

KANT AND POSTMODERNISM

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When I was first informed of the invitation to read a paper to our community, I inquired what people might be interested to hear from me. Two simultaneous replies came immediately from distinct quarters, one suggesting Kant and the other recommending anything which might be occupying my mind at the moment. Kant, of course, is a logical choice since this was and still is what I have been largely identified with. But it would be dishonest of me if I fail to consider something which I must admit has been consuming me for some time now.

Even before I shifted from the academe to the religious life, a shift which was not really exclusive since there was no actual abandonment of philosophy even as I started to pursue the religious state, - even before I made this shift, I had already been engaged in yearly research on various philosophies of both past and present, all with a view to discovering what the best thinkers of all times have contributed to Postmodernism. My interpretations of Plato, Heidegger, Krishnamurti, Rudolf Steiner, and even St. John of the Cross, as well as my attempts to explain Filipino and French philosophies, were all a part of this venture to discover the historical roots of the new consciousness. In doing so, I was trying to understand the philosophy of our own time without having to betray what I thought was the authentic spirit of Kant's teachings.

Thus, it cannot be said that my interest in Postmodern Philosophy contradicts my ceaseless interest in Kantianism. On the contrary, there is a way to prove that the true direction of Kant's thinking ineluctably leads to insights which belong even to our own time. I shall, therefore, endeavor to integrate the two things which nowadays never cease to occupy me: Kant and Postmodernism.

Kant

Allow me to begin with something already known to most of you. Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth-century intellectual revolutionary, was in many other things quite ordinary. Just a little over five feet in

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height, he hardly left his birthplace until he died at almost eighty in 1804. He did not seem to have been made of the ambitious stuff since he chose to stay in Königsberg and teach in its university rather than take advantage of the juicy invitations from other prestigious institutions. Legend has it that in his old age he was wont to live such regular life that even housewives would check their time with his walking schedule. Indeed, there seemed to be nothing singular about this man who was destined to serve as a landmark in the history of philosophy. If, indeed, nothing is the same again after the shock of a great philosopher, as claimed by Whitehead,¹ then it can safely be said that philosophy was thoroughly altered after Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.² He meant it to be so. During a remarkable silent decade, during which hardly anything was heard from him by his academic compatriots, he noiselessly devised what he would later compare to the revolution effected by Copernicus in physics. We would do well to reproduce here his exact words:

We here propose to do just what Copernicus did in attempting to explain the celestial movements. When he found that he could make no progress by assuming that all the heavenly bodies revolved round the spectator, he reversed the process, and tried the experiment of assuming that the spectator revolved, while the stars remained at rest. We may make the same experiment with regard to the intuition of objects. If the intuition must conform to the nature of the objects, I do not see how we can know anything of them *a priori*. If, on the other hand, the object conforms to the nature of our faculty of intuition, I can then easily conceive the possibility of such an *a priori* knowledge.³

This text, which belongs to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, proves at least two things: that Kant was quite aware of the radical, even revolutionary import of his philosophical project, and that he was cautious enough to wait for at least six years before he openly declared his own evaluation of the value of his work. In the same second edition he even went so far as to say that he had found "nothing to alter".⁴ This should lay to rest the question as to whether Kant changed his mind drastically when he issued his work a second time in 1787. He was quite confident about the scientific character of his findings and conclusions owing, he said, to the long and thorough examination which he had given to his subject, but also because of the very nature of the subject itself. Pure Reason is of such a nature, he added, that it will not take long before it manages to expose its own organic structure as well as all its parts. Whatever you or I might think of this contention of Kant, the fact is that the philosopher was quite conscious of the revolutionary significance of what he was doing.

Much of the preface to the second edition is given to explaining what constitutes a scientific revolution. What occasioned this project in Kant is what he perceived to be the need of philosophy, of metaphysics especially, to establish its secure moorings, seeing how people were getting confused with the contradictory positions of philosophers. This was a sign, Kant opined, that metaphysics had not yet found the sure path of a science.

Logic, mathematics and physics were on a happier footing. They no longer had to retrace their steps and their proponents were already quite confident in what they were doing. This happy state of affairs, however, took time to develop; before they became a science, they had to pass through the normal process of tentative groping. The question is, what was it that transformed them finally into a science? What was the key to their confidence and certitude?

Logic, Kant claimed, had advanced in this sure course even from the earliest times. The man to whom we should attribute its change of status is none other than the great Aristotle, whose *Organon* has remained authoritative to this day. There is no denying that, at least in our country, we still find much relevance in the syllogistic logic laid out by the Greek philosopher and later entrenched even more by St. Thomas and the other scholastics. Not even the popularity of the so-called logic of symbols, also called mathematical logic, has diminished the value of this discipline. Aristotle's logic remains correct, which only shows to what extent it is a science.

