

Feliks Mikhailov 1976
The Riddle of the Self
CHAPTER ONE
CLEAR APPROACHES AND DEAD-ENDS

3. When Is Kant Right?

What are these general forms of thought and what are we to do about our Something that, although present in every concept, is fundamentally irreducible to the sensuously perceived external appearance of the object? It cannot be inferred necessarily from individual experience and yet it is extremely active in determining this experience.

Now we see why we have had to make this historical excursion. It has helped us to note two extremely important points.

First, in the history of philosophical thought the process of acquiring knowledge is indeed regarded as an individual process of reflection of the mind's cognition of an infinite variety of sensuously given individual things.

And, second, we have seen that this notion of the Process of cognition encounters an insoluble contradiction: sensuous experience is always concerned with the separate and accidental, while consciousness operates with something extra-sensuous, a Something comprising only the general, the necessary, the essential knowledge of the most diverse and sometimes externally dissimilar separate things and phenomena.

These contradictions revealed themselves to the full in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. We must note from the start that for him, too, experience is only the individual intelligence's treatment of external

sensuous impressions. In experience man has to face nature alone, and it is only thanks to his natural abilities that he can pass any judgements about his environment. Man, the subject of cognition, the knower, contemplates in his experience the diverse world of separate phenomena and this “contemplative” experience awakens his cognitive ability. This is Kant's initial epistemological position.

No wonder, then, that this German philosopher had to remark: “... experience, no doubt, teaches us that this or that object is constituted in such and such a manner, but not that it could not possibly exist otherwise”.

What then is the solution? Kant's predecessor, the English philosopher David Hume, found a solution, although it was rather a strange one. Experience is the source of our knowledge, he reasons. But what are we to do if experience does not guarantee the truth of universal necessary judgements? Hume decides simply to reject the faith in the authenticity and necessity of such judgements. Who can really say whether all changes have a cause? No one can test this by experience because it is obvious that he cannot come into contact with all the changes that have occurred, are occurring and will occur In his experience he sees that something repeats itself and apparently without exception. From this he draws the conclusion that this is how it should be, that the repetition is not accidental, and that here we have a law. That is how it always has been and how it always will be. And suddenly in some new experience it is discovered that it does not and will not always occur like this. Then of what value is the previous judgement?

In its time the classical example of authenticity, universality, necessity was the conclusion reached from experience that “all swans are white”. And it seemed to be quite true that no matter what swans we happened to see they were all white. So here is a law, true of both the past and the

future, was the hasty conclusion that people drew from their empirical observations. But it turned out that in Australia there were black swans.

In the same way people insisted that every change has a cause. But, in Hume's view, where is the guarantee that somewhere, if not in Australia, then on some other planet or in the micro-world there are not some changes that occur without cause? But in that case the very concept of "cause" is placed in doubt. Perhaps there are in fact no causes and man has just become accustomed to thinking on the principle *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of it). Who can tell? Doubt everything – that is the only correct position for scientists if experience is insufficient grounds for the necessary conclusions. This was the conclusion reached by Hume who, as Kant aptly put it, steered his ship of knowledge on to the sandbank of scepticism and left it there to rot. This was obviously not a solution but a dead-end.

So the problem still remains unsolved. We have not moved an inch forward in solving it if along with Kant we merely scold Hume for scepticism. But the analysis of experience does not help us. Kant realises, if anybody does, that sensuous experience is possible only thanks to the fact that we are guided by general necessary knowledge that is not derived directly from experience. It is this knowledge that gives experience its form. For Kant this is so clear that he regards it from the start as an axiomatic proposition: a necessary judgement, something that is affirmed or denied as a necessary attribute of the object of our thought, something that in all cases must be present (or absent) in the given object, such a judgement cannot be based on experience, does not follow from experience, but precedes it. The judgements of necessity are a priori (before experience) judgements.

