In Memoriam

Judith Helen Beale
(1947–2004)
Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason

An Orientation to the Central Theme

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Historical Prelude

‘Above all, my truth-seeking young friends, beware of letting our professors tell you what is contained in the Critique of Pure Reason.’

–Schopenhauer

Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, first published in 1781, is one of the glories of modern Western philosophy. Its title declares its overall theme. That is the question of what knowledge we can acquire through the exercise of reason alone, independently of all sensory experience. The broad answer Kant proposes is that while reason can teach us much about the nature and structure of our cognitive grasp of the world, it cannot itself deliver any determinate matter of substance. That is the business of experience, not ratiocination, and the traditional pretensions of reason to supplement, or stand in for, experience here under the title of speculative metaphysics are revealed as entirely illusory.

This response to the central question determines the structure of the whole work. Broadly speaking, its first half is devoted to the positive aspect of the answer, where Kant sets out his famous doctrine of Transcendental Idealism. That doctrine, which is, indeed, held in place by reason alone, proposes to show how sensible experience is competent to furnish knowledge of the world, and to do so in a way that is immune to the various difficulties with that seemingly truistic thought which had beset Kant’s immediate predecessors. The second, more negative, half of the Critique focuses on what Kant sees as the failures of traditional metaphysics, which had aimed, through the power of reason alone, to attain insights about the world more secure than any that mere experience might provide. There Kant is concerned to identify the limits that reason should set to its own ambitions, and to demonstrate how earlier and contemporary philosophy had ridden roughshod over them. In these pages I set that large portion of the Critique aside and concern myself exclusively with the positive account of knowledge-enabling experience that Kant develops in his work’s earlier parts.

Putting it for the moment very roughly, Kant’s principal teaching is that the world experience reveals to us, and about which we can attain
reputable empirical knowledge, is in large part constituted by ourselves and our own ways of thought. It is a world that we must understand to be coloured through and through by the nature of our own minds. For this reason, if for no other, it is to be thought of as the world as it appears and not as the world as it is in itself. By contrast, Kant’s predecessors had usually taken the world we aspire to know and understand as having its character fixed quite independently of the mental capacities that we bring to bear upon it. For them, knowledge of the world was absolute knowledge, knowledge of the world as it is in itself. We shall need to appreciate the enormous difficulties that Kant believed this natural, and largely unquestioned, assumption encountered if we are to understand what he proposed to put in its place. For him, the rather negative doctrine of Transcendental Idealism was not just as a way of avoiding those difficulties; besides that, and together with its more positive dual, Empirical Realism, it aimed to articulate a more stable view of the relation that must hold between creatures with minds like ours and any world that is cognitively accessible to them.

To understand how Kant arrived at this striking position and to appreciate its many merits we need to be clear about the historical setting from which it laboriously emerged. The point of departure here lies with the work of René Descartes, whose *Meditations on First Philosophy* had been composed a century and a half or so before Kant embarked on the *Critique*. Struggling to explain our right to claim far-reaching knowledge of the world and, more particularly, to account for our prospects for making sound scientific sense of it, Descartes had taught that we should only succeed to the extent that our world-oriented beliefs could be rendered proof against all doubt. In this way everyday knowledge of the world around us (cognitio) and any more taxing scientific understanding of it we might hope to reach (scientia) both demanded certainty. Now, evidently, both our everyday beliefs about the world and our more theoretically driven scientific ones are, at the end of the day, largely rooted in one form or another of sensory perception, as, for example, are my beliefs that snow has fallen during the night, that the trains are none the less running on time, and even such highly theoretical matters as that $e = mc^2$. Yet, if we take the perceptions that underpin such beliefs to be directly of the snow in the street or of the information legible on the arrivals board in the station or perhaps the trains themselves, the certainties Descartes teaches us to look for seem to be lost. Possibilities of misidentification, delusion, hallucination, illusion and other sorts of error abound, and so seemed to Descartes to rule out any such worldly starting point. Instead, he had proposed that we set out from the error-proof data of our own consciousness, that is, from the certainty of how
things subjectively seem to us, as opposed to how we take them objectively to be in fact. (See here in particular the Second Meditation.) On that unimpeachable basis, Descartes supposed that we should be able to construct secure lines of inference to the distant causes in the world beyond the mind of the mind’s own stream of indubitable data. In the case of our examples, such inferences, executed with all due care, could be supposed to take us faultlessly to the presence of snow in the street and to the existence of information posted on the arrivals board, and thence, further down the line, to impeccable knowledge that snow has fallen in the night, and that, even so, the trains are running on time. Similarly, too, though undoubtedly in more complex fashion, with the sort of knowledge that we take it to be the business of the natural sciences ultimately to provide, such as knowledge about the fundamental nature of energy and of light.

