

KANT'S IMPORTANCE FOR EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY. THE PERSPECTIVE OF HERMENEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

Prof. Andrzej Przylębski

Adam-Mickiewicz University of Poznan (Poland)

Abstract. The article is a short presentation and critical evaluation of the main aspects of Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy. It focuses on ontological consequences of the so-called Copernican turn that places man in a self-created, phenomenal world, cutting off any hope for his contact with the transcendent reality, independent of man's cognition. The only escape from this danger of the subjectification of reality is, unjustly criticized, Kant's acknowledgment of *Ding an sich*. In the area of practical philosophy, Kant's ethics of categorical imperative, of good will and the fact of freedom, is an interesting but indefensible project of formal and autonomic ethics that, unfortunately, due to its elitist conclusions cannot fulfil the task of teaching morality. In the light of development in cultural anthropology and hermeneutical philosophy of life, Kant's position needs to be significantly updated.

Keywords: transcendental logic; metaphysics; imperative ethics; neo-Kantianism; hermeneutical philosophy

Introduction

This text is a kind of reckoning with Kant. An assessment made by someone who began his adventure with philosophy 40 years ago with analyses of Kant's thought, in particular with the prospect of its revival in the form of Baden neo-Kantianism.¹ Yet at the same time someone who, in the course of his research, largely abandoned the transcendental perspective, having been convinced that at the turn of the 20th century European philosophy quite justifiably took an anthropological and then a hermeneutical turn.² These changes were certainly influenced by the emergence of phenomenology, in the versions of both Husserl and Scheler. Each of these philosophers questioned, though in a different way, the results of Kant's investigations: Scheler in practical philosophy, that is, in his concept of material ethics; and Husserl in theoretical philosophy, that is, in his theory of knowledge.

This does not change the fact that Kant's transcendental philosophy (that is, his critical philosophy) played a huge role in the history of philosophy, perhaps com-

parable only to the thought of Plato or Aristotle. It pointed to aporias that neither Anglo-Saxon empiricism (see Hume's questioning of the possibility of the laws of nature) nor French rationalism (see the complete separation of body and spirit/mind as two completely different substances in Descartes' thought) could deal with.

Even though he ultimately sided with idealism, Kant did not want to repeat the mistakes of Hume or Descartes. With remarkable intellect, he combined apriorism with empiricism in his aesthetics and transcendental logic. Completing his concept with the idea of the existence of transcendental ideas of reason, he also briefly defended the possibility of metaphysical research. However, this was a completely new metaphysics. Or actually – and this frequently goes unnoticed – two different metaphysics. One that, as a metaphysics of the spirit (that is, of the human mind), could claim to be reliable knowledge, on a par with science, as the title of one of Kant's works suggests.³ And the second one that results from the needs of the human spirit (reason) that exceed human experience, exceeding the area of experience available to it and building a comprehensive image of existence using the idea of the immortal soul, the idea of God and the idea of the cosmos.

Kant's contribution to practical philosophy is also very important, both to moral theory and political philosophy. His concept of autonomous, self-legislative ethics, based on the formal nature of the categorical imperative, marked a kind of revolution in thinking about ethics and morality.⁴ It cannot be denied that it also meant an attack on the concepts of morality based on ancient ethics and Christian ethics, even though Kant tried not to attack the latter directly. However, he did so with his belief that true ethics is autonomous ethics, while Christian ethics, due to its submission to God's commandments, is obviously heteronomous ethics.

Kant did not bother to answer the question whether the autonomous and formal ethics he proposed could replace the existing ethics functioning in society. He probably assumed that every human being, as a being endowed with reason, would easily review the maxims guiding his actions in terms of their compliance with the categorical imperative. In other words, this would determine whether they could (or could not) be principles of general legislation.

