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The Greatness and Limits of Kant's Practical Philosophy

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There can be no reasonable doubt that Kant's practical philosophy is a landmark in the history of philosophy, and its importance can be compared only with that of Socrates. Kant's thought implies a Copernican revolution not only in theoretical, but also in practical philosophy: all heteronomous attempts at founding ethics are rejected, and ethics is grounded in the autonomy of the subject. The indissoluble link between freedom and ethics tries to bring the Enlightenment into its truth: no external validity claims are accepted; every authority has to justify itself before reason. On the other hand, Kant is firmly convinced that reason has in itself the power to develop an ethics which is universally valid and, therefore, all but subjective. Few philosophers have had harsher words against the destruction of the belief in absolute moral duties.

Since we are manifestly living in a time of moral, political, artistic, and intellectual decay, I think that our interest in Kant's practical thought must not be only historical. It would be naive to assume that the ethical ideas that we have today are necessarily better than Kant's and that we should regard Kant only as the predecessor of our own ideas (to a large extent, these are the banalities and absurdities that are in wide circulation these days). In Kant's moral philosophy, problems, though, are discussed which most contemporary philosophers intentionally ignore because they

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are afraid of what they entail on the epistemological and even on the metaphysical levels; these problems, however, cannot be ignored if consistency is still an aim for philosophy. The greatness of Kant's practical philosophy is based on the fact that it is developed within the framework of a critique of reason and that it is closely interwoven with his theoretical philosophy, his philosophy of religion, and his philosophy of history. In contrast, most contemporary ethical thought consists of ungrounded assertions, unprincipled casuistry and reflections lacking any organic unity with the rest of our knowledge. Nevertheless, I am far from thinking that Kant's moral philosophy is perfect; I do not, though, know of any subsequent attempt that achieves the depth and intensity of his thought. Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, the Utilitarian tradition, the value ethics of Moore and Scheler, the discourse ethics of Habermas and Apel, Jonas' ethics of responsibility—these all undoubtedly offer important critical insights which correctly question several tenets of Kant's practical thought; and although they did not develop specific moral systems, even Marxism and existentialism may claim to have discerned some of the problems which Kant neglected. In the following, I shall first try to sketch out what, in my view, constitutes the unchallengeable core of Kant's practical thought, and, then, I will turn to identifying those problems which necessitate a modification of Kant's framework. My central aim, of course, will be to avoid inconsistencies in the positive conception forming the background of my appraisal and criticism of Kant, even though I will not be able to develop it positively in this paper.

I

A. In order to show the necessity for our time to have an ethics combining the idea of autonomy with that of unconditional and, therefore, absolute duties, I want to begin with some reflections on the phenomenon of enlightenment, of which Kant forms a constitutive part. I shall, however, use the term 'enlightenment' more in a structural than in a concrete historical sense. 'Enlightenment' means, here, not only the specific historical movement of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, but it also designates a general concept which embraces all intellectual movements that question the social institutions and traditions of their time in the name of reason. Although Indian culture developed

metaphysical systems of remarkable complexity, it did not produce treatises which try to answer not the question 'what is good?'—this question can be answered by religion—but rather the question '*why* is something good?'. To be sure, not every culture has had a movement of enlightenment. The Greeks, however, succeeded in turning the powerful reflection of philosophy to the concrete ethical life of their nation and in founding moral philosophy (after many decades of natural philosophy). The first moral philosophers of Greece are called 'Sophists', but there is little doubt that they were the first "enlighteners" of world history. The negative connotations which our language still today attaches to the word 'Sophist' go back to the use of the word by Socrates and Plato, who were the first really to understand the dialectic of enlightenment (a dialectic which Horkheimer and Adorno have only partially grasped[1]). On the one hand, enlightenment indeed does away with unjust institutions, dissolves irrational traditions, and frees human beings from oppression. In order that a criticism be valid and not only the expression of subjective idiosyncrasy, we need, on the other hand, first, a theoretical knowledge of what we criticize and, secondly, some normative criteria (e.g., values, against which we can hold that which we criticize). But where do these criteria come from? I discern three possibilities.

The criteria can be drawn from the tradition; in this respect, however, the program of enlightenment is incomplete, since it does not make sense to follow the tradition's fundamental tenets while rejecting their concrete applications. A consistent enlightener, taking as he does the thought of the autonomy of reason seriously, will therefore attempt to avoid this possibility.

The second possibility, the standpoint of ethical nihilism, is no more appealing than the first. In order to enforce the dissolution of social institutions, enlightenment usually tends to question the ideologies supporting them, and it is certainly right in doing so, since without this support they cannot last for too long. At the same time, however, this very questioning undermines the basis of enlightenment's own criticism which rests on the values of the tradition; in other words, enlightenment criticizes unjust institutions in the name of a concept of justice which is, however dimly, present in the tradition. Since it attacks the traditional concept of justice, but is not able to develop a new one, it bars itself from the possibility of stating that something is unjust. Hence, the possibility of rational criticism is undermined, and a positivism of

power is the end result of an enlightenment movement which remains only negative. Such a result of enlightenment is already detectable in some of the Sophists. It appears also in some thinkers of the eighteenth century, but it achieves its clearest formulation with Nietzsche. I do not believe I am exaggerating when I state that the Nietzschean self-dissolution of enlightenment has clearly been expanding over the last decades. What is happening with the Left (the traditional heir of much of the thinking of the eighteenth century enlightenment) has aptly been called a "Nietzscheanization."[2] Granted, most of Nietzsche's epigones are not openly nihilistic; the terrible consequences of their position usually drive them back to the first position, and, after having asserted that there are no objective values, they will usually defend ideas borrowed from a secularized religious tradition or from a Marxist tradition (of course, without grounding them). This makes them more acceptable as human beings, but there is little doubt that their inconsistent vacillation between the first and the second positions only attests to the weakness of their philosophical thought.

