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The Impasse in Western Philosophy

The Copernican Revolution (1543)

The Reformation not only licensed the faithful to find spiritual guidance from the light within, without reference to Scripture or the mediation of priests: it also opened the door for the Copernican Revolution in natural science.

Though now largely separated from Theology, Science and Philosophy were not yet fully distinct disciplines. Disputes over how to understand Nature and our place in it became the central axis of development of Science and Philosophy in Europe for the next 300 years.

I have already discussed the work of Spinoza, who was a follower and critic of René Descartes (1596–1650), and together they constituted the Rationalist camp in philosophy. Rationalism arose as a critique of Empiricism, whose founding light was the Englishman Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Both Rationalism and Empiricism belittled the value of ancient texts as sources of knowledge of God and His works. The Empiricists advised that nothing could be more fruitful than experience, especially experiments designed to shed light on the underlying laws at work in Nature. The Empiricists were sceptical of theorising which was not immediately based on experiment.

The Rationalists taught, on the contrary, that we should consult the faculty of Reason with which we are endowed and be sceptical of experience as a reliable source of fundamental knowledge.

As to the Will, we have seen that in the person of Spinoza, Rationalism had arrived at the conclusion that Free Will was a delusion – human beings were slaves of their own emotions and the best that could be hoped for was to *understand* those emotions, and in a sense to rise above them.

Spinoza had rejected Descartes' ontological dualism, but as I have indicated, the questions that Spinoza posed could not be taken up until the last years of the eighteenth century.

Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia

Descartes' ontological dichotomy persists in philosophically uneducated consciousness to this very day. Consciousness is indeed something entirely incommensurable with extension, or matter, that is, what lies outside consciousness. There is no half-way in-between substance or any substance which is a mixture of matter and consciousness. The problem is not the mind/matter dichotomy, but in *making a beginning* from this distinction, rather than deriving the distinction from some prior ontological starting point.

It was Descartes' correspondent, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, who raised the problem with Descartes' ontology for the problem of the Will: How can an immaterial, unextended thinking substance determine the motions of an extended body, given that all causation we understand involves contact or extension? There is no rational answer to this question. Once consciousness is accepted as a substance, that is to say, an irreducible, fundamental component of reality, the dualism is insoluble. Free Will must be an illusion.

So, by a different path, Descartes' Rationalism had arrived at the same negative conclusion as Spinoza as regards the Will, except that Descartes could still have recourse to Divine intervention, something which Spinoza would not.

The Empiricists were largely untroubled by Descartes' dualism and the problem lay unresolved until the end of the eighteenth century. I shall now turn to see where Empiricism took us in our understanding of the Will.

Empiricism

Francis Bacon formulated his program as follows:

[I]n nothing else does the aspiration to deserve well show itself than in that things are so arranged that people, freed both from the hobgoblins of belief and ignorance of experiments, may enter into a more reliable and sound partnership with things by, as it were, a certain literate experience.

Bacon, 1607

As to the Will as such, Bacon was not so troubled by conundrums like those posed by Spinoza. Bacon saw himself as a devout Anglican, but he did not exclude the human body from Nature. So like any other aspect of the human being, the Will had to be understood by the same means as any other phenomenon of Nature. His response to Spinoza can then be taken as implicit in his famous aphorism:

Natura non vincitur nisi parendo

(Nature cannot be vanquished until she is obeyed).

Bacon, 1620, Book 1, Aphorism 3

To this day, this aphorism stands up to sceptical criticism. However, the argument about *how Nature can be understood* was far from settled by Bacon's Empiricism.

Dogmatism vs Scepticism

The struggle between Rationalism and Empiricism was not resolved. The criticism of Empiricism continued and defenders of experience as the sole source of knowledge responded by building various kinds of "system" to rationalise what was given in experience (Newton, for example). Natural science has continued like this to this day, and it always demands a reasonable degree of epistemological tolerance, so to speak, to withstand criticism. In an age in which Science is subject to distrust and incessant scepticism on the public stage this should be evident.

The project which continued constructing models of Nature to "explain" experience, but offering no *direct* means of verification, is called "Dogmatism." I characterise the next phase in the history of European Philosophy as Dogmatism *vs.* Scepticism. David Hume (1711-1776) represents the culmination of Scepticism.

David Hume

David Hume (1711-1776) would challenge the claim that you can be absolutely certain that the sun will rise tomorrow:

That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than that it will

rise. ... All inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past.

Hume, 1772, §IV

In short, a causal explanation of appearances is no more a warrant of truth than an elaborate description of what has always happened in the past. Causality is always an assumption; it is not given in experience. No present-day scientist exercises this degree of scepticism in relation to their own experience. And this is despite the fact that present-day conceptions of how the world works rely on sophisticated instruments and arcane mathematical theories all far from everyday experience.

