

Human Freedom and the Philosophical Attitude

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Abstract

*Attempts to describe the essential features of the Western philosophical tradition can often be characterized as 'boundary work', that is, the attempt to create, promote, attack, or reinforce specific notions of the 'philosophical' in order to demarcate it as a field of intellectual inquiry. During the last century, the dominant tendency has been to delineate the discipline in terms of formal methods, techniques, and concepts and a given set of standard problems and alternative available solutions (although this element has been both present and at times highly influential at least since Plato). One vital feature of the philosophical tradition that has played a certain rather subterranean but nonetheless indispensable role, which I will discuss in this article, is that of repeatedly and stringently calling into question the conditions of its own possibility. The Cartesian tradition (including Kant, Husserl, Popper and Weber) shares with the anti-philosophers (say, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, but even the later Wittgenstein) the insight that this questioning itself is and has always been a problem, perhaps the deepest problem, for philosophy. The idea that one has the right, even the responsibility, to pose questions that are non-standard, not *comme il faut*, perhaps even taboo, lay at the very heart of notions such as 'the pursuit of truth', 'vita contemplativa', and 'philosophy as work on one-self'. On what grounds can one possibly assert such a right? In the Western tradition, it has most often been associated with a form of genuine doubt founded in deep engagement with some subject matter, i.e. the notion that one has a 'problem' demanding that one take responsibility for one's beliefs and thoughts, both morally and logically. It seems to me that the meaning of this most basic attitude is something that each generation must rediscover for itself; indeed, recreate for itself in a new environment and under new conditions. Thus, the blindness of the past, in this self-understanding of philosophy, need not bind or blind us in the future. To the contrary, the European intellectual tradition can be seen as providing a series of perspicuous representations of intermittently faltering and flourishing attempts at asserting the viability of the idea of human freedom as essentially bound up with the pursuit of truth. As such, it is of necessity open to perpetual revision (even when it resists it).*

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1. Two Understandings of the Discipline of Philosophy

There are today two distinct but related challenges to the continuation of the discipline known as 'philosophy'. In the end, they are one, but seen from two perspectives: the challenge from within and the challenge from without. Starting with the latter, the very organizational prerequisites and their attendant professional perquisites have been radically called into question. The response from academic philosophy has been to address problems such as diminishing student enrollments and skeptical university managers by applying 'philosophical methods' to the interests and worries of the day and developing programs of study and research projects in which these can be integrated. Such initiatives to provide economic opportunities for departments and contribute to improving general education in other fields have, of course, existed for decades in the form of courses in ethics for students in business and medicine (business ethics, biomedical ethics). And, given the organizational and economic structure of universities, it was only natural that research programs and projects should follow. In other areas of philosophy, such as formal logic and to some extent the philosophy of science, the pattern was somewhat different. These are fields in which questions arising out of conceptual problems internal to scientific practice resulted in specific methods and theories that could then be taught and studied as 'specializations'. Cognitive science is an example of a field where philosophical theorizing could be put to practical use in this way. In the last few decades, we have seen an explosion in attempts to put philosophy to work at something concrete or, as one might say, to give it a job description. There are now a plethora of work packages for ethicists: the 'classics' mentioned earlier (biomedical ethics and business ethics), as well as environmental ethics, research ethics, population ethics, and digital ethics, to name a few. Alternatively, there are courses of study and programs of research in decision theory for organizations, risk management for sustainable urban planning, etc. In short, the move is toward making philosophy 'relevant' to real life and the real world. This move presupposes, of course, that in and of itself, philosophy is *not* relevant. In my view, this pervasive assumption poses a much more profound menace to philosophy, both as an academic discipline and, more critically, as a possible form of human thought.