It can also be said that Kant's contribution was considerable in the context of his writings on the state and law. His scepticism towards democracy is justified, because he understood it differently than we understand it today. Elements of his respect for the modern understanding of democracy can be found in his approach to republicanism as the system to which he gave primacy. Emphasizing the libertarian and subjective aspect of the republic is not only cognitively valuable, but also realistic. The republic, understood as the primacy of the common good over the freedoms of individual human beings, is superior to democracy, understood as every citizen having the right to vote. This becomes particularly clear during wars. Defending the state and society against destruction most often means at least a temporary suspension of de-

mocracy. Nevertheless, the important connection between the republic and democracy is obvious, also for Kant.

Kant undoubtedly also has enormous merits when it comes to so-called wisdom philosophy, which concerns advice that is supposed to improve the existential quality of our lives and show the importance of the ethical dimension, while blocking the temptations resulting from human corporeality, which connects man with beings deprived of reason – although not necessarily elements of intellect – meaning animals of a higher order. He posits and emphasizes that what really determines the humanity of a human being, the latter's essential difference in relation to other living beings, is that humans have the capacity to establish laws to which they then subject themselves. This means, in addition to recognizing the external laws of nature, creating laws regarding social life, laws for which people are responsible. This is undoubtedly an enduring achievement not only of Kant, but of all German idealism. And its origins can be found in Kant's concept of the categorical imperative, as well as in his philosophy of state and law.

1.

So much for the epochal significance of Kant's thought in the history of philosophy. What will now follow is an attempt to assess the foundations of his theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy in the context of their contemporary relevance. I would like to emphasize that this only concerns the basics, because in a relatively short article there is no space to elaborate the appropriate argumentation based on the extensive literature on the subject.

And it is, unfortunately, quite a critical assessment. It has two points of support, or two references. The first is related to the development of European philosophy, especially from the beginning of the 20th century. As a historian of philosophy, I closely examined what happened to Kantian-type transcendentalism after Kant's death. Fichte seemingly follows his instructions, but with his rejection of "the thing in itself which stimulates the senses to produce representations", pushing reason to create the objective world (thus guaranteeing a minimum of the presence of what is transcendent), he introduces idealism, no longer defined as transcendental, but as subjective, that goes astray. Reality becomes a meaning or sense, a product of consciousness. This subjective idealism gives the human mind an almost divine power to create reality, which humans do not possess to this extent. This position, like Hegel's absolute idealism, led German idealism to lose its seriousness and significance when confronted with the enormous and rapid development of the empirical positive sciences, based on the principle of causality and on a materialist approach. The technological triumph of the latter has shown that in experience we are not dealing – as Kant claimed – only with phenomena, but also with things in themselves (noumena), with a reality independent of human existence and cognition.

The second pillar on which I base my criticism of Kant is hermeneutical philosophy. I have been an advocate of it for over 30 years. I have long been striving to present it as a comprehensive (although rudimentary⁵) philosophical position that has answers not only in the area of narrowly understood epistemology (that is, in relation to the specificity of the humanities and cultural sciences), but also in the areas of ontology, ethics, aesthetics, anthropology and politics.⁶ The position I have developed on the basis of the discoveries of Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur does not allow me to subscribe to the statement that Kant's philosophy can also be defended today. It has been overtaken by hermeneutic philosophy of life, and by cultural anthropology.

2.

So, let's go *ad rem*. When it comes to Kant's theoretical philosophy, I shall address the issue of his transcendental idealism. And when it comes to practical philosophy, I shall address the question of whether a theoretically adequate and practically effective theory of morality can be based solely on the concept of the categorical imperative. These two theories are the most important elements of the Copernican revolution, which was to be carried out by Immanuel Kant. Although this term usually refers to Kant's theoretical philosophy, there are good reasons to also apply it to his ethical concept, which is part of practical philosophy.

