

Kant's Shorter Writings

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Critical Paths Outside the Critiques

Edited by

Rafael V. Orden Jiménez,
Robert Hanna,
Robert Louden,
Jacinto Rivera de Rosales
and Nuria Sánchez Madrid

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VARIATIONS ON THE POSSIBLE: “WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ORIENT ONESELF IN THINKING?”

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1. A Text Far from Marginal

The topic of the “possible” is important in order to understand the meaning of Kant’s criticism. The text “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” (1786) adds—to the distinctions which are proposed in the *Beweis* of 1763 (those between intrinsic and extrinsic possibility, on the one hand, and between logical and real possibility, on the other hand)—the theme of subjective possibility, on behalf of an intrinsic necessity of reason, which aims to overcome the boundaries of the phenomenal level. One year later, Kant then published the second edition of the *Critique*, in which, in the Postulates of Empirical Thinking in general, he added the Refutation of Idealism.

The work which I intend to focus on appeared in October 1786 in the “*Berlinische Monatsschrift*” review and was decisive not only in the context of the transition between the two editions of the *Critique* and in the development towards the *Critique of Practical Reason* (which was published two years later), but also with regard to the role of the critical philosophy within the Enlightenment.

The controversy between Mendelssohn and Jacobi had not calmed down with the death of the Jewish philosopher in January 1786. The charge of Spinozism was threatening to involve even Kant and the effective exercise of freedom was at risk due to the worsening of Frederick II’s health conditions (he disappeared in June of the same year).

These are the reasons why Kant is then forced to intervene in October 1786 with the text “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” at the request of Erich Biester, director of “*Berlinische Monatsschrift*”, in order to stop the dangerous diffusion of Jacobi’s fideistic enthusiasm. Furthermore, Thomas Wizenmann has joined the above-mentioned controversy, with the “*Critical Investigation of the Results of Jacobi’s and Mendelssohn’s Philosophy by a Volunteer*”, in defence of the reasons of the historical faith against the claims of Enlightenment reason.

These are the essential points of reference for understanding Kant’s work, which is certainly characterised as public intervention by some limits (indeed, it could not leave room for the thorough analyses which are required to clarify the polemic purpose of every passage). However, for those who closely know the development of Kant’s thought in those years, “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” does not fail to suggest some interesting reflections.

I will not dwell upon the task of the Enlightenment that Kant strongly defended here. On this point see the final hint at the freedom of reason and the need to prevent it from being overwhelmed by an easy enthusiasm: “And so freedom in thinking finally destroys itself if it tries to proceed in independence of the laws of reason” (*OOT* 8:146/*CERRT* 18). And, in a footnote, he recalls the typical feature of the Enlightenment: one must “think for oneself” (this is the true meaning of Enlightenment) and be guided by a genuine critical attitude toward every single statement: “To make use of one’s own reason means no more than to ask oneself, whenever one is supposed to assume something, whether one could find it feasible to make the ground or the rule on which one assumes it into a universal principle for the use of reason” (*OOT* 8:146/*CERRT* 18).

At the same time, in the present analysis, I also omit the polemic references that are scattered all over Kant’s text, references which are to be understood with regard to the various interlocutors. I rather focus on one of these topics, which is a main theme within Kant’s discourse, that is, the theme of the “possible”, trying to highlight the relationship between this work and the second edition of the *Critique*.

I will therefore focus on the theoretical level, without examining the practical field, despite being aware of the importance of the latter in work of Kant, as well as in later ones: indeed, Kant’s practical discourse starts from the theoretical level.

I will argue that the demand of reason to go beyond the experimental field acquires a theoretical value and does not stop at a purely negative role, as even Kant sometimes seems to suggest in marking his distance from Mendelssohn.

2. What Does “Orientation” Mean?

The *incipit* of Kant’s work reminds us of the close relationship between the level of experience and *a priori* concepts, that is, “which are not otherwise derived from experience” (*OOT* 8:133/*CERRT* 7): “For how would we procure sense and significance for our concepts if we did not underpin them with some intuition (which ultimately must always be an example from some possible experience)?” (*OOT* 8:133/*CERRT* 7).

