MATTER AND SELFHOOD IN KANT'S PHYSICS: A CONTEMPORARY REAPPRAISAL

1. Kant's search for unity

The son of Werner Heisenberg and nephew-in-law of Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, the neurobiologist Martin Heisenberg, who has worked extensively on the neurogenetics of Drosophila, has recently proposed that quantum physics and behavioral biology can solve the Kantian third antinomy in which Reason (Vernunft) appears to be hostage of an insurmountable conflict with itself concerning the contradictory coexistence of two types of causality, namely "causality in accordance with laws of nature" and "causality through freedom" (A444/B472 ff.). To be sure, the novelty of Heisenberg’s proposal does not reside in the idea that the third antinomy is solvable, since for Kant the antinomy is nothing but an illusory contradiction that can be easily "dismantled" and avoided by distinguishing appearances or phenomena (mere representations) that are embedded in an empirically conditioned series in time and space from things in themselves whose intelligible being is situated outside any sensible conditions and enjoys total independence of all empirical laws. Thus, for him, if the Antinomy is truly understood, then its antinomic structure is dissolved. Indeed, Kant admits that both the realm of empirical causality, which guarantees the unity of experience, i.e. a necessary chain of time-determined occurrences, and the realm of intelligible causality, which constitutes the power of beginning an original action from oneself, can coexist effectively, although in different levels of reality as it were. Both models of causality are “true at the same time but in a different relation”.

By using this strategy of differentiation within cognitive functions, between what is determinable by another being (inside temporal relationships as a cause that is, in indefinitum, an effect of a previous cause) and self-determining (outside temporal constraints as a cause that produces itself ab ovo), Kant acknowledges the true effectiveness of the privileged but unknown level of being-in-itself whose key feature is spontaneity – the thing that appears in time and space but remains beyond its appearing. However, under a Kantian

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angle, spontaneity amounts to self-determination (or a self-ruled power), not to indetermination. His determinist framework is absolutely strict and he concedes no room for any randomness or for a breaking of a fundamental state of law, even freedom is always conceived as the ability to generate lawfulness, and thereby to act according to one’s own law of action. In a sense, the rationality and the legality of being are the first foundation and the first unquestionable assumption of Kant’s critical philosophy, as if it were the conditio sine qua non or the ground-belief of any possible act of thinking and knowing in general. For, even if the “inner legislation” of noumena remains and must remain essentially unknown and unknowable, Kant cannot conceive any being whose behavior is “without reason”. Despite his profound construal of spontaneity, Kant does not endorse any absolute form of unpredictability and incomputability, two of the strongest assumptions of contemporary science. Instead, he holds fast to a nomothetic system in such a way that the emergence of possibility and generativity is, perhaps paradoxically, anchored in inner or outer determination, which entails a form of necessity that, in the peculiar case of freedom, exhibits the efficacy of self-necessitating reasons. It follows that unpredictability should be reducible to the finitude of our understanding and invite us to “epistemic humility”4, whereas quantum physics envisages it rather as intrinsic to things and confronts us with an abyssal gap between the spontaneity of being and the traditional belief on its lawfulness or algorithmic regularity.

Moreover, under a Kantian view, freedom begins with the production and adoption of reasons or laws and this process in itself is not necessitated, it is rather a primal force of being. Freedom, nevertheless, opens up immediately a system of self-necessitation, since freedom is the self-gift of Reason, and therefore the suspension of Reason could never be free, but the surrender to the brute causality of lifeless or selfless nature. In fact, just as the antinomy of nature and freedom concerns two kinds of (fully determined) causality, so too the “illusory” antinomy of the faculty of judgment, which divides it between two opposing maxims, two regulative principles, that is, the maxim of mechanical laws and the maxim of teleological laws, is located within the general jurisdiction of determinism5. Kant declares non-intelligible the harmonization of these two forms of causality unless one postulates a supersensible being or level of being, being-in-itself, in which organizational ends and efficient causes are perfectly united in a manner that we, humans, have neither concepts nor images to represent it. This transcendental postulation of the systematic unity of both causalities in being or nature and of both maxims in Reason, unity which functions as the ultimate law and as the asymptotic goal for our rational action, is doubtlessly a necessary presupposition for the rationality of all human cognitive endeavor and for the possibility of knowledge6. So, in the last analysis, all Kantian dualistic ontological and epistemo-logical distinctions are to be resolved in the transcendental unity of a well articulated and all-encompassing system, where Reason spouses being and nature: “For the law of Reason to seek unity is necessary, since without it we would have no Reason, and without that, no coherent use of the

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