The relevance or irrelevance of philosophy as such is not self-evident. It depends entirely on what conception of philosophy is at stake. In one conception, namely, the dominant one, philosophy is a special science that has progressed to achieve a relatively high degree of precision, due in no small part to formalization. Intrinsic to this precision and the reliability of the results emanating from it is sub-specialization within the field. An expert in value theory is no more an expert in the philosophy of mathematics than an astrophysicist is expert in climatology. In both cases, there are surely certain very basic notions in common, but they are not of the kind apposite for dealing adequately with particular advanced problems within the field. Each area of specialization has its own methods and *modus operandi*, and while there may be greater or lesser degree of overlap between fields, proficiency in a given field requires mastery of the concepts, techniques and operations germane to the area of specialization in question. On this conception of philosophy, the question of relevance is conceived in the same way as in any science: one distinguishes between 'basic', 'pure' or

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'fundamental' research, on the one hand, and 'applied research', on the other. As in the natural sciences, the distinction is not absolute, but rather a question of to what degree the research involved is formulated so as to solve a problem not issuing out of scientific inquiry itself, but posed as a practical problem by some external agent, authority, or interest. Metaphysics and epistemology, as a rule, fall on the far side of 'pure research', while digital ethics are substantially practical in their orientation. Even within a particular branch, however, there is a spectrum between theoretical and applied orientations. In the philosophy of law, for example, basic questions regarding the nature of laws and rights are among the most abstract and fundamental, whereas applied legal philosophy attends to particular aspects of the law in relation to the social and political context of legislation and reform. And once again, even here, there is room for work stressing the theoretical framework, which would be more 'basic' than one analyzing a specific piece of jurisprudence against a socio-political backdrop by utilizing some philosophical theory.

This conception of philosophy follows the pattern of science generally, then, in accepting that scientific advancement presupposes specialization. But also, as in science generally, there is a kind of 'remainder' left every time a border is drawn between areas of inquiry and their methods and theories that justifies asking more fundamental questions about the possibilities and limits of those methods and theories. The notion of 'pure research' is just the notion that a certain degree of intellectual autonomy is part and parcel of the pursuit of scientific truth. It is the freedom to ask ourselves what we are doing, why we are doing it, and if we might not be doing something wrong or if we could or should do something else.

When such questions arise, one natural first step is to retrace our steps, as it were, and try to understand how it came about that we started thinking in this way, i.e. to reflect historically on the presuppositions or conditioning intellectual context that made possible a certain way of thinking. 'Historical reflection' here need not be understood in terms of intellectual history, although such considerations are often highly pertinent, even inevitable, for understanding the development of a certain kind of discourse. But historical reflection can be understood more broadly, as questions in this borderland between or beyond academic disciplines that ask precisely what is it that we are doing *now*. Foucault's idea that Kant's essays on the Enlightenment and the French Revolution introduced a new question into philosophy, namely, the question of the contemporaneity of the now, makes a similar point. In science, we are agents in a self-contained activity that has certain predetermined rules of play. But in posing the question, 'what is happening?' we are both agent and element. The question forces on the one who poses it a state of intellectual self-reflection and reflexivity, and thus, neutralizes any and all 'natural' categories, concepts, distinctions, practices, routines, and techniques. (Foucault, 1986, pp. 88–96). This kind of reflection does not properly belong to science, since, rather than taking for granted the conceptual framework and methods that constitute a discipline and the kinds of objects it studies, it interrogates these concepts and models as objects of autonomous scrutiny, that is, unbiased and unconstrained analytical examination and evaluation. On this point, there is not serious disagreement between, say, Kuhn and Popper. The difference is that Kuhn would say that this sort of discussion without a unitary paradigm is outside

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science properly speaking, while Popper considers it an ever present possibility belonging intrinsically to the very idea of science, properly understood. In either case, this idea of the freedom and hope of science share important characteristics with an altogether different conception of philosophy than as that of a special science.