It is interesting to note that mathematics, which is now keenly regarded as allied to logic, is ahead of the other disciplines in revolutionizing its status and transforming itself into a science. Physics came later. But in both cases, as in the case of logic, there was someone, known or unknown, to whom the honor of this revolution must be accorded. After a "stage of blind groping" it finally dawned on one man that an experiment had to be done if things were not to remain on a standstill.

A new light must have flashed on the mind of the first man (Thales, or whatever may have been his name) who demonstrated the properties of the isosceles triangle. For he found that it was not sufficient to meditate on the figure, as it lay before his eyes, or the conception of it, as it existed in his mind, and thus endeavour to get at the knowledge of its properties, but that it was necessary to produce these properties, as it were, by a positive *a priori construction*; and that, in order to arrive with certainty at *a priori cognition*, he must not attribute to the object any other properties than those which necessarily followed from that which he had himself, in accordance with his conception, placed in the object.⁵

What becomes clear in all this is that a scientific revolution is an effect of man's intervention in the state of things. This is only to be expected, since there would be no science if there were no human beings to begin with. It would be misplaced to forget that every science has an ineradicable subjective component, and that even our most objective knowledge points to (Husserl would later say that it is intended by) a subjectivity. This, in fact, would be one of Kant's most enduring conclusions, as we will see later.

When Galilei experimented with balls of a definite weight on the inclined plane, when Torricelli caused the air to sustain a weight which he had calculated beforehand to be equal to that of a definite column of water, or when Stahl, at a later period converted metals into lime, and reconverted lime into metal, by the addition and subtraction of certain elements; a light broke upon all natural philosophers. They learned that reason only perceives that which it produces after its own design; that it must not be content to follow, as it were, in the lead-strings of nature, but must proceed in advance with principles of judgment according to unvarying laws, and compel nature to reply to its questions.⁶

Thus, a scientific revolution takes place only as a consequence of human initiative. It, therefore, a similar revolution is to happen to philosophy or metaphysics, then no less than a similar effort on the part of man will have to be required. This is what encouraged Kant to consider the possibility of paving the scientific road for his own discipline. Did he succeed? As pundits would tell us, we may philosophize with or against Kant but never without him. That is the measure of the greatness of a philosopher, not that we may not disagree with him, but that we may not philosophize without him.

A man destined to revolutionize a science experiences a light breaking in upon him. Bernard Lonergan calls that "insight." An example of such an insight could be gleaned from

the story of Archimedes rushing naked from the baths of Syracuse with the cryptic cry, 'Eureka!' King Hiero, it seems, had had a votive crown fashioned by a smith of rare skill and doubtful honesty. He wished to know whether or not baser metals had been added to the gold. Archimedes was set on the problem and in the bath had hit upon the solution. Weigh the crown in water!⁷

Kant would say that in this instance light had dawned on one man, namely, Archimedes, and the result, as we now know, are the principles of displacement and specific gravity. Thus, it is not the case

that, in the pursuit of knowledge, man simply follows the lead-strings of experience such as what a slave does. As soon as a person is seized by an insight he begins to determine how to handle the rest of the work. Nor are his conclusions merely a product of experience, for it is possible that even experience is truly a composite of elements coming from both objective and subjective sources.⁸

It should be noted further that such an insight, which might dawn on man effortlessly, is actually preceded by no small amount of work and effort. One can presume that Archimedes, who obtained the light while relaxing at the bath, was himself an indefatigable worker. Genius could not have borne fruit if allowed to lie fallow; the normal ground of intelligence has to be exercised adequately enough if it is to receive new lights.

What all this goes to show is that knowledge, and especially the scientific revolution we are here considering, is possible only through human cooperation. This is all that is meant by a *a priori* knowledge, that it has the human faculty as its source.⁹ But because it is also an insight, it thus brings original understanding to our usual set of learning. In other words, it expands our knowledge, and this is what Kant means by synthetic knowledge.¹⁰ Hence, our knowledge is synthetic *a priori* if it is not simply a tautological statement like $A = A$; that is, it is not a mere repetition of what is already known about the subject, but contains additional information about it, although itself a result of that human intelligence which seeks a scientific basis.

All that is what Kant had in mind when he ventured to secure for metaphysics the character of a science. That would constitute for this discipline, which had thus far been revolving around mere concepts, a revolutionary turning point. Philosophy would thereby cease to be a purely rationalistic exercise, a sheer case of intellectual gymnastics, and it would then be a true science, in the sense of one which adds to our knowledge in a manner that is both necessary and universal.