Kant's enormous achievement is the synthesis of empiricism and rationalism, that is, demonstrating that pure empiricism and pure rationalism cannot be defended, because in human cognition, based on sensory contact with reality, empirical data are processed into objects located in time and space. Or even – subject to certain regularities. This processing, in its basic form, is the work of the intellect that has a certain logical and categorical apparatus at its disposal. Kant calls this apparatus “the transcendental logic”, a logic that, in his opinion, complements the traditional logic developed since ancient times.

Transcendental logic reveals a network, according to Kant, of a priori categories that serve the intellect to synthesize empirical data. He most often illustrates the operation of this logic with examples of the functioning of the concept of substance and the concept of cause. This means, however, that substantiality (things) does not exist in external reality but is constructed only by the cognizing subject. The same applies to causality: the causal relations that we recognize in the observations available to us do not occur in a reality transcendent to us, but are added by the cognizing subject.

However, such an approach, which is essentially revolutionary, generates enormous difficulties. According to Kant, we do not know things as they are in themselves, regardless of our knowledge, but as phenomena, that is, things for us. Kant perpetuates this fundamental difference by distinguishing between phenomena and noumena. The element of independence of reality external to man is preserved only

in the claim that phenomena arise as a result of the impact of things in themselves on human sensuality, thus initiating the cognitive process. This is emphasized by the famous but simultaneously controversial phrase: things in themselves stimulate (*unsere Sinne rühren, affizieren*) sensuality (Kant 1968a, p. 27). This term is controversial, at least because Kant seems to apply the category of causality to the relationship that precedes the intellect's reference to already formed objects. And that is explicitly prohibited by his transcendental logic. But let's ignore this problem, although it was the reason for J. G. Fichte's purification of Kant's transcendentalism from the remnants of empiricism. Purification that, in my opinion, meant the dead end of German idealism.

While from the perspective of contemporary philosophy – for example, the hermeneutic concept of pre-judgments, or the presence of theory already in observation sentences, developed within the framework of analytical philosophy – the mediation of empirical experience by various conceptual or categorical elements seems proven, the placement of all human cognition within the phenomenal area alone is something very risky. How can we explain the effectiveness of human action in the world, based on knowledge, assuming that it concerns only the phenomenal world and not the objective world of things completely independent of us? After all, cognition only constructs knowledge about them, not them themselves.

Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism seems to inevitably lead to the conclusion that we owe the objectivity of knowledge only to the fact that all people are equipped with the same categorical apparatus (with the same logic), because of which the subject's (and therefore subjective) approach to reality can be considered objective, being essentially only intersubjective. Kant limited this cognitive community to the human experience of nature; however, research in the field of cultural anthropology, unknown to him, showed that different cultures, especially non-European ones, perceive even the natural reality in a way different to ours. Suffice to point to the research on the culture of the Hopi Indians conducted by B. L. Whorf and E. Sapiro, American linguists, or research concerning the Amazonian Piraha tribe.⁷

Hermeneutical philosophy, in particular Gadamer's concept of the presuppositional nature of understanding and Heidegger's concept of *Vorstruktur des Verstehens* (pre-structure of understanding), showed that Kant's initial idea revealing the mediation of cognition by human cognitive faculties was an idea going in the right direction. The fact that his transcendental logic has not enriched contemporary textbooks on logic, even though they include newer theories such as Łukasiewicz's three-valued logic, shows that the word "logic" used there had a certain figurative meaning. A meaning indicating that our knowledge of external reality is always mediated by some preliminary knowledge, the existence of which we are often unaware of. However, this is not final knowledge, as it can be brought to the level of reflection and subjected to criticism or correction. The well-known German philos-

opher O. Höffe points out something similar with regard to Kant in his monograph, when he states that the benefit of criticism of reason is only negative. This criticism does not serve to expand but only to purify our reason (Höffe 1992)⁸. And this does not change the belief that in authentic cognition we must adapt to external reality, and not it to us, as Kant wrongly believed. Otherwise, we would have to assume that we live in the Matrix.

3.

