

SARTRE'S CRITIQUE OF KANT

The fundamental question governing all philosophic research, according to Sartre, concerns the relationship between the knower and the known. The polarity between what Sartre terms "being" and "consciousness", respectively, is nothing new, of course; discussion of it and of the requirements of discourse (tenses, polyadic predicates) in the light of it stretches back at least as far as Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*; but Sartre credits Hegel with the discovery of the "dialectic" and hence with the most profound methodological insight, if not innovation, in the field of epistemology.¹ What Hegel saw has since pervaded philosophy; namely, that the problem of knowledge is both paradigmatic and unavoidable; paradigmatic in that all solutions to other philosophic problems can be traced, if not reduced, to their roots in the knower-object of knowledge dichotomy, and unavoidable in the sense that the attempt to deal with the problem of knowledge systematically seems a, perhaps the, besetting sin of philosophic inquiry. The urge towards what Sartre calls "totalisation" demands that facts be transmuted into *a priori* necessities, in the interests either of a comprehensive science of man (psychology, history, anthropology) or a metaphysics of experience. Sartre is both too much of a Marxist and too much of an existentialist to countenance such developments. He rejects the view that complete prediction of human behaviour is possible, or complete understanding of the self, not only because the future is replete with indefinite but very much open possibilities, but also because man is defined, if he is to be defined at all, not in terms of his rationality or even his natural participation in the temporal chain of community (historicity, finitude), but as a creature or self who is free to shape that future, at least partly, to forge genuine alternatives for himself and execute in accordance with the responsible choices exercised at given times in the pursuit of goals and the formation of a life-plan. Man is not identified with his doings; he is his freedom, not the content which his freedom may at any one time dictate to himself.²

In this context, Sartre's appraisal of the contributions of Kant to the problem of knowledge may be understood and assessed.

Kant's *a priori* limitation of knowledge to sense-derived experience does not disturb Sartre, as it did Hegel;³ Sartre does not see in Kant's denial of supersensible knowledge either an implicit affirmation of such knowledge or any other attempt to place the agent outside or above nature, such as one might find in a Spinozan or Platonist spectator-theory. Rather, his criticism of Kant is much like one of Aristotle's (and Parmenides') famous objections to the theory of Forms. It will be recalled that a divorce between the intelligible world and the world of shifting, transient appearances undermines the very purpose for which the Forms are introduced, inasmuch as there can in principle be no contact between the temporal and non-temporal realms, lest the ontological purity and the abstract, conceptual nature of the intelligible realm be sullied. But in that case, how can the Forms be said to explain or be related to the unintelligible world of the senses at all, whether as universals or as concepts in relation to particular instances? There is no answer to this question.

Likewise, there is no answer to Sartre's question: if Kant is right about the conditions necessary in order for experience to be possible, then experience itself remains a mystery, an unintelligible residue unaccounted for in the explanatory scheme⁴; the "opacity of the fact" is left just as cloudy as it was before,⁴ or else is shifted from experiential to metaphysical ground. In particular, if our characterization of the world as one consisting of objects outside ourselves, as having an existence independent of particular states of awareness, and as existing in space and time, is said to be due (*a*) to the projection from our mode of sensibility, or *a priori* Anschauung (*b*) to the perceived stability or permanence of experience (*c*) to the mediation of (*a*) and (*b*) through the built-in interpretive mechanism of the self, then the question arises, what is the self? Kant's answer, couched in terms of the transcendental unity of apperception which Kant considers the highest principle of all knowledge,⁵ explains much but also leaves much unanswered. It explains how experience is possible, through the necessary attribution of experiences to an experiencer, to an agent capable of assimilating and organizing the data it receives, recognizing and identifying them (though not on all occasions) as its own; so that the problems of Berkeleyan and Cartesian idealism simply do not arise, since experience presupposes both

experiencer and subject-matter (outward sense, or spatial magnitude) of experience.⁶ But the famous "I think" which must possibly accompany all experiences is a nebulous, non-observable entity or activity; moreover, the metaphor of possession (my experiences) begs the question as to how experiences are classified as mine, instead of either not being categorized at all, or else being randomly attributed to someone else as owner. The "I think" sheds no light on the self because it is, in spite of Kant's disclaimers concerning transcendental psychology⁷ and the pretensions of ego-as-substance view points, a postulation, not an "empirical discovery", and hence is not, on Kant's terms, compelled to constitute or establish its own intelligibility.⁸

This critique, if taken seriously, veers towards one of the following: (i) Humean skepticism, skepticism about the self, for example, and reversion to a conscious-stream or "bundle-theory" of perceptions; (ii) insistence on a full-fledged, self-correcting empirical method of cognitive research and inquiry (Piaget, for example). It does not justify any of the aspirations of an old-time metaphysical solution to the problem of knowledge, because modern positivism, has, if nothing else, ruled that out as untenable, whether in monadological form as presented by Leibniz or in the version of the ego proffered by Fichte, nor those of Marxism. For Sartre is well aware that the very philosophy which in our own time is unavoidable because it most fully raises the question of the relationship between knower and known, at the same time precludes a solution of it;⁹ because, unlike Hegel, the Marxist is not free to suppose that his abstractions either reduplicate or render superfluous the examination of empirical historical detail. Hegel's Absolute Spirit is yet another in the long line of unwarranted *a priori* attempts to avoid dealing with the subject of man, through the positing of metaphysical science with special claims to intuitive insight and wisdom, an evasion which is saved from charges of complete incompetence through its astute recognition that "dialectic" is the cornerstone of philosophy.

