

Enhet i mangfold



Festskrift til
Johan Arnt
Myrstad
i anledning 60-årsdagen

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Discourse on the Method versus Orientation in Thinking

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In a small text titled: "What is orienting in thinking?" Kant asks how we can know about supra sensible objects such as God's existence? The idea that thinking needs orientation is not new; already Descartes had explained in his famous Discourse on the Method that there is a way to reason:

For, in conclusion, the Method which teaches us to follow the true and enumerate exactly every term in the matter under investigation contains everything which gives certainty to the rules of Arithmetic." Discourse on the Method, Part II.

Nevertheless, the choice of the term "orientation" instead of "method" leads us to believe that Kant has a different conception of thinking than Descartes. Also, Kant draws a distinction between "healthy reason" and "speculative reason" when he analyzes what could be the proper use of reason in the debate between Jacobi and Mendelssohn. If for Jacobi faith is a matter of feeling, Mendelssohn believes in reason to find faith. Anyway, for Kant both of them are pursuing a way that leads to fanaticism, and none of them are relating to reason in a healthy way. How can we understand what Kant calls a "healthy reason" and what does it mean to orientate in thinking?

Kant considers that Mendelssohn makes a *speculative* use of reason which is responsible for the "lofty claims" in theological matters. Of course in trying to prove the existence of God, reason does not have an object of experience to relate to. Such a proof is a priori, and for Mendelssohn a product of abstraction or pure reason, and therefore grounded in objectivity. In a way, Mendelssohn has inherited the Cartesian rationalism, which identifies objectivity with abstraction. Descartes in Discourse on the Method shows that life with all its diversity of experience brings confusion to the mind. In order to have a clear mind, the philosopher Rene Descartes needs to distrust the conclusions reached by sensorial experience because sensorial experience leads us to contradictory statements about the same thing. For instance, in the second part of his Meditations, he shows us that if we trust experience to tell

us the nature of the wax, we will end up accepting contradictory statements; a piece of wax will be solid and liquid, yellow, and white, soft and hard, smelling and without smell.

“What then did I know so distinctly in this piece of wax? It could certainly be nothing of all that the senses brought to my notice, since all these things which fall under taste, smell, sight, touch, and hearing, are found to be changed, and yet the same wax remains”.

Experience cannot give us a clear and trustable knowledge of the piece of wax. In order to reach sure and clear statements about things, we need to exclude the impressions given by the senses, and trust constant knowledge such as mathematical knowledge.

Jacobi is at the opposite position of Mendelssohn: he is relating faith to feelings and not to pure reason. Kant is also suspicious about Jacobi's position. Feelings lead to *enthusiasm* and push reason away. That is the fact why Kant defends the “maxims of sound reason” against the “sophistical attacks of speculation” and overwhelming feelings. In his short essay, Kant describes reason in a new way and breaks with the rationalism developed by Rene Descartes. Kant develops a new understanding of reason, and a new way to use it. Thinking about the proofs of the existence of God gives Kant the opportunity to explore aspects of reason that we never had understood before.

a) Kant: how to define healthy reason?

Kant introduces the idea that reason can be used, for instance, in a “healthy way” or in a “speculative way”. For Kant, a “healthy reason” is applied to experience. Obviously, thinking about theological problems exceeds what we can know by experience. As in that case the concepts are “abstracted from the realm of the senses”, in order to be significant they have to be expressed with “figurative notions”. Kant underlines that:

“the proper function of these is to make such concepts, which are not in other respects derived from experience, suitable for use in the experimental world. For how else could we endow our concepts with sense and significance if we did not attach them to some intuition (which must ultimately always be an example derived from some possible experience)?”

The function of these “figurative notions” is to produce images able to both establish a connection with the world of experience and to make sense. The major discovery of his inquiry is that reason, contrary to Descartes, is by nature applicable to life. For Kant, to disconnect thinking from experience and to pretend to be objective, always opens a world of fantasy and deprives us of intellectual freedom.

“This is the way in which even universal logic came into being; and in the application of our understanding and reason to experience, there may still lie hidden certain heuristic methods of thought which, if we could carefully extract them from experience, might well enrich philosophy with useful maxims, even in abstract thought.”

It is clear that according to Kant, we find the tools able to develop abstract knowledge in the application of thinking to experience, and not the contrary as developed previously by Descartes.

b) Reason needs orientation: The geographical metaphor for thinking

For Descartes, in order to go outside the forest we need to keep walking straight ahead; in the same way, to find the truth we need to follow a method. The method teaches us how to use our reason; it is therefore different from the truth and is prior to the discovery of the truth. The function of the method is to help us to find the truth. For Kant, there is no method to follow in order to think well, neither a starting point such as the *cogito*. For Descartes, the sign of reason is its objectivity. It means that rational statements are independent of the subject. On the contrary, Kant understood the subjective dimension of our knowledge. For him, who reflected for a long period about the Copernican revolution, astronomical observations are never true in themselves, but relative to the position of a subject; this appears to be another way to say that knowledge is necessarily subjective. That is why Kant introduces a geographical metaphor for thinking in order to show any statements are relative to the subject. For instance, the distinctions between north and south, east and west do not exist in themselves but in reference to the position of an observer defining what is below and above him/her or on his/her right or left:

“Thus, in spite of all the objective data in the sky, I orientate myself geographically purely by means of a subjective distinction.”