If philosophy is not a science in its own right, what can it be? The most common alternative to the idea of philosophy as a science is that of philosophy as a special genre of scholarly commentary. In this paradigm, philosophy consists in the appropriation, contemplation, and explication of its own history. The value or relevance of studying thinkers of the past is often associated, among other things, with *Bildung*, or with the importance of historical perspective. Often, although certainly not always, there exists an implicit form of historical realism that motivates the study, an idea that there is a singular correct way of understanding what, say, Kant had on his mind and wanted others to understand, and that this correct interpretation is at one with the most highly regarded and widely accepted scholarly commentaries. But this idea can and often does lead to an emphasis on the text as a presentation or product, that is, as a system or structure of theses and doctrines, rather than as someone's actual living thoughts, that is, as a way of thinking. It can also lead to a tendency to use the text in question to confirm or reinforce contemporary conceptions of a set of ideas associated with the name of Kant, for instance, which in turn is used to confirm or reinforce contemporary dominant conceptions more generally, in science, scholarship, or politics. When these conceptions are altered, the manner of reading Kant, 'what he said', is altered with it. In short, the history of philosophy as a scholarly discipline is concerned with placing and positioning texts deemed 'philosophical' within the academic community in a certain historical representational context. But this academic activity, as a discipline, has its own canon of exemplary texts, scholarly standards, standard techniques, and accepted solutions. In this respect, philosophy as commentary and interpretation, that is, as scholarship, follows the same pattern of philosophy understood as a science.

Foucault's suggestion above does not belong to this tradition. Rather, it follows Kant in that the attitude that Foucault takes toward his object here is non-dogmatic (in the Kantian sense) with regard to Kant exegesis, commentary, and interpretation. Rather than justify or reaffirm, his approach is rather tentative and comparative. His technique does not aim to provide a 'true' or 'correct' interpretation of Kant, but to read Kant in such a way as to loosen the grip of constrained readings, namely, those that come 'naturally' due to our contemporary notions and ways of thinking. In this respect, the object is not the Enlightenment, but the present. The aim is actually double: to see what ideas and notions that we find in Kant that are still relevant and valid (that is to say, useful), and just how relevant and valid they are; and to see which are obsolete and invalid (that is to say, not useful), so that we can leave them behind as historical artifacts not belonging to our way of life. The difference between this 'method' of philosophical thought and standard scholarship in the history of philosophy can be described in terms of the perspective taken on the thoughts considered. The scholarly approach within the history of philosophy as an academic discipline is to study Kant's philosophy in terms of the doctrines for which it became famous: the *results* of his thinking; what he said and how he said it. Indeed, Kant left us with a

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philosophical vocabulary that we can barely do without, its influence on later philosophy comparable with that of the King James bible or Shakespeare's tragedies on the development of modern English.

But there is again here what was termed earlier a 'remainder', what is beyond the ideas, doctrines, theories, positions, standpoints, and various 'isms'. It's doubtful that the uncontested canonical philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant) saw their life's work as consisting of a contest between established doctrines. Kant explicitly denies that he is concerned with hypotheses and standpoints at all (cf. Kant, 1965, A xv–xvi and B xxxv–xxxvii). Kant also denies that the understanding of a work in philosophy that approaches it as a system of doctrines is a philosophical understanding (Kant, 1965, A 484/B 512).

An alternative conception of philosophy is to see it as constituted by problems—not in the sense of intellectual puzzles, but in the sense of deep concerns requiring great intellectual exertion. Theories and theses are, in this view, merely instruments or means by which to solve a problem. Thus, it makes no sense to treat theories and theses as external to or disconnected from the problem at hand. Plato's *diaeresis*, Kant's critical philosophy, Hegel's dialectic, Freud's psychoanalysis, or Foucault's genealogical method are all responses to a certain kind of question, and the value and even to a great extent the sense of those answers are indistinguishable from how the question is formulated and what it means. With regard to older texts, this means that the intellectual historical environment in which the problem(s) and their attendant theories, theses, and concepts were used and the language in which they were formulated are unavoidably part of the understanding of the problem. Or, as Collingwood famously put it, 'we only know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution' (Collingwood, 2002, p. 70). Our own ideas, concepts, and vocabulary are as historically determined as those in the works that we study. In this understanding of philosophy, this insight is fundamental for philosophy, while it is for the most part irrelevant for the special sciences. Past and present intellectual traditions are mutually dependent insofar as both are affected by how Kant, for example, is and has been read. Our contemporary ways of dealing with the philosophical problems that troubled Kant are an expression and result of that historical conceptual formation. The developments and connections are not transparent for the reasons cited in connection with Foucault above: in thinking through the problems, we are at once agents and elements of the concept formation that is the precondition of our own thinking. The natural starting point for all thinking is to take our own starting points as self-evident and necessary without regard to the choices and decisions that were made at some point, which lead to that just these concepts and solutions and not others came to be taken for granted as given, obvious and indispensable.¹