Under sceptical attack, the “dogmatic” illusion that the nature of reality could be definitively determined by experiment collapsed. The everyday experience that constantly demonstrates to common sense that human beings possess Free Will has been shown incapable of withstanding serious philosophical criticism, even if it seems to work OK for everyday life.

For Hume, all actions are determined by impressions and associations, so Will can be nothing more than a complex habit. People will act as they do according to habit and their interests and desires. Having knowledge only of appearances, they have no rational basis for determining their own action. So there is no room for Free Will here, actions being fully determined by desire and unfounded belief.

Having been subject to sceptical critique, Empiricism joined Rationalism in finding no reliable basis for Free Will.

Kant's Answer to Scepticism

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) left us an expressive report of the impact of Hume's scepticism:

I freely confess that it was the remembrance of David Hume which, many years ago, first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a completely different direction.

Kant, 1787, Preface to the second edition, B xiii

Hume had claimed that causality is not given in experience, so if all necessity were derived from experience, then natural science could have no objective validity.

Kant responded with his *critical* philosophy, claiming:

The first step in regard to the subjects of pure reason, and which marks the infancy of that faculty, is *dogmatic*. The second, which we have just mentioned, is *sceptical*, and it gives evidence that our judgment has been improved by experience. But a third step, such as can be taken only by fully matured judgment, based on assured principles of proved universality, is now necessary, namely to subject to examination, *not the facts of reason, but reason itself*, in the whole extent of its powers, and as regards its aptitude for pure *a priori* modes of knowledge. This is not the censorship but the *criticism* of reason, whereby not its present *bounds* but its determinate and necessary *limits*, not its ignorance, in regard to all possible questions of a certain kind, are demonstrated from

principles, and not merely arrived at by way of conjecture. Thus scepticism is a resting place for reason, in which it may reflect on its dogmatic wanderings and gain some knowledge of the region in which it happens to be, that it may pursue its way with greater certainty; but it cannot be its permanent dwelling-place. It must take up its abode only in the region of complete certitude, whether this relates to the cognition of objects themselves, or to the limits which bound all our cognition.

Kant, 1787, II

Kant's intervention marked the turn to Idealism, that is, an examination of the character, means and limits of knowledge itself, rather than making competing claims about the nature of the material world including issues which actually lay outside experience, outside the bounds of possible knowledge.

Descartes and Bacon had agreed that definitive knowledge of God (i.e., Nature) was possible; according to Descartes by Reason, according to Bacon, by experiment. But by Kant's time, both had come to the point where it seemed that Reason and Experiment could lead only to knowledge of *appearances*, while direct, unmediated access to Nature in itself was impossible.

To get to Kant's views on the Will, it will be necessary to outline Kant's Moral Philosophy (1785), since it is through this lens that Kant gives us his theory of action. The problem of the Will cannot be solved as a problem of Science, as a matter of cause and effect. Nonetheless, people act according to what they believe is right, as expressions of their own moral philosophy, so to speak. What a person does is what they believed was right at the time. But how does someone know what is right? This question cannot be answered in terms of a person's upbringing or inclinations or habits, but only by moral discourse.

What is right must be determined by the exercise of Reason, and Kant (1787) claimed to prove that human beings did indeed have an innate faculty which already contains certain a priori forms – pure intuitions of time and space, categories such as causality, substance, unity, plurality, necessity, etc., and crucially, the capacity to Reason. An examination of these ideas is central to the history of Western philosophy, but they are not relevant to the current problem, viz., the Will.

Outline of Kant's Moral Philosophy

Kant does not set out to construct a moral code prescribing what a person should do in this or that instance just as he did not (generally) construct models of "how Nature worked." But just as with his critique of Reason, he investigated the *limits* of what *could be* a good action.

His first conclusion is that the only thing that is good without qualification is a Good Will. A Will is good because of the principle on which it acts, not because of its consequences, which are in general unforeseeable. The problem then reduces to determining *laws* against which actions can be judged. The laws Kant has in mind are however the laws a person makes, or could have made, *for themselves*.

So already, Kant has introduced the Will into his conception, because the person formulates the limits to which they will subject their own action. But he is not making any psychological claims here. The concept of the Will arises necessarily from a reasonable examination of action.

In summary, Kant concludes that an action has moral worth *only if* it is done out of duty, not merely *in accordance with duty*. Further, moral obligation is not learned from experience: it is a priori, necessary and universal.