How far has Kant succeeded in his endeavor? He himself does not harbor any doubt about his success. It remains for his reader to decide whether he, the reader, shares Kant's own optimism about the results of his own venture. Let us now look into the source of Kant's confidence. My own suggestion is that we shall find it in the very title he gives to his book, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

There are at least three places where Kant explicitly explains what he means by the term *Critique of Pure Reason*: in the Prefaces, the Introduction, and the section in the Transcendental Doctrine of Method called "The Doctrine of Pure Reason in Polemics." In the

Preface to the first edition, Kant speaks of

a call to reason, again to undertake the most laborious of all tasks - that of self-examination - and to establish a tribunal, which may secure it in its well-grounded claims, while it pronounces against all baseless assumptions and pretension, not in an arbitrary manner, but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws. This tribunal is nothing less than the critical investigation of pure reason.¹¹

The first thing to take note of is that the critique of pure reason constitutes Kant's contribution to what could be philosophy's most urgent task; none other than the Socratic call for self-knowledge. I would like to give prominence to this aspect of the critique of pure reason, because it is precisely only a consciousness which knows itself which is in position to a claim of objectivity and certitude. The idea is that if we know ourselves enough to understand where the limits of our powers lie, then we will not be tempted to make extravagant and uncalled-for claims; we will be modest enough to admit our own limitations and we shall have the courage to accept our own ignorance. This, in fact, is a generally accepted stance of a truly wise man, that he knows that he does not know.¹² But this knowledge of ignorance can arise only from a profound understanding of one's own self. It is self-knowledge that brings about this attitude of modesty of a wise man.

Let us now see how this wisdom is present in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason and why this could also be the source of his confidence in his own certitude. In the above quotation we notice how our philosopher regards this critique as a tribunal, a court of appeal which shall decide the just bounds of reason according to eternal and unalterable laws. He repeats this description of the critique of pure reason toward the end of his book, in the section on the Discipline of Pure Reason in Polemics. Here he calls it

the highest tribunal for all speculative disputes; for it is not involved in these disputes, which have an immediate relation to certain objects and not to the laws of the mind, but is instituted for the purpose of determining the rights and limits of reason.¹³

In what sense is the critique of pure reason a tribunal, a court of appeal? In the sense that, like a judge, it is in a position to decide which of our speculative claims are legitimate and which are not. How does it do this? On the basis of laws that spring right from the nature of reason itself, thus making them eternal and unalterable. Which laws are these? To answer this last question Kant had to undertake what was supposedly the most difficult part of his

enterprise, which was also his contribution to the Socratic challenge, "*Know thyself!*"

The first thing to notice is that the critique of pure reason is not a criticism of books and systems.¹⁴ In other words, what is being criticized here is not any philosophy or philosopher, although inevitably no philosophy or philosopher will remain unaffected by its conclusions. The object of criticism here is pure reason itself, so that both critic and criticized are actually one and the same. Pure reason is criticizing itself, which amounts to saying that I am criticizing my own self. So, by undertaking the critique of pure reason, I am a critic not so much of others and their own judgments, but of my own self and my own claims. As Kant says, this is a critical inquiry into the faculty of reason itself, especially in regard to those of its judgments which rise above experience.

Experiential knowledge is common enough for it to constitute a real difficulty. If I want to know if it is raining today, all I have to do is get out of this room and check whether there are rains outside. What my eyes actually see belong to experience, so that I can truly say that I am now typing on a computer keyboard and there are actually black prints on the computer screen. At this very moment my senses are being bombarded by countless data, all of which are material for what philosophers call *a posteriori knowledge*.¹⁵

It is not this type of experiential knowledge which is the focus of Kant's critique. His concern has to do with our more scientific claims, the ones that are not content with the contingency and particularity of what we can experience, those which dare to formulate judgments so universal and necessary that they cannot reasonably be said to have been provided by experience. These are what philosophers call *a priori knowledge*.¹⁶ For example, when the scientist says that water seeks its own level, the intention is to make no exception at all. But such an exceptionless understanding is beyond our reach, for our experience can cover only some instances at most and never all instances, and even so what is necessary in one instance need not be so necessary also in another instance. In other words, if we rely solely on experience, we shall forever be unable to speak in a general sense. It is, however, this general sense which is the stuff of which our scientific statements are made. Let us consider a few examples.

Einstein's revolutionary equation $E = mc^2$ is not something one directly derives from one's experience, and I do not think anybody will doubt this. Kant would say that the universal and necessary quality of this equation, of this judgment, disqualifies it from being *a posteriori*. If this were a purely experiential statement, it should have been accessible to everyone even before Einstein's time. Thus, we owe it to Einstein's genius, and I would say also to his

hard and persevering work, that we have come upon a scientifically revolutionary insight that actually alters the way we, humans, view things.

