

#### Topic 4

“We have to entertain the possibility that there is no reason for something existing; or that the split between subject and object is only our name for something equally accidental we call knowledge; or, an even more difficult thought, that while there may be some order to the self and the cosmos, to the microcosm and macrocosm, it is an order that is absolutely indifferent to our existence.” Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy* vol. 1, 2011, p. 18.

#### The Challenges of Modernity

In the extract provided above, Eugene Tacker argues for two distinct theses: He first states that 1) the order of the world is independent of our faculties and the distinction between the subject and the object, from which foundation Kant constructed his pure philosophy to find secure grounds for the sciences of his day, can only lead to contingent knowledge. Hence he seems to argue that the central thrust of the transcendental deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding, which was to demonstrate the applicability of the pure concepts of the understanding to phenomena and thereby counter David Hume’s sceptical challenge regarding the possibility of necessary knowledge in the domain of natural sciences, has somehow failed or been supplanted, and we no longer can have necessary knowledge arising from such a distinction. 2) Secondly he seems to argue that the mechanistic view of the world that arose after the Enlightenment and the concomitant retreat of values from reality has led to a situation that one might call “absurd” following Camus, who argued that in the face of a callous, mechanistic world, we are forever condemned to search for meaning where there is none to be found. Here, I will evaluate both of these assertions and will find both to be true. In the first section, I intend to discuss the extent to which human faculties shape and constrain “reality” and thereby render it knowable. I will discuss how general logic still shapes reality, the extent to which it would be reasonable to persist with the phenomenal-noumenal distinction and some tenets of the transcendental aesthetic, the necessity of a new metaphysics and a new transcendental deduction in the face of the change in natural sciences, whereby the natural sciences are now to a large extent supra-phenomenal, i.e. they have gone beyond phenomena. Thereafter I will remark on the effects of this apparent transformation and how a Humean view of the categories (Kant’s categories) has opened the way for contingency in the natural sciences. The second section will be concerned with the possibility of external values and will mainly center around a refutation of moral realism, an all-too favourable doctrine in analytic philosophy though to the best of my knowledge it has failed to gain adherents outside of this tradition. Moral realism will be refuted together with valuational realism, by using Hume, Kant and Nietzsche’s arguments, as well as an argument of my own.

## Section I: Mind and Reality

The root of the problem of order and its independence from human faculties, to the extent that it is independent, lies in the final years of the Enlightenment, when David Hume ascertained that the categories of the understanding are not empirical concepts. The most influential of his discoveries was his discovery that the concept of causality is a priori and pure, that is, that causality has no empirical content, i.e. causality cannot be observed. He made similar demonstrations regarding other pure concepts of the understanding, such as unity, oneness, difference etc. but his central contribution remained the same: He discovered that some concepts are pure and a priori. Thereafter one of the central problems of the Enlightenment and today's sciences became manifest to everyone: How are concepts that a priori in nature applicable to phenomena, in such a way that these necessary concepts likewise impart their necessity on phenomena and are not merely contingently applied to them, by force of habit, as David Hume put it? If indeed they are not applied by force of habit, but indeed shape reality, influence it, are necessary for our very perception of the world, then it would appear that our knowledge that is derived from these pure concepts can be solely a priori and therefore necessary. If not, then the possibility for necessary knowledge also seems to disappear. This question is the question that is raised by the author of the text above in relation to reality, and his answer appears to be that the categories cannot be applied to things but rather are only applied by force of habit. However, there is another aspect in which the subject conditions and shapes the world and which makes possible the creation of knowledge, the concept of logical necessity. Hence I will first turn to the concept of logical necessity before I evaluate the transcendental aesthetic and the transcendental deduction. (Obviously necessity, possibility and actuality are also pure concepts of the understanding, but I do not see a problem regarding the application of the concept of possibility and actuality to concrete phenomena; hence I side-step its deduction.) By evaluating the transcendental deduction and looking at the ways possibility and actuality condition existence, I will be able to offer a view as to how the interaction of the subject with the world produces necessary knowledge, and where our present metaphysics falls short of this aim, thereby evaluating the first claim of the author.

There is a very trivial sense in which mind structures reality, and it is that all of reality is possible, that is, conceivable. All of reality is within the realm of logical possibility, as actuality as a concept or actual existence requires possible existence. Hence all of reality is conditioned by the concept of possibility. An apple cannot be red and not red at the same time. Therefore we have to recognize that the a priori concept of possibility shapes reality and renders it knowable to some extent before we proceed with the rest of the essay. Reality is not completely independent of the subject.

