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## Introduction

To introduce the central theme of this book, I propose to offer a very brief sketch of two conceptions of descriptive metaphysics (to borrow the very useful phrase of Professor P. F. Strawson). These conceptions are those of Aristotle and Kant, and with them we shall in different ways be occupied throughout the whole work; this though much more explicit attention will be paid to Kant's ideas than Aristotle's. Yet the latter will continually make their influence felt throughout the argument. For very different though their concerns and methods were, Aristotle and Kant can be bracketed together as practitioners of descriptive metaphysics in that while both of them have very definite *Weltanschauungen*, they both carried out systematic enquiries aimed at laying bare the most fundamental and pervasive features of the world around us, the manner in which those features are interrelated and the identity and nature of those concepts revealed by analysis to be involved in all descriptive and referential discourse. Inevitably there must be oversimplification and specialists either in Kantian or in Aristotelian studies will no doubt find much in this outline to outrage their scholarly sensibilities; but it may be that the outlines offered will enable the experts to return again to the field of their special knowledge and see things which neither I, nor they, had noticed before.

It would be maintained, almost without question, that Kant, in the first half of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, was both trying to give as satisfactory an account as he could of our ultimate conceptual scheme, and at the same time, and as part of the same enquiry, to give an inventory of the fundamental *structural* features of the world in which we find ourselves. Moreover, he was concerned to show, where the structural features of our world were concerned, that these features, and these features only, *must* be exemplified in any objective world with which we might suppose ourselves concerned.

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### *Kant's descriptive metaphysics*

1. Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is determined to reveal (as he believes completely and exhaustively) the ways in which conceptual thinking is diversified. Such thinking he regards as fundamentally an activity of recognition, in which we identify particulars as being of certain sorts (e.g. a given animal as a tabby-cat) or certain relatively restricted sorts, as belonging to more general sorts (e.g. anything with the properties of a tabby-cat as belonging to the feline species). He may indeed be claimed as anticipating to some extent the treatment of concepts as recognitional capacities by modern philosophers. This we may illustrate by a quite sophisticated legal example. If one asks a man whether he has a clear concept of 'contempt of court', we are asking him whether he can recognise the presence of 'contempt' in certain kinds of public discussion of matters *sub judice* as well as in the behaviour of a witness who arrives in court to give evidence indisputably under the influence of alcoholic drink.

Kant's 'pure categories' are second order concepts, concepts of ways in which these recognitional capacities are exercised. If we say that the category of ground and consequent is 'a pure concept of the understanding', we are not suggesting that it is a recognitional capacity of an exceptional degree of refinement and resulting width of application (as e.g. the conception of gravitational force), but that it is the conception of the way in which in exercise of our understanding, we entertain the relevance of determining what is the case in respect of one state of affairs to determining what is the case in respect of another. This form of understanding is in play in the most diverse enquiries. Thus, we encounter it in a *reductio ad absurdum* proof in mathematics, and again in such historical judgements (expressed in terms of a counterfactual conditional) as 'If Hannibal had marched on Rome after the battle of Cannae, he would have taken the city.' In this last case the answer to the question whether he marched on the city after the battle is presented as relevant to the answer to the question whether or not he took it.

2. But this enquiry, to which the section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* known as the 'Metaphysical Deduction of the Categories' is devoted (and to which Kant returns in his third and last critique, the *Critique of Judgement*), is introduced in the argument of his first critique as the essential first stage in a distinguishable enquiry, namely his enquiry concerning the structural features of the world

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in which we find ourselves, with which we have commerce through senses, and by contrast with which indeed, in its unyielding public order, we come to recognise our own private, personal autobiography. We suppose that in all our experience we have to do with a world belonging to a single space, enduring through a single time, in which there are relatively permanent, identifiable things which provide us with reference points for the marking of environmental changes, whose constancy is as much a matter of natural law as the occurrence of the observed changes which we note and plot in their relations one with another with ever-increasing sophistication. It is with such matters as these that Kant is concerned in such sections of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as the 'Aesthetic', the 'Transcendental Deduction' and the 'Analogies of Experience'. Certainly, there are here certain very important differences of emphasis between stretches of his argument that must be noted, differences which are not confined to apparent contradictions between the first edition of the 'Deduction' of 1781 and the second of 1787.