So, according to Kant, the necessity and universality inherent in our knowledge are not drawn from experience. But where are they drawn

from then? Perhaps they are put into our consciousness by God in the form of innate ideas? No, God does not intervene directly in the specific business of cognition. A priori knowledge is not congenital. As knowledge of something it does not exist in the consciousness at the moment of birth. According to Kant, a person is born with a certain capacity to perceive and know, with the ready-made abilities to see, hear, smell, and so on. The perceptive abilities thus emerge as something that is formed before experience, that is given in man a priori. This, according to Kant, immanently inherent ability has its own organisation, its own peculiarities, and limits. It can be investigated, man's thought constantly rests upon it either consciously or unconsciously, and finally, it arises before our mental vision as a field of pure contemplation, as pure space and pure time, stripped of all objective attributes.

Try for a minute to close your eyes and see absolutely nothing. The sensuous expectation of an image unfolds before you like an empty screen. The pure ideal subjective space of this empty screen is ready to accept the image of any object, but it can also exist before our mental eye without anything on it. And it is on this screen, according to Kant, that thought draws the ideal "line in general", the "ideal circumference", the "ideal triangle", and similar objects of pure contemplation that we never encounter in experience, that are not abstracted from individual objects and that possess the true merit of universality and necessity. Here "triangularity" turns into a visible triangle, right-angled or acute-angled, equilateral or isosceles, and so on. But all these properties, unobscured by the deceptive light of the feelings, are revealed to our astonished gaze as purely necessary, as purely universal properties, as the necessary and universal law of angles and sides.

In order to reflect the external world, says Kant, we need a special screen provided by nature for projecting the impressions received from the contemplation of the external world. This screen is pure space; the

duration of the events that occur upon it is pure time. Time and space therefore are the subjective sensuous receptacle of the future impressions of experience. If man concentrates his attention on the necessary properties of the “screen” and on the laws of the “projection”, then he will be concerned with the unvarying, the eternal, the strictly necessary and the universal. Judgements revealing the necessary properties of space and time possess unconditional authenticity and universality because they do not register any accidental, external experience data. Their particular virtue lies in the fact that they are capable of expanding our knowledge and adding something new to what is there already without relying on experience as such.

Note the fact that true universality is achieved not by examining many individual cases. This is what is known by relying not on experience but on the subjective forms in which man perceives the world! Now we see why Galileo arrived at the true universality of the conclusion concerning straight and steady motion without going through all the cases known in his experience of such motion, but by mentally drawing on the pure spatial field of his imagination the line of movement at various angles to the horizon. And then it turned out that the required motion could only be obtained when the angle was zero. So Galileo simply resorted to the universal properties of the “space” of perception waiting to receive individual impressions, and not to experience.

If he had generalised empirical facts, then, first of all, as we remember, he would have had to draw an opposite conclusion and, second, this conclusion could not have been truly universal; in certain conditions of experience it is obviously not enough for there to be a force applied from without in order to make a body move straight and steadily. It may be “bumped” on a pothole or thrown aside in some way. But now after consulting the universal forms of perception, the universal rules of reason (logical rules and devices inherent in man) one can explain every single

experimental fact from the standpoint of the conclusion drawn. So, according to Kant, the theoretical thought that takes place in inherent forms not drawn from experience establishes universal laws for the content of our experimental perception as well.

Admittedly, you may ask Kant, but do these laws operate outside theoretical thought itself? If they are not derived from experience, then what guarantee have we that they are objective, that is, that really existing things and not merely our impressions of things actually obey them? Kant gives no such guarantees. And why should he? Man can create symmetrical, uncontradictory theories based on extra-experimental forms of perception and on the operations of thought. The order of the impressions of experience exactly accords with these theories. What more do we want?! But does the order of things themselves correspond to these laws – that is not for us to know in principle. Things themselves, or, as the philosophers say, “things in themselves”, things outside and apart from man are not given to him in any form and he therefore knows nothing about them. This was how Kant reached the conclusion that “things in themselves” are unknowable.

If a person tries to use the universal forms of reason not for interpreting his experience and rational generalisation, but for passing judgement about “things in themselves” that are beyond experience, the reason at once encounters insoluble contradictions (antinomies). Kant avoids contradiction in logical thought by abandoning the attempt to cognise the contradictions of reality itself.

