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Introduction

The Vocation of Humankind, 1774

> Everything in nature persuades me that righteousness and happiness belong together, and that they also always come together if external circumstances do not disrupt this otherwise so essential a bond. Such a pervasive tendency for order must, however, be fulfilled; and only its realization would remove the confusion and contradiction that would otherwise obtain.
>
> Spalding

1.1 THE THEME

Kant is the most important figure in this book, as one would expect in a work that deals with late-eighteenth-century German philosophy. He is not, however, the only or even its main object of interest. As a matter of fact, Fichte will end up occupying just as much space as Kant. The main object of interest lies, however, in neither of these two philosophers but at the intersection of two themes too broad to consider on their own. One has to do with the reception of Kant between the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 and Fichte's publication of *The Vocation of Humankind* in 1800 – in the period, that is, when transcendental idealism was being transformed either into what eventually came to be known as 'post-Kantian idealism' or into that kind of typically German form of scientific as well as religious positivism that took hold of the German philosophy faculties in the nineteenth century. The philosophy of Jakob Friedrich Fries can be cited as a splendid example of this kind of positivism.[1] The other theme has to do with the revolution in the traditional conception of 'humanity' that had been underway throughout

Europe long before the publication of Kant's Critique. Such a revolution was radical in nature and inevitably posed some formidable challenges to the still deeply religious culture of the late German Enlightenment. The object of this book is to show, on the one hand, how Kant's Critique of Reason[2] was itself part of this revolution, and, on the other hand, how older modes of thought interfered with a proper understanding of its conceptual as well as cultural implications. The fact that Kant himself was not completely clear about such implications, but remained in many respects still hostage to the philosophical language of the older tradition, made things all the worse.

The nature of this revolution in the concept of humanity can be summed up in a simple statement. It consisted in the recognition that it is a mistake for the human being to look for meaning in the world, since his primary mission there is precisely to create this meaning.[3] Of course, nobody could have been expected at the time to formulate as radical a shift in perspectives as this recognition entailed with the same clarity as is possible for us in retrospect. Goethe had, however, come as close to it as anyone could in his famous poem *Prometheus*, the one that was to cause much scandal for Jacobi.[4] And Kant himself was soon to provide the formula for the shift that we still accept today as normative. On the whole, however, the change found expression indirectly in a variety of ways, most obviously in the general tendency to consider human beings precisely as *individuals*. In reaction against what it considered the empty speculations of past metaphysics, the Enlightenment sought to portray humanity mainly in the practical sphere, according to the psychological makeup of individuals, their personal interests and social relations.[5] The late Enlightenment movement of 'popular philosophy' (*Popularphilosophie*) was a widespread and self-conscious expression of precisely this tendency. At the same time, the Enlightenment also endorsed a view of physical nature that in fact negated the most individuating factor of any human being – namely, his capacity to determine his existence independently of physical compulsion. This was a view consistent with the old scholastic metaphysics, for which the possibility of human freedom vis-à-vis God had always been a source of difficulties, but one that now found revamped justification in the new physics that the Enlightenment also accepted enthusiastically. The problem was that, on the view of humans as individuals, the human being emerges as the responsible master of his own destiny; on the deterministic view, as a piece of the greater organization of matter[6] by which he is determined from beginning to end. Or again,

on the one view, God – if a human individual still cares for him – has to be sought within the individual's own heart, as if an extension of his private conscience; on the other, the same individual finds himself externally caught up in this God's cosmic designs without having any effective say about them at all. The two views were incompatible. Goethe might have indeed found a poetically acceptable way of reconciling them in the vision of a humanity that attains freedom in the resolve to create a progeny of happy individuals – such that can laugh and play, and behave before the gods as if free, albeit in full awareness that they are in fact bound to them by chains.[7] This was the vision that he had forcefully expressed in the poem *Prometheus*. It might have been poetically viable, but it did nothing either to resolve the conceptual problem at hand or to relieve the moral predicament that it posed.