In the same manner, Freud's statement that "every civilization must be built up on coercion and renunciation of instinct"¹⁷ is meant to be a scientific opinion not confined to any exceptional cases of civilization. No one, of course, could possibly so exhaust every civilization and culture as to experientially conclude the necessity of this statement. That such a statement is ever made is not coming from experience but purely from the intelligence of a human being, in this case Freud.

Einstein and Freud are two equally revolutionary thinkers who have shaped the consciousness of the contemporary man and woman. What they have accomplished is not only due to what they actually experience, but also to their genius, i.e. to that intellectual courage by which they are able to formulate in scientific terms their respective insights. This is what is meant by *a priori knowledge*.

There is, however, another aspect of knowledge which we should consider here. Even if these are only *a priori* judgments, and thus come only from human intelligence, they nevertheless expand what we already know of things. They constitute new knowledge, so to speak. They do not merely repeat what we already know, but add something new to that. In short, they augment and increase our knowledge. They help in the very process by which our knowledge grows. This is what is meant by *synthetic knowledge*.

We see, then, that our most essential scientific judgments are *synthetic a priori*. Because they are *a priori*, their source is only our reason. What this fact teaches us is to feel no inhibition at all; there is no need for man or woman to shy away from the formulation of even the most revolutionary statements, as long as these are preceded by honest and earnest toil. If such statements prove to be irresponsible and immature, the pool of human intelligence will in no time at all see through them. Indeed, we have witnessed time and again how only those judgments which authentically arise from serious and earnest work ultimately win the day. They eventually augment our storehouse of knowledge and even alter the most crucial contours of our consciousness.

Thus, the *synthetic* character of our knowledge is responsible for its dynamism. Knowledge is not static; it grows. There is, in fact, a kind of growth that so alter things drastically that they can be counted as revolutionary. Such a revolution is what Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is supposed to effect, at least in so far as metaphysics is concerned.

However, Kant's project turns out to be so fundamental that it begins to shake not only metaphysical knowledge but all other knowledge as well. To understand this, let us quote somewhat lengthily from the Introduction.

But the expression "*a priori*," is not as yet definite enough adequately to indicate the whole meaning of the question above started. For, in speaking of knowledge which has its sources in experience, we are wont to say, that this or that may be known *a priori*, because we do not derive this knowledge immediately from experience, but from a general rule, which, however, we have itself borrowed from experience. Thus, if a man undermined his house, we say, "he might know *a priori* that it would have fallen;" that is, he needed not to have waited for the experience that it did actually fall. But still, *a priori*, he could not know even this much. For, that bodies are heavy, and consequently, that they fall when their supports are taken away, must have been known to him previously, by means of experience.

By the term "*knowledge a priori*," therefore, we shall understand, not such as is independent of this or that kind of experience, but such as is absolutely so of all experience... Pure knowledge *a priori* is that with which no empirical element is mixed up. For example, "Every change has a cause," is a *proposition a priori*, but impure, because change is a conception which can only be derived from experience.¹⁸

Kant's use of technical or scientific language tends to conceal its revolutionary import. What he is trying to say is that there is a type of *a priori* knowledge which has no vestige of anything of experience in it, that is, that its source is purely and simply reason alone. In the above example of a house that we can know *a priori* to be in danger of falling, our knowledge is influenced by experience. Meaning, if we had not experienced a house which had fallen due to its dilapidated state, we would not have foreseen that this particular house, itself in a state of dilapidation, will soon fall. The kind of *a priori* knowledge that Kant is interested in has nothing in it that may have been influenced by any previous experience; thus, his interest is focused on what may be called *pure a priori knowledge*. This is the kind of knowledge which owes its birth purely from reason.

Thus, "Every change has a cause," is *a priori*, but impure, for change is a concept which we could not have guessed if it were not for experience. Because we have experienced many changes in life, both within and without us, we have the concept of change. Put

the other way, we would have no concept of change at all if we had not experienced changes in our life.

It is different with the concept of cause. As we actually experience change, we can only surmise that it has a cause. The actual cause of an event, says David Hume¹⁹, cannot be empirically verified. We experience only the happening, never the cause of that happening. We witness, in fact, a series of events, and then we connect these events by calling the earlier event cause and the latter event effect. What is it that justifies our making such connections? Hume says that we are urged in this only by custom or habit. The more often we witness the concomitant appearance of two events, the greater is our tendency to connect them as cause and effect. So, Hume arrives at the sceptical solution of custom or habit as the key to our judgment of causal connection.