The third possibility (or position) is the most ambitious and difficult one. It is the attempt to ground (not in social facts such as traditions, but in reason itself) fundamental moral values. Socrates attempted to do exactly this; and this also makes for the greatness of Kant's enterprise. Reason itself will answer the moral question 'What shall I do?' and will consider no empirical datum to be a criterion of validity. At the same time, its answer must be universal and objective; it must restitute on a higher level the self-assurance of the naive ethical consciousness which the enlightenment critique has dismantled.

B. Although I am convinced that the intellectual situations of Socrates and Kant were similar, there is one important difference between the two. Kant had to consider a phenomenon which in Socrates' time did not yet exist, but which since Kant's time acquired even greater importance—that is to say, natural science. Its claim to truth is, in fact, very strong, and no unbiased person can deny that its successes are extraordinary. Kant himself was deeply impressed by these successes, and since on the basis of experience alone a science's claim to be necessary can never be grounded, he wanted to give natural science an *a priori* foundation. On the other hand, the successes of natural science easily induce the conviction that the world described by it is the only real one and

that man is nothing but an offspring of nature. This, however, would be fatal to ethics: for natural science describes facts, a world without norms and values. To avoid this, one could assume that there are both an empirical world and a world of norms or values which cannot be explained in the terms of the former. But Kant was not satisfied with this solution. He not only thought that natural science cannot be the basis of all knowledge, but he also held that natural science was not able to describe the true reality. He was motivated to make this assumption by the following fact: within the framework of Newtonian physics (and within that of relativity theory as well), every physical event is determined by the system of the laws of nature and by antecedent conditions. If one is not a mind-body dualist (and we must note that Kant did not regard any of the traditional arguments for the soul's being a substance as cogent), it follows that every human deed, thought, etc., is predetermined. Kant, as many philosophers before and after him, deemed this consequence to be not only extremely disturbing, but to be incompatible with the idea of moral responsibility.[3]

Kant's two main interests (to ground modern science and to leave room for a moral free will) seem to be very different, if not contradictory. But his genius led him to a solution which allowed him to satisfy both his aims with *only one* argument. This argument is as follows. Science can be necessary only if it has an *a priori* foundation. Such an *a priori* foundation is possible only if the *a priori* intuitions and categories stem from the subject, for if they stemmed from experience, they would be *a posteriori*. Since they stem from the subject, they do not grasp the true reality which lies behind the phenomenal world described by natural science. To this noumenal reality, the categories do not apply. It is, therefore, possible to believe in the free will of the noumenal selves, which, however, are unknown and unknowable (even to their phenomenal selves).

Kant's theory of the noumena, his dualistic ontology of appearances and things-in-themselves, leads to problems which we shall discuss later. But, although his concrete version of metaphysical dualism is unacceptable, he is absolutely correct in thinking that the common-sense ontology of the modern scientific age is not compatible with the moral law. The existence of an objective ethics requires an ontology which transcends the factual and the empirical. "Is-propositions" cannot ground "ought-propositions"; this fundamental discovery of Hume's[4] cannot be given up, and it

entails that no naturalistic ontology can furnish a basis to ethics. We must avoid not only an ontology such as that of logical positivism, for it eliminates ethics, but also a more differentiated ontology which regards the objects of the social and hermeneutical sciences as irreducible to those of natural science. These "weaker" or "softer" sciences also describe facts, and are therefore just as incapable of grounding norms. They can, of course, *describe* factual moral systems, the norms and values shared by different societies, but to reduce the task of ethics to the performance of such a description amounts to a crude misunderstanding. With the help of the categories of the social sciences, it is impossible to determine whether the values of the early Christian community are better than the values of National-Socialist Germany. Max Weber's idea of a value-free *social* science is in my view correct.[5] His belief that there can be no objective knowledge of norms and values is, however, unconvincing. The fact that the natural and social sciences cannot ground norms and values does not imply that these norms and values are merely subjective; there might be another form of knowledge (namely, philosophical knowledge) which can deal with them.

While logical positivism and Weberian social science both deny the possibility of a rational foundation of ethics, there has been one great post-Kantian attempt to ground ethics within an ontology denying the existence of a trans-empirical world—that is to say, Marxism. For a long time, the intellectual appeal of Marxism rested on its combining a crude naturalistic ontology (which was labeled 'scientific') with a revolutionary program which, of course, needed a counter-factual authority in order to be legitimized. This authority was the future; within the Marxist framework, the communist society is right *because* it *will* win. This argument is manifestly invalid. First, not even the most outspoken dogmatist will claim that we can know what the future will bring. Secondly, even if we knew that something was going to be historically successful, the problem of the naturalistic fallacy would remain: in other words, the future no less than the present belongs to the realm of being that cannot function as the basis of deontological propositions.

All attempts at questioning the validity of the criticism of the naturalistic fallacy are, in my view, hopeless. John Searle's proposal to found the moral duty to carry out a certain deed on the promise to do so, presupposes a normative proposition, namely, the proposition 'you ought to keep promises'.[6] As for Hans Jonas'

metacriticism of the criticism of the naturalistic fallacy, it makes sense only if we assume with him that nature is not neutral with respect to values.[7] Now, this nearly Aristotelian conception of nature may be true, but in order to be grounded, it needs a normative and ideal authority which would allow us to recognize the value character of nature. In fact, the distinction between "is" and "ought" does not entail that all that is, is not as it ought to be; it only says that what something ought to be does not follow from anything that is.

C. The insight into the necessity for an ontology that makes room for more than the empirical world is not Kant's only lasting contribution to ethics. Closely connected with this idea is Kant's clear analysis of the logical nature of ethical propositions. They are synthetic *a priori* propositions (about this Kant is also entirely right). They cannot be empirical propositions, because of the naturalistic fallacy, and they are not analytical propositions: where is the contradiction in a proposition such as 'Kill as many people as possible without being punished'? Every normative or evaluative proposition is certainly synthetic *a priori* (although not every synthetic *a priori* proposition is normative or evaluative), and, therefore, the denial of the existence of synthetic *a priori* propositions leads to the negation of ethics, as Kant himself knew very well.[8] The denial of synthetic *a priori* propositions is inconsistent: indeed, the proposition 'there are no synthetic *a priori* propositions' is itself a synthetic *a priori* proposition. Of course, this argument does not yet prove that there are ethical synthetic *a priori* propositions; with it, we have only shown that the claim that there are no synthetic *a priori* propositions is self-refuting.