Kant, as we have just suggested, had hit upon the perfect conceptual formula for expressing the new humanism now taking shape. The radical rearrangement of ideas that this humanism required was implicit in his relentless polemic against traditional eudemonism, or the belief that the pursuit of a naturally preappointed happiness is what motivates moral life and therefore also defines the principles of moral science. It was made explicit in the claim, which Kant advanced in opposition to the other traditional and widely accepted position, that the idea of the law is itself the beginning of all morality, and of moral science accordingly. This appeared to his contemporaries as a strange claim indeed, counterintuitive and too empty of content to provide any significant guide to conduct. In fact, its formalism had wide-ranging material implications, for it made the 'law' itself – or 'lawfulness' as such; or again, in more concrete language, reason's capacity to legislate – into the one overriding value according to which all other values are to be measured. The pursuit of the realization of this value becomes, therefore, the highest end to which every rational being is to be committed; and the maintenance of the conditions that promote this pursuit, the highest duty to which such a being is bound. The inversion of priority of terms in the previously assumed relationship between reason and nature was clear. Nature does not determine what constitutes moral value. Rather, it first acquires moral significance only inasmuch as it becomes implicated in the task of establishing the universal rule of law. As Kant put it most graphically, it is not because the law abides by an alleged naturally determined distinction between 'good' and 'bad' that it acquires validity as law. On the contrary, that distinction arises in the first place when an action and its product either conform to

the rule of law and are then deemed good or do not conform to it and are deemed bad. The pursuit of any naturally defined happiness loses, therefore, every semblance of constituting by itself a moral principle, since what counts as a happiness worth pursuing is itself an issue to be resolved on independent moral grounds.

This shift in perspectives was as radical as it was unmistakable. It came across most strikingly in the context of Kant's moral theory. But Kant's contemporaries had already been given notice of it at the very beginning of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where "in place of the old presupposition, namely *that the understanding conforms to things*, Kant [had] laid down the new presupposition *that things must rather conform to the understanding*."[8] I am quoting from Reinhold (about whom much more in due time), who made this comment at the close of the century while lamenting the sad misappropriation to which Kant had been subjected at the hands of the 'popular philosophers'. The point is that after Kant reason was no longer to be conceived as the discoverer of meaning, whether in a theoretical or a practical context, but as the creator of it.

The question, however, is whether Kant had also succeeded in reconciling the two otherwise contradictory tendencies of the Enlightenment. In his own mind, and those of his first followers, it seemed that he had. His famous distinction between 'thing in itself' and 'appearances' allowed him an added intelligible space on the side of the thing in itself within which he could conceptually situate the human subject when considered as an agent responsible for self-determined activities, while still conceding that, when an object of external observation, that is, as appearance, the same subject is just as much ruled by the mechanism of nature as any other physical entity. That extra space could also be furnished with all sorts of what Kant called 'noumena' – *entia rationis*, as they were known in traditional scholastic philosophy, or 'constructs of reason'.[9] The ideas of 'God', the 'soul', and the 'world' all fell into this category. But there were many other instances as well – such entities, for instance, as 'courts of law', 'contracts', 'juries', and 'wills and testaments'.[10] These are all ideal objects that do not admit of strict empirical definition but that (according to Kant's scheme of things) the moral agent can nonetheless postulate as having a place in the ideal world of morality that is conceptually made possible by reference to the thing in itself. He must treat them as quasi-physical things for the sake of conducting his rationally determined human affairs. The scientist as well, according to Kant, produces his own set of ideal constructs – in his case, however, in order to regulate and thereby advance his own scientific activities of systematizing

experience.[11] In either case, whether the issue is the broader goal of promoting humanity as such or the narrower one of promoting scientific discovery, the motivation for constructing these noumena and treating them as if they were real things lies, according to Kant, in reason's interest in its own program of formal rationality. In brief, it appeared indeed that Kant had hit upon the right formula for restricting knowledge to the limits of the science of the day, without, however, thereby embarking on any reductionist program on the broader pragmatic side of human existence. There was still ample logical room for legitimately treating the human individual as an autonomous subject of action.

