was justified in that it "put an end to the discord...so that practical reason may have tranquility and security from the external attacks that could make the land on which it wants to build a matter of dispute."¹⁶

In approaching the speculative, Kant however does "secure" the noumenal world and while speculative reasoning demarcates the limits of knowing anything whatever of the noumenal, specifically by limiting our knowledge to a *negative* understanding, as mentioned, there is a sense from the discussion of the individual as free and as not "temporally determined" of which one might say that Kant is *in fact* saying something positive about the person as noumenon.¹⁷ It seems that from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* with its enumeration of categories and clearly defined limitations, one is afforded the ability say something about the

noumena in the negative sense only but from Kant's moral theory one is afforded the ability to say something positive about the noumena.

In the next portion of the paper, three possibilities approaches will be used for uncovering what might be positive statements about the noumenal human experience, first through metaphor in Nietzsche, and then through explicit and implicit statements in Kant's writings.

Among the seemingly negative statements which Kant seems to be making about humans is that inasmuch as they are moral agents they "are not and cannot be psychological subjects found in the world of experience." Therefore, "[m]orality can exist only in a world we cannot see, and the world we can experience is amoral. Since morality admits of 'no empirical exhibition,' 'it is absolutely impossible to give an example of [moral action] from experience.'

¹⁸

If morality belongs only to the noumenal, then it seems Friedrich Nietzsche might have been saying something Kantian when he asserted:

There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena...¹⁹

The choice to examine the philosophical use of metaphor, therefore, follows from this latter statement of Nietzsche.

Of Kant's philosophy, Nietzsche wrote:

Kant...showed that in reality [space, time, and causality] served only to elevate the mere phenomenon... to the position of the sole and highest reality, putting it in place of the innermost and true essence of things...²⁰

The statement "mere phenomenon" is characterized in the metaphorical use of the Apollonian tradition. Conversely, the things-in-themselves, that is, those which are behind the

phenomena, which are most real, are characterized in the metaphorical use of the Dionysian tradition, and in the statement of Nietzsche, the Dionysian seems to be supplanted by the Apollonian. That this contrast between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is representative of the contrast between the “phenomenon and the thing-in-itself [that is, the noumenon]” is shown in Nietzsche’s exposition of the dynamics of the two at work within Greek tragedy as the music and the drama, respectively.²¹

One possible positive statement about the noumenal human experience, taken from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, reveals that contingent upon his embrace, understanding, and recognition of the Dionysian, a free man emerges from former servitude:

[He] feels himself not only united, reconciled, blended with his neighbor, but as one with him; he feels as if the veil of Mâyâ had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious Primordial Unity.²²

This positive statement, concerning unity, clarity, reconciliation, and losing oneself in Dionysian ecstasy, seems to be, at first glance, somewhat metaphysical.

However, as beautiful and useful the metaphor may be in the equating of Kant’s phenomenal/noumenal paradigm and Nietzsche’s Apollonian/Dionysian paradigm, it seems that I could, at the same, be a mistake. While the words used are the same, the ways the two so-called “worlds” or “realms” interact, present themselves, and relate to the human experience, are nonetheless too different to conjoin.

Furthermore, as one scholar argues, Nietzsche actually “wished to correct [the appearance of indebtedness to...Kant]” in a later preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche wrote:

How I regret now that in those days I still lacked the courage (or immodesty?) to permit myself in every way an individual language of my own for such individual views and hazards – and that instead I tried laboriously to express by means of Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulas strange and new valuations which were basically at odds with Kant's and Schopenhauer's spirit and taste! ²³

While metaphor is not a lost cause, as it were, the use of Nietzsche's metaphor may be misguided, as popular as that interpretation may have been. If metaphors are to be used in discussing the phenomenal/noumenal paradigm, one may perhaps need to be creative.

There are explicit statements about metaphysical questions in Kant's writings. For example, this one quoted at length here:

But the rightful claim to freedom of will made even by common human reason is based on consciousness and the granted presuppositions of the independence of reason from merely subjectively determining causes, all of which together constitute what belongs only to feeling and hence come under the general name of sensibility. The human being, who this way regards himself as an intelligence, thereby puts himself in a different order of things and in relation to the determining grounds of an altogether different kind when he thinks of himself as an intelligence endowed with a will, and consequently with causality, than when he perceives himself as a phenomenon in the world of sense (as he also really is) and subjects his causality to external determination in accordance with laws of nature. Now he soon becomes aware that both can take place at the same time, and indeed must do so. For, that a *thing in appearance* (belonging to the world of sense) is subject to certain laws from which *as a thing* or a being *in itself* it is independent contains not the least contradiction; that he must represent and think of himself in this

twofold way, however, rests as regards the first on consciousness of himself as an object affected through the senses and as regards the second on consciousness of himself as an intelligence, that is, as independent of sensible impressions in the use of reason (hence as belonging to the world of understanding).²⁴

These statements about a human being “as an intelligence” who chooses to “subject his causality to external determination in accordance with laws of nature” sound particularly metaphysical upon first hearing. Likewise, as mentioned above,²⁵ statements about any being who is “not temporally determined” seem metaphysical.

Furthermore, implicit in Kant’s discussion of the law-creating human with free will, is a notion of the nature of the human being in itself, that is, considered noumenally, which seems to be open to further exploration.

If one were to further examine the possibility of a Kantian theory of metaphysics, it would behoove the individual, it seems, to study the recently translated manuscripts of his metaphysical lectures at the University in Königsberg, his lectures on ethics, and his lectures and writings on religion and theology, along with, of course, his *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

So this brief enquiry ends; but, as a beginning. For the optimistic student of Kant, his thoughts, at the end of one of his courses on metaphysics, provide encouragement and perhaps even approval in such an endeavor:

Metaphysics is the spirit of philosophy. It is related to philosophy as the spirit of wine is to wine. It purifies our elementary concepts and thereby makes us capable of comprehending all sciences. In short, it is the greatest culture of the human understanding.²⁶

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 146 [B19-20].

² Ibid., 147 [B21].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 148 [B23].

⁵ Ibid., 110 [B xv].

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 142 [29:786-787].

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, Trans. Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon. *Lectures on Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 110 [29:747].

⁸ Ibid., 146 – 147 [B19-21].

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Trans. Mary J. Gregor. *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73 [4:421].

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary J. Gregor. *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 380 [6:226].

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See James Van Cleve's *Problems of Kant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 134-137.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 360-362 [B307].

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 146.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Trans. Mary J. Gregor. *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 231-232 [5:114].

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 103 [4:456-57].

¹⁷ See *Critique of Practical Reason*, 173-174 [5:42-3].

¹⁸ Roger J. Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 92.

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Trans by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 96.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. by Clifton P. Fadiman. *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: The Modern Library [Random House], 1954), 1049.

²¹ Ibid., 1070. See also Paul de Man, "Genesis and Genealogy in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*," *Diacritics* (Winter 1972), 52. JSTOR. Stable URL <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464505>. (accessed April 2008).

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. by Clifton P. Fadiman. *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: The Modern Library [Random House], 1954), 955 - 956.

²³ David B. Allison, "Nietzsche Knows no Noumenon," *boundary 2*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Why Nietzsche Now? A Boundary 2 Symposium (Spring – Autumn, 1981), 303. JSTOR. Stable URL <http://www.jstor.org/pss/303124>. (accessed April 2008).

²⁴ Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 103 [4:457]

²⁵ See quotation of Kant on page 5 of this paper.

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 286 [29:940].