If one thing has become clear, it is that current ideas about what constitutes an academic discipline are under pressure from all corners, and are neither obvious nor regarded as necessary. But in considering the future and the present of the discipline of philosophy, it can be helpful to consider the relation between two senses of 'discipline': on the one hand, a field of study, branch of knowledge, subject area, field of specialization or systematic instruction, and so forth, and, on the other, the idea of control or self-control that the former assumes. The notion of discipline in the first

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sense can be described as the training of a disciple, that is, the expectations placed on someone engaged in a craft or order with a set of norms or a code of conduct to which he has committed himself. But it can also be described from the perspective of the disciple himself, in terms of the self-control or self-mastery he aims to achieve by submitting himself to the exercises and system of reward and punishment of the institution. A disciple's highest goal is to achieve the continence of the master, that is, his ability perform consistently well because his aims and desires conform to his knowledge and reason. This sense of the 'discipline' of philosophy echoes in part Hadot's Wittgensteinian idea that the activity of philosophy at its inception was characterized by 'spiritual exercises', i.e. 'practices ... intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subjects who practice them' (Hadot, 2002). On this 'therapeutic' view, contemporary philosophy as an academic discipline understanding itself as a special science is a misunderstanding and distortion of the basic idea of philosophy, which is concerned with the True, the Just, and the Good, not as theoretical abstractions, but a way of life. Theorizing is a means (among others), not an end in itself.

2. Transcendental Philosophy as an Exercise in Freedom and Discipline

In *Discipline and Punish* and elsewhere, Foucault makes the argument that '(t)he disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate' (Foucault, 1979, p. 223). Educational disciplines as we know them, that is, as describing institutional boundaries, came rather late on the scene, largely the final result of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century attempts to catalog and control the rapidly growing body of scientific results and culminating in the American system of departmental organization (Clarke, 2007). Our 'traditional' divisions into 'the natural sciences' of physics, chemistry, biology, geology, and astronomy, 'the social science disciplines' of economics, politics, sociology, and psychology, and 'the humanistic studies' of languages, philosophy, history, and literature are relatively recent conventions. Prior to the nineteenth century, what we call 'scientists' were known as Natural Historians (life sciences) and Natural Philosophers (physics), and they were amateurs associated mostly with academies rather than universities. In any case, modern scientific specialization developed in tandem with the departmentalization of teaching and the university, which increasingly became the main financial source and institutional structure of scientific activity. With specialization, there emerged ever more concentrated areas of expertise, manifested most notably in the advent of specialized journals. Further, academic disciplines are intimately linked to the evolution of professions, since it is the disciplinary field that determines and authorizes the necessary and sufficient knowledge for admission into the profession and the criteria by which proficiency and expertise are assessed. One might say that academic disciplines are in the business of keeping thought in line, of keeping it in its place through the socialization and thus self-regulation of its practitioners, as it were. It is intrinsically a matter of community standards, criteria, and norms. Philosophy as understood in the alternative understanding sketched above, on the other hand, arises out of doubt or intellectual dissatisfaction, a sense that something is missing or not quite right in

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accepted theories and habit of thought that belong to them. The freedom of philosophy, in this conception, is the act of taking one's doubts seriously, claiming the right to hesitate before acceding to convention or contemporary manner and mores, and reflecting upon the basis for one's own assumptions and intellectual inclinations.