The question whether there are synthetic *a priori* propositions of an ethical sort and whether they can be grounded is not easy to answer. But I do not think that the truth of the following implication is too difficult to grasp: if there are no normative or evaluative synthetic *a priori* propositions, then there can be no objective ethics. The only thing which we could ground would be what Kant calls 'hypothetical imperatives', i.e., imperatives of the following structure: if you want *A*, you must do *B*. Such imperatives are based on the empirical proposition '*B* is a necessary means for achieving *A*' and the analytical proposition 'whoever wants the end, wants the means'.[9] Now, it is clear that ethical propositions do not

have this structure: the purpose of a hypothetical imperative can be completely immoral.

Ethics needs categorical imperatives; without them, it merely is a doctrine of strategic techniques teaching us to maximize happiness, power, money, sexual pleasure and whatever else human beings may happen to strive after.

In this context, it is important to reject an objection often levelled against Kant—I am referring to the problem of exceptions to moral rules. On the one hand, I agree with all those who think that Kant's injunction never to tell a lie (even if a lie may be the only way to save the life of an innocent soul from someone intending to murder that person[10]) is absurd and immoral. Every moral theory wishing to be taken seriously must explain rationally the necessity of exceptions, and, even more, it must recognize that there are norms which are valid only under certain conditions and not valid under others. But does this concession not transform ethics into an empirical science of hypothetical imperatives? Not at all. In fact, we must distinguish sharply between hypothetical imperatives and what, elsewhere, I have called 'implicative imperatives'.[11] The first we have already discussed. The second have the following structure: under the conditions *A* you must do *B*. Clearly, such implicative imperatives do not derive their validity from what I happen to want: they are valid under certain conditions; these conditions, however, are objective and not subjective ones. The implicative imperatives are synthetic *a priori* propositions, although they are not universally valid. They can be grounded rationally by what may be called a mixed syllogism. The first premise of such a syllogism is a normative or evaluative proposition and it has the following structure: *C* is a value, or, you ought to try to realize (or save) *C*. The second premise is empirical and exhibits the following structure: under the conditions *A*, *B* is necessary in order to realize (or save) *C*. Now, Kant has wrongly ignored the whole sphere of implicative imperatives and the importance of empirical knowledge to most ethical decisions. We must recognize, however, that implicative imperatives are not hypothetical imperatives and that in order to be objectively valid, they presuppose the existence of synthetic *a priori* propositions.

D. What is the content of the synthetic *a priori* proposition which forms the basis of ethics, i.e., the categorical imperative? In the second *Critique*, Kant does not give a transcendental deduction of

it, for owing to the irreflexive character of his transcendental philosophy, its transcendental deductions presuppose "a third factor" such as the possibility of experience or pure intuition. But these two play a role only in theoretical and not in practical philosophy.[12] Kant, however, tries to prove the equivalence of freedom and moral law (*Critique of Practical Reason*, subsections 5–6, A 51f). If the will determines itself and is, therefore, free, its self-determination cannot be based on the object of a maxim, since, according to Kant's theoretical philosophy, such an object can be given only empirically. And, vice versa, if the universal form of maxims is the only ground of determination of the will, then nothing empirical determines the will. As such, it is free. The formal character of Kant's ethics is a consequence of his wanting to have an autonomous ethics.

At this point, one could object that the self-determination of the will does not necessarily entail a formal ethics. Hegel's peculiar ethics, which is at the same time a philosophy of right and a political philosophy, accepts the Kantian idea of the self-determination of the will as the basis of the philosophy of objective spirit; but since Hegel has a very different epistemology, he can, at the same time, believe in the self-realization of the idea of right in different material institutions.[13] Similarly, in the framework of Scheler's value ethics, we have *a priori* and, nevertheless, material intuitions.[14]

Hegel and Scheler do not deny that the ethical will is the truly free will, and that the truly free will is ethical. Freedom, here, is evidently not understood as the possibility to do what one wants to do, since our desires are themselves heteronomous: they are induced by nature or society, and the stronger the need is to satisfy them the less free a man is. Real freedom manifests itself on a higher level—in the desires we have. A person is free if his or her will wills a moral duty, or, at least, what is morally permitted. That is to say, a person is free if that person's will is determined by reason alone and by nothing which is itself an empirical fact. Moreover, we are free when following categorical and not hypothetical imperatives. One may criticize Kant's formalism, but there is little doubt that compared with his concept of autonomy almost all modern concepts of freedom (including the emancipatory ones which we find in psychoanalysis and a certain democratic tradition) are much more formal; they are only concerned with the problem of the realization of desires and not with the much more important

question: which desires should the truly free person have? Only Kant's concept of freedom can give dignity to human beings; a being who learns only to satisfy his or her desires will never be anything else but a smart animal, and a society in which all, including immoral, desires could be satisfied might be a happy one (I would, however, doubt this), but it would have no place for human dignity and spirit.

From Kant's substantial concept of freedom it follows that the evil person is not free. This is an important conclusion which, however, contradicts many other statements made by Kant, especially in the first part of the work on religion. I shall return to this point.

E. Kant's ethics is an intellectualist one, because reason is the only ground of validity for norms. Feelings are regarded as subjective and unable to ground an ethics which claims to be valid for all reasonable beings, including possible finite non-human spirits (and God). This intellectualist basis is, in my view, undeniable. Granted, there are innate moral feelings, but they are the object of a descriptive psychology, and they do not constitute the basis of ethics. In fact, the subjective intensity with which someone feels that something is morally right or wrong is irrelevant in determining whether something is morally valid. It may well be that the racist finds the idea of a marriage between people of different races repellent, and that the militarist finds the idea of war as an end-in-itself noble; but, from these empirical facts, which can themselves be explained causally, nothing follows with regard to the normative question. It even seems that the critical attitude which enlightenment brings human beings (almost necessarily) weakens innate moral feelings, although it is only via the process of enlightenment that new and higher moral ideas can come to replace those of the past.