This close link with the experience bring us to the core of the “possible”: on the one hand, Kant refuses to conceive the “possible” as the mere absence of contradiction, as Leibniz did; on the other hand, while drawing attention to the synthetic character that experience can only provide, he stressed the need for an *a priori* guarantee of our knowledge.

The interlacement of these two levels brings us to the task of thought and of “general logic”; in this sense, it is possible to “extract from experience” a “*heuristic* method” that could provide us with “useful maxims” for philosophy: “It is in just such a way that general logic comes about; and many *heuristic* methods of thinking perhaps lie hidden in the experiential use of our understanding and reason; if we carefully extract these methods from that experience, they could well enrich philosophy with many useful maxims even in abstract thinking” (*OOT* 8:133/*CERRT* 7).

In this passage, Kant uses some terms that have a precise meaning within the context of the critical framework and acquire an appropriate sense in the work that we are examining. They are terms that suggest a problem that goes beyond the purely subjective level within which we usually read this Kantian text. The “need of reason”, while being grounded on the subjective level of experience, is an element that can not be disregarded: it is an element that has a specific value, one which is not only moral but also theoretical.

This specific option which the reason must take ownership of in the comparison between *a priori* knowledge and experience, becomes the guarantee of being able to expand our knowledge in the purely empirical

field in an attempt to go beyond the boundaries of the experience. The only precaution needed is not to conceive this possibility as if it were a real demonstration such as the one that characterises the synthetic *a priori* level of scientific knowledge.

Hence, the agreement and, at the same time, the disagreement with Mendelssohn's theses: on the one hand, "it was in fact *only* reason—not any alleged sense of truth, not any transcendent intuition under the name of faith, on which tradition and revelation can be grafted without reason's consent which Mendelssohn affirmed, staunchly and with justified zeal; it was only that genuine pure human reason which he found necessary and recommended as a means of orientation" (*OOT* 8:134/*CERRT* 8); on the other hand, we must reject the high "claims of reason's speculative faculty, chiefly its commanding authority (through demonstration), obviously falls away, and what is left to it, insofar as it is speculative, is only the task of purifying the common concept of reason of its contradictions, and defending it against its *own* sophistical attacks on the maxims of healthy reason" (*OOT* 8:134/*CERRT* 8). The Kantian reference to the ability to *orient oneself* (namely the capacity to find the east and, thus, to divide the regions of the world into four distinct areas) is part of this context.

In this process, which has become usual for us, there is a subjective aspect which is crucial: indeed, the pure objective vision is not enough to find the difference between the various regions of space: "For this, however, I also need the feeling of a difference in my own subject, namely, the difference between my right and left hands. I call this a *feeling* because these two sides outwardly display no designatable difference in intuition" (*OOT* 8:134-5/*CERRT* 8).

Before continuing our reflections, I suggest that we focus on the meaning of the term "feeling", which Kant used in the above-mentioned passage. I think we must avoid assuming the "feeling" as something that is merely subjective, in the romantic sense of the word.

Here, as was still common in the Eighteenth century, the word "feeling" rather suggests a perception that needs the subject's consciousness and is not limited to outward sense. In this sense, the term *Gefühl* was the German translation of Leibniz's *apperception*, that is, something that goes beyond mere perception. Now, this ability of the subject to distinguish between his own right and left allows Kant to define *a priori* as "a

difference in the position of the objects” (*OOT* 8:135/*CERRT* 8). Thus, on the basis of the “*subjective* ground of differentiation” (*OOT* 8:135/*CERRT* 9) it becomes possible for the subject to orient himself geographically. In the “impossible case” of a miraculous event where all remains the same, but what changes is the direction of movement of the stars, all would remain identical and we could not notice any “change” (*Veränderung*) without such a subjective basis of distinction.

Starting from the geographical point of view, Kant then extends the concept to space in general: “In the dark I orient myself in a room that is familiar to me if I can take hold of even one single object whose position I remember” (*OOT* 8:135/*CERRT* 9).