And the main thing is that the question of the origin and essence of knowledge remains unsolved. Neither “pure” nor experimental contemplation enables us to understand the nature of the leap from the external image to the concept! The apparent explanation that Kant offers is that in the images of “pure” contemplation that gives them their system

the a priori form is expressed directly, leaps to the eye, exists in pure form. So the proposition runs something like this: what is perceived in experience is in fact external, transient, individual, accidental. The a priori forms of contemplation are something quite different! They exist in the soul and the soul understands everything “at a glance” So Kant's apriorism does not save us from the necessity of the assumption, “seeing is knowing”. Again there is no explanation. We have only the assertion that this has been so throughout the ages, such is the soul and such is substance, God, and so on. To assert that the “pure contemplation” of a priori forms allows the soul to understand at a glance is a piece of intellectual sleight of hand. One simply dismisses the living contemplation of actual things and presents the “pure” contemplation of the a priori forms eternally inherent in the soul in such a way that there is no need to explain how it is that one glance is enough for us to see, understand and give a name to the essence of what is seen.

Perhaps then the very concept existing in my soul was given at birth! Then Descartes is right, then there must be a God. But in that case where does science come in? What is the theory of knowledge for? Scientific theory has to be replaced by faith. And then we see why Kant said that he had to restrict (*aufheben*) *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*.

But one is justified in asking when is Kant right? Must one really pay such a high price as the abandoning of cognition for the pleasure of seeing that scientific conclusions are truly necessary and universal in character? And besides, it would appear that Kant did not prove even this. The reader may well say it would be better to declare straight out that we do not know why judgements come to have a strictly universal and necessary character rather than to regard them as a priori.

But the whole logic of the history of philosophical thought makes us think that something resembling Kant's a priori exists in the consciousness

and in cognition. And if we abandon our epistemological Robinsonade, there will be no need for that something to lead us to agnosticism, to mysticism, to God. But why? Because along with Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Descartes, Locke and Kant, we are convinced at least of the following: in order to know, it is not enough merely to see; in order to see and understand what we see, we must know something already; from individual sense experience one cannot deduce something that is necessary, general, essential, that is contained in every word, in every concept.

When Kant assures us of the limitations of experience, of the fact that a man is bound to rely in his individual sense experience on something that is given to him beforehand, that has the nature of a law of necessity, of universality, and without which individual experience is impossible, Kant is completely right. But the methodology of the Robinsonade, with its search of individual man for the principles organising experience in “man in general” turns Kant's right into a wrong.

Kant's story has led us to the idea that something similar to Kantian a priori forms of the activity of intelligence must be given, as it were, in the consciousness of the individual because our Something is certainly not to be, derived from his individual sense experience.

However, despite all the reservations such a rehabilitation of apriority may evoke protest. In order to explain our conclusion, which may seem rather unusual to the materialist who rejects all apriority out of hand, I would like to draw attention to what may seem at first to be a specialised question. Is it possible to produce a mathematical concept from experience? Where does everything, including the mathematical concept, come from, if not from experience? From our schooldays we remember that geometry, for example, the science of measuring the earth, was derived directly from the experience of measuring plots of land. Its

concepts the point, the straight line, the triangle, and so on are undoubtedly abstractions from sensually perceived properties of objects. When they looked at triangular objects people registered their triangular form in their memories and then gave it a corresponding name and this was the concept of the triangle. (Familiar logic! This is once again the pyramid and we shall not refrain from returning to its sharp corners from which the old philosophy always began, until we see quite clearly a logic of a different kind.)

So the concept of the triangle is an image that applies to all triangular things called by a name-word. But during a certain highly scientific argument we heard a familiar question: Is it possible to imagine a triangle in general? The question is not a new one. It was posed by Berkeley and in fact it was suggested much earlier.

The reader must now pay special attention to this question that has always arisen, and has always had to arise, in the history of philosophical thought. Can one, in fact, imagine a triangle, an axe, a tree, a pomegranate, a man, a cat, and so on? You may think that nothing could be easier.

But think of the logic behind it! Any image that arises in our memory is always a sensuous image, that is, an external form of a phenomenon. But the external form can never be universal, can never include all the diverse external peculiarities of the countless numbers of similar phenomena around us.