The most famous emotionalist critique of Kant's ethics (namely, Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion) exhibits a complete inability to understand the radical difference between the issue of validity which deals with the *reasons* for something's being good, and the psychological question which deals with the *causes* for someone's acting morally. Schopenhauer may be partially correct with regard to the motivational problem. He does not, however, grasp the normative question. He simply *presupposes* that altruistic behavior is morally good, and from there he proceeds to wonder which psychic forces lead human beings to such behavior. However, the

decisive question whether altruistic behavior is more than foolishness, whether it is something which ought to be engaged in, is not only not answered, but it is not even recognized as a problem by Schopenhauer.[15]

Only an intellectualist ethics can have universal claims. Feelings are usually restricted to something particular. Emotionally, we find that an injustice done to us is more injurious and affronting than the same injustice done to a distant person. Rationally, on the other hand, we see that there is no moral difference. It may, under certain conditions, be moral to confine our charities to our neighbors, but this is so only because by such a general restriction more may be achieved than by a disorderly generosity, and not because my neighbors have more moral rights than distant people.

Although contentwise Kant's ethics is certainly the most universalist of the tradition (it goes so far as to consider non-human rational beings, while excluding merely natural ones), I do not think that the exclusively formal formula of the second *Critique* is very fruitful. It rules out only certain brutal forms of injustice, but not a universal and general violation of fundamental rights. And, with regard to the so-called "imperfect duties," Kant himself recognizes that their general violation can be conceived without difficulties, but that we could not desire such a state of affairs.[16] But why not? We need a criterion for saying why something cannot be desired, and Kant does not furnish one. Nevertheless, I think that Kant's universalist intentions can be reconstructed in a more concrete way, if we assume that every rational being has the right to lead an autonomous life, and that, in order to lead such a life, there are certain fundamental rights which must not be violated (e.g., the rights to life itself, to a certain amount of property, and to education). Such a development of Kant's ethics can be found, for instance, in Fichte's *Sittenlehre* and in Hegel's *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*.

Much more fascinating is the second version of the categorical imperative, which is stated in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* and which forbids treating mankind in one's own or in another person as a mere means. Whatever Kant says about this matter (A 66f), I do not think that it is equivalent to the first version, since reciprocal instrumentalization appears to be compatible with it (the first version). Certainly, the second and the third formulations open up a horizon of intersubjectivity which for practical philosophy is decisive (in this respect, I must add that I

agree with Kant that there are duties towards oneself which would remain valid for a possible single denizen of this planet). So, the second formulation clearly gives pride of place to communicative behavior over strategic behaviour. All the same, Kant's theory of intersubjectivity is far from perfect, as we are going to see.

F. I have just alluded to the fact that certain fundamental rights seem to follow from a correctly understood universalist ethics. These fundamental rights constitute the normative basis of just laws and just states. In accordance with the tradition of natural law, Kant recognizes a non-positive criterion for judging legal and political systems. In the first part of his *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Kant develops many of the fundamental principles of the modern constitutional state; he favors republican institutions; he regards the overcoming of war via international institutions, which limit the sovereignty of states, as one of the most important tasks of a rational and moral politics.

In contrast to Hegel and the historicist tradition, Kant does not show a very pronounced interest in history. It is remarkable how little he considers the fact that universalist ideas have evolved over time, although, of course, the recognition of the complex genesis of universalist ideas does not relativize their validity. Kant is, however, concerned with the evolution, not of moral ideas, but of political institutions. In his teleological philosophy of history, he interprets the realization of universalist institutions as the task of history.[17] He believes that the historical realization of rational institutions will not happen through mankind's explicit decision to apply moral criteria to politics. He assumes, as Vico did before him and Hegel after him, that the pursuit of egoistic interests can lead, in the long run, to the emergence of rational institutions. He does not object to reforms based on a universalist spirit (although he does reject revolutions[18]), but his deep skepticism about mankind leads him to put more hope in a secularized version of providence than in rational human action.

G. In fact, Kant (at least the Kant of the published works) is convinced that without a concept of God we have no guarantee that the highest good (a state in which there is a correlation between happiness and the worthiness of being happy) can be achieved, although our working to bring about such a state is prescribed by the moral law. Together with freedom and the immortality of the

soul, God is, therefore, one of the postulates of practical reason. Why does practical philosophy lead to the concept of God? Not at all because God is the ground of validity of the moral law; Kant correctly rejects the voluntarist conception of God. Something is moral not because God has ordered that it be so (and God could have ordered that it be otherwise), but God is God because his holy will can will only what is moral. In Kant's view, the other widespread religious idea according to which we should abide by the moral law in order to get rewarded in our next life, is no better than voluntarism. Also, such a conception does away with the autonomous character of ethics and transforms the categorical imperative into a hypothetical one. Kant introduces his belief in the immortality of the soul with a very different argument: he reasons that in a finite amount of time we cannot achieve moral perfection and that, consequently, we have to continue with this arduous task in another life. Although in a world bereft of God the moral law would still be valid, in a dual world consisting of nature on the one hand and of the moral law on the other, nothing would guarantee the realizability of the moral law in the phenomenal world of nature. In order to believe in the concrete possibility that the highest good can be realized, it is necessary to assume a unifying principle beyond the duality of nature and moral law—namely, God as creator of a nature which can bring about the realization of the moral law.