Descartes’ choice of starting point was heavy with consequence for the century that followed, since his principal successors, both on the continent of Europe as well as in off-shore Britain, all assumed that Descartes’ privileging of the mind’s own indubitable subjective contents could not be gainsaid. The trouble, it quickly came to be seen, came with knowing how to proceed from there. The alternatives that were canvassed and which engaged Kant at the end of the eighteenth century are swiftly enough set out.

First, there is Descartes’ own strategy. We set out from certainties about the mind’s own present contents, and then, drawing to the very best of our ability on our God-given resources of sense, memory and understanding, we infer to the nature of the distant causes of those subjective states (cf. Sixth Meditation, ad finem). Exercising our intellect with all possible care, we exclude all grounds of doubt that might beset us, and once that is done – and just to the extent it can be done – we are to trust God benevolently to ensure that the beliefs we form by way of the best explanation of those close-to-home indubitable subjective effects are indeed true ones. In this way Descartes held our possession of perceptually based knowledge about the world around us to be secure. Analogous reflection was presumed to support the more ambitious aspirations of the natural sciences to provide us with systematic insight into the world’s workings.

Next, on the English side of the Channel, and at the end of the seventeenth century, we find John Locke endorsing the broad lines of Descartes’ epistemology, only with the important difference that for him appeal to God and His benevolence have in all consistency to be treated as somewhat insecure empirical matters, on a par with other beliefs about the world beyond the mind. So, the all-important theological
props on which Descartes had relied to secure certainty for the inferences that were to yield knowledge of the surrounding world beyond the mind were simply not available. The upshot for Locke was that our speculations about the causes of our subjective mental states enjoy at best probability, not certainty, and both we and the practising scientist have to content ourselves with that. Whereas Descartes proudly claimed to possess a route to knowledge of the world beyond the mind, Locke more modestly acknowledges our extensive and unavoidable ignorance of it. The most we can know is that there exists beyond the mind some present cause of our various ‘ideas’ and that it must be varied enough in its nature to account for the variety of impressions that are registered by our senses (cf. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, IV.xi.2).

Writing in the wake of Locke, the Irish divine, George Berkeley, was convinced that the subjective starting point that Locke and Descartes had both assumed was unassailable. He was, however, insistent that inference could not play the fundamental role that those two thinkers had assigned to it in accounting for either certain or probable insight about the world. Seeing their over-optimistic inferential procedures as opening the way to an intolerable scepticism – eventually, even to atheism – Berkeley sought to cut the knot by the drastic expedient of identifying the natural world itself with those very mental states, otherwise known as ‘ideas’, whose character we could not doubt. Much knowledge of the kind we unhesitatingly claim about the world could then be taken as given to us directly in our having those very mental states, and then there would no need to appeal to dubious inferences to account for its possession.

Lastly, for Kant’s closer contemporary, David Hume, Berkeley’s radical solution to the problem facing him was, like that of his predecessors, quite uncompelling. Even though perception is, indeed, immediately of our sensory impressions, or Berkeleyan ideas, the worldly objects of common sense and scientific investigation are, as we conceive of them, independent of us. Hence they must be distinct from our mental states and cannot be identical with them. Moreover, we think of them as persisting through breaks in the flow of our conscious states, which Berkeley’s proposal could scarcely consistently acknowledge. However, Hume thought he could show that it lies quite beyond our power to prove that such things do actually exist. Our various faculties of mind, reason, sense and imagination are all impotent in that regard. In consequence, we should abandon the old Cartesian quest for secure knowledge and simply accept that we have an inbuilt natural propensity to believe in the existence of the extra-mental world, a propensity that we are quite incapable of shaking off in the conduct of our everyday life. In the quiet of the study, it is true, we cannot avoid out-and-out scepticism
(as Berkeley himself had feared in his reflections on Locke), but once outside its doors and going about our daily business, we find the natural world’s unamenability to philosophical proof has no hold over us. The acceptance of philosophical scepticism has no implications for life itself.