Another word for this reluctance is 'second thoughts', or, one might say, a more thoughtful kind of *thinking*. At the same time, the hesitation presupposes that there is or may be some truth or idea or insight that one hopes or suspects can be found that guides the direction of one's thoughts. To maintain direction, to find what one is seeking, requires self-discipline and self-determination, since there is no external authority to serve as the given touchstone which will give the seeker satisfaction except his own sense that he has come to clarity. A certain idea of freedom as intrinsic to the philosophical enterprise is as ancient as it is modern, namely, the idea of self-legislation or autonomy. This idea is not coterminous with liberty. The latter is broad enough to encompass an idea of boundless and facile freedom, while the exercise of autonomy requires an enormous effort on the part of the individual. One possible idea of freedom in the sense of liberty is the freedom to do whatever one pleases, to follow one's inclinations without hindrance. (Indeed, some of the critique of modern liberal democracy today stems from dissatisfaction with the limits it places on the possibility of fulfilling wishes and desires. Legislation criminalizing non-consensual intercourse even between spouses or corporal punishment of one's own children as impingements of freedom within the private sphere would be a case in point.) Self-legislation, on the other hand, is the idea that one can learn to observe, understand, and even modify, that is, master, one's wishes and desires. Autonomy as an ideal then is freedom from both external constraints and internal compulsions, including those beliefs and attitudes that seem to come so naturally that one barely recognizes that they exist.

What kind of an idea is this? Robert Pippin asks:

what is the real content of this ideal (what would it be to lead a free life) and why has it become so important to us, what is its importance to us—are obviously pretty vague, it already does not look like a strictly philosophical answer to those questions could get us very far, at least it doesn't seem likely to me. It is after all only relatively recently in Western history that we began to think of human beings as something like individuals directing and guiding the course of their own lives, in some sense independent and self-determining centers of a causal agency; only relatively recently that one's entitlement to such a self-determining, self-directed life seemed not just valuable but absolutely valuable, for the most part more important even than any consideration of security, well-being, and peace that would make the attainment of such an ideal more difficult, so important that it was even worth the risk of life in its defense. (Pippin, 2006, p. 87)

And, in partial response to his own question concerning how the ideal of autonomy came to take hold of the western imagination, he notes that even if we concede to all historicizing accounts describing the *de facto* conditions of this development, often aimed at demonstrating the contingency of those conditions, we have not satisfied the

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impulse to ask questions concerning the normative status of the ideal. And those questions are acute. He continues:

At just the moment in the nineteenth century when Western European societies, for all of their visible flaws, seemed to start paying off the Enlightenment's promissory notes, reducing human misery by the application of their new science and technology, increasing the authority of appeals to reason in life, reducing the divisive public role of religion, extending the revolutionary claim of individual natural right to an ever wider class of subjects, accelerating the extension of natural scientific explanation, and more and more actually gaining what Descartes so boldly promised, the mastery of nature, it also seemed that many of the best, most creative minds produced within and as products of such societies rose up in protest, even despair at the social organization and norms that also made all of this possible. In painting, literature, and music, as well as philosophy, bourgeois modernity as a whole became not only a great problem but also a very confusing, largely distasteful fate. All this eventually came to be reflected in what the profession classifies as continental philosophy—the end of metaphysics, the end of philosophy, the impotence of reason, failed signifiers, the death of the subject, the end of man, negative dialectics, the impossibility of poetry, the end of the novel, absolute contingency, anti-humanism, and on and on. (Pippin, 2006, p. 89)

If one wants to see what might still be useful, veridical, or relevant in this idea today, one way of going about it is to try to understand it in terms of what it meant for philosophy when it came to be articulated, again, not as an intra-theoretical problem belonging to one set of specialized questions (moral philosophy or ethics or political philosophy) but as a way of thinking about real problems, where the divisions between theoretical and practical, or between different disciplines, are not assumed beforehand.

In what follows, we will return to the example of Kant. Kant will be used here not as an object of scholarly interpretation, but as an illustration of two things: first, as an example of a different conception of philosophy than that of a special science; and second, as an example of how one might approach the philosophical tradition without reducing it to a canon of doctrines, on the one hand, or mere white mythology or rationalized pietism, etc. on the other. The approach is to try to follow Kant's train of thought as emanating from a real need or desire, to read back to the question, as Collingwood would say, to understand what one must take oneself to be doing in order to invent Kantian critical philosophy and the doctrines and distinctions associated with it. On this way of reading Kant, the doctrines and distinctions, that is, the products or results of his thinking, regarded solely as products or results, are in and of themselves no different from the products of any earlier or competing systems. What is distinct for Kant's critical philosophy is its *method*, which he thinks guarantees the validity of the results. And it is the validity or truthfulness that is the aim of philosophy as described above. The critical method, in contrast to dogmatic philosophy, is characterized by autonomy. While dogmatic thinking does not and cannot question