But was the formula truly successful? It did not necessarily imply a two-worlds view of reality – one sensible and the other supersensible. This is an interpretation no longer in favor. It has now rather become commonplace to say that, according to Kant, "there are not 'two worlds', [i.e., one phenomenal and the other noumenal,] but rather one world which must be conceived in two different ways. [. . .]. When we view ourselves as phenomena, we regard everything about ourselves [. . .] as part of the natural world, and therefore as governed by its laws. But in so far as we are rational, we also regard ourselves as *active* beings, who are the authors of our thoughts and choices."[12] This is a fair claim. But its fairness should not blind us to its limitations. The metaphor on which it plays of conceiving one and the same world from two different points of view remains inherently opaque until two questions are answered: *Who* is the 'we' (call it the 'I') who assumes the two allegedly different points of view and considers himself, on the one hand, as *homo phaenomenon* and, on the other, as *homo noumenon;*[13] and *from where* are these points of view to be assumed? The obvious reply is that this I is the individual human self, and that the two points of view are assumed by him as he engages historically in different forms of activities. Though obvious, however, the reply begs the important questions of what constitutes the unity of this individual who can nonetheless regard himself in such totally disparate and apparently irreconcilable manners; and of how this same individual manages to stand outside of himself, so to speak, in order to regard himself in these ways. As I shall try to show in the rest of this book, this is the question that controlled the first stage of Kant reception in Germany. It explains in large part why the Critique of Reason met such vehement opposition in many quarters, and why so many attempts were made by those who at least thought they were its friends to interpret it along more familiar modes of thought or to reshape it radically along more idealistic lines. It even explains why many might even have thought

that Kant was committing himself indeed to a two-worlds view of reality. In all cases, the problems that the question posed found expression in a debate concerning the adequacy of Kant's system for safeguarding the reality of human freedom. And this debate unavoidably brought in its train the further issue of the nature and importance of religion in human affairs.

1.2 THE SYSTEM

Why the system should have been implicated in the first place is a question worth considering.[14] One place where the philosopher comes to grips with the individual as such is precisely in the construction of his system, that is, at the juncture where all the more particularized conceptions that he has otherwise developed independently are deployed together in a single view of reality. System building is the philosopher's reflective way of regaining conceptually the experiential unity that the historical individual achieves pragmatically in the moment of decision taking. It is the philosopher's way of reaching back to actual history while still operating at the abstract level of reflection. In the medieval past, a theologian such as Thomas Aquinas could make this move by combining logical genealogy and historical narrative in a single conceptual structure. The *Summa Theologiae* is at once the deduction of things from their first principle of being and the story about an original event (creation) that was followed by another (man's fall through disobedience), which then necessitated another whole series of events (the incarnation and redemption) that marked the slow return of a fallen nature back to the creator. In the case of the critical Kant, since the principle of being is now thought itself, and since the original creative event is the positing of a world of meaning, the move back to historical experience is made rather in the second part of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in the Dialectic of Reason and the Transcendental Method. There Kant tries to reconcile apparently contradictory conceptions of nature by limiting each, and thereby rejoining, as Kant believed, the vision of common wisdom (A831/B859). Reality is now to be represented by individualizing, albeit ideal, constructs such as the Soul, the World, and God, with respect to which the historical subject of experience can define his own place within that reality precisely as individual. It is in the system, as Kant well knew, that one finds the philosophical resolution to such an existentially pressing question as "What may I hope for?", and thus it is in the system that the existential relevance of a philosophical position is being tested.