(a) Thus, at times, Kant seems concerned chiefly to develop an extremely subtle and deeply suggestive account of the constant condition of human perceptual experience, and in particular of the role in such experience of self-awareness, imaging, imagination, memory and conceptual thought. In the course of this enquiry he probes the difference between the sort of self-consciousness to which an individual may win his way through grasping the particular factors that have co-operated to give his personal biography the shape it has assumed, and the kind of self-awareness (called by Kant 'pure apperception') that accompanies as its formal subjective condition the very possibility of any sort of awareness of the world to which we belong as a continuous whole and any sort of questioning concerning that world and our own place in its history.

It may be that the point can be grasped by us by an example Kant does not himself employ, namely the plight of the amnesiac. Such a man knows that he has in fact a past and that to this past there belongs not only the secret of his personal identity but the causes of his being where he now is, e.g. in a hospital ward in a town with which he can recall no sort of association. Yet, in this instance he is only able to pose his problem to himself and to understand it when put to him by others because he knows what a town is, what it is to be in a hospital, etc. If we suppose a case in which the amnesiac is unable to identify a hospital ward, doctors, nurses, etc., for what they are, seeming indeed ignorant even of the sense of the word

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'town', we find ourselves moving towards a very different sort of situation, and one which we find it very hard, if not impossible, to conceive. We certainly find it difficult to conceive the plight of an amnesiac whose ability to frame to himself his own problem is jeopardised by loss of all sense of a past, of an order of events at once independent of himself and yet as involving him, of a place in the same space as he now is from which he came to the bed in which he lies, etc. We are familiar with conditions in which we say of a man in a prolonged coma after a motor accident that such a man has become a 'living vegetable'. Yet, such language is used to indicate the sort of breakdown of communication which must follow the disintegration of all sense of the structural constants of our world. The amnesiac does not know who he is: yet he knows he has an identity and in this knowledge he is preserved by his capacity to reach *in principle* beyond the present to integrate in a coherent order the *dissecta membra* of his history and experience.

It is characteristic of Kant's extraordinary philosophical power that at the same time as he submits to very searching criticism Hume's account of self-identity, he avoids the mistake of ignoring Hume's sharp judgement on Descartes' unsophisticated supposition of a substantial spiritual self as something immediately intuited. The subjectivity which he regards as ultimate and irreducible is formal, something that can only be grasped when presented as the ultimate subjective condition of a unitary experience from which it *cannot* be prised apart and regarded as some sort of ontologically indestructible element in the world. Kant's advances on Hume in fundamental questions in the philosophy of psychology provide the foundations of his relentless criticism (in the 'Paralogisms of Rational Psychology') of traditional metaphysical argument for the immortality of the soul which finds its alleged point of departure in a failure to grasp the limited and relative character of the irreducible uniqueness of status we have to concede to the unitary subject in experience.

(b) Yet, Kant combines this intense concentration on the subjective aspects of human experience with a differently orientated attempt to vindicate our conviction that in the world of which we have commerce through the senses, there are of *necessity* certain structural constraints. Thus, it is a world in which we have to reckon with things to which events happen and, moreover, do not happen at random but in accordance with laws. Thus, a sudden drastic change in our environment, an explosion or an earthquake, both alike quite unforeseen, is something whose antecedents we seek,

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confident that in time we shall find the necessary sufficient conditions of its occurrence. We may, indeed, be totally mistaken in our first identification of the cause, whether made tentatively or confidently. Similarly, where those features of our environment are concerned which we treat as the things to which events happen, or (an element in the traditional conception of substance) as the constant self-contained wholes seemingly quite unaffected by the sorts of changes to which we ourselves and our more immediate environment are subject, we may wilfully ignore the extent to which their very constancy is itself in part determined by inclusive environmental processes by which we ourselves are affected. Thus, we say that 'the rocks remain', acknowledging the slowness of their weathering and contrasting their recognisable immunity to violent upheaval with the vulnerability of the world both of natural objects and of artefacts which we know to be less resistant to storm, to erosion, etc.