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its own resources, conditions, and procedures, the critical method subjects itself to strenuous self-critique. While dogmatic thinking assumes the sense and applicability of certain basic concepts and distinctions as unquestionable and non-negotiable (to the extent it even recognizes that they are in play), that its procedures and applications are reliable and sound (to the extent that it even recognizes that it is following predetermined procedures), and takes the results of those assumptions consequently as demonstrated truths, critical philosophy places the object of inquiry in relation to the grounds or assumptions in which the question is framed, and asks if those grounds are sufficient for an adequate answer, and if so, how it is possible (Kant, 1965, A 484/B 512). On this view, philosophy is the conviction that is possible to separate truth from error, in the first instance, in one's own thinking. Kant does not claim to prove that the conclusions arrived at by means of his method are true, merely to have shown that it is possible. And that possibility is what entitles us to try, since it does not violence to reason to attempt the possible.

Kant is an interesting example for our purposes in part because he thematizes one of the central issues of this article, namely, the autonomy of philosophy with respect to the special sciences. The idea that it is possible and necessary (even urgent, if we share the concerns of later thinkers in the Kantian tradition such as Husserl) to systematically articulate the absolute unconditional principles for all knowledge is one that has lost salience in philosophy. But for Kant and his contemporaries, the conditions, possibilities, and limitations of the paradigmatic forms of *Wissenschaft*, that is, mathematics and the physical sciences, were of foremost concern. Kant's hesitation regarding the scientific status of metaphysics as it had hitherto been conducted, i.e. his suspicion that metaphysics was not a science at all, was the starting point of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The problem he found was not primarily with the results (doctrines, claims, and teachings) of metaphysics, but with its methods. The methods appropriate to the special sciences, and which serve them well, lead irrevocably to the formulation of basic problems that of necessity result not in justified true knowledge, but in antinomies of reason. The sciences are defined and delimited by the methods employed to solve distinct and determinate problems. Such methodological predetermined delimitation is useless and potentially harmful to a form of inquiry lacking that kind of object. What remains for philosophical inquiry that hopes to have the rigor and epistemic accountability of the special sciences is to direct its attentions to its own resources, possibilities, and delimitations, that is, to take itself as its own object. Thus, metaphysics is possible precisely as thinking about the conditions of thought, or reason's critique of itself; as Kant puts it, in philosophical reflection 'reason is occupied with nothing but itself' (Kant, 1965, A 680/B 708). Kant's discussion of the antinomies attempts to show how metaphysical problems dissolve as real questions (that is, as questions about 'reality') when they are understood as questions concerning our own faculties, the resources we have at our disposal, for construing and answering the kinds of questions that we are inclined to pose.² Principles, concepts, and categories that belong to our ways of dealing with empirical matters cannot simply be shifted to an entirely other kind of question without loss of meaning and with it coherence. If the legitimate use of the language and categories of empirical knowledge is limited to matters concerning possible empirical experience, then the aim of

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the critique of reason is to investigate the foundations of empirical and mathematical claims to knowledge with regard to its conditions and resources. In his forward to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that his point is not simply to reject certain kinds of problems as belonging properly to science due to the limitations of the human intellect. To the contrary, Kant is deeply impressed by the enormous power of science and the breadth of its results. But he wants to know how the knowledge that science produces is possible, and he recognizes that the question of the possibility of science is not a question belonging to any of the special sciences. By the same token, he is not as impressed with the results of 2000 years of metaphysics, and he asks himself how it is possible to formulate problems in such a way that it is immune to a straightforward and unequivocal answer.