Such an existential view of 'system' might appear odd to us today. It is certainly at odds with the relentless polemic waged by existentialists and poststructuralists alike in the recent past against anything systematic. But it was not one that was foreign to Kant. On the contrary, there is good reason to believe that this existential view was uppermost in his mind, and that it was precisely to such a view – common in his day – that he wished to provide scientific reflective limits. Take, for instance, the title, *The Vocation of Humankind*,[15] that Fichte affixed to his already mentioned philosophico-devotional tract of 1800. In choosing that title, Fichte was harking back to a central theme of Enlightenment literature by unabashedly appropriating it from the book that in 1748 had given expression to the theme in the first place. The author, the pietist theologian Johann Johachim Spalding,[16] had then kept a record, so to speak, of the pulse of the Enlightenment by restating the theme in many subsequent revised editions of the book, each time in terms that reflected the most recent philosophical developments. The book won immediate and widespread popularity from the beginning and was to maintain it to the end of the century. It had been written in the language of the eudemonism of the day, and, as the author openly acknowledged in the preface of a later edition,[17] it reflected the modes of thought of the first half of the eighteenth century.[18] We shall have many occasions to return to it. Of interest to us right now is that, as stated in the edition of 1774, the purpose of the book had been to determine the nature and the purpose of human existence – to establish a "system of life," as Spalding says – in an effort to defend religion against what the author perceived to be the growing encroachments of materialism into people's lives.[19]

Here is a taste of what Spalding, writing under the thin cover of a fictional character, had to say.

> Having suffered long enough the plague of an unstable mind, one troubled by opposing impressions, he [i.e., the writer] had resolved in earnest and with equanimity to examine what he should be, starting from the beginning. He had resolved not to accept anything as true, or reject anything as prejudice, which would not appear as such by this rigid new test; to collect and join together all that he found in this way undeniable, and to draw from it the necessary consequences . . . ; thus to establish for himself a secure system of life by which he could abide for all times. . . . (3)

Surely it was a worthwhile effort, the writer goes on to say, "to know why I am here, and what I should rationally be" (4). In this enterprise, moreover, he had been guided by the belief that "in a decision regarding such an important issue, truth would yield even to the plain but healthy

human understanding the evidence sufficient to impart certainty and peace to a honest enquirer" (3–4). The writer was already in possession of the fruits of much experience; he had, moreover, the power to reflect and to choose. His task was only a matter of putting things in order. To this end, he would have had to avoid both the poetic pictures of an overheated imagination and "the aridity of unduly subtle thought" (*trockene Spitzfindigkeit*). As he concludes, "Let plain uncomplicated nature speak by me; surely its decisions are the most reliable" (4–6).

And what does this honest inquirer find as a result of his self-examination? First, he discovers that the satisfaction of the senses cannot be his only aim in life, since by itself such a satisfaction can easily lead to destruction. There are such things as the pleasures of the spirit (1–13). Second, he recognizes that he is a social being – that the satisfaction of his own needs cannot be divorced from that of the needs of others (25). Third, he observes that he reacts differently to the behavior of an animal, a child, or an idiot than to that of a man who acts with premeditated and possibly evil intentions, even though in both cases the behavior in question might be a threat to him. On the basis of this observation, he concludes that there must be, as he says, "a type of inclination, a source of actions, essentially different from self-love yet just as essentially part of my nature. Something is right and good and praiseworthy in itself, also without reference to my particular satisfactions and advantages; and something else is not" (31–2). Fourth, once this discovery has been made, he further recognizes that he finds in himself a deep satisfaction in the presence of order of any type, whether physical, aesthetic, or moral. This satisfaction is just as certain a fact for him as his need to sleep. At this point, therefore, he also discovers that his desire for happiness – his own and that of all others – follows from his awareness of being part of an overall order. "I am myself a part of the whole," he exclaims (33). It follows that, whenever his desire for happiness is thwarted by evil or other circumstances, his integrity as a human being is still left undisturbed, provided that in his actions he has remained attuned to the order of the universe. "Whatever evil might afflict me, cannot make me essentially [*in der Hauptsache*] unhappy, so long as I can say to myself: I do what I should do; I am what I should be. This alone is the inexhaustible source of the equanimity and the peace which, in their silent ways, are worth more than all the din of sense amusements" (38). Fifth and last, he discovers that his belief in God – a belief that follows naturally from his recognition of universal order (41) – also affords him the certainty of a future life. For the order itself of the universe requires that happiness be distributed

according to righteousness of conduct, and if the right proportion between the two is not achieved in the present life – and we know that it is not – then it must be achieved in a future one.

