

Denaturalizing Atheism After Kant

I love not men the less, but Nature more

— Lord Byron

In this essay, two related tendencies will be analyzed from the period of German Idealist philosophy, along with an accompanying reading of one theoretical line leading up to its contemporary reception. It will be argued we should wager a thoroughgoing atheism that is conditioned necessarily by a transcendental response as to the status of any given alleged nature. This possibility is only opened up in the history of philosophy beginning most of all with the work of Kant. The ways in which it becomes later taken up by other German Idealists will be viewed as holding some additional significance in developing the theory further. German Idealism must be read as an event culminating from the unique circumstances of the late Enlightenment. Though the process had been slow and often doubted itself, the greatest thinkers from this time in their best moments had only wished to deepen and even radicalize some of its most troubling aims. Their hope was that for taking this risk they could open up the potentials of human freedom as had not been achieved previously until then.

I. Nature

For Kant, nature is distinct from matter¹ in being a collecting of laws over and above being merely a group of bodies. This is only the formal sense of nature², the material sense demands that we involve the totality of all the possible objects of experience together. But this hyperphysical object itself cannot be an object of experience, it is what is entirely beyond the capacities of nature to produce. All there is is the series of individual appearances each occurring on its own.³ At the same time subjective experiences are of universal necessary laws so much as they can be made of an object present before others - they must involve pure concepts of understanding. Since to be present before others here is interchangeable with being present before any possible subject, Kant says that, “Objective validity and necessary universal validity (for everyone) are therefore interchangeable concepts.”⁴

In deciding the “conditions of possibility of experience”⁵, Hegel adds that the process is communal and not simply of the self. It does follow with Kant’s notion that this thing is a “legislature”, which after producing the transcendental aesthetic Kant decided there is nowhere left to locate it but in the self. We should only add that Hegel’s addition does not necessarily bring the process any more assurance, as he well knows the community comes with all of its own

¹Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. (1997). *Prolegomena to any future metaphysics that will be able to come forward as science with selections from the Critique of pure reason* (p. 46). Cambridge [England: Cambridge University Press.

²Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 48.

³Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 70.

⁴Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 51.

⁵Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 71.

worries. Kant fatefully declares that, “...the understanding does not draw its (a priori) laws from nature, but prescribes them to it.”⁶ And later includes conversely that, without understanding there would not be any nature at all...”⁷ The chaotic forces assumed to be at work in nature do not become law until they are some how after the fact made to conform with our experience by ourselves. But Kant has no method for differentiating these laws from the totality of the appearance of forces in-themselves. He imagines the possibility that, “For appearances could after all be so constituted that the understanding would not find them in accord with the conditions of its unity, and everything would then lie in such confusion...”⁸ But then carries out an argument toward a kernel of necessity present in the concept of causation, from which all other concepts will share in its effect. What is in question now are the very laws under which the forces of cause and effect are said to take place. Hegel will set about trying to “invert” the world of forces into a second world of law, both of which are present at the same time to the understanding. There remain to be open questions about whether this process is necessary, or if it can be completed. If we have certainty in advance that it will not be done it is unclear why we should even attempt to do this for all possible forces. Hegel noticeably fails to account for the sort of cosmological forces that Kant sets directly in contrast with the field of moral law⁹. We might as with Kant want to isolate an experience of the sublime which by definition refuses all attempts at fully grasping its images that are produced by a rational cognition. These images while presented with great intensity of force, would not at all be subject to falling under any particular comprehensible law as can be done for all kinds of ‘regular’ experiences, whatever majority of experiences those may appear to be.

Nature and freedom will be attributable without contradiction to the very same thing¹⁰, but in different respects, in the one case as appearance, in the other as a thing in itself. In our investigations we will often fail to fully take into consideration one side or the other. The pre-synthetic unity is constituted by the imagination, but it cannot be reached directly through rational understanding and must be posited. In doing so we conjure up the sort of images of monsters and the living dead, these just-bordering-on-human forces which we tend to connect with the domain of the imagination when it goes left unchecked. Kant speculates quite openly about the very possibility for the persistence of a kind of diminished life after death by claiming that, “...if the mode of sensibility through which transcendental (and for now entirely unknown) objects appear as a material world should cease, then not all intuition would thereby be terminated.”¹¹ In particular this is the continuation of an entirely passive series of intuition

⁶Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 72.

⁷Kant, I., & Guyer, P. (1998). Critique of pure reason (p. 242). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸Kant, I., & Guyer, P. 223.

⁹Kant, I., & Abbott, T. (2004). Critique of practical reason and other works on the theory of ethics (p. 141). New York: Barnes & Noble Books.

¹⁰Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 96.

¹¹Kant, I., & Guyer, P. 438.

without the active contributions being made by some rational understanding, and so he carefully recognizes that, "...it might well be possible for the very same unknown object to continue to be cognized by the thinking subject..."