Kant’s view of these various responses to the original problem was unremittingly hostile. From his point of view, they are as quickly dismissed as they are set out. Descartes’ approach suffered on two counts. It relied on invalid argument in establishing the existence of a benevolent God; and then, its pretension to erect compelling and indubitable hypotheses about the distal causes of our immediately given sensory states was overblown. Once we set aside the theology, the fact that we can find no better explanation for the perceptual states we enjoy than the existence of a world of mind-independent objects that cause those states may perhaps account for our feeling certain about their existence, but that can scarcely make their existence certain. Yet, in the matter of knowledge, be that demanding scientia or mere everyday cognitio, it is the latter certainty that is at issue, not the former. As Kant would see it, speculative inferences erected on such a narrow base could not even lay claim to the sort of probability that Locke was optimistically prepared to accord them, let alone certainty of the kind required by Descartes. Such views should be dismissed as little more than pious ‘enthusiasm’ (B128).²

Berkeley’s alternative way of making the distant, extra-mental, world accessible to us, namely by depriving it of its very distance, fares no better. The outright identification of the world of common sense with our sensations, or ‘ideas’, signally failed to preserve the crucial distinction between reality and illusion, and that Kant insisted was far too high a price to pay. No acceptable philosophy can secure our knowledge of the world at the cost of ‘degrading bodies to mere illusion’ as he puts it at B71. Finally, Hume’s urbane form of scepticism leaves us in the scandalous position of abandoning all serious claim to know that we live in the world at all (Bxxxix fn.). Just being natively unable to resist the belief that we do so is no consolation to philosophy, which can hardly earn its spurs by blithely renouncing the task of providing intellectual support for our very most basic beliefs.

While epistemological concern for the world beyond the mind provided one notable stimulus to the Critique, Kant’s manner of proceeding was also responsive to other, for him deeper, inherited philosophical problems. Two of these demand to be noticed at the outset. The first is that of explaining the very ability we have even so much as to think about a world that is distinct from us, whether or not such thought terminates in knowledge. Thinking about the world is of course an ability we exercise even as we ask how our belief in the existence of such a thing
can be justified. For Descartes, it passed without question that the indubitable data of sensation already came replete with that extra-mental content. After all, whether I am right to think so or not, it is now to me subjectively as if I am confronted by the façade of a house illuminated by the brightly shining sun; it is now to me as if the trains are running on time, and so on. However, given that by Descartes’ own reckoning our senses do not themselves immediately acquaint us with such things as houses and their façades, the shining sun or the punctual trains, and that we allegedly know about such things only through the construction of inferences from the sensory data that are immediately given to us, the question presses whence it comes that we are equipped with the conceptual stock we need to possess if we are to fashion those inferences and formulate their conclusions. The answer evidently cannot rightly be provided by the purely phenomenal character of our sensory experience. Nor can it be given by appeal to imagination (which, for Descartes and Locke, can do no more than put together simple elements that our mental experience itself provides). So it seems that, for Descartes at least, we have to turn to God again to supply us benevolently with such concepts innately. From Kant’s point of view that is to do no better than to explain one mystery by another, an even darker one.

Locke at least was not drawn in that particular direction. Rejecting all appeal to the innateness of our cognitive stock as theoretically otiose, in his Essay (1690) he had attempted to account for our ability to entertain thought about external bodies as fully explicable in terms of our capacity to combine elementary ideas, directly given in sensation. Laudable though the attempt may have been, it was none the less doomed from the start. As we have already seen Hume pointing out, the fundamental conception we have of the physical world involves the idea that it exists in independence of ourselves and of our minds. Yet nothing that is directly given to the mind by way of bare sensation, as Locke had conceived of it, has that solid character about it; nor can our simple ideas, whose content merely captures the phenomenal quality of those sensations themselves, be combined to generate that demanding idea of independence; so, once again, our very ability to think in such terms returns as acutely problematic. And if that is problematic, how much more so must be the ability Locke presumed we enjoy to construct probable inferences to the supposedly distant causes of our sensory experience. Such inferences have to be expressed in terms whose content extends far beyond anything ascribable to the data from which they set out, and, eschewing Cartesian nativism, Locke’s empirical alternative has no clear way of making good the deficiency. That is a second problem from which Kant sets out, the solution to which dominates his whole philosophy of experience.
The remaining topic to bear in mind at the outset, distinct from, though closely related to, those just discussed, concerns the issue of causality. The world in which we live and which we think of ourselves as exploring through our experience is not just a collection of disparate individuals unrelated to one another; it consists of things that have their effects on us and which stand in complex causal relations to one another. Descartes’ advocacy of mechanistic ways of thinking about the world and the advance of the physical sciences in the seventeenth century made such thought philosophically commonplace and theoretically quite irreversible. Analytical metaphysics, however, had not kept pace with this theoretical advance. It seemed evident to Kant that to recognize causality in the world is possible only if some necessity can be discerned that relates causes and their effects, yet the resources of established philosophy were quite inadequate to the task since such necessity would, it seemed, have to be viewed either as purely logical matter – which would clearly not be to the point – or, alternatively, to be reduced to a species of empirical regularity – patently too weak to do the job (A91–2/B124). So, theoretically speaking, not knowing what we should be looking for, contemporary epistemology was impotent to justify the claims about the world we cast in causal terms, thus rendering some of our most fundamental beliefs about it nugatory, even when taken in abstraction from the other difficulties raised so far.