Let us now turn to Kant's moral theory. Kant rightly notes that man, as a living being endowed with reason, exists not only in the world of natural laws, given from above, but also in the world of social regulations, which can be called cultural laws. Man thus breaks free from purely natural (biological and physical) necessity, gaining freedom thanks to the activation of his own mind, which supplements the laws of nature with socio-cultural laws. Kant recognizes freedom as a fact, without deliberating on how it is possible in the light of the principle of universal causality. It is absurd to say that man is causally determined in the phenomenal world, while in the noumenal world he is a being endowed with freedom. Man does not live in two worlds, but in one. Discussions about the possibilities of freedom continue, as we know, to this day. Due to the sound arguments of defenders of freedom (in the works of philosophers such as P. Bieri or J. Searle) against the attempts of determinists, Kant can be faulted for the lack of deeper reflection on the "fact of freedom" he accepted a priori. But this assumption is necessary for the possibility of attributing responsibility to a person for their actions. This in turn makes both morality and legality possible.

Kant, living in the world of Christian culture, was naturally aware not only of the existence but also of the cultural significance of Christian ethics. However, he also understood that it was a heteronomous ethics, imposed on man from the outside, in this case by Yahweh. Most ethics functioned and still function similarly. Kant was not satisfied with such a grounding of ethics. He believed that man, as a being endowed with reason, deserved an ethics that he himself would create, that is, an autonomous ethics based on rationality. However, the very ambitious concept of ethics he created took little account of the morality prevailing in a given society or cultural circle, even though Kant willingly used the term morality (*Sittlichkeit*), which would indicate this.

His ethics is not an ethics related to the consequences of committed actions or ethics of acting in accordance with prevailing customs and moral rules. It is an ethics of duty based on a rational will, that is, a will guided by reason that blocks biological inclinations and egoistic interests, because, as Kant claims in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, only the will is what is absolutely good (Kant 1968b, p. 393). This means that it is an ethical concept that sees the moral value of actions in the purely ethical intentions of the acting person. The measure

(criterion) for assessing these intentions is supposed to be self-reflection guided by a categorical imperative, that is, an absolute ethical command that determines our duties.

Already in this short characterization we can see how rigorous this concept is on the one hand, and how difficult to apply morally on the other. Actions that bring positive social effects, also performed out of the desire to improve the functioning of a given society, go beyond the criteria as self-interested. Inhibiting one's own inclinations and drives, for example due to expected social sanctions, is also placed in the area of legality and not morality. The question then arises: when and on what basis do we know that a human individual has behaved morally and not merely legally? After all, we are unable to penetrate their mind to determine what really conditioned a given action.

Let us add another doubt to this. We know that the categorical imperative, the basis of Kant's ethics, has four different forms, the most famous of which are two, which are considered equivalent. However, when making a deeper examination we begin to doubt whether the thesis about their equivalence is true. Let's take a closer look at them. The first is: "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1968b, p. 421). The second in turn reads thus: "act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (Ibid., p. 429).

In this second formulation there is neither a reference to maxims nor to a generalization procedure. It is also visible that the generalization called for transforms Kant's (intentionally) individualistic ethics into social ethics, into an ethics that is about ensuring that a given community is governed by ethically positive laws. This means that it would become a "good society". This is simply not present in the second formulation of the imperative. However, there is an existential element in it, absent in the first: a reference to humanity. As one might assume, Kant sees this humanity in the fact that people perceive themselves as rational beings, beings having and using reason. This form of the categorical imperative, which allows for behaviour in which we sometimes use others as a certain means to an end, at the same time forbids, under pain of immorality, treating them solely as a means to something. And this is the form of categorical imperative that seems to be behind Kant's idea of inherent human dignity, which is today referred to in the constitutions of many countries around the world, including Germany. The latter makes no secret of the fact that the source of the stack of provisions in the first sentences of the German Basic Law is the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

The ethics proposed by Kant, based on the idea of autonomy of (good) will, is not only a rigorous but also a very elitist concept. Reserved for people not only full of good will, that is, of moral virtues, but also prone to reflection, to the constant analysing of their actions in terms of the maxims that guide them, and then to

generalize these maxims into ethical laws, meaning their compliance with the good of the community. They are supposed to be able to become laws governing the functioning of these communities.