Now that we have talked about logical possibility and actuality, we can come to an appraisal of the transcendental aesthetic, not as regards time and space, but as regards the duality of existence, its division into phenomena and noumena. This is necessary for our purposes

because it will ground the discussion that is to come, the one regarding the transcendental deduction. Here I will have one trivial and one critical objection to the transcendental aesthetic, which divides existence to things-in-themselves and things as they appear to us, noumena and phenomena. The trivial objection to this division is that Kant has not absolutely demonstrated the necessity of conceiving of the world in this way. Kant seems to think that demonstrating the non applicability of the pure concepts of the understanding to that which is beyond experience in the transcendental dialectic through deriving a contradiction from their use in the “noumenal” realm suffices to establish this difference. He is mistaken in this, or rather he omits to answer a question, for thereby he proves that something exists beyond experience that can be thought, but he does not prove that this is the only necessary way of conceiving of reality. He shows us how, granted that we accept the transcendental deduction, noumena also have to be at least thinkable; but he does not tell us why this is the only way in which we can conceive of the act of perception. This does not mean his theory is wrong or faulty, just that it does not demonstrate its own necessity. The more significant objection to the bipartite division of reality in the transcendental aesthetic is that modern science has gone beyond it: Today, the objects of physics are not exclusively phenomenal but supra-phenomenal; they are observed only indirectly; they do not appear to us but they stand as a possible explanation of the existence of phenomena themselves. To explain this point, modern physics does not deal with my table and the sensation I feel when I touch the table; modern physics rather deals with the atoms and electrons of the table and my hand, which cannot “appear” to us but the existence of which is only indirectly inferred from phenomena. It deals not with color or light but with photons and light-waves. It deals not with any particular phenomenal quality of an object but rather its “mass” and “energy”, both of which do not directly appear to us, but are only measured in relation to that which is phenomenal, i.e. how far a spring is compressed or stretched when the object is connected to it etc. Many ways of measuring and understanding these new entities may be offered, but the simple point remains: Objects of modern physics, as opposed to Newtonian physics, are supra-phenomenal; they are not phenomenal but they are not noumenal either for the pure concepts of the understanding are frequently applied to them, with no contradiction so far.

Regardless of these objections, I do not believe we ought to conceive of the world some other way. These new supra-phenomenal objects need to be included in a new ontology, yet the fundamental insight of Hume, which Kant also took up, which is that the faculty of sensibility has only an undifferentiated manifold as its object (in the sense that it is that which concerns it) and this Mannigfaltigkeit needs to be subjected to the concepts of the understanding in order for it to become an object of the understanding, i.e. stand as a comprehensible object, is still the only ontology of appearances that is justifiable within bounds of epistemology, because such an ontology is mindful of the bounds of the faculty of sensibility. Such an ontology is cognizant of the fact that the faculty of sensibility does not receive anything other than sense-data and that the source of the concepts of unity, oneness, difference, as well as other pure concepts of the understanding, cannot be empirical. That human reason strives after things which cannot be understood as phenomena, which stand beyond the concepts of

the understanding is also plain; things like God and soul do not belong to the realm of the phenomena. As Kant points out, this does not mean they exist, but they are thinkable.

Regardless, the problem of the transcendental deduction lies in the fact that the transcendental aesthetic is also obsolete. I do not claim here that I will offer a critique of the transcendental deduction by directly engaging with its intricate arguments, firstly because the constraints of the medium do not permit it (time constraints), secondly because the transcendental deduction has become somewhat obsolete. The original motivation of Kant in proposing the transcendental deduction was to offer a secure basis for the new science of physics, which was still phenomenal in its character in the Newtonian paradigm. Today's physics concerns itself with the connection between supra-phenomena and phenomena, and often the categories are applied to these objects as well as the phenomena. Therefore there is now a need for a new metaphysics to ground the achievements of science since the time of Newton, a new transcendental deduction that will demonstrate the applicability of the pure concepts of the understanding to the sciences. It must not be thought that this problem is endemic to physics; insofar as the sciences of chemistry and biology are reducible to physics and operate on fundamental physical principles, the problem is generalizable to other natural sciences, even though it must be admitted that the science of biology is afflicted the least with this problem, as the newest of these three sciences and the one farthest from physics.

In the absence of a transcendental deduction for these supra-phenomenal things, a Humean scepticism reigns in these sciences, and there is widespread consensus that scientific theories are overdetermined: that is, that they explain the world but are themselves contingent, in the sense that the propositions that make them up are contingent, and obviously the existence of scientific objects is also contingent. Therefore there are other theories that can explain the world, possibly without even the same supra-phenomenal objects. Here the author's point regarding the contingency of knowledge which is produced from the interaction of the pure concepts of the understanding of the subject with "objects" is particularly apt; this is precisely the situation that we find ourselves in today as a result of the development of the sciences. The previous domain of transcendental investigation has become contingent and empirical.

To conclude the first section, the interaction of the subject with reality can lead us to have some knowledge regarding reality, mostly with the application of the pure concepts of possibility and actuality. However, the progress of the sciences beyond where they stood during the Enlightenment has caused a problem, mainly the problem that it is required now that we demonstrate that the pure concepts of the understanding apply not only to phenomena but also to new supra-phenomenal things science has conjured up. Whether such a deduction is possible or whether the transcendental deduction succeeds even for phenomena is not the subject of this essay. However, it can be said that in the absence of such a deduction Humean scepticism reigns supreme in all natural sciences.