In lectures given in the hall of Trinity College, Oxford, in the Hilary Term, 1934, on the conceptions of substance and causality with special reference to the philosophies of Hume and Kant (to which I owe an abiding debt), Professor H. H. Price (who was indeed not yet a professor at the time) emphasised what he called the 'although' character discernible in the working out of natural laws. Once (to use a modern phrase) a chain-reaction had been set in motion or a process begun (e.g. the detonation of an explosive, a drastic movement in a geological fault), granted that the initial stages of the process are the necessary and sufficient conditions of its outcome, apart from effective interference, whether natural or contrived, that outcome will follow. Although one might have it otherwise, these are the ways in which such changes take place. Further, there are in the world a very large number of processes of change quite independent one of another. Thus, the rapid inflow of the tide floods the beach in complete independence of the bodily metabolic changes, or alternating psychological moods, of strollers who walk along the shore at the time. It is a romantic cliché to speak of the 'indifference' of such movement to human feeling. Similarly, a man may indulge in anthropomorphic invocation of the hills in front of him: 'What changes have these great hills seen across the centuries?' Hills do not see either as man or as cats undoubtedly see. Moreover, their surface has been weathered across the centuries and many disturbances of one sort or another have altered their contours, sometimes suddenly rendering their appearance quite unfamiliar to the

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surprised climber approaching a route that he thought he knew, to find the rock surface so altered that his projected climb has to be abandoned. Again, the first emergence of these hills remains a datable event in that same time-order to which the speaker's reverie belongs; they were not always there (whatever the force of 'there' in that expression). Yet, their gradual changes are changes within a total *Gestalt* that is relatively self-contained and both the endurance of that *Gestalt* and the *relative* insignificance of the changes in question are recognised as causally independent of the chains of events that take their course under their shadow. Certainly this self-containedness is an instance of the working of natural law; a man makes himself foolish who shakes his fist in the face of the hills as if he momentarily thought his anger substitute for the faith of which it was said that it could move mountains! Yet, if we discern the working of natural law in the constancy of the hills, we must not suppose that the writ of causal explanation runs any less in respect of the courses of events of which we have spoken as taking place within their shadow. Such courses follow their own routes, independent of the hills, independent also very often one of another. Of course, the routes may intersect, furnishing the imaginative writer or even some less sophisticated commentator with instances of what he must call coincidence.

It is with such features of the world of our experience as I have illustrated and the justification with which we assume their constant presence as necessary, indispensable conditions of objectively referential statement that Kant is concerned in his first *Critique*. But all the time, when the emphasis falls in his argument where I have now placed it, invoking a large number of examples to compensate the extreme abstract character of his exposition, Kant seeks to rejoin in the end the emphasis of 2 (a) by suggesting that treatment of what is presented to us by the senses as disclosure of a fragment of such a world is necessary to our including it within a total experience ascribable to a single subject.

3. Further, Kant well knew as his *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770 effectively illustrates, that the notions of substance, causality, unity, existence, possibility, necessity, were fundamental tools of traditional transcendent metaphysical speculation. In the *Dissertation*, Kant developed his own account of the proper method of metaphysical speculation and a considerable part of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is devoted to exposing the mistakes that he had become convinced he had there made. We are entitled to treat the concepts

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of substance and causality as concepts of fundamental, uniquely pervasive, necessarily permanent features of the world around us. Yet, we are not entitled to use them in an attempt to estimate the relations of the conditioned to the unconditioned, the relative to the absolute. We have to reckon with the fact that human beings are impelled by the exigencies of their intellectual natures to aspire to the ultimate and unconditioned. There is indeed something of profound positive significance in such aspiration; but if men are not to be betrayed by it into sterile, futile or destructive disputation, it must be disciplined, and the road to the successful achievement of such discipline lay by way of the sort of conceptual analysis, indeed appraisal, of conceptual thinking as such, to which the *Critique of Pure Reason* is devoted.