By Kant's own admission, it is Hume who woke him up from his dogmatic slumber. Trained under the rationalistic and dogmatic school of Leibniz and Wolff, he must have been strongly shaken by Hume's relentless argument. However, not even the empiricist who relies solely on the authority of experience is able to single out the source of some of our concepts, notably the concept of *cause*. Granted that it is only through custom or habit that we are able to attribute a cause to a certain happening, the question remains: *Where did we ever get this concept?* If, as the empiricist claims, experience in no way discloses the causes of things, the question remains where on earth we have obtained this concept. Kant has an answer: *If the concept cause is not from experience, then it must have come from reason itself.* Thus, *cause* is a pure *a priori* concept. It is as if to say that, when God created us, he had made us in such a way as to be naturally equipped with a few concepts, of which one is *cause*. We are so constituted as to possess, by nature, a few concepts which Kant calls *categories*, as well as a couple of intuitions which Kant refers to as the pure intuitions of *Space* and *Time*.²⁰ These pure intuitions and pure concepts are what constitute the pure formal elements of knowledge; in themselves they are not knowledge yet, but the formal conditions by which we know. They are not borrowed from experience; we are naturally endowed with them, and through them we are able to determine the way or ways whereby to view the world.

Now we clearly see why we can boast of no better knowledge than of phenomena. This is what Kant means when he avers that Ontology is a proud name and that it is time for it to give way to a much humbler title, that of a mere analytic of the pure understanding.²¹ While we may presuppose that there are things-in-themselves, the *Ding an sich* or the *noumena*, these cannot otherwise be understood except under the condition of the pure forms of intuition

and the pure concepts. There is no way by which we may have access to the reality of things other than by means of the natural resources of the mind. All knowledge, even the most scientific and objective, is still only human knowledge, that is, subject to the built-in mode of our knowing faculty. To use Michael Polanyi's now famous description of knowledge, ours is only *personal knowledge*.

This is how Polanyi puts it:

...as human beings, we must inevitably see the universe from a centre lying within ourselves and speak about it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse. Any attempt rigorously to eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity.²²

Anyone who has gone this far in his knowledge of self must have realized, too, the folly of dogmatism.

Kant has this to say:

This critical science is not opposed to the *dogmatical procedure* of reason in pure cognition; for pure cognition must always be dogmatic, that is, must rest on strict demonstration from sure principles *a priori* - but to *dogmatism*, that is, to the presumption that it is possible to make any progress with a pure cognition, derived from (philosophical) conceptions, according to the principles which reason has long been in the habit of employing - without first inquiring in what way and by what right reason has come into the possession of these principles. Dogmatism is thus the dogmatic procedure of pure reason *without previous criticism of its own powers...*²³

What Kant seems to be saying is that it is unlikely for one who has earnestly gone through the critique of pure reason to fall into an attitude of dogmatism, which in reality a presumption of knowledge, inasmuch as such an one should have already realized the sources of what one claims to know. In other words, such a critical mind - such a self-critical mind - sees clearly the difference between what comes from experience and what comes from one's own reason only. In none of these cases is there any reason for boasting, since while experience can only remain on the level of the subjective and particular, reason will do well always to keep in mind that its scientific universality and necessity do not go beyond the realm of the phenomenal. Without having to mention God, Kant would like to say that only to God is the knowledge of things themselves accessible.

We, of the human constitution, will have to be content with that type of knowledge that is appropriate to our nature.²⁴

Precisely here is where we see the justification for Kant's sense of confidence and security. That he feels his conclusions to be in no danger of being obliterated is due not to arrogance but to modest self-knowledge. The danger, he says, is not that of being refuted, but of being misunderstood.²⁵ I am personally inclined to believe in the correctness of Kant's cold evaluation of his own accomplishment. The Copernican Revolution that he has effected in philosophy is not the type of revolution that bloats the ego and augments one's feeling of self-importance. His achievement is a solid cement to what sages of all ages and climes have been trying, oftentimes vainly, to tell us. He who thinks he knows does not know, and he who knows that he does not know knows.²⁶

Postmodernism

This brings us, finally, to what I feel is Kant's contribution to our own time, the Postmodern Age. The first and most obvious of Kant's gifts to us—the critique of pure reason itself. Unfortunately, the term has not caught fire, except among the experts, for it does sound a little too technical and abstract for the popular consciousness. Instead, what comes close to this term is *critical mindedness*. This has, in fact, been one of the more explicit goals of most departments of philosophy, that students should be taught how to be *critical*.

