

A Dialectical Discussion of the Two Possible Human Worlds

In reflecting on the readings assigned in the course, the idea that human beings are the source as well as the product of society, the collective consciousness, is perpetuated early through the writings of Immanuel Kant. His theoretical explanations of *a priori* perceptions in contradistinction to *a posteriori* perceptions has opened the door for theorists to follow in his wake and continue exploring this dichotomous characteristic of human perception. Therefore, a brief discussion of his unprecedented philosophy will better establish the context for his purporting that there are two possible human worlds and, subsequently, allow me to relate this to the compelling alternatives suggested by two particular theorists. The formulated notion of “pure” reason alludes to the intuitive (*a priori*) information, via preexistent mental hardwiring, that human beings already possess before observing or experiencing the inescapable influence of the external world. However, all the information that an individual starts receiving from the very moment they begin interacting with the outside world (*a posteriori*) is no longer pure because it has been amassed through the disparate sense perceptions that individuals develop according to their own observations and experiences. This fundamental difference between these two categorical perceptions is manifested in Kant’s supposition that the two possible human worlds are: either organized by unfolding pure reason and the quest for enlightenment, or there is only a “dismal reign of chance.” In other words, a belief in *a priori* precepts provides the necessary parameters to embark on a journey to elucidate innate sense perceptions that are unintelligible due to the coalescent impressions of the experienced world, while a consideration of *a posteriori* precepts emphasizes a dependence on luck and coincidence to advance universal understanding of the individual as a social being. In the essay titled “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” Kant states:

A high degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people’s *intellectual* freedom, yet it also sets up insuperable barriers to it. Conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom gives intellectual freedom enough room to expand to its fullest extent. Thus once the germ on which nature has lavished most care — man’s inclination and vocation to *think freely* — has developed within this hard shell, it gradually reacts upon the mentality of the people, who thus gradually become increasingly able to *act freely*. (59)

This discussion of freedom directly relates to the quest for “enlightenment” because he says: “*Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another*” (54). Therefore, one’s true freedom is contingent on their understanding that enlightenment is only possible once they decipher the meaning of being able to *think* and, then, *act* freely within society. However, in the appendix from “The Critique of Pure Reason”, he communicates: “A constitution allowing the *greatest possible human freedom* in accordance with laws which ensure *that the freedom of each can co-exist with the freedom of all the others [...]*, is at all events a necessary idea which must be made the basis not only of the first outline of a political constitution but of all laws as well” (191). The relationship described between “constitution” and “human freedom,” in association with natural as well artificial laws, reveals the ambiguity around the source from which sense perceptions originate in an individual. Thus, the “dismal reign of chance” that Kant declares as the other possible human world is plausible because without endeavoring to unfold pure reason there exists only the freedom to reason based on convenient circumstances.

This leads to the first theorist that I think suggests a compelling alternative to Kant's theory. In *the Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the study of totemism as 'the simplest and most primitive religion that is known at present' (1) by Emile Durkheim, through observing individualistic and collective behaviors of indigenous tribes, is significant because he gains confirmation that: "...man is double. In him are two beings: an individual being that has its basis in the body and whose sphere of action is strictly limited by this fact, and a social being that represents within us the highest reality in the intellectual and moral realm that is knowable through observation: I mean society" (15-16). It seems as though he is speaking directly to Kant, as the "apriorist," as well as empiricists as he establishes this idea, which implies his view of the two possible human worlds. He clarifies that his hypothesis keeps the principles of "apriorism" intact, while considering empiricism irrational, but then points out where it falls short. According to Durkheim: "The apriorists are rationalists; they believe that the world has a logical aspect that reason eminently expresses. To do this, however, they have to ascribe to the intellect a certain power to transcend experience and add to what is immediately given. But for this singular power, they offer neither explanation nor warrant" (14). It is here that he begins to explain the single, most critical idea that apriorists are overlooking: the source from which the power to instinctively reason comes. Thus, he emphasizes: "Merely to say it is inherent in the nature of human intellect is not to explain that power. It would still be necessary to see where we acquire this astounding prerogative and how we are able to see relationships in things that mere spectating cannot reveal to us. To confine oneself to saying that experience itself is possible only on that condition is to shift the problem, perhaps, but not to solve it" (14). Then, he tactfully offers an intellectual approach to deriving a solution to this problem:

The point is to know how it happens that experience is not enough, but presupposes conditions that are external and prior to experience, and how it happens that these conditions are met at the same time and in the manner needed. To answer these questions, it has sometimes been imagined that, beyond the reason of individuals, there is a superior and perfect reason from which that of individuals emanated and, by sort of mystic participation, presumably acquired its marvelous faculty: That superior and perfect reason is divine reason. (14)

He very logically and eloquently articulates his reasoning in order to make the argument that apriorists, like Kant, are forgetting that in order for human beings to possess the faculty of immanent reason it must be acquired from some higher power. Consequently, in expressing his issue with the doctrines of apriorism, he also advocates for the work that he has done with indigenous peoples. Thus, he affirms that totemism is: "...the subject of [my] research because it seems better suited than any other to help us comprehend the religious nature of man, that is, to reveal a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity" (1). Durkheim augments apriorist ideology in order to arrive at the theory of man as a binary being when he construes:

Collective representations are the product of an immense cooperation that extends not only through space but also through time; to make them, a multitude of different minds have associated, intermixed, and combined their ideas and feelings; long generations have accumulated their experience and knowledge. A very special intellectuality that is infinitely richer and more complex than that of the individual is distilled in them. That being the case, we understand how reason has gained the power to go beyond the range of empirical cognition. (15)

Furthermore, the significance of his work lies in his observation of primitive religious life because it seeks to develop a better understanding of how human beings are able to function as individual beings and social beings.

The second theorist who suggests a compelling alternative is Sigmund Freud through his theoretical frameworks of consciousness and unconsciousness. In *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, the first assertion made by psychoanalysis, he says, is: "...that mental processes are in themselves unconscious and that of all mental life it is only certain individual acts and portions that are conscious" (25). Immediately, the idea conveyed is unconsciousness and consciousness are two different worlds existing within the mind of human beings constructed using latent and manifest impressions of the external world. Freud confirms this when he explains that a bifurcation of the instinctual being transpires because individuals find themselves at the mercy of the constitutional laws of civilization, or the social world. He declares:

We believe that civilization has been created under the pressure of the exigencies of life at the cost of satisfaction of the instincts; and we believe that civilization is to a large extent being constantly created anew, since each individual who makes a fresh entry into human society repeats this sacrifice of instinctual satisfaction for the benefit of the whole community. (27)

It is his honest belief that human beings are sexually instinctual and, thus, the inability to completely subdue these instincts creates a divergent reality, which is unconscious and abstrusely represented in, for example, dreams and 'parapraxes'. Freud further characterizes this process of "sublimation" as being 'diverted from their sexual aims and directed to others that are socially higher and no longer sexual' (27). Therefore, his two possible human worlds are defined as: one in which the sexual instincts are successfully sublimated to allow individuals to live viably under the pressures of society, and the other in which these instincts are not efficiently sublimated so individuals crumble under the strict canons of society and become either sexually deviant outcasts or neurotics.

Furthermore, I chose Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud as the two theorists that foster unique theories for the two possible human worlds because they, respectively, use the dominance of society's collective representations and consciousness to argue that human beings are both its source and its product. This intimate relationship creates a duality between the sense perceptions that Kant asserts individuals gather *a priori* and *a posteriori* and, in turn, reveals a common ideology among all three theorists. Therefore, in relating the social theories of Durkheim and Freud back to that of Kant's, it has been further demonstrated that perceptions of the human world are and will always be dialectical. Needless to say, social thought and theory will continue to present fresh perspectives on how the progress of civilization and its social contents is interrelated with previous eras, the current generation, and future ages. It is my personal goal to present my own perspective and hopefully help to close the gap between what is known and what is yet to be known.

Bibliography

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