Once again, Kant emphasises that even in this case, it is a “*subjective* ground of differentiation” (*OOT* 8:135/*CERRT* 9) and he suggests the hypothesis that, for a joke, someone had moved the objects, holding their mutual position, while reversing them, setting on the right side what was before on the left side: Kant states that, even in this case, I can orient myself “through the mere feeling of a difference between my two sides, the right and left” (*OOT* 8:135/*CERRT* 9).

The recall to the subjective reference is accompanied by the remark concerning the mathematical nature of such considerations, which concern precisely the ability to orient oneself in space.

The reference to the distinction between “mathematical” and “dynamic”, according to the first *Critique*, is clear: this becomes manifest shortly afterwards, when we will pass from the ability to orient oneself in space, that is mathematically, to the attempt to extend one’s orientation in terms of “*thinking* in general, i.e. *logically*” (*OOT* 8:136/*CERRT* 9).

Now, it is possible to formulate what Kant defines as a “conjecture” based on an analogy between the two levels: “By analogy, one can easily guess that it will be a concern of pure reason to guide its use when it wants to leave familiar objects (of experience) behind, extending itself beyond all the bounds of experience and finding no object of intuition at all, but merely space for intuition” (*OOT* 8:136/*CERRT* 9).

3. The Objectivity of Space and the Refutation of Idealism

Before focusing on what is implied in this discourse, which concerns the role of metaphysics in Kant's thought, it will be useful to draw attention to the ability to orient oneself in space. My aim is to show that, even in this regard, the "subjective essence", which Kant assigns to the distinction, is not merely "subjective" in the ordinary sense of the term. It is enough to remind ourselves Kant's considerations regarding incongruent counterparts and the Refutation of Idealism included in the second edition of the *Critique*.

As is well known, even since the pre-critical essay "Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation in Space" (*DDS* 2:375-83 [1768]/*CETP* 70:361-72), Kant pointed out that the impossibility of superimposing two specular figures depends on their orientation and he recalled the difference between the right hand and the left one.

He used this "subjective" reference in order to emphasise the objectivity of space, as well as, in the second edition of the *Critique*, the *a priori* nature of space and then proved from a pure form which comes from the subject, and no longer from the object: "Now how can an outer intuition inhabit the mind that precedes the objects themselves, and in which the concept of the latter can be determined *a priori*? Obviously not otherwise than insofar as it has its seat merely in the subject, as its formal constitution for being affected by objects and thereby acquiring *immediate representation*, i.e., *intuition*" (*CPR* B41/*CECPR* 176).

The need of a subjective reference becomes immediately manifest even in the Refutation of Idealism included in the second edition of the *Critique*: we need a permanent point of reference outside ourselves (in outside space) with regard to which we can determine the change (*Wechsel*) that characterises the phenomena of the internal sense, but such a reference is possible just because we are originally able to distinguish between the results of our imaginations and what is instead furnished by the external sense.

This is the way whereby we can distinguish between reality, on the one hand, and representation of reality, on the other hand: the first element is objective, the second one is subjective. But let us examine Kant's text:

I am conscious of my existence as determined in time. All time-determination presupposes something *persistent* in perception. This

persistent thing, however, cannot be something in me, since my own existence in time can first be determined only through this persistent thing. Thus the perception of this persistent thing is possible only through a *thing* outside me and not through the mere *representation* of a thing outside me. Consequently, the determination of my existence in time is possible only by means of the existence of actual things that I perceive outside myself. (CPR B275/CECPR 327)

In the formulation of the thesis, Kant states that “*the mere, but empirically determined consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me*”. I would like to stress this passage, because here we are in a field which, in Kantian language, should be indicated as purely “mathematical”. The empirical conditions indicate that, in order to perceive any change (*Wechsel*), there must be something that is persistent. And this allows us to orient ourselves starting from the distinction between what is the result of our imagination, on the one hand, and what is suggested to us by experience, on the other hand.

In the *Preface* to the second edition of the *Critique*, Kant then further specifies, with reference to the Refutation of Idealism, the objective character of the point of reference: “*But this persisting element cannot be an intuition in me. For all the determining grounds of my existence that can be encountered in me are representations, and as such they themselves need something persisting distinct from them, in relation to which their change, and thus my existence in the time in which they change, can be determined*” (CPR B XXXIX/CECPR 121).