However, it is not rarely that our effort at critical thinking falls rather short of our highest standards. In the first place, there is a tendency to be selectively critical, that is, critical only of those ideas which are not like ours. We seem inclined to listen only to those we'd like to hear. So much so that, if I am Thomist, I tend to measure what is true in other philosophies in terms of what accords with the principles established by Thomism. Or, if I am Marxist, I do not allow for truths which contradict Marxism. Or, if I am a Kantian, I summarily reject those which fail to satisfy the Kantian requirements.

I would say that Kant's critique of pure reason makes no exception of anything. In this regard it belongs to the rank of those who try to extend the critical procedure to the widest possible scope. Nothing is sacrosanct to such a procedure, which brings to mind the likes of Descartes, Bacon, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Derrida. Even the Oriental concept of *neti, neti* belongs to this tradition. I dare say that this is the essential first requirement of the Postmodern consciousness, that it is able to so question all its knowledge and assumptions that it is no longer attached to anyone of them.

When R. Buckminster Fuller opines that the Dark Ages still reign over humanity,²⁷ what he actually seems to be doing is agonize over the inability of humans to break away from established molds, such as the solids of science as well as ordinary experience. Until now, for example, we continue to refer to the sun as rising in the East even as we reckon with the very relativity of the term "East." How do we live in a world where there are no solids, ruled as it is by such paradigms as quanta, quarks, and other eternally mobile and measureless entities?

Fritjof Capra speaks of the bootstrap philosophy which

represents the culmination of a view of nature that arose in quantum theory with the realization of an essential and universal interrelationship, acquired its dynamic content in relativity theory, and was formulated in terms of reaction probabilities in S-matrix theory.²⁸

This philosophy, Capra says, constitutes the final rejection of the mechanistic world view in modern physics.

...the world cannot be understood as an assemblage of entities which cannot be analyzed further. In the new world-view, the universe is seen as a dynamic web of interrelated events. None of the properties of any part of this web is fundamental; they all follow from the properties of the other parts, and the overall consistency of their mutual interrelations determines the structure of the entire web... The bootstrap hypothesis not only denies the existence of fundamental constituents of matter, but accepts no fundamental constituents whatsoever - no fundamental laws, equations, or principles - and thus abandons another idea which has been an essential part of natural science for hundreds of years.²⁹

This fundamental idea is that of God, a concept dear to all of us. But since it is dear to us all, we are readily conditioned to react adversely to anything that has the least tendency to shake it. It might be well to refer to another giant of the contemporary times, Sigmund Freud, who will perhaps shock us with his suggestion that **"civilization runs a greater risk if we maintain our present attitude to religion than if we give it up."**³⁰ It would be undoubted advantage, he says, if we were to leave God out altogether and honestly admit the purely human origin of all the regulations and precepts of civilization.³¹ In doing so, we shall not be in danger of losing our faith at the instance that some cherished opinions and beliefs of ours start to be challenged. Our speculative mistakes, in whatever field of

learning, will be unable to eradicate our feeling of affection for the God beyond our reach, but only on condition that we are able to appreciate the subjective basis of every human knowledge. That subjective basis is fundamentally null; it is not anything definite and is thus the ground of any attempt to define. It goes to show that every such definition is liable to critique, sooner or later, and nothing of it is really solid and eternal.

Once this is understood, we will not find it difficult to see why, in philosophy as in most other areas of the mind, *deconstruction* is a thing to reckon with in our days. We may only remind ourselves of Paul Ricoeur who speaks of the hermeneutics of suspicion, ushered in by such giants of the intellect as Hegel, Freud and Nietzsche.³² Then, we cannot help but remember Jacques Derrida's sweeping methodical gesture which calls for what might constitute the most nihilistic procedure in post-Heideggerian metaphysics, that which goes by name *deconstructionism*.³³ For his part, Krishnamurti tirelessly asks that we doubt everything,³⁴ making us recall Descartes whom we all venerate as the Father of Modern Philosophy.

Thus, it is no accident that at the threshold of the Postmodern Age we are reminded of him who initiated formally the Modern Age. In a previous paper, I suggested that Nietzsche shall become the prophet of Postmodernism in the same way that Descartes prophetically initiated Modernism. There is, however, a difference. Whereas Descartes settles with the residue of the *cogito*, the new philosophers are settling with nothing. Not even the *cogito* is now being presupposed. What is happening seems to be that all presuppositions are being done away with in a way which leaves nothing behind. This is perhaps why Buddhism, with its nirvana, is gaining a lot of ground again. David Hume's bundle of impressions is, after all, not a figment of our imagination; it inevitably allows itself to explode into nothingness.

