

The Humility of the Modern Philosopher: Remembering Ramon Reyes's Insights on Kant's Epistemology

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I indeed we learn theories and concepts from our teachers. But from the teachers that make the most significant impact on us, we learn how to fashion an *ethos*, or how to mold one's character. A great teacher does this implicitly by going about the daily lectures and tests and discussions in his or her characteristically excellent manner. A teacher *demonstrates* the good and we simultaneously *witness* it through his or her character.

Now this demonstration and witnessing of the good is not something immediately evident. Deep things often take time to grow roots. When I attended the Modern Philosophy and Contemporary Philosophy classes of Dr. Reyes in 1998, I was particularly impressed with the clarity of his lectures and the breadth of his knowledge of the history of philosophy. This is a seasoned teacher, I told myself; no one could teach the history of philosophy more clearly than Dr. Reyes. That he was a *great* teacher came to me when I was studying abroad: I found myself recalling not so much his words, but more so the *care* and *caution* that he brought into his claims. This is then one of Ramon Reyes's virtues: he thinks and speaks clearly because of the care and caution, and, I believe, because of the *humility* that he brings into his claims.

It is easy to make claims, or in other words, "to say what is that it is." However, to make claims that are carefully thought out and indisputable—not because of the loudness of one's voice nor because of the dogmatic quality of the claim, but because of a measured appreciation of relevant insights—this is exceptional and deserving of admiration.

To illustrate this trait and hopefully to draw insight from it, I will briefly take up the task of making truth claims through the lens of Immanuel Kant's epistemology. What Kantian epistemology *is not* can be shown by recalling an oft-cited passage in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, entitled:

HOW THE “TRUE WORLD” FINALLY BECAME A FABLE

The History of an Error

1. The true world—attainable for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man; he lives in it, *he is it*.

(The oldest form of the idea, relatively sensible, simple, and persuasive. A circumlocution for the sentence, “I, Plato, *am* the truth.”)

2. The true world—unattainable for now, but promised for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man (“for the sinner who repents”).

(Progress of the idea: it becomes more subtle, insidious, incomprehensible—*it becomes female*, it becomes Christian.)

3. The true world—unattainable, indemonstrable, unpromisable; but the very thought of it—a consolation, an obligation, an imperative.

(At bottom, the old sun, but seen through mist and skepticism. The idea has become elusive, pale, Nordic, Königsbergian.)

4. [...]

5. [...]

6. The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.*

(Noon; moment of the briefest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.)¹

Number 3 above shows how Kant is portrayed as entangled in this “history of an error.” Observe here how in the third stage the search for the “true world” has become “unattainable, indemonstrable, unpromisable.” Let us suppose that in Nietzsche’s mind, this true world is identical to the thing-in-itself, since Kant describes it as *unknowable*. This means the thing-in-itself cannot be attained, cannot be demonstrated, and cannot be promised. To follow Nietzsche’s point

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982), 485-86.

here is to learn that the third “error” in this history of “true worlds” is that Kant has rendered this search futile, beyond our reach. For Nietzsche, as long as Kant insists that we cannot know the thing-in-itself, the true world remains “unattainable, indemonstrable, unpromisable.” What we must then deal with is the fact that some scholars, including Nietzsche, have interpreted Kant’s Transcendental Idealism, particularly the distinction between the thing-in-itself and appearance, as a metaphysical claim. This means that these scholars have understood the distinction as *ontological*. On the one hand, there is a metaphysical world out there—let us call it the *noumenal*—and it is inaccessible to us. We cannot know it, for it is beyond the conditions of the possibility of human experience. On the other, we exist in a phenomenal world, where things are merely appearances. We use the term “merely” here to depict the phenomenal world as akin to the world of shadows in Plato’s Cave, which is inferior to the world of *eidōs* outside. This interpretation may have gained currency for a particular path in the history of interpreting of Kant’s first critique. Some scholarly debates in the past few decades, however, have given rise to what appears to be a new interpretation. In my view, this represents only a particular group of scholars who oppose a *misreading* of Transcendental Idealism. My claim is thus simple: Transcendental Idealism must be understood *epistemologically*, and not *ontologically*. Let me clarify this in two points.