In the first consideration within the Refutation of Idealism, Kant underlines once again the basis for such a distinction: “Yet here it is proved that outer experience is really immediate” (CPR B276/CECPR 327); and in a footnote he adds: “But it is clear that in order for us even to imagine something as external, i.e., to exhibit it to sense in intuition, we must already have an outer sense, and by this means immediately distinguish the mere receptivity of an outer intuition from the spontaneity that characterises every imagining” (CPR B276-7/CECPR 327-8).

Now, is not this reference to the outward experience based on a distinction, which cannot but be subjective, between the spontaneity of my imagining and outward intuition? Certainly we become able to realise such a distinction only by means of comparison among the empirical data, but these data do not include only the objective aspects (of the outward sense),

but also the “subjective” ones (of the inner sense), which are both necessarily connected to each other.

4. Beyond the Boundaries of Experience

When Kant moves from the ability of the subject to orient himself in a spatial sense, that is, mathematically, to the ability to orient himself in the domain of thought in general, he emphasises that in the examination of the analogy between the two levels we cannot forget that in this way reason aims to go beyond the boundaries of every possible experience:

By analogy, one can easily guess that it will be a concern of pure reason to guide its use when it wants to leave familiar objects (of experience) behind, extending itself beyond all the bounds [*Grenzen*] of experience and finding no object of intuition at all, but merely space for intuition; for then it is no longer in a position to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to objective grounds of cognition, but solely to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to a subjective ground of differentiation in the determination of its own faculty of judgment. (*OOT* 8:136/*CERRT* 9-10)

This difficulty does not, however, eliminate the need to use a maxim, although our judgement cannot fulfil the conditions for a determinative judgement; we are driven to exceed the boundaries of experience by “the feeling of a need” that belongs to reason: “This subjective means still remaining is nothing other than reason’s feeling of its own need” (*OOT* 8:136/*CERRT* 10).

Once again, in this task, the distinction between different kinds of possibility might help us. The limits (*Schranken*) of our knowledge prevent us from considering what exceeds every possible (sensitive) intuition as an object of our experience: “here there can be no intuition of objects or anything of the kind through which we can present a suitable object to our extended concepts and hence secure a real possibility for them” (*OOT* 8:136/*CERRT* 10). If the object cannot be provided by experience, so that we cannot verify its real possibility, then all that remains to do is to ascertain, from a negative point of view, that the criterion of logical possibility is respected, assuring that this claim to go beyond experience hides no contradiction: “there is nothing left for us to do except first to examine the concept with which we would venture to go beyond all possible experience to see if it is free of contradiction, and then at least to bring the *relation* of the object to objects of experience under

pure concepts of the understanding—through which we still do not render it sensible, but we do at least think of something supersensible in a way which is serviceable to the experiential use of our reason” (OOT 8:136-7/CERRT 10).

However, the negative criterion of logical possibility does not exhaust the problem. Indeed, Kant states that we have not yet asserted anything: “Yet through this, namely through the mere concept, nothing is settled in respect of the existence of this object and its actual connection with the world (the sum total of all objects of possible experience)” (OOT 8:137/CERRT 10). However, this inability to assert the existence of a transcendent object as well as the other objects of experience does not exclude the fact that reason does not have the right to go beyond the boundaries (*Grenzen*) of experience itself. Kant shortly after observes: “But now there enters *the right of reason’s need*, as a subjective ground for presupposing and assuming something which reason may not presume to know through objective grounds; and consequently for *orienting* itself in thinking, solely through reason’s own need, in that immeasurable space of the supersensible, which for us is filled with dark night” (OOT 8:137/CERRT 10).

I cannot thoroughly examine here Kant’s argument: I merely observe that Kant continuously and strongly distinguishes between, on the one hand, an invasion of the supra-sensible field (“Thus that is not a need at all, but merely impertinent inquisitiveness straying into empty dreaming to investigate them—or play with such figments of the brain”: OOT 8:137/CERRT 11) and, on the other hand, what is, on the contrary, a real “need” of reason, such as the case of reason’s feeling of “a need to take the *concept* of the unlimited as the ground of the concepts of all limited beings—hence of all other things” (OOT 8:137-8/CERRT 11).