I admit that this first premise of Postmodernism is not yet fully appreciated in the Philippines today. We have yet so many fears born of our clinging to many assumptions handed down to us from the past. There is still a great deal of resistance to the challenge of pulverizing all that we hold on to. The various forms of our selective detachment cannot yet let go of many of our cherished beliefs.

This, I suspect, is why so many of the postmodernists appear to be singling out religion as a favorite target. Our attachment to our religious beliefs makes it difficult for us to appreciate the emergence of a higher type of Christianity on the basis of what is groundless and nothing. Slowly, however, knowledge has a way of diffusing itself. Freud suggests that the greater the number of men to whom the treasures of knowledge become accessible, the more widespread is the falling away from religious beliefs.³⁵ We are afraid that if we let go

of our beliefs, then we let go, too, of our religion and we cease to be Christians. Is it possible that, precisely by freeing ourselves from all these beliefs, then we allow a more perfect Christianity to unfold itself and, in its trail, transform our beliefs into even more enriching pointers to the Kingdom? This is hard to tell, and history is all that can ultimately decide matters. I, myself, will no longer be there on the day when the many critical knots of our times shall have been resolved. Indeed, you and I can only hope for the success of our contemporary prophets who continue to see beyond the narrow confines of our present vision.

I would like to add that this radical critical-mindedness is a product, not of a lack of study and experience, but of maturity of judgment. It is a mistake, for example, to think of deconstructionism as a careless and mindless rejection of all structures and systems; that would be lacking in integrity. I think that a deconstructivist consciousness is honed after years and years of serious effort at gaining mastery of a certain discipline. He who knows a subject really well will see to the bottom of things; that, after all, at the bottom of things nothing anymore counts, nothing at all.

When one has attained this speculative rock bottom, one seems to have arrived at what Nicolas of Cusa calls *docta ignorantia*, *learned ignorance*. Only he who knows thoroughly understands his own profound ignorance. The rest of us will be content with our little learning which, according to the poet, is a dangerous thing. It is when we know a little that we hesitate to give it up, that we are in danger of being so wrapped up in it that we turn it into a gospel truth. Here, again, Krishnamurti's advice is well taken, for he suggests that we should dare to pursue an idea to the very end, like stretching a thread to its breaking point, at that point where we see how futile it is to hold on to it any longer.

Then, when we have arrived at that point, what is marvelous happens. We attain certitude, the certitude of which Kant and Husserl, as well as Plato and the Vedantist, speak about. It is a certitude of the widest latitude, as shown by the barely studied second part of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Taken up by the immensity of his task in the first part of his book, our philosopher could only spare relatively few pages to the Method of Transcendentalism. Still, we can see the new philosophy that is supposed to grow out of his critical philosophy. Such a philosophy will include a Discipline, a Canon, a History and an Architectonic. The discipline is synonymous to the critique of pure reason itself, a most difficult project which, if hurdled successfully, will ease the way for the rest of the work. It makes clear to us the extent of what we can know, on the basis of which we are able to appreciate the more practical side of things. This practical aspect of transcendentalism is what the canon

is all about. What this seems to suggest is that the critique of pure reason has a value that goes beyond the merely speculative. Even the way we shall conduct our life is borne essentially by our deep appreciation of that knowledge of self which is what the critique of pure reason is really all about. Life is not the same again after reason has reached the certitude that follows the critique.

Again, we see that Kant is not averse to history. On the contrary, he considers it essential that we studiously consider all sides of a question before formulating its architectonic. The emerging theoretical constructs are no longer the result of an inveterate clinging to a favored system. Whoever has a deep understanding and appreciation of the many byways of history will not have the mind to reject the countless possibilities that it struggles to show us. What results from a profound historical understanding is an appreciation of the great tributaries of the mind, none of which can be dismissed outright. Such a historical consciousness will challenge us to know philosophy vastly and deeply. This new consciousness, the postmodern consciousness, is no longer caught up in the web of any one ideology or system. Rather, it is able to relate to what lies at the very bottom of all thought and experience, that abyss which constitutes what might be called the nihilistic or critical basis of certitude.

To a Filipino, this should be good news. It means that he is now at liberty to draw up his own architectonic, based on all he knows while deeply aware of the scope of what he does not know. We should not be pulled down by any idea or system, even if that proves to be most congenial to us, for that idea or system remains as confining as any of Bacon's idols. This implies that we have a lot to do. We have to study long and hard. We should not allow ourselves to be cooped up within any favored theory. We should understand that there is no short-cut to a philosophy which we can proudly call our own. Our own philosophy, if it is to be authentically an expression of the deepest and greatest aspect of our spirit, shall grow from many inspirations. It will be Catholic enough to be truly Christian, and Christian enough to be truly Catholic.