4. While Kant emphasises the spontaneity of understanding, and of that imagination which in one place he characterises as the ‘understanding working blind’, it is fundamental to his whole argument that neither understanding nor imagination creates its own objects. For Kant, to come to know what is the case is a finding, not a fashioning. Yet the ways of finding out, although it is Kant’s claim that they express an underlying unity, have their own internal complexity, and (as I have said) the detail of their operation, *in concreto*, evokes from him some of his most painstaking and searching work in the philosophy of perception. For all this he never abandons his underlying loyalty to the common-sense conviction that in coming to know we do not construct a world of our own fashioning, but compel that which is given to us to yield its secrets in ways admitting of our assimilation.

To this point he returns in a very illuminating passage towards the end of his third *Critique* – the *Critique of Judgement*, where he contrasts human with divine understanding, what he calls the *intellectus ectypus* with the *intellectus archetypus*. He is, in this passage, in no sense arguing for or against the existence of God; rather, he is helping his readers to attain a firmer purchase-hold on the limits of their characteristically intellectual activity. If God exists, then what he knows he himself creates, and therefore what he knows is immediately transparent to him. In the *Critique of Judgement*, what Kant is chiefly concerned to bring out is that God (again if he exists) does not have to argue inductively, to carry out experiments, to revise conceptions in the light of further observation; whereas we need to do all these things. Yet Kant is also making, in this passage, the much more general point that our understanding does

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not create its own objects; this we come to grasp when we contrast our understanding with an understanding that *does* create its own objects.

Concepts for Kant are (as I said at the outset) basically capacities of recognition, and our ultimate conceptual scheme is the manner in which these capacities are diversified in their operation. So, with the notion of existence, to take a familiar example, we ask whether the Loch Ness Monster exists, or whether there is a Loch Ness Monster. In asking the question we assume that the state of affairs about which we are enquiring is possible, even though, of course, we may not be clear precisely what sort of entity would have to be found in Loch Ness to satisfy the description 'the Loch Ness Monster'. Unexpected questions calling for conceptual decision may arise, although we may be sure from the outset that we would not affirm the monster to be there, if we discovered a floating log of unusual size and shape, assuming in certain lights, especially in the eyes of persons returning from places of public refreshment, the likeness of a large moving creature! If we end by answering in the affirmative the question whether the monster exists, we emerge from a state of ignorance, advancing beyond the admission of bare possibility to one of the affirmation of existence. Yet we do not find any necessity in this existence comparable to that which we have to acknowledge in a logical demonstration, or in the operation of a natural law. The distinction between existence, possibility, and necessity, with which Kant is concerned in his discussion of the categories of modality, is a distinction whose whole significance only becomes plain when it is recognised as a distinction drawn in terms of the modes of operation of such an understanding as we find ours to be. Of course, Kant's philosophy of logic is extremely crude and unsophisticated by the standards of modern modal logic; but what he is saying is clear enough, and the principles of his treatment have emerged from my discussion. Yet, I have said this study of the forms of our understanding is integrated with his attempt in the 'Transcendental Deduction of the Categories' to establish the limits of that experience, the features that must be manifested by any world of which we are to make intelligible assertions. Thus we insist, and for Kant we are right to insist, that whatever matter of fact we refer to must fall within an all-embracing single space and time. What, for instance, a radio-astronomer asserts concerning events  $3\frac{1}{2}$  thousand million light years away must<sup>1</sup> belong to the same time-order as the writing

<sup>1</sup> The relation of this 'must' to the 'must' of entailment and to that of a law of nature is a central problem in the interpretation of Kant's *First Critique*.



