

Some Notes Toward a Genealogy of Existential Philosophy
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Descartes

- ostensive task: to secure by 'ungainsayable' rational means the orthodox doctrines of faith regarding the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

- procedure: hyperbolic, 'metaphysical' or radical skeptical doubt, whereby every *kind* of belief in which there is any possibility of doubt whatsoever is set aside as if it were indeed false, until by this means some truth is discovered which cannot possibly be doubted under any circumstances.

- the truth discovered by this method of hyperbolic doubt will then serve as the secure foundation (*fundamentum absolutum et inconcussum*) for the reconstruction of the whole system of knowledge. (This procedure has at least two metaphorical dimensions, one explicit, one tacit: the explicit comparison Descartes makes is between the "truth" he seeks and "Archimedes' demand for a fixed, immovable point in order to move the entire earth." The tacit metaphor is biblical, with Descartes methodologically doubting away all reality and then 'recreating' it on an absolutely secure epistemic foundation in six days of meditations.)

- the indubitable truth Descartes discovers is expressed in his (in)famous *cogito, ergo sum* (I think; therefore