The rigor of Kant's ethics derives from the exclusion from the scope of ethics of actions that are socially considered altruistic, ergo morally positive, as long as they are performed, for example, out of respect for the moral principles adopted in a given community. In this context, Kant uses the distinction between ethicality and legality, extending the latter concept beyond formalized, established law. However, it seems that an assessment of Kant's ethics from today's perspective would be improved by distinguishing between ethics and morality. Ethics, or ethicality, would constitute the highest level of morality, available to individuals willing to reflect on the moral principles that they themselves are guided by and that guide the community in which they live. This category would include all normative and philosophical ethics proposed by humanity's greatest thinkers.

4.

So-called neo-Kantianism, in the form of various schools referring to different aspects of the thought of the author of *Critique of Pure Reason*, tried in the late 19th century to revive the transcendental idealism created by Kant. Suffice to mention the Marburg-School, established by H. Cohen and P. Natorp, elaborating on Kant's position mainly in relation to the natural sciences, or the Baden-School, whose main representatives were W. Windelband and H. Rickert. The latter worked at the universities in Freiburg, Heidelberg and Strasbourg, hence this trend was also called South-West German neo-Kantianism. Their main task, apart from defending Kant's thought, was to supplement it with the epistemology of the humanities, based on the transcendental theory of value. However, neo-Kantianism did not survive for long; it ended in all forms with the death of Henryk Rickert in 1936.

Another form of idealism was the transcendental phenomenology initiated by Edmund Husserl. But Husserl's solipsistic position – its final consequence – also proved untenable. Phenomenology on the other hand, understood as a thorough study of peculiar, difficult-to-grasp and therefore overlooked phenomena, has survived to this day. Due to the rejection by most of its contemporary representatives of the individual consciousness as the place where sense (that is, the meaning of phenomena) is formed, it is difficult to decide whether contemporary phenomenology sticks to idealism or whether, referring to the concept of "givenness" (*Gegebenheit*), it has moved towards realistic positions.

Hermeneutics, that is, the modern form of philosophy of life based on the concept of understanding and interpretation, has been subjected to similar processes. I should say Hermeneutic Philosophy, because this is the name that should be used for the concept created by Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, not to be confused with biblical, legal or literary hermeneutics. It could sometimes give a wrong

impression of sympathizing with idealism. However, the works of its contemporary representatives, such as M. Ferraris, G. Bertram and F. Fellman, leave no doubt that this philosophy wants to be perceived as a realistic position.⁹⁾

Hermeneutic Philosophy has two important elements in common with Kant's thought. Firstly, the belief that our contact with transcendent reality is always mediated and conditioned by our pre-empirical perceptual-cognitive structures, that is, by the knowledge embedded in our mind (*Vorwissen*). Knowledge that we owe to the fact that we are humans, that we are subject to processes of education and acculturation, and that we are able to perform acts of reflection. However, it is not a permanent network of transcendental categories of reason common to people of all cultures and epochs.

And secondly, the belief that we owe this knowledge to the fact that there is a reality external to our mind, to our consciousness, which stimulates – as Kant also noticed – our mind to organize various data and create knowledge about the reality around and in us. This means that we owe it to the culture in which we live, to the experience that our ancestors shared (tradition). This means the abandoning of the development of Kant's thought, which we owe to Fichte, a development leading to subjective idealism in which consciousness creates not only the meaning of the world, but also the world itself. This means – remaining true to the realism of things in themselves, a recognition made by Kant that has not lost its relevance.