Although I am going to present the difficulties that arise with Kant's concrete version of this argument, I am firmly convinced that there is a dire moral and intellectual need to overcome the duality of moral law and nature in Kant's ontology. The emergence of the systems of German idealism can in part be explained by this need. Additionally, Kant's third *Critique* already exhibits awareness of the necessity for bridging the duality of the two prior *Critiques*.[19]

II

I have thus attempted to show that Kant's moral philosophy is convincing in the following respects. It accepts the challenge of enlightenment to develop a non-traditional ethics, rejects for this purpose a naturalistic ontology, and requires synthetic *a priori* propositions. It correctly links freedom and moral law together and, basing itself on reason, it achieves a universalist dimension that stands unprecedented in the history of ethics prior to Kant. It applies this universalist ethics to politics and assigns to history the

task of being the process of the slow realization of universalist institutions. Finally, it leads to the topic of God as the principle which can bridge the duality of nature and moral law. In view of this, why is it, then, that we cannot accept Kant's moral philosophy in its entirety?

A. First, as Kant himself recognizes, the categorical imperative is not grounded. Now, Kant has important reasons for not grounding the categorical imperative,[20] and we cannot rule out that there may be truths which cannot be demonstrated, but which are, nonetheless, truths. It is evident that no empirical proof of the categorical imperative is possible; those who ask for such a proof do not understand what moral philosophy is about and, at the very outset, transform categorical imperatives into hypothetical ones. Furthermore, the demand for a logical deduction cannot always be fulfilled, since a deduction presupposes axioms and since the axioms themselves cannot be deduced. A large part of the tradition has, therefore, assumed that there is an intuition of the axioms and principles, and that consequently the categorical imperative could be the object of such an intuition. This seems to me the best philological reconstruction of what Kant means by 'fact of reason'. Although I cannot deal here with the whole problem of intuition and do not want to exclude categorically the possibility of a philosophical intuition, I must say that the appeal to such an intuition is certainly not the most satisfying answer to our problem. It may have been persuasive in Kant's time, but, after radical skepticism and ethical nihilism, anyone who has recourse to intuitions must be aware of the now common retort: "I cannot find such an intuition in me." In view of this situation, the standard alternative to the appeal to intuition should be given a try, namely, the use of reflexive arguments. Reflexive arguments are not deductions (which come to a halt with regard to their principles): they rather attempt to show that we necessarily make certain presuppositions when trying to prove something. For example, a demonstration of the fundamental principles of reason cannot be carried out without presupposing them, for without them the concept of demonstration makes no sense. Nor can they be denied without being presupposed. This lends them a special status, for it places them outside the alternative between deduction and intuition.

Kant does not make use of such reflexive transcendental

arguments. Fichte, however, is a master at them: in his *Sittenlehre* he tries to deduce the categorical imperative by means of reflexive arguments (subsection 3). In contemporary philosophy, it is a great merit of Karl-Otto Apel and Wolfgang Kuhlmann to have applied them to the transformation of Kant's ethics.[21]

Although this is not the appropriate place to discuss this topic in the depth which it deserves,[22] I wish to state my conviction that reflexive arguments are able to grasp the unconditioned, presuppositionless, and, therefore, the absolute. In grasping these, reason depends on nothing outside itself and is, therefore, absolutely free. What reason grasps is, at the same time, absolutely necessary; autonomy and theonomy coincide in this act, without which there would be only empirical or analytical knowledge and, therefore, no ethics. The experience of this act leads to a fuller form of subjectivity: this is so because in it subjectivity is united with what is absolutely objective. While existentialism rightly felt the need to transcend the banality of everyday ethics by experiencing a deeper dimension of subjectivity, it failed to grasp the objective moment of it and, hence, also missed the subjective one.

B. Although Kant is entirely right in requiring an *a priori* ground for ethics, one of the main defects of his ethics is that it does not grasp the importance of empirical knowledge for concrete ethical decisions. I have already mentioned this problem in my discussion of the implicative imperatives. For their grounding, such imperatives presuppose both *a priori* and empirical knowledge. Mill's utilitarianism is quite impoverished because of its denial of *a priori* knowledge, but Kant's denial of the necessity of empirical knowledge in ethical matters is also faulty. One of the greatest merits of Moore's ethics is to have understood the necessity of both. As finite beings, we in most cases are in dire need of empirical information in order to make the right ethical decision. Denying this fact betokens a complete indifference towards the consequences of our actions which are part of the empirical world. In fact, such an attitude (which is fatal to every attempt at constructing both a moral and successful *Realpolitik*) is implicit in many of Kant's statements, and one cannot help feeling that such an ethics of pure conviction amounts to negating any concrete responsibility and is, therefore, utterly immoral. The individual who does not lie to the person with murderous intent prefers the untainted purity of his soul to the life of the other and is nothing

but a self-absorbed egoist. Those who refuse to dirty their hands are not really interested in the *realization* of the moral law. This refusal in Kant's ethics is deeply related to his ontology, according to which the phenomenal world is ontologically inferior to the noumenal world to such an extent that working within it is not worthwhile. Not only mere empiricism, but also a disdain for the empirical is destructive of the world; for if the empirical world does not have its own ontological dignity, any action in it is ethically senseless.[23] Of course, Kant is right in saying that the maxims of an action, and not the actions themselves, are what is morally relevant. But, the first thing a moral person must accept as a maxim is that he or she has to attempt to contribute with all legitimate means to the realization of the good; and, secondly, that it might be a moral duty to prefer a manifestly immoral and, therefore, despicable, but successful person to a noble, but incompetent, one, when we have to choose not our friends, but, for instance, our political leaders.

C. In order to justify actions (especially the exceptions to moral rules), we must not only consider the probable consequences of our actions, but we also need a hierarchy of values and goods. For the violation of a value may be allowed in one case only: when it is necessary to violate that value in order to save, with a high degree of probability, a higher value. Kant's formalism does not contain any criterion for such a hierarchy, but the justification of exceptions necessarily leads to the idea of an ethics of material values as it was developed—although without the solid metaphysical basis which it needs—by Moore and by Scheler (we find it also in Hegel, albeit presented in a different form). Within the framework of such an ethics, the categorical imperative is to realize as many values as possible and to prefer, in the case of conflict, the higher value to the lower one. It is true that such an ethics faces many problems. For instance, there might be situations wherein it is very difficult to distinguish which value is higher. But no reasonable being can deny that there are also situations wherein the hierarchical order is manifest. Life is undoubtedly a higher good than property; insights into ideal truths are of a higher value than pleasure. For life is more general than, and a necessary condition for, property, and insights into truth are already presupposed on the performative level when we discuss the hierarchical relation between intellectual insights and pleasure from the point of view of value (this is a famous Platonic argument).