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of this chapter, the last football match between Rangers and Celtic to be played in Glasgow, and the forthcoming examinations in the University of Cambridge. Kant believes (as I have said) that he can prove that there are certain features which must belong to anything whatsoever concerning which we make intelligible assertion; whatever we say must be capable of statement in terms of what is qualitatively similar to what we experience, if it is to be regarded as endowed with objective import. Moreover, the characteristics which mark out this qualitative similarity can and must be plotted. The choice, as an example here, of the single space and time which Kant so stresses is deliberate, for I should like to register an underlying hostility to the view sometimes put forward (as if it were a sort of revelation) that the time-order in which historical events occur is somehow quite different from the order in which natural events occur. It is part of Kant's achievement to have drawn attention to the continuities of natural and historical existence, of which the more obviously historical natural sciences (for instance, geology) should make us immediately aware. Yet notoriously for Kant genetically space and time were subjective forms of outer and inner sense.

5. So, in conclusion of this part of my study, I must emphasise Kant's anthropocentrism. It is indeed to bring out this fundamental aspect of his thinking that I introduced a reference to the passage in the *Critique of Judgement* as well as the reminder of his treatment of space and time as objective forms of sensibility. Our point of view as experients is the human point of view, our world a world marked by the conditions under which alone experience is possible for us. And indeed, at this point it is fitting that I should indicate my realisation that extended treatment of Kant's philosophy must involve deep appraisal of the role in his theory of knowledge of synthesis. Certainly, reflection on the use he makes of this notion emphasises his sense of the relativity of the human point of view, especially when the implications of carefully drawn distinction between intuitive and discursive understandings are drawn. At the deepest level for Kant to prove the indispensability for objective human experience of such categories as substance and causality is to lay hold on the inherently limited character of the experience which they make possible, and indeed to suggest immediately that if Kant is to develop any philosophical theology, that theology must fall within the tradition of negative theology.

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### *Aristotle's descriptive metaphysics*

We pass now to Aristotle. Professor Knowles has brilliantly characterised Aristotle as foremost 'amongst those who have sought to trace the veins and sinews of substance'.<sup>2</sup> But how are we to understand this exploration?

It is very easy to accuse Aristotle, as the late Professor R. G. Collingwood did in his *Essay on Metaphysics*,<sup>3</sup> of finding the subject-matter of 'first philosophy' in the most general of all abstract concepts, namely that of being, and to follow him in stigmatising this subject-matter as vacuous, and its study as sterile. Yet to treat being as a *summum genus* is to ignore the doctrine, both of the *Metaphysics* and of the *Categories* alike. In the sixth chapter of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle insists that the categories are a developing series; in *Metaphysics*, Γ II, he amplifies this doctrine, seeming to oscillate between defining the subject-matter of metaphysics as substance, and as being. Yet there are modes of being that are manifestly non-substantial. When we predicate in the category of accident, when, for instance, we affirm Socrates to be snub-nosed, we certainly take for granted that being snub-nosed is a mode of being. But being snub-nosed is not being a substance or thing. Yet it is arguable that if there were no things as men, there would be nothing to be snub-nosed. If we predicate his manhood of Socrates, we predicate what is the condition both of his being snub-nosed and of his being a philosopher. Again, he might have philosophised without being snub-nosed and been snub-nosed without philosophising. Of course we know well that a man's physical appearance may affect deeply his life and behaviour. A grotesque may seek compensation in intellectual activity. We are on edge in the presence of Aristotle's repeated loyalty to a conception of individuality (arguably at war were his deepest insights over substance) that finds the principle of individuation in spatially locatable matter.

Yet, however deficient we may find this tendency in Aristotle's thought to invest the universal with greater dignity than the particular, even while insisting against Plato on the ontological primacy of the concrete thing, we have to allow that his categories of being form a developing series to the extent that, for instance, a philosopher's manhood is presupposed by his philosophising, that his being in a particular place at a particular time, although possibly significant

<sup>2</sup> *The Evolution of Mediaeval Thought* (Longmans, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> (O.U.P., 1940), pp. 3–20.