In other terms, these distinctions are subjective, which means that they are provoked by our perceptions; in the same way, reason needs to be guided by our subjectivity.

In theology, when our subjectivity is not there to direct our reason, we are led to *lofty speculations*. Reason has no direction to be guided by in the absence of a subject and experience. How does the subject relate to reason? For Kant, to think is always thinking in direction towards something, and relates therefore to an object of experience; it seems that when reason is used for the purpose of accomplishing an action, it fulfills its real nature. How does reason fulfill its nature when thinking about the existence of God which is not an object of experience? When a theologian concludes to the existence of an infinite God creator of our finite world, Kant characterizes this way of thinking as intellectual or *speculative* because it is based on pure logic and not on experience. Kant speculates the nature of human reason is needy, which means first of all that it is subjective. The idea that reason has *needs* is extremely new and implies that reason is looking for something to be completed. In this way Kant withdraws reason from the sphere of objectivity where Descartes had crystallized it.

“It is easy to guess by analogy that this will be the means whereby pure reason regulates its use when, taking leave of known objects (of experience), it seeks to extend its sphere beyond the frontiers of experience and no longer encounters any objects of intuition whatsoever...It will then no longer be in a position, in determining its own faculty of judgment, to subsume its judgments under a specific maxim with the help of objective criteria of knowledge, but only with the help of a subjective distinction. This subjective means which still remains available to it is simply the feeling of a **need** which is inherent in reason itself.”

Compared with Descartes, who defined reason in relation with mathematical objects, Kant characterizes reason from the inside, independently of any objects. He identifies its main need as practical:

“Much more important, however, is the need of reason in its practical use, because this is unconditional, and because we are compelled to assume that God exists not only if we wish to pass judgment, but because we must pass judgment. For the purely practical use of reason consists in the formulation of moral laws.”

The idea that God needs to exist in order to allow us to act morally or according to an absolute law goes beyond the Mendelssohn's proof of the existence of God based on a logical necessity. According to Kant, because we have to judge our acts as moral or immoral, we look for the Divine existence able to give us a model of what it means to be absolutely moral. The existence of God is therefore a necessity rooted in our morality before being an intellectual necessity. Contrary to Descartes, who had first considered in his Meditations the existence of God as a prime logical necessity, Kant is reversing the priority. The logical necessity of God's existence capable of explaining the existence of the world, or how the finite world is created by the Infinite God is, for Kant, only a hypothesis. The necessity of God's existence comes first from our need to act morally. This need defines in fact the subjective nature of our reason.

c) Freedom of thought

In exploring with Kant the world of reason, we discover also that freedom of thought is also quite different from Descartes' position. Kant writes in his small essay:

“Freedom of thought also signifies the subjection of reason to no laws other than those which it imposes on itself; and its opposite is the maxim of the **lawless use of reason** (in order that it may, as the genius imagines, see further than it does when restricted by laws).”

For Kant, freedom of thought is not an anarchy but is realized when reason can give itself a law. This capacity of reason to give itself laws differs from the false freedom of the genius:

“The genius is at first delighted with its daring flights, having cast aside the thread by which reason formerly guided it. It soon captivates others in turn with its authoritative pronouncements and great expectations, and now appears to have set itself up on a throne on which slow and ponderous reason looked out of place.”

The absence of law, instead of producing freedom, has consequently authoritative pronouncements. When reason does not follow its own law it turns into an authoritative instance characterized by dogmatism:

“But since human reason nevertheless continues to strive for freedom, the first use which it makes of its long unaccustomed liberty, once it has broken its

bonds, must degenerate into misuse, into a presumptuous confidence in the independence of its own powers from every restriction, and into a conviction of the sole authority of speculative reason which accepts only what can be justified on objective grounds and by dogmatic conviction, but brashly dismisses everything else.”

“Speculative reason” is the first manifestation of reason when it can free itself from any kind of external coercion or social, religious or political constraint. The Cartesian reason described in the Discourse on the Method corresponds to what Kant defines as “speculative reason”: this type of reason does not recognize any law and believes in the objectivity of its position. Is there a contradiction between social, religious and political freedom, and this freedom reachable by reason when it follows its own law? For Kant, external freedom can only come from the freedom of reason.

Conclusion

It is possible to think about the proof of the existence of God in a healthy way if we can listen to the need of reason. In fact, this proof itself represents the fundamental moral need of reason and secondly represents its logical need. This conclusion illustrates the kind of revolution Kant accomplished in the way to think about theology, morality and thinking itself. Does this philosophical way of thinking about reason have some influence on how we should lead our lives? Obviously, it gives us the possibility to better understand the way reason works, and give us the possibility to evaluate the best paths of action. In which way does such a theory connect us with the political, religious, and moral debates we need to take part in order to pursue a human life? Thanks to Kant, we have the possibility to enlarge our consciousness about reason and understand how it works with the world. It broadens our perspective on how the world and our consciousness communicate together. Recognizing the subjectivity of reason allows Kant to connect reason with the world in an efficient way. To “orientate in thinking” recovers here the totality of its meaning. Descartes had made of the “method” an objective and external process to reach the truth, while Kant finds the orientation in the subjectivity of reason itself.

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