That is the Ideal which Kant described in the Transcendental Dialectic, now redeveloped in a positive direction, while not denying past considerations about the ontological proof.

Here, in a footnote, Kant observes: “since this is the only way in which the principle of thoroughgoing determination makes it possible for our reason to distinguish between the possible and the actual—we find a subjective ground of necessity, i.e. a need in our reason itself to take the existence of a most real (highest) being as the ground of all possibility” (OOT 8:138/CERRT 11). And further he emphasises that such an assertion,

which is always placed on a different level than that one of the objectivity of experience, however, is “of great importance” (OOT 8:138/CERRT 11). Finally, he asks: “For with what right will anyone prohibit reason—once it has, by his own admission, achieved success in this field—from going still farther in it? And where then is the boundary at which it must stop?” (OOT 8:138/CERRT 11).

5. Conclusions

Taking up the thread of our remarks, I would now like to recall a few points that seem crucial for clarifying the contribution that *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* can provide us, in order to thoroughly understand both Kant’s thought and the room which can be left to metaphysics within Kantian critical philosophy.

Placed just before the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant’s essay clearly indicates the positions then exposed in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), especially where it emphasises that the need of reason becomes unconditioned; as well as the statement of rational faith clearly announced in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793).

Concerning the task of metaphysics, as presented “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?”, it is important to stress the avowal of the need of reason to go beyond the boundaries of experience, because of the urgency to answer the questions that experience itself presents.

In this sense, I think that here, more than elsewhere, the structure of the Kantian argument clearly appears. When he emphasises that it is matter of a “subjective ground of necessity” (OOT 8:138/CERRT 11) or “feeling of a need” (OOT 8:139/CERRT 12), we must overcome the reductive sense that this expression can assume, since it is always reason which is at work, and for purely theoretical reasons, in the attempt to give an explanation for what cannot be answered at the level of phenomena.

When Kant distinguishes between the practical and theoretical levels, it seems clear that his aim is to highlight the unconditioned nature of the former and the conditioned nature of the latter: “but one sees very well that it is only conditioned, i.e. we must assume the existence of God *if we want to judge* about the first causes of everything contingent, chiefly in the order of ends which is actually present in the world” (OOT 8:139/CERRT

12). Now, in my opinion, this “conditioned” character is not a limitation, but an essential feature of metaphysics, if by “conditioned” we mean reference to experience, which is the starting point of all our considerations.

However, as Kant lucidly points out, we must carefully distinguish the limits (*Schranken*), within which we have to stay when we are working in terms of scientific knowledge, from the boundaries (*Grenzen*) of experience itself which indicate the common ground between the sensible and the supra-sensible, between the level of phenomena and reality in itself. Rejecting the Sceptical view, Kant takes up this distinction in the Transcendental Doctrine of Method, once again with reference to geographical field: “I cognize the limits (*Schranken*) of my actual knowledge of the earth at any time, but not the boundaries (*Grenzen*) of all possible description of the earth” (*CPR A759/B787/CECPR 653*).

Even in this investigation, as Kant observes in a footnote of the text that we are examining, reason is still active cognitively: “Reason does not feel; it has insight into its lack and through the *drive for cognition* it effects the feeling of a need” (*OOT 8:139/CERT 12*).

When he then reminds us of the need for rational belief which “must also be taken as the ground of every other faith, and even of every revelation” (*OOT 8:142/CERT 14*), he points out at the same time that such belief is “the signpost or compass by means of which the speculative thinker orients himself in his rational excursions into the field of supersensible objects; but a human being who has common but (morally) healthy reason can mark out his path, in both a theoretical and a practical respect, in a way which is fully in accord with the whole end of his vocation” (*OOT 8:142/CERT 14*).

It is especially in this defence of the task of reason that Kant gives us a strong appeal that goes beyond the controversy between Jacobi and Mendelssohn which motivated this work: thus, it takes a value which, at the present time, is still relevant, in an age which seems to exhaust itself in terms of scientific naturalism, forgetting every “ulteriority” and neglecting the need to find meaning, orientation (in Kantian terms) in our researches, as well as in our own lives.

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