I. Atheism

Are not the things which linger with the force of presence in the understanding after it has been ridden of all sensible content, the human soul itself? And likewise its relation to other phantom souls which haunt the consciousness, even while being only mirror-like false apparitions of other souls and by necessity never an actual soul thing-in-itself. These are not real souls but their dismembered images. Against Fichte's radicalization of the self, Kant seems to predict, "Thus the dogmatic spiritualist explains the unity of the person, which consists in remaining unaltered through all changes in its states, by the unity of a thinking substance, which he thinks he perceives immediately in the 'I,'..."¹² The identification of the self is a purely negative determination against the background of what had appeared to be the case in the space of that situation from which we are trying to identify a self. If we accept the argument about the limits of reasoning toward the transcendental, then it follows at least that part of ourselves is an "immaterial being."¹³ God would be identified with the noumena which is that space that underlies the possibility of all beings. The intelligible world would be made up of all objects of possible experience accessible to subjectivity, and not with the external world outside in-itself. Kant argues that sorting through the appearances alone could not lead us to these results¹⁴ which are what is ultimately satisfying to reason, even while being limited as transcendental forms.

Of course there is not anything which is not. It is just that the thing which makes up the space of the subject that is transcendental must become posited retroactively after the fact. We cannot merely identify with it in an unmediated way because it is the very thing which performs identification for us. Kant sees the danger in losing touch with the content hidden behind the concept altogether, and so he says of the real thing, of the real God, etc., "...that appearances always presuppose a thing in itself, and so provide notice of such a thing..."¹⁵

But here we should part with Kant, and go all the way in sanctioning off the space of the understanding. We now live in an age where the content of the concept becomes redoubled over time and time again, and we still manage to move on just the same. It should be understood that while there is a ground of history against which concepts are often forced to attempt to prove themselves, they have all each one now become disconnected from the form of thought they had originally been extensions of. In fact Hegel had already radicalized this thesis, upturning the necessity in the categories Kant carefully set out. It seems all too easy again today to imagine that some of the categories which we happen

¹²Kant, I., & Guyer, P. 616.

¹³Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 106.

¹⁴Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 108.

¹⁵Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 106.

to measure the world by are somehow essential. No matter how pressing this feeling may be, it is possible to take a theoretical stance against it. And its own urgency only reveals its lack of faith in the correct side coming out ahead.

This anxiety being felt very widely in the present moment is not to be confused with terms of the climate crisis, which is itself beyond escalating. Kant even in his time felt that time was short, admitting that he, "...must proceed frugally," because it is clearly an almost impossible task that he intends, "...to carry out my plan of providing the metaphysics both of nature and of morals..."¹⁶ By many accounts we have now today missed the moment in which we could have acted and put into place measures that might prevent an imminent total collapse. What is it exactly that is collapsing?

Kant proceeds to take Hume to task for equating any deism with an anthropomorphism, and then denying both at once together¹⁷. Kant, however, has taken the ground of the concept out from under God exactly so much as he has done so for Man, and thinking is done, "...only directly on the boundary of all permitted use of reason..." He notes that in arguments about theism we should consider the grounds of the concept of a possible God, and not the existence of an actual one. These make up the grounds for the advent of a new radically experimental attitude toward the function of all concepts, including that of God. There is not a naturalistic attitude governing metaphysics to fall back on and measure claims made about God against those more reasonable ones made about Man and his natural relations to the world, because natural science only ever gets presupposed by metaphysics. What we are left with is what Kant refers to as a weak anthropomorphism, so long as it is presently being identified with existing exactly along this impossible speculative boundary. From here we might dare to undermine the naively assumed actuality of both God and of nature. As we should not, "look upon the field of possible experience as something that bounds itself in the eyes of our reason,"¹⁸ the possibilities for any given concept are not necessarily enclosed within the field of totality of all possibilities present before us today.

At the end of the Prolegomena Kant shows that the commonly shared hope for a life that will follow this one in another world authored by an intelligent being is grounded in the very structure of transcendental reason.¹⁹ It is just that we can now know this is a necessary possibility on the conditions of life, rather than it being an empirical discovery about some way the world actually is. We should not expect the structure of this situation to change in the future, the hope will neither be abandoned nor will it become fulfilled. Kant argues emphatically about any posited substantial notion of the soul that, "...it cannot teach us any of the usual conclusions of the rationalistic doctrine of the soul, such as, e.g.,

¹⁶Kant, I., & Guyer, P. 123.

¹⁷Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 107.

¹⁸Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 111.

¹⁹Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 152.

the everlasting duration of the soul through all alterations.”²⁰ It is not given to the intuition with the feeling of certainty except as a sometimes materially manifest illusion. This will be the case so long as we are essentially constituted by the form of transcendental subjectivity. One might be quick to give that up, but it is the ground of both past experience and of all possible experience²¹. It is difficult to see how our hope could become fulfilled except when experienced as such.