There is no need to fear. There is some truth in Fredric Jameson's assertion that

today, in full postmodernism, the older language of the "work" - the work of art, the masterwork - has everywhere been displaced by the rather different language of the "text," of text and textuality - a language from which the achievement of organic or monumental form is strategically excluded.³⁶

There are, indeed, no more masterpieces, for the tricks of the masters have already been largely uncovered. You and I can now emulate the way of the experts and we no longer need simply to step on the shoulders of the Western giants, but only on condition that we do not shirk from the responsibility of digging up the sources as mightily as we can, giving way to neither sloth nor lethargy, and ceaselessly listening to all quarters without fear or bias. Only in this way, I presume, shall we be able to find entry into this marvelous world that is dawning before us, what for lack of more exact terms we refer to simply as the Postmodern World.

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NOTES

- 1 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*; (New York: The Free Press Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), p. 14.
- 2 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Henceforth referred to as KRV. The English translation is J.M.D. Meiklejohn's, but the page reference is to the German original.
- 3 KRV, BXIII-XIV.
- 4 "*In den Satzen selbts und ihren Beweisgrunden, imgleichen der Form sowohl als der Vollständigkeit des Plans, habe ich nichts zu andern gefunden...*" KRV, BXXXVII.
- 5 KRV, BXI-XII.
- 6 KRV, BXII-XIII.
- 7 Lonergan, *Insight*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 3.
- 8 KRV, B1.
- 9 This is what is meant by the famous enigmatic statement of Kant in the beginning of the Introduction: "Although all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it arises from experience." (KRV, B1) Knowledge whose source is experience is *a posteriori* knowledge, while knowledge whose source is reason itself is called *a priori* knowledge.
- 10 KRV, B10 & ff.
- 11 Kant and Postmodernism. KRV, AXI.
- 12 To Plato, Socrates is the wisest of men inasmuch as he alone knows that he does not know. See *Apology*, 23b.
- 13 KRV, A751=B779.
- 14 KRV, AXII.
- 15 "*...was lediglich von der Erfahrung erborgt ist, wie man sich ausdrückt, nur a posteriori, oder empirisch erkannt wird.*" (KRV, A2=B2).
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, tr. by James Strachey, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1961), p. 7.
- 18 KRV, B2.
- 19 See Hume's *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, especially Section V.
- 20 What Kant has to say about Space and Time is found in the first part of his *Elements of Transcendentalism*, called *Transcendental Aesthetic*, and what he has to say about the Categories is found in the second part, especially in the *Transcendental Analytic of Concepts*.
- 21 KRV, A247.

22 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 3. He adds: "We shall find Personal Knowledge manifested in the appreciation of probability and of order in the exact sciences, and see it at work even more extensively in the way the descriptive sciences rely on skills and connoisseurship. At all these points the act of knowing includes an appraisal; and this personal co-efficient, which shapes all factual knowledge, bridges in doing so the disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity. It implies the claim that man can transcend his own subjectivity by striving passionately to fulfill his personal obligations to universal standards. (p. 17)

23 KRV, B35.

24 Kant says: "The conception of a *noumenon*, that is, of a thing which must be cogitated not as an object of sense, but as a thing in itself (solely through the pure understanding), is not self-contradictory, for we are not entitled to maintain that sensibility is the only possible mode of intuition. Nay, further, this conception is necessary to restrain sensuous intuition within the bounds of phenomena, and thus to limit the objective validity of sensuous cognition; for things in themselves, which lie beyond its province, are called *noumena* for the very purpose of indicating that this cognition does not extend its application to all that the understanding thinks." (KRV, A254=B310).

25 KRV, BXLIII.

26 Besides Socrates, others who readily come to mind are Lao Tzu, Nicolas Cusanus, and J. Krishnamurti, to name only three.

27 Fuller, *Cosmography*, (New York: Masvmillsn Publishing Company, 1992), p. 1 and *passim*.

28 Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), p. 276.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Freud, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

32 The term *hermeneutics of suspicion* is found in Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. by Denis Savage, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970).

33 "The prerogative of being cannot withstand the deconstruction of the word. To be is the first or the last word to withstand the deconstruction of a language of words." (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. by David B. Allison and Newton Garver, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 74).

- 34 J. Krishnamurti, *You are the World*, (New York: Harper & Row Perennial Library, 1973), p. 40 and *passim*.
- 35 Freud, *op.cit.*, p.38.
- 36 Jameson, "Surrealism Without the Unconscious," in Peter d' Agostino and Davic Tafler, *Transmission: Toward a Post-Television Culture*, (London: SAGE Publications, Inc. 1995), p. 32.