When Kant asks how the sciences are possible, he does not begin with the given facts, methods, and concepts as they are used in the sciences but with the question of in what such knowledge can be grounded, what sort of foundations would have to hold for the results to be true and valid. This question, the question of a priori conditions, is the question of the possibilities and limitations of the idea of knowledge, and it leads to a transcendental thinking, a thinking in which knowledge is related to what is known, the thought.³ The sciences ask for the objective grounds for a judgment, while transcendental philosophy asks what it means for a thinking subject to make or grasp such a judgment to begin with. But in a transcendental reflection (that is, in critical philosophy), the subject is not in the first instance to be understood empirically or psychologically, but *a priori*. The 'I' in question is an ideal 'I', an 'I' in the bare-bones sense of the logical subject of thinking, apart from its particularity and contingent characteristics. Precisely this aspect of Kantian philosophy is regarded today with suspicion in many quarters, as at best a quaint remnant of old, European metaphysics that we do not have to take very seriously. But this response is rather exaggerated, and blinds us to what sense we can make of it, and what value it might have for our own thinking. In a great deal of everyday discourse, we often make reference to phenomena in an attitude of non-situated impersonal knowledge. When we talk about plants and animals, we do it as a rule in a way that is not conceptually bound with our own 'private' experiences. We quite simply mean different things by these terms, regardless of our ethnicity, gender, social or economic conditions, or personal history of tulips and aardvarks. Now of course prior knowledge of etiology or horticulture, various cultural associations with certain kinds of flowers, dietary laws, etc. will likely inform when, where, and how the distinction comes into play, but that very observation assumes that we already understand what we are talking about in the first place. In this sense, we share a common form of life, even if that commonality may mislead us into assuming a false universality or even necessity to more local, contingent, or specific variations than is warranted.

It will be recalled that 'transcendental idealism' does not contradict empirical realism; it takes it as its starting point (Kant, 1965, A 367–380). Rather than denying the reality of the external world, Kant takes for granted that we have experience of aardvarks and tulips. But what he hopes to achieve by means of his critical method is to provide an answer to the question, 'given that I experience x as x, how is it possible? What conditions must hold?' And this question is not posed from an external point of

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view in the manner of Hume, as a question concerning some empirical object (the psychological subject or I), but from the point of view of the experience itself. A transcendental investigation concerns the sense of the concepts necessarily involved in discrete experience (this is the point of Kant's remark that intuitions without concepts are blind). What characterizes transcendental reflection is that it does not result in 'valid knowledge' about some (empirical) thing, since it does not concern things in the world. Outside of the reflection, it has no sense at all. When Kant points out that concepts without intuitions are empty, and intuitions without concepts are blind, he is not making an empirical claim about the relation between two things. He is saying that in any case of the phenomenon of Y, for it to be Y, it must be recognizable as such. Otherwise there would be no phenomenon, since to be a phenomenon is to be apprehended. But Y, the form itself, is a function of thinking, and the distinction between thinking and apprehending can only be thought, not perceived. It is not something that we can arrive at through experience. But such a statement is not part of knowledge of or about the world; it is not part of science and it is not ontology (or rather, ontology, for Kant, is only possible as epistemology). His question is not 'What are phenomena and how are they related to consciousness', but rather 'How are we to philosophize so as to better understand the nature, applicability and limitations of empirical knowledge?' One might even consider the entirety of his philosophy in light of the desire to answer that question. But if it is right and reasonable to say that his answers cannot help us due to historical developments in science and society, as well as in logic, mathematics, and philosophy, it is not at all clear that it is uninteresting and unhelpful to pose similar questions about *our* science, *our* logic, and *our* philosophy. To the contrary, one might think that the question has never been more relevant or the need for a viable answer more pressing.