D. Although fashioning an elaborate value theory would not be an easy task, the two arguments which I have just sketched out show why there can be a rational approach to a theory of values. Despite my sincerest admiration for the author of this century's greatest book on ethics, I think that Scheler errs in trying to ground ethics in feelings. In this respect, Kant is definitely superior, and one cannot help thinking that some of Scheler's disappointing anti-universalist options are connected to his rejection of a rationalist ethics. This reservation notwithstanding, it seems to me that on one point Scheler is absolutely right. He is right in his conviction that feelings can be the subjects of moral predicates. The ground of validity for the prohibition of murder is not our feeling of compassion, and yet, it is not only of utmost social importance that such moral feelings continue to exist. Even if the same practical result could be achieved without moral feelings, a world bereft of them would lack some important values. In fact, nearly everyone will disagree with Kant's opinion that the person who is generous by nature is morally inferior to the miser who forces himself to follow the categorical imperative.[24] It would, of course, be immoral if someone said: "I do my duty only because I happen to like it in this case." But if someone cherishes the right values by nature or owing to a good education, and, after a thorough intellectual examination, comes to the conclusion that the values he or she embraces are really the right ones, is that person not morally better than the one who has to fight every day against his or her evil feelings? Schiller's criticism of Kant in *Anmut und Würde* seems to be cogent: the appropriate feeling on the right occasion is what gives grace and, also, moral value to a person. It is one of the gravest faults of abstract intellectualism to have neglected the cultivation of the emotions; the *désordre du coeur* in our time is the manifest consequence of this neglect. Incidentally, here we can see the central and probably irreplaceable importance of a solid religious education: those who do not receive the right moral feelings during their childhood will not become entirely moral human beings, even if later in life they succeed in recognizing intellectually the right norms and values.

E. A further serious flaw in Kant's ethics is the lack of an explicit theory of intersubjectivity. In fact, the third formulation of the categorical imperative in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, in which the theme of intersubjectivity is predominant,

deals only with noumenal selves, entities which are unknowable. Kant's theory of the phenomenal world does not have a place for the experience of other selves, since the outer sense grasps the physical world, while the inner sense apprehends it own subjectivity. But how do we experience other subjects? Kant does not answer this question; the sciences, which it is the first *Critique*'s aim to ground, are the natural sciences and psychology, but not the social and hermeneutical sciences. In many respects, he is a predecessor of modern scientism, insofar as he regards human beings and institutions as nothing other than nature. This can easily be explained by the fact that in his time the social and hermeneutical sciences were not yet well developed (as well as by the fact that since Descartes philosophy thought that "object" and "subject" were its fundamental categories). But if we understand that another subject cannot be interpreted either as an object or as one's own subjectivity, but is somehow the synthesis of both, then we need an additional philosophical discipline, namely, the new science of intersubjectivity. The development of both the social and hermeneutical sciences and the philosophical reflection upon these sciences since the last century have contributed much to the constitution of such a discipline, and it is clear that an elaborated ethical theory will need its support. If the moral law must not remain restricted to my own soul, but must be realized in the intersubjective world of history, then we must come to know the laws of this world. It is of utmost importance to understand that this discipline will never be able to replace ethics, although without it ethics must remain abstract; for the normative dimension germane to ethics presupposes something which transcends the empirical world to which the intersubjective world belongs.

The phenomenon of intersubjectivity is important for another strictly ethical reason. Kant seems to believe that ethics could be realized even if there were only a single human being left on earth. As I have stated above, I concur with him that in such a case the only remaining subject would have to recognize ethical duties such as intellectual and moral self-perfection. But how ethically impoverished would a world with a single subject be! From the fact that the values which can be realized by a community are much higher than those realizable by private individuals, it is easy to see how one can be mislead into thinking that only groups of persons have duties. Of course, it is decisive to conceive of such a community as an end-in-itself, and not merely as a society necessary for the

satisfaction of private needs. An analysis of the different types of community and of the emotions appropriate to them, which would range from love to patriotism, constitutes an important task for a full-fledged ethical theory. Incidentally, it is to be noted that discourse ethics, despite its insistence upon the necessity of communicative behavior, is far from having given us such a theory. Its central argument is that we have to respect the other because he or she can be useful to us for discovering the truth. But an intellectual instrumentalization of the other is an instrumentalization, and it misses the essence of communities.

F. The part of Kant's ontology which was very quickly subjected to sharp criticism is that concerning the things-in-themselves. The concept of something which not only is not presently known, but cannot be known in principle, seems to be either contradictory or meaningless. Kant is wrong in believing that *a priori* knowledge must be subjective only. The tradition of objective idealism from Plato to Hegel has shown that it is possible to assume that *a priori* knowledge grasps the essence of reality. Furthermore, subjective idealism (Kant's position) does not demonstrate what Kant thinks he has proved, namely, transcendental freedom. Firstly, we can never know whether our, or another person's, noumenal self is really free. It might be free, but we cannot rule out *a priori* that in the unknowable noumenal realm it is compelled by another thing-in-itself. Secondly, Kant's acceptance of predetermination in the phenomenal world gives rise to great difficulties.[25] For either there is no correspondence between the phenomenal self and the noumenal self (and then it may well be that the noumenal self of a person who acts immorally in the phenomenal world is moral, and conversely), or there is a necessary correspondence. But how is this correspondence to be guaranteed? Either we must regard the noumenal selves as creators of the phenomenal world (but this is not what Kant wants), or God is responsible for such a pre-established harmony. In this last case, the noumenal selves must be determined by God. The arguments Kant used to exclude the latter possibility are so weak that Schopenhauer thought that Kant did not really believe in them.[26]

Giving up the idea of a noumenal self thus seems unavoidable. Does this not entail accepting the naturalistic ontology which, as was shown at the beginning of this paper, is inimical to any and every ethics? I do not think so. If we regard the mental act by which

someone grasps the timeless moral law (the correlative *noesis*) as an act belonging to the causal order of the empirical world, this does not alter the fact that the moral law as *noema* does not belong to the phenomenal world, that it is not empirical, but rather *a priori* and timeless. The negation of the ideal world, to which values and the moral law belong, is destructive of ethics; the denial of noumenal selves, on the other hand, is much less damaging.