Then, just as with our concept of material things, it was hard to account for our possession of any respectable concept of causation anyway. Appeal to the God-given innateness of such an idea was unacceptably ad hoc, yet accounting for it empirically failed to supply any grasp of the necessity internal to the causal relation from anything given to experience taken in the narrow subjective way that seemed natural to Locke and his successors. So, as Kant surveyed the intellectual landscape before him, not only did systematic causal knowledge of the natural world that presents itself to us in everyday thought seem to lie beyond our reach; in addition, we appeared not to have even the first clue about how it is possible for us to think of our world in such terms. Yet since the natural world is precisely a domain of law and causality, our very ability to conceive of ourselves as part of the natural order was under threat, or at the very least hung precariously in the air.

With Transcendental Idealism Kant took himself to have a compelling resolution to these problems. In the following chapters I set out the structure of his reasoning in some detail, but it will be useful to sketch its broad outline now in a preliminary way while setting aside all question of its internal justification. To do this here will at least make it plain why Kant should have proudly talked of his philosophy as engineering a
Copernican revolution in the subject, and also make plain why he had no little reason for pride.

First of all, we see Kant abandoning the central assumption that guided the various thinkers just mentioned to the effect that what we are immediately aware of in perception are our own conscious sensory states of mind, the buzzing array of indubitable sensation that we find it so difficult to describe except in terms of what we take to be its causes. We do indeed enjoy such arrays – the ‘manifold of intuition’ as Kant calls them – but what is immediately given to us in our experience of things are not those manifolds themselves, but appearances, by which Kant quite generally means things in the world as they present themselves to us. My experience presents the world to me in the guise of a punctual train or the shining sun or the façade of a house, and I do not have to devise some far-fetched inferential story to explain how I come to be aware of these things. In favourable circumstances, they are immediately given to me in the experience that is mine and which I have formed (‘synthesized’, in Kant’s vocabulary) in making sense of that initially unconceptualized sensory array, that ‘manifold’.

As I have just expressed it, there is bound to be uncertainty whether the appearances with which Kant holds experience to acquaint us are anything other than the interpretations we put upon the sensations or sensory input that his predecessors thought we had to start out from, or whether they are to be understood as objects in the world beyond the mind and which we are acquainted with in perception. If they are the former, as Kant’s talk of appearances as ‘syntheses of the manifold of intuition’ might suggest, it must look as if he is hardly distancing himself from the subjective and Cartesianly inspired starting point of his predecessors. After all, it seems uncontroversial that we interpret the content of our perceptual input in terms of what we take to occasion it, but the philosophical question of our intellectual right to do that is what is at issue. On this view of what Kant means by ‘appearance’, that question looks untouched, and the accuracy of our interpretations to the world itself remains quite inscrutable. On the other hand, if ‘appearances’ are taken in the second, somewhat Pickwickian, way, as designating objects in the world, Kant is likely to be seen as just dogmatically sweeping the original epistemological problem under the carpet, and not advancing its solution one whit. Does not the old question remain: With what right can we say that our perceptual experience is ever of objects beyond our experience itself? How can the answer to that question be advanced by calling such things ‘appearances’?

It would be Kant’s view that this puzzlement should evaporate as the precise nature of his position becomes clear. The pressure to start from