According to Kant (1787), causality is a condition of possible experience, and conversely, the moral law is a condition of possible moral action. The problem is to determine such moral law, by the exercise of Reason alone.

The moral law Kant determined is referred to as the *Categorical Imperative* (CI). The CI is expressed in several different formulations, the most famous being:

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Kant, 1785

Note that for Kant the subject gives this law to themselves. This is Kant's definition of freedom and thus effectively his definition of Free Will. It is clear that this does not tell a subject *what* their duty is, but merely places a *limit* on what their duty could be. Beyond setting moral limits on action, Kant can tell us nothing about how a person might exercise the faculty of Will. The subject that "legislates" the law governing their own actions therefore has autonomy, so long as the law is in conformity with the CI. So autonomy as opposed to heteronomy is central to Kant's conception of freedom, and this includes:

Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means.

Kant, 1785

What one actually does is indeed driven by desire, belief, custom, habit and so on, but the Will is free insofar as it exercises Moral Reason by limiting their actions so as to act only according to a maxim or law which conforms with the Categorical Imperative.

The age-old question of how the Will can co-exist in a human body governed entirely by the laws of Nature is not even touched upon by Kant.

This is as far as Kant goes in granting freedom of the Will. Frankly, Kant has not solved the problem at all. He largely vouched for what the Empiricists and Rationalists had already agreed to: there is no basis in Science for the concept of Free Will.

Critique of Kant

In Germany, over 50 years following the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the central axis of Philosophy and Science was the critique of Kant. This was a truly rich period in the history of the development of Western thought. The only definitive outcome of this period is Hegel's Idealism. Otherwise, the endless debates between Rationalism and Empiricism and between Dogmatism and Scepticism continue to this very day.

I will deal with the Materialist critique of Hegel in the next chapter and this will constitute the central line of my argument. Suffice it to say that in the aftermath of Hegelianism a decisive split between Philosophy and Science, both natural or human science, took place. For the next century, Science developed mostly independently of philosophical reflection on any vision of the whole. Scientists each focussed on "problem solving" in relation to very specific domains of

experience. Insofar as scientists had a sophisticated philosophical conception of their own work it was thanks to Kant. But Kant only provided the *limits* of possible knowledge, little else.

The period of Classical German Philosophy culminated with Hegel. I will mention just a couple of important stimuli which showed a way forward for Hegel.

In the first place, I must mention Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Herder was a critic of Kant from the beginning, and as we mentioned above, he was central to the rehabilitation of Spinoza, along with the idea that Nature itself was saturated with striving. Thus, the basis of the Will existed already in the living Nature.

Herder formed a friendship with the great poet and naturalist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). Goethe shared a deep hostility to “Newtonian” science, that is, science which relied upon invisible and abstract “forces” acting as causes but in themselves outside of possible experience. In conversation with Herder, Goethe developed the concept of *Urphänomen*. An *Urphänomen* was a simple something, the smallest and simplest instance of some phenomenon, something which was accessible to the senses but at the same time open to Reason. In Goethe’s day, microscopes did not have the power to reveal the microworld of cell life. However, the biological cell aptly expresses Goethe’s intuition. Once you have identified the cell of an organism, then it is possible to reconstruct the development of the organism without recourse to metaphysical “forces.”

A friend and mentor of Hegel as he worked on his critique of Kant was Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). Fichte is remembered as a Subjective Idealist in the sense that he wanted to reconstruct the whole society in which individuals lived by beginning with the Individual. He was an extreme Liberal in this sense. However, by adopting this project, Fichte identified the *limits* of this methodological individualism. Fichte was the first to introduce from the theory of international relations the concept of *recognition*. If a state held a monopoly of violence over some territory, this was not sufficient to claim that it was a *state*. To be a state also demanded *recognition as a state by other states*.

Likewise, persons were subject to the same qualifications. Until a person is recognised as a person by other persons who treat them as a person and demand that they *act* as a person, they are not truly a person. It was thanks to this recognition by others that the person gains self-consciousness. Self-consciousness arises hand-in-hand with social consciousness.

In Hegel’s view, Fichte was wrong to attempt to understand the whole by beginning with the individual, but he did appropriate the concept of Recognition, and made it the central theme of his Jena lectures in 1805–1806.

Together with the ongoing critique of Kant’s achievements, the ideas that the Will existed as a potential in Nature itself, and that a logic resembling Goethe’s notion of the *Urphänomen* – in which the whole was already present in the smallest part – could overcome the problems which had arisen from Kant’s essentially failed attempt to overcome the struggle between Dogmatism and Scepticism.

These are the essential ideas that led to Hegel’s philosophy to which I will now turn.

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