First, at the heart of Kant’s position is what could be interpreted as the identity and difference of the appearance versus the thing-in-itself. While the appearance of the chair in front of me is *not* the chair-in-itself, let me affirm that there is something = X that is *causing* that appearance, something is appearing to me that I am representing to myself given the subjective manner by which I represent an object in space and time. Still the appearance corresponds to something. I cannot claim straightaway that the something = X is exactly the chair-in-itself because I do not and cannot apprehend that something = X outside space and time; it is beyond the conditions of possibility of my faculties of sensibility and understanding. I can certainly *think* of that something = X as the chair-in-itself, but I *cannot know or experience* that something = X *as the chair-in-itself*. The point is that the subjective constitution of my sensibility and understanding requires me to represent the transcendental object *as it appears to me*. Insofar as the appearance of the chair is an *effect*, I can claim that my special and qualified “access” to that something = X is the subjective manner by which the thing-in-itself appears to me.

Second, one may now ask: Do I know the thing-in-itself? We answer here with both a no and a yes. On the one hand, we answer, “No,

I do not *experience* the thing-in-itself without qualifications,” because I do not have the absolute, God-like perspective that does not require the mental and sensible act of representing the thing-in-itself in space and time. On the other, we can answer, “Yes, I experience the thing-in-itself but *only as it appears to me*,”² because the represented object in my mind is, after all, a representation of something, the thing-in-itself, that I can *think of* but cannot *know or experience*.³

Therefore, Kant’s critical philosophy appeals to us to be deliberately self-aware of the truth claims that we make, to be circumspect whether or not they remain within the conditions of the possibility of experience. Here there is a kind of self-auditing of what we genuinely experience versus the “necessary fictions” of metaphysics. This deliberate self-auditing is the opposite of a kind of truth-claiming in metaphysics that acts as if it had a direct non-subjective and God-like absolute access to the thing as it really is, without the mediation of the faculties of sensibility and understanding. For in the spirit of complete paternalism, no matter how benevolent the authority figure is, there is the pretense of knowing the truth that the subordinates must accept.

In this interpretation of Transcendental Idealism, however, Kant ceases to be merely of historical value, that is, as someone to be studied for his role in the history of ideas, but not for the existential import he

² Perhaps this is a strong claim. Let me offer an alternative: “The appearance corresponds with something = X that is causing the representation.”

³ The following passage explicates this distinction:

And here then it is necessary to make understood what is meant by the expression “an object of representations.” We have said above that appearances themselves are nothing but sensible representations, which must not be regarded in themselves, in the same way, as objects (outside the power of representation). What does one mean, then, if one speaks of an object corresponding to and therefore also distinct from the cognition? It is easy to see that this object must be thought of only as something in general = X, since outside of our cognition we have nothing that we could set over against this cognition as corresponding to it.

We find, however, that our thought of the relation of all cognition to its object carries something of necessity with it, since namely the latter is regarded as that which is opposed to our cognitions being determined at pleasure or arbitrarily rather than being determined *a priori*, since insofar as they are to relate to an object our cognitions must also necessarily agree with each other in relation to it, i.e., they must have that unity that constitutes the concept of an object (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 231 [A104-105]).

has on the way we live our lives. On the contrary, to understand Kant's epistemology in this manner is to affirm that he represents the Copernican Revolution in philosophy. And to understand this Revolution is to learn humility. It is to see oneself as a member of a community of scholars of the history of ideas, who try to articulate the truth in their own subjective ways. There is no place for dogmatic and uncompromising pronouncements when one is deliberately aware of the subjective manner by which one represents truth. There is a maturity and wisdom in this kind of epistemological humility for it requires care and caution in making truth claims, which are now to be understood as regulative judgments. This care, caution, and humility are part of Ramon Reyes's *ethos*.⁴ He is a man who stands for the Enlightenment, and this is what makes him exemplary as a philosophy teacher. For this, I am grateful to him, as are the generations of students that he has taught. Thank you, Dr. Reyes, for becoming the great man that you are. You remain close to our hearts and lives.

Works Cited

- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. In *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin, 1982.

⁴ I thought of abusing the serenity prayer to apply to this interpretation:

God, grant me the serenity to accept *in faith those things that are beyond the conditions of possibility of my experience*,

The courage to *affirm with care those that I genuinely experience*,

And wisdom to know the difference.