Such a denial is even compatible with Kant's idea of autonomy. Whatever causes may mediate such an occurrence, if an empirical person's reason succeeds in freeing him or her from all empirical determination and in following exclusively immanent criteria of rationality, then this person can rightly claim to be free. But Kant confuses this concept of freedom (which is linked to a determinate object of the act of reason) with what he calls 'transcendental freedom'. This latter notion of freedom has nothing to do with the content of a free act, but only designates our not being determined by preceding events. The two concepts are entirely different. While the first is absolutely necessary for the preservation of the validity of the moral law and of such a central aspect of life as human dignity, I do not think that the same is true of transcendental freedom. As a matter of fact, I think that giving up the doctrine of the noumenal self makes believing in the second type of freedom impossible—this is at least so if we do not accept a dualist theory of mind and body (which is certainly not a sufficient condition for denying determinism). I am, of course, aware that there are strong sentiments against determinism, but I know of no strong arguments against it. I should add that the acceptance of certain non-determinist interpretations of quantum theory is far from sufficient to prove freedom in the second sense, for microphysical events, which are only statistically determined, differ greatly from human freedom.

The acceptance of determinism does not lead to important changes in our moral convictions. Since ontological determinism is compatible with epistemological indeterminism, which follows from the finitude of the human mind, i.e., since we do not know what the future will bring, our duty to fight for the good remains unaltered. Determinism does not lead to fatalism. If we start thinking that striving for the good does not make sense, we can be sure that we belong to those beings who are not moral and, therefore, not free. We even have the duty to treat nearly all persons as if they were free; for it may be that someone will become free if he or she is treated like a free being. However, if we see that this will

probably never happen and that a certain person is causing a considerable amount of evil in the world, it is our duty to prevent this person from continuing on this course of action. But it is true that we cannot regard an evil person as free in any meaningful sense of the word. As practical beings, we must fight this type of person, and in such a situation it will be natural to feel hatred and anger. When the battle is over, and after a theoretical investigation has revealed the causes that forced this person to be as evil as he or she is, our negative evaluation will remain, but anger and hatred will have given way to a peculiar form of compassion.

G. With regard to the theological consequences of ethics, I agree with Kant that we need a principle beyond nature in order to explain why the moral law can act on the world. I think, however, that the moral law is not an entity different from God. The moral law is the innermost part of God who is the set of all *a priori* truths. God so understood must now be interpreted as the principle of the world in order to answer our question. That God is the principle of the world does not entail that the temporal extent of the world is finite; it means that the world is constituted in an ideal sense by God. But how can this world, so manifestly full of injustice and meanness, be the creation of a God who is the moral law? My answer is that only in such a world can the moral law prove its absolute validity. For an absolute being, it is easy to be moral; it is in a certain sense too easy. But if a finite and mortal being, an organism with a subjectivity which feels its own existence, has to sacrifice itself in order to stand the test of morality, then we can say that the moral law has proved its absoluteness. The moral law must, therefore, create a temporal world with mortal beings who do not know whether they will ever be rewarded for fulfilling their duty. The future must be dark to them; they must not know whether their actions are doomed to fail or whether they will succeed. For if they knew that they would succeed, their merit would be diminished; and if they knew that they would fail, putting up a fight would make little sense to them. Ethical deeds must, indeed, strive after acting on the world; they must not confine themselves to the purity of their interiority. The absolute, therefore, externalizes itself into the finite world in which we human beings have to live.

Much in the preceding sketch is influenced by Hans Jonas, one of the most important ethical theorists of our time—especially by his last book.[27] With great depth, he has recognized the importance of

a metaphysical and even theological basis for ethics. Despite my awe for him, I wish to note an important difference between us regarding the question of determinism. Jonas rejects determinism. As such, he believes that it remains an open issue whether the world will succeed in bringing the divine adventure of the world (the realization of the moral law) to a happy end. Being a determinist, I cannot follow him in this respect. I think, on the contrary, that with the choice of one of the infinite possible systems of laws of nature and with the option of one of the infinite possible antecedent conditions, all that will happen in the machine of the world is irrevocably fixed and that a spirit who would know both (as well as all of mathematics), would be able to foresee all events. For this spirit, time and change would be an illusion; *sub specie aeternitatis,* they would not exist. Now, I do not necessarily share Leibniz's conviction that ours is the best of all possible worlds, for if that were the case we would probably be able to determine *a priori* the main structures of the world (in other words, I do not disagree with him on the ground of the banal experience of evil, which, of course, was no less familiar to Leibniz than it is to us) and thereby overcome the epistemic indeterminism which seems to be necessary to the realization of the moral law. In my presentation, 'determinism' only designates the fact that the world into which God externalizes himself follows the irresistible principle of causality (in which even God cannot intervene), and not the fact that this causality has an absolute teleological nature. I think, however, that since the purpose of God's externalization into the world is to realize the ideal in this finite world there must be some restrictive conditions placed on the system of laws of nature and the antecedent conditions that are determinative of our world. Incidentally, this is one of the reasons why I believe in an *a priori* philosophy of nature; for example, nature must be structured in such a way that it can bring forth finite minds and be known by them. Now, since spirit and intersubjective communities which conceive of themselves as ends-in-themselves are the aim of the universe, I cannot believe in *a world* that may be predetermined to become waste again and, hence, empty.

H. Does it follow from this that we have *a priori* assurance that mankind will not destroy itself? No, it doesn't at all. Although I have no doubt that it is already determined whether this will or will not be the case, we do not know what is predetermined. We therefore

have an absolute duty to do all that is in our power to prevent this destruction. Today, a universalist ethics must be even more universalist than Kant's; it must include future generations in its concept of the beings toward whom we have duties. It is true that this thesis brings with it many ontological difficulties (e.g., how can beings who do not yet exist have rights?), but, again, I think that Hans Jonas has given us a solid basis for continuing work in this direction. To ground a concrete program of responsible international ecological policy in his principles is one of the main tasks of contemporary philosophy. Such a program will have to recognize the necessity for the economical and intelligent use of non-communicative strategies; the battle against the forces of stupidity, indolence and malice cannot be won by universalist means alone.

But it must be stated again that we do not know who will win this battle. It is certainly not excluded *a priori* that mankind will destroy itself. If the moral, political and intellectual decay of mankind continues; if the pollution of the natural and intellectual environment goes on; and if the formal concept of freedom entirely displaces the substantial and moral one, then large-scale catastrophes will become unavoidable—possibly including the self-destruction of mankind. Given this threat I am forced to consider a possibility with which Hans Jonas, in my view, dispenses all too rapidly. Since I concur with him that God can only be realized in a community of finite spirits, and do not believe in transcendental freedom, I must assume that of the still enormous number of possible worlds God perhaps did not choose the best possible one, but that he at least chose one in which he will necessarily be realized, although this realization may be mediated by catastrophes. Moreover, since we cannot exclude that mankind will be destroyed, we must give up the Judeo-Christian identification of finite physical spirits with human beings. I am more and more convinced that one of Hegel's greatest errors in his philosophy of spirit is to have grounded that philosophy in an anthropology, while man is truly only one possible realization of the concept of finite spirit (as Kant, but also Nietzsche, have rightly seen). We cannot exclude that elsewhere in this huge cosmos there are other finite spirits with a better nature than that of human beings and that they will be the ones to continue the work of the idealization of the real and the realization of the ideal. Additionally, if mankind is predetermined to destroy itself, it becomes *a priori* necessary to postulate such beings. On the other hand, if mankind should

survive, the slow and toilsome communication among spirits (who not only do not share the same language, the same race, and the same religion, but who do not even share the same biological nature) would represent the greatest triumph of spirit over nature and, therefore, the aim of the universe.

To be as clear as possible, I must state that I absolutely agree with Hans Jonas that speculation about finite spirits on other planets is immoral, if it gives us a pretext to neglect our duty on this earth. But if reflections of that sort do not have this purpose, they seem to be morally permissible, and even necessary to those who take the thought of a possible self-destruction of mankind very seriously, but do not accept the idea that the divine adventure might fail only on account of the dullness of man. Love for the curious species to which we belong should include self-sacrifice for it, but not the theoretical sacrifice of God.

It is now time for me to conclude. I may have already traveled down too many avenues of metaphysical thought which are not exactly trendy these days, but I must end by stating that an ethics which refuses such metaphysical reflections, can only be a weak ethics, and I am convinced that humanity urgently needs a strong ethics. And, to all who try to elaborate such an ethics, Kant's theory, with its deep metaphysical framework, will always afford the starting point.

NOTES

1. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: 1971).
2. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: 1987), pp. 217–226.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* [= *KPV*] A 167ff; *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* A 54f/B 58f.
4. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* III, 1, 1.
5. Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1919), *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: 1973⁴), pp. 582–613.
6. John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: 1969), chapters 6 and 8.
7. Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (Frankfurt: 1979).
8. *KPV*, A 23.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* [= *GMS*], A 37ff.
10. Immanuel Kant, *Uber ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen* (1797).
11. Vittorio Hösle, *Hegels System*, 2 volumes (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987), pp. 484f.

12. *KPV*, A 72ff. See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [=*KRV*] B 193ff/A154ff.
13. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, subsections 27ff.
14. Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* (1913–16) (Bern/München: 1980[6]), chapter 2.
15. Inconsistent also are Schopenhauer's remarks about the difference between 'is' and 'ought', a difference which in general is denied by him: see Arthur Schopenhauer, *Preisschrift über die Grundlage der Moral*, subsections 4 and 13, *Werke in zehn Bänden* [=*WZB*] (Zürich: 1977) volume VI, pp. 160 and 234. Although he himself presupposes it once, in subsection 13, ibid., p. 233.
16. *GMS*, A 57.
17. Immanuel Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1784) and *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis* (1793).
18. Immanuel Kant, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, A 178ff/B 208ff.
19. See also *GMS*, A XIIIf and *KPV*, A 162.
20. *GMS*, A 127f and *KPV*, A 72ff.
21. Karl-Otto Apel, "Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft und die Grundlagen der Ethik" (1972), *Transformation der Philosophie* (Frankfurt: 1973), volume II, pp. 358–435; Wolfgang Kuhlmann, *Reflexive Letztbegründung* (Freiburg/München: 1985).
22. See my essay "Begründungsfragen des objektiven Idealismus," *Philosophie und Begründung*, Forum für Philosophie Bad Homburg ed. (Frankfurt: 1987), pp. 212–267. An excellent analysis of transcendental arguments in Plato is to be found in Christoph Jermann, *Philosophie und Politik. Untersuchungen zur Struktur und Problematik des platonischen Idealismus* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: 1986).
23. See George E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: 1903), subsection 68: the assumption that the eternal is the only reality, or the only good, is deadly for any ethics.
24. *GMS*, A 10f.
25. *KRV*, B 566ff/A 538ff; *KPV*, A 169ff.
26. *KPV*, A 179ff; Arthur Schopenhauer, *Preisschrift über die Freiheit des menschlichen Willens*, *WZB*, volume VI, p. 111.
27. Hans Jonas, *Materie, Geist, Schöpfung* (Frankfurt: 1988).