Sartrean existentialism is at no time abandoned in favour of metaphysics of the soul, nor in favour of an uncritical acceptance of Marxist "group" psychology and historical systematization; it does not recognize the empiricist reduction of experience to discrete, unrelated episodes bound together by memory or time,

or the organism's endurance of occasions coupled with higher functions of mental interpretation of its own states, nor does it feel compelled to deduce knowledge in the form of rules, be they *a priori* theses about the march of Spirit in the world or would-be *a posteriori* rules of meaning and significance (verificationism)¹⁰. The Sartrean position verges towards none of these extremes, but preserves its own integrity intact by denying the adequacy of previous solutions while pointing out the shortcomings inherent in any view which, as Kant's does, makes time a property of the self (inner sense), while failing to explain how this can be accessible either publicly or to the private consciousness of the agent.

What, then, is the answer to the problem of knowledge? Simply this: that transactions between knower and known, while they have a structure, are never finalized or terminated, except individually (e.g., by or in death), and that they are, as a consequence, best characterized as processive. This does not mean that they are not amenable to rational treatment (look at what Whitehead has done for the subject!), but it does mean that the knower and the known are in an unfinished association, a relationship which is on-going, one whose goals may in outline be discernible but which, like human freedom itself, is both open to genuinely novel possibilities (futural) and to the possible tragedy of non-completion, as a collective enterprise of sorts. The potential procedural rapprochement between the poles of subject and object demands surrender of the vain hopes of definitive treatment, predictability or "determinist" (causal) explanation. The model for construing and describing the relationship is subject to change, for the relationship itself is; to put it more bluntly, the form of man (freedom), his essential, unique and individuating property, precludes a stable, permanent form of reconstruction of the results of cognitive transaction, whether the product of such transaction be linguistic (affirmations) or of some other kind.¹¹ This does not mean that pretenders to the status of philosophic explanations of man in relation to his environment can do no more than engage in special ideological pleading; they can at least be gifted with the Hegelian insight of recognizing (and christening) the urgency of the issue and, like Kant, observing the (self-imposed) limitations on its dimensions that finite and fallible investigators are in principle and inescapably subject to.¹² And, like Sartre in his own work,

they can attempt again to rework the entire theme both conceptually and empirically from the ground up : but surrendering both the claim and the prideful boast to final understanding which has hitherto marred even the most restrained and unpolemical of philosophic treatments. That this claim has seemed a logical consequence of previous methodologies indicates a defect in the formulation of their attack on the problem of knowledge; what is entailed by previous failures, in the light of the reasons for them, is humility bordering on intellectual self-denial. For this reason Sartre contributes the unique perspective of an existentialist, both on the pressing matter of his own revision of Marxism and the ensuing criticism of Kantian *a priori*-ism which it engenders.

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NOTES

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* (Paris, 1960), Préface, p. 10. Hereafter referred to as "Critique."
2. This summarizes Sartre's teaching in *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris, 1943), the ethical component of which bears a strong tinge of Kantian universalism, as the later *Existentialism is a Humanism* (English tr., London 1948) makes clear.
3. See for example Hegel's *Enzyklopaedie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1816), paragraph 60. Also see P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London, 1966), p. 38.
4. Sartre, *Critique*, p. 136; on the opposite extreme, "dialectical hyperempiricism," see *ibid.*, p. 130.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymuud Schmidt, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1930), B 135; also B 131.
6. For an admirably lucid summary statement of Kant's principal tenets in this regard, see Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*, esp. pp. 24, 93, 98, 101; Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, B 274-276.
7. Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, esp. A 348, A 351, A 360, A 361, A 363 (the Paralogisms). Kant's own views on *a priori* Anschauung render the fact of his own denials especially acute, not to say paradoxical, in their original format.

8. Sartre, *Critique*, pp. 135-137. Sartre, in a perplexing footnote (*ibid.*, p. 136n2) contends that it is amply demonstrated (he does not say where, or by whom) that Kant in his late years moved towards a "dialectical" position on the subject of reason in light of the "exigencies of intelligibility" which Kant's own system confronted him with, or rather resisted. This is at best an undocumented assertion, if by it Sartre means that Kant moved in the direction of Hegel, Marx or possibly Sartre himself; but Sartre clearly intends it both as a compliment and as a sign of the breakdown of *a priori*-ism in the domain of knowledge.

9. Sartre, *Critique*, Préface, pp. 9-10.

10. Sartre, *Critique*, pp. 128, 132.

11. For full and sympathetic study of this topic, see Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago, 1958) and *The Tacit Dimension* (New York, 1960).

12. It is here that Heidegger antedates Sartre in observing the endemic weaknesses of the Kantian postulations with regard to space and time as components of the mind. For Heidegger's version of *a priori* anthropology and his extensions (not indictments) of Kant's understanding and conception of human finitude, see Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tuebingen, 1927), and *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Bonn, 1929).