We can 'situate' Kantian thinking in a narrative about Western European thinking and its bourgeois assumptions in which a certain form of white, male heteronormative rationality is reified and fetishized, but then we have not even begun to raise the question of the normative validity of the ideal whatever its origin. But not asking the question is not the same thing as having answered it. It is not really clear that we have even fully understood what this account of philosophy is, or what potential applicability it has. One of the more salient aspects of his philosophy is Kant's delimitation of the valid domain of scientific authority, one that is far from what we should rightly call 'positivist'. Kant quite explicitly rejects the sovereignty of the sciences over human existence. Science or scientific thinking is the name for a human activity; it is something we do to satisfy certain needs, including the need to find answers to the questions and doubts that arise in our experience. One of his main concerns in accounting for the conditions for possible experience is to show that certain problems are not amenable to scientific proof, since they are not objects of experience and therefore cannot be objects of scientific proof (the ideas of God, the soul and the cosmos). Equally important for Kant is to show that this limitation need not lead to skepticism; to the contrary what appears to be a limitation is in fact not a real limitation at all, but appears to be one if we make the sort of conceptual mistake described above, namely, that of taking transcendental questions as substantial ones, with objective empirical (i.e. substantial) answers. At the same time, Kant says that the 'limitation' of scientific

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knowledge, the boundaries of what can be said substantially, is not a limitation at all, but rather a demonstration of our freedom. We are free to hesitate when we encounter metaphysical and dogmatic claims about freedom and necessity, and free to rely on our own reason rather than external authority in the form of 'established truths' and ask ourselves if these arguments actually bring us closer to satisfying answers to questions that are of the greatest concern for us. For questions regarding Nature and limits of the human capacity to attain to the truth, to understand the world around us and our place in it, questions concerning the freedom of the will and the order of nature, are always relevant and always momentous, at least for some. But the answers that have been offered have not satisfied our need to know what is the case precisely because they treat nature and the will as kinds of objects, as possible objects of knowledge. According to Kant, they are not and cannot be. They are *ideas of reason*, not concepts of the understanding. And ideas of this kind make it meaningful to continue thinking and trying to act rightly and justly, because we are human beings who choose and not machines that merely process information, blindly and dumbly following the rules of understanding. It is nonsense to speak of truth or validity with regard to such ideas. They are regulative; they constitute the very condition of our humanity. Kant saw clearly that it would be difficult for us to 'take the transcendental turn' in our thinking. Our reason must learn to tame, to discipline, the very desires that motivate and justify its use. But there is a clear difference between bridling desire and satisfying needs. On that point, however, Kant was not an idealist but a realist, in the popular sense, in the end, the choice is not ours. Our autonomy consists in nothing but our capacity to recognize and follow the dictates that we legislate for ourselves out of our reason, to listen to reason, one might say, since we are at heart rational beings. In that respect, it is probably fair to say that not only Kant, but the intellectual tradition for which he might well be said to be the foremost representative, is a relic of a past form of life. Were it otherwise, if we really could make use of Kant as he intended, then philosophy would be alive and well and in no need of further justification.

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Notes

1. Consider, for instance, certain concepts that were derived from Kant's thought (Kant's particular way of formulating the distinctions between subject and object, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, analytic and synthetic, empirical and logical, as well as the very ideas of 'intuition', 'evidence', etc. in philosophy), but due to certain historical developments in philosophy and logic came to be used in different ways. When Frege posed the question of whether mathematical propositions are synthetic, it wasn't the same question as Kant's, in part because they didn't have the same conception of arithmetic. Kant wanted to deduce mathematics from our apprehension of time. For Frege, mathematics is grounded in logic and entirely independent of our knowledge. Thus one cannot understand Kant's transcendental thinking if one assumes Frege's use of the concepts in question.
2. The metaphysical problem concerning the absolute totality of things in space and time, if it is to be solved, requires the possibility of making universally valid judgments about the

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totality of all empirical experience. But the idea of the totality of empirical experience is not a possible object of experience, and therefore cannot be an object of an empirical judgment. The limitation described here is not however a description of the limits of human knowledge so much as a conceptual remark regarding experience and totality. The idea of the totality of things in space and time does not lend itself to the methods of sciences (which rely on distinct empirical experience), and the judgments made on the basis of the accuracy and legitimacy of those methods.

3. This article is not intended to contribute to Kant exegesis in any way, but to use certain basic elements of Kantian philosophy as a perspicuous presentation of the problems addressed herein. The question of just what Kant means by his reference to 'thoughts' and related issues are therefore not within the parameters of the present discussion. For a helpful analysis related to the issues touched upon (see Pippin, 1987).

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