From this point in the dialectic many scholars will quite conspicuously move to deriving a non-synthetic a priori mathematics. This was originally explored as a possibility of the synthetic a posteriori by Mill²², and of the analytic a priori by Frege²³. These lines continue to be followed today through the respected mathematical domains of realist construction and of formalist fiction. These changes would rid Kantian intuitions of time and space of their abyssal quality, they would become merely appearances with a minor concession made toward some underdeveloped notion of representation. It would be in the vein of Reinhold’s highly reductive reading of the problem of representation confronted by Kant, and this of course would be done implicitly in the service to the persisting possibility for a general faith. Kant would be viewed as opening up a field of problems surrounding discursive normativity under the purview of a pragmatic language philosophy, and this would be the end of his achievement.

Even in Kant’s time it was already quite clear to him that concerning both mathematics and natural science, “...we do not need to ask whether it is possible (for it is actual), but only: how it is possible.”²⁴ We have passed the point where the theist can propose defensive skeptical arguments against these programs. And what they show ultimately is not the fullness of their own positive content, but the necessary positing of an empty space made up by transcendental subjectivity in addition to them. He will even go on to say that we must seek out its origins because²⁵, “...appearances must be subsumed under the concept of substance...,” and so much as it serves as a real event it, “...must be subsumed under the concept of an effect in relation to a cause.” But this can only be done after the fact by the very transcendental subject itself as posited by the understanding and cannot be reached as intuitive content given in itself. And since, “...there also belongs to judgments of experience the cognition of agreement and connection...,” we could very much end up being wrong in our attempts at identification.

Although it remains to be widely held in Kantian scholarship that mathematics

²⁰Kant, I., & Guyer, P. 417.

²¹Kant, I., & Guyer, P. 264.

²²Mill, J., & Robson, J. (1973). *A system of logic, ratiocinative and inductive; being a connected view of the principles of evidence, and the methods of scientific investigation.* (p. 304). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

²³Frege, G. (1968). *The foundations of arithmetic; a logico-mathematical enquiry into the concept of number.* (2d rev. ed., p. 5). Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.

²⁴Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 26.

²⁵Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 59.

as a synthetic a priori form is crucial to Kant's overall system, very little work gets done today on the subject of synthetic a priori mathematics itself. All kinds of means will be searched for in order to negate the transcendental of its potential under the hidden banner of a return to the traditional. This is the most desperate of attempts, but for us it must be worked right through and not gone around. The deciding factor now is the historical advent of the transfinite and the multiverse, which mean there are too many infinity of infinities to imbue back into Hegel's Inverted World. It too necessarily will remain incomplete, as a supplement to Kant's theory and not superseding it.

We will argue instead the turn should be made toward a stringent atheism and not away from a transcendental sense of the possibility of mathematics. These may seem like remote decisions but they each hang exactly in the same way on how we intend to treat the problem Kant poses to us.

I. Atheism Denaturalized

Of the world-creator that we place at the beginning of the chain of experiences which leads directly up to ourselves, Kant concludes skeptically, "...we think the world as if it derives from a supreme reason, as regards its existence and inner determination."²⁶ Here today though a speculative question is opened up, as we seem very near to acting from a position of supreme reason in forming wholly new worlds just as Kant predicts must happen. With the advance of computers we come every day closer to making real thinking machines that are indistinguishable from ourselves. In our constant engagement with the internet, in introducing increasingly complicated technologies into the field of medicine, we are situated on the precipice of a fully cybernetic age. It should be understood that even with an affirmative answer to this speculative question, this could only explain the creation of very microscopic possible worlds and not that of our own. And this is also an a priori limit on the possibility of reason, rather than a merely empirical failing in spite of the obvious acceleration of discovery otherwise being carried out by science.

A disalienated subject position is the one which should be arrived at in in order to act with radical freedom, but you cannot get there without having gone through an alienating process. The potentials which get opened up is the moment of negativity that never can be done away with so long as the established field of possibility remains secured. The negativity which gets opened up when this field is done away with in symbolic death, or in revolutionary events, is another one conditioned itself by the terms of the new situation and not the old.

The worst thing atheism could become is a half-hearted label we adopt without any serious commitments. We also face this problem with every movement available to us today, and theoretically in general, while atheism makes this problem become explicit and identifiable as a universal. It is incredibly tempting to arrive at the point of possibility of a fully-fledged atheism and decide to stop

²⁶Kant, I., & Hatfield, G. 111.

halfway. The point is not that we one insignificant part of a vast material cosmos. It is that we are what remains in spite of this failing order, to act once more. Everything begins in disaster, this is the nature of things.