The writer concludes:

> Everything in nature persuades me that righteousness and happiness belong together, and that they also always come together if external circumstances do not disrupt this otherwise so essential a bond. Such a pervasive tendency for order must, however, be fulfilled; and only its realization would remove the confusion and contradiction that would otherwise obtain. If I were to consider this life as the final human state, I would not be able to make my thinking on the matter fall in one piece. The moment I however expand my vision [. . .], everything falls conceptually into place [. . .]. The moment I am assured that the great originator of all things – the one who at all times acts according to the strictest of rules and the noblest intentions – cannot possibly be willing to annihilate me, I need not, so I believe, fear any other destruction. (54–6, passim)

Now, at least as of 1774, in the medium of the popular philosophical language of the day heavily influenced by British empiricism and Scottish 'commonsense' philosophy,[20] Spalding had in effect already formulated both the questions and the substance of the answers around which Kant was to construct his system. He had done it, moreover, by undertaking an inventory of the mind, exactly how Kant proposed to do it (Axiv). What can I know? Answer: what my finite yet rational nature allows me to know. How must I act? Answer: according to a distinction between right and wrong that is more fundamental than any distinction between the pleasurable and the repugnant. In what must I believe? Answer: in my freedom and in a universal order. What can I hope for? Answer: in a future life. These are Spalding's questions and answers no less than Kant's. I am not suggesting that Kant drew his inspiration from Spalding or, for that matter, that he even knew of him – though it is very unlikely that he did not.[21] The point, rather, is that, though the 'system' might appear to us to be the aspect of Kant's critical work most removed from actual experience because it is the aspect most dependent on ideal constructs, it was in fact the place where he was addressing the most pressing existential questions posed by his age. It is the system, moreover, where his critical revolution had the most devastating effects. To all appearances he was simply restating Spalding's questions in their culturally accepted form, and also giving to them the culturally accepted answers. He was rejoining 'common wisdom', as he himself might have thought, though by way of his new critical instruments. But in fact, precisely by deploying these instruments, he was explicitly bringing into play

the assumptions of the new humanism that had already been interfering with the accepted beliefs of his day. While speaking the language of Spalding, Kant had in fact already undermined the easy transition from a presumed universal order of nature to the moral perfection of the human individual that Spalding took for granted. To be sure, in his system Kant had sought to reestablish on a critical basis the possibility of that transition. But the resulting universal harmony of things could no longer have the same meaning that it had for the audience to which Spalding was addressing himself. Nor could the ideal of rationality that Kant now promoted, or the faith and hope he counseled, have the same meaning.

Here is where the potential for confusion lay. For Kant was couching his system in traditional language. It was easy to assume that, after Kant, things in the cultural universe stood exactly where they had always been, except that the method for justifying their place had become more complex. As a matter of fact, things had not been the same for some time, and Kant's Critique of Reason, far from reestablishing them in the old order, only served to destabilize them all the more. Whatever order it brought about had to be radically new. One man who was clearly to understand these deep cultural implications was Fichte. But he paid the price for his insight in 1800. At the very end of the first stage of the reception of the Critique of Reason, he found himself leaving the university and the city of Jena under suspicion of atheism. Kant himself had just disavowed him as a would-be disciple.[22] Apparently Kant also was not in the clear about the radicalness of his own conceptual revolution.

1.3 THE PRESENCE OF JACOBI

We shall eventually return to these events. Here we must retrace our steps and add one more circumstance that affected the first stage of Kant reception. In the course of the events that eventually led to Fichte's departure from Jena in 1800, there was one man whom Fichte thought was an ally but who, though trying to come to his aid at the personal level, came out against him in public. This man was Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, the same man we have already mentioned in connection with Goethe's *Prometheus*. He is important because, although he became a factor in the reception of Kant only after 1785 – after the publication, that is, of his correspondence with Moses Mendelssohn on the subject of Spinoza and Spinozism[23] – from that time on he set the tone of the reception of Kant on both the pro and the contra side. Jacobi might not have been an