## Section II- On Value after the Enlightenment

The author of the statement above also seems to argue that the order of the universe is “indifferent to our existence”. This is reminiscent of a claim by Albert Camus, who argued that humanity is doomed to search for meaning in a cold, uncaring world, where none is to be found. Here I will evaluate this claim. What I understand by “meaning” in this context is value. Therefore our question is: Are there values independent of the human subject? Are values to be sought after in reality.

That values cannot be thought independent of the human subject is the natural conclusion of the project of the Enlightenment, particularly in the hands of David Hume and Immanuel Kant. David Hume satisfactorily demonstrated that the source of moral or valuational knowledge cannot be a posteriori- We do not perceive the immorality or morality, value or disvalue of actions or persons. We do not have experiential access to value, so that even if there is “value” independently of experience, it could not be called “value”, because value necessarily denotes something that is accessible by human faculties. Kant adduced another problem to this, mainly that even if values were external to us and we could somehow perceive them, they would not explain why we are motivated to act according to those values. Hence any realist account of values would fail to explain human motivation. (Kant made this argument in relation to morality, just as Hume did the same, but the argument can be modified to fit values more broadly, instead of just moral values, or some abstract property of immorality and morality, however conceived.) As Nietzsche would put it, the commitment of Christianity to truth undermined the very value that Christianity gave to truth and other high values. “The highest values devalue themselves” or rather they have devalued themselves. I think these two arguments are devastating for anyone who is a realist as regards values, yet recently moral realism and concomitantly the possibility of a realist understanding of moral values or values became possible within analytic philosophy; hence it is necessary now to refute this position again, with new arguments.

The moral realists, those who say that there are moral facts by virtue of which things are right or wrong, do not exactly claim that there are moral values that are embedded in the world: This is just an accidental feature of such an account and is not necessary to it; one might as well claim that there are moral properties. Yet I will regardless refute the possibility of such an account, for morality is bound up inextricably with values, and it would seem that if a satisfactory realist account of morality were to be offered, it would be offered in such a way that those who advance this doctrine are cognizant of this fact. To clarify, I will refute the possibility of the existence of values independent of the existence of a volitional subject, a subject with will, at least a human volitional subject or any subject that perceives the world as we do, in a way that is explainable by the transcendental aesthetic. The gist of the argument is that each intuition or sensation in the manifold can, in theory, stand on its own, i.e. to use an old philosophical term from Aristotle, it is an object; it does not necessarily depend on the

existence of something else. Only here in terms of necessity, I mean nothing other than logical necessity, or logical possibility, the possibility and necessity that arise from the application of these pure concepts to phenomena. It is at least conceivable that a blotch of red exists independent of anything else, which makes understandable the act of synthesis in the first place: That which is separate is brought together to form an object. This is true for all input from sensibility. Values, however, are not like this. They necessarily subsist in states-of-affairs, states or objects. Therefore it is very quaint to argue that values can somehow be perceived, as that would make values a very quaint class of intuitions. (This conclusion is not a priori but rather depends on induction.)

Another argument against the reality of values is of course the variability of values and moral values in space and time, and perhaps the arguments that we might provide to explain the historical development of value systems, such as Nietzsche's pungent critique of Christianity and the historical development of Christian values. If the source of values is better explained by reference to the human mind, then moral realism or valuational realism will be weakened. Modern moral realists try to come up with ways in which the people who have had radically different moral values may be deceived as regards reality due to a myriad of influences, but it has to be recognized that the more reasons for why a people or a person in the past has been deceived are found, the more complicated the theory of moral realism or valuational realism, as the general form of some form of moral realism, becomes.

Hence the author's assertion that we live in a world that is indifferent to our values is true. The world does not have values embedded in it, but rather humans impose those values on it. Therefore Camus is also correct: Each of us is alone in this meaningless world in the quest to impose some meaning on it.

### General Conclusion

In conclusion, there are two problems that the Enlightenment and developments after it have caused which the author of the citation above mentions. The first is that the development of modern natural sciences has made the transcendental deduction obsolete and have thrown the sciences into the hands of Humean scepticism, which might be impossible to surmount. I have given reasons as to why this scepticism arises and explained that it is precisely because modern science concerns itself not with phenomena exclusively but also with supra-phenomenal objects, which are not anywhere represented in the transcendental aesthetic or the transcendental deduction. Therefore the author is right in his assertion that knowledge that comes from the interaction of the subject with reality has become contingent in nature, except insofar as such knowledge is concerned with the application of the pure concepts of possibility and actuality, where sure knowledge remains possible. The second problem is that we now find ourselves thrown in a world where there is no value independent of us. That is because even if there were such values, they would be inaccessible to us and hence not values properly understood and they would not be sufficient to explain human

motivation. Moreover, values would be quite quaint things if they were the only objects of sensibility that cannot logically exist on their own. There is also Nietzsche's genealogical argument regarding the origin of specifically Christian values. Such genealogical arguments can be surmounted by adherents of valuational realism by explaining why some people failed to correctly perceive and identify values, yet this, in some circumstances, needlessly complicates the theory and makes the theory less preferable each time a new reason has to be invented for people to have wrongfully perceived some values.