NOTES

1. I devoted my doctoral dissertation on Emil Lask (1875 – 1915), professor of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, to this field of philosophy (*Emila Laska logika filozofii*, Poznań 1990) and my habilitation on Baden Neo-Kantianism (*W poszukiwaniu królestwa filozofii. Z dziejów neokantyzmu badeńskiego*, Poznań, 1994).
2. The most important work in which I prove this is my book *Hermeneutyczny zwrot filozofii (The Hermeneutic Turn in Philosophy)* (Poznań 2005). A number of important philosophers have a similar opinion to mine, such as F. Fellmann, G. Vattimo, G. Figal, G. Abel, and H. Lenk.
3. I mean, of course, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Present Itself as a Science*, from 1783.
4. I deliberately separate these two concepts because I attribute different content to them. Ethics is the result of reflection on the rules of behaviour, based on reflection, while morality is the set of socially given rules of behaviour accepted by a given community. Ethics may or may not take the form of a normative theory. Morality can be the subject of sociology and ethnology rather than philosophy.
5. In the meaning of “*pensiere debole*” and “*essere debole*” (a weak theory of being and cognition), proposed by Gianni Vattimo.

6. An overview of these answers, presenting hermeneutic philosophy as a comprehensive philosophical position, is contained in my latest book, *Hermeneutyka. Od sztuki interpretacji do teorii i filozofii rozumienia* (Hermeneutics. From the art of interpretation to a theory and philosophy of understanding), Poznań 2019.
7. Cf. the book by Daniel Everett, *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes. Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle*, New York, 2008.
8. See p. 71 in the Polish edition which was published in Warsaw in 1994 (Höffe 1994).
9. Let us take as an example the book edited by M. Gabriel, *Der neue Realismus* (Berlin 2014), containing among others the paper by Heidelberg philosophy professor Anton F. Koch, "Die Subjektivitätsthese als Grundlage eines hermeneutischen Realismus".

REFERENCES

- EVERETT, D., 2008. *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes*. Profile Books. ISBN 9780375425028.
- GABRIEL, M., 2014. *Der Neue Realismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag. ISBN 978-3-518-29699-8.
- HÖFFE, O., 1992. *Immanuel Kant*. München: C. H. Beck. ISBN 3406085067.
- HÖFFE, O., 1994. *Immanuel Kant*. Warszawa: PWN. ISBN 8301116560.
- KANT, I., 1968a. Kritik der reinen Vernunft, in: *Kants Werke. Akademie Textausgabe*. Band III. Berlin: de Gruyter. ISBN 9783110014365.
- KANT, I., 1968b. Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, in: *Kants Werke. Akademie Textausgabe*. Band IV. Berlin: de Gruyter. ISBN 9783110014372.
- KOCH, A. F., 2014.: Wir sind kein Zufall. Die Subjektivitätsthese als Grundlage eines hermeneutischen Realismus. In: Gabriel, M. (Hrsg.): *Der Neue Realismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 230–243. ISBN 978-3-518-29699-8.
- PRZYŁĘBSKI, A., 1990. *Emila Laska logika filozofii*. Poznań: Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza. ISBN 83-232-0286-9.
- PRZYŁĘBSKI, A., 1994. *W poszukiwaniu królestwa filozofii. Z dziejów neokantyzmu badeńskiego*. Poznań: Wyd. Nauk. UAM. ISBN 83-232-0482-9.
- PRZYŁĘBSKI, A., 2005. *Hermeneutyczny zwrot filozofii*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM. ISBN 9788323214571.
- PRZYŁĘBSKI, A., 2019. *Hermeneutyka. Od sztuki interpretacji do teorii i filozofii rozumienia*. Poznań: Zysk i S-ka. ISBN 978-83-8116-665-2.

✉ **Prof. Andrzej Przyłębski**

Adam-Mickiewicz University of Poznań, Poland

E-mail: aprzylebski@poczta.onet.pl