Suppose we use the word "axe". But wait a minute. Think of all the things a person may mean by this word. It may mean the stone axe of our ancestors and the medieval axe of the executioner or the axe of the woodsman and thousands of other cutting tools that may not be outwardly similar to each other. Imagine an axe. Even the vaguest image will clearly

differ from the image of some other type of axe. The same thing happens with the triangle. Here are the clearest outlines that arise in my consciousness when I try to imagine “a triangle in general”:

[image of equilateral triangle]

But what I was thinking of in reality was a particular kind of triangle, differing from this one:

[image of scalene triangle]

The question we are discussing takes us back to Plato and Aristotle, to Bacon and Hobbes, to Descartes and Kant. The universal, i.e. the necessary, the idea, the form, the universalia, our Something, contained in every concept and not having any adequate sensuously perceptible equivalent – this is what cannot be imagined, what cannot be fully expressed by an image!

One cannot imagine a “triangle” in general. Nor can one imagine the meaning of the words man, axe, and so on. The man we draw in our memory on the principle of three circles and four strokes will, of course, be a general image of the external features of all people without distinction of race or class. That is to say, a general notion is not difficult to evoke in the memory. But this is a generalised image of only the external appearance of the object, and we were asked, as you remember, to imagine the Something that is inherent in all similar phenomena and cannot in principle be reduced to their outward appearance. And in the question of the triangle we were also asked to imagine the meaning of the word “triangle”.

The image of the object's appearance may be generalised, may retain only its functionally significant details, but it will never completely convey the whole meaning implied in the word. Moreover, a person

retains in his memory only the idea that, as Wallon puts it, “is named by the word”, which is in some way embraced by the system of semantic, linguistic associations. So once again we find that a concept cannot arise and exist as a generalised notion named by a definite word-name. The very idea of the external features of phenomena is retained in the memory with the help of a word, which always carries with it our Something – a meaning stripped of all imagery.

The question of the triangle is a deliberately provocative question. It cannot be answered by anyone who consciously or almost consciously proceeds from the conceptualist notion of cognition, who from the height of the pyramid surveys the process of man's cognition of the general, the necessary and the essential in phenomena. In fact, if we believe that cognition begins from simple contemplation of individual things, the sensuous copies of which are converted into “general notions” subsequently called words, just that one question as to why it is impossible to imagine a “triangle in general” topples the pyramid and puts common sense at a loss. It sets other problems that have to be solved. Where did the unimaginable concept of the triangle come from in the first place? How does it exist if in fact there is no such thing as a “triangle in general”, if in our consciousness we can only imagine some definite kind of triangle? But the most interesting thing here is that the person who asks the question himself stands on the granite foundation of our pyramid.

In full accord with the logic of classical nominalism the questioner believes that a sensuous image cannot be general, that the general is only the name, the concept. Who is closer to the truth in this argument? Both sides are far enough away from it for us to follow the logic of their reasoning a little further.

However, the question of the triangle has shown us that one cannot regard the geometrical concept of the triangle as an abstracted general

idea named by this word. And if this is so, one is led to doubt whether the concept of the triangle actually did arise as an abstraction from triangular objects contemplated in experience.

When uttering the word triangle, I cannot imagine a triangle in general. Consequently the general concept is either only a general name given to specific things (nominalism) or else it is the unimaginable “triangularity” that appeared in our consciousness not as a consistent generalisation of external properties, but in some other way.

We have to reject the first alternative. The “general name” is itself an empty phrase. According to the logic of the pyramid it can have meaning only as the designation of what is seen. However, we have gradually come to realise that, in the first place, our Something is far more understandable to us than the external appearance of the phenomenon, no matter how generalised a notion we have of it and, secondly, no notional image fully corresponds to the Something. We are left with the second alternative. The concept cannot be a simple designation of the general abstracted in experience. So now the situation is this. If we understand the experimental source of knowledge as it has been understood in the history of philosophy, and in the history of any specific science, that is, as the immediate sensuous reflection of the phenomena of the external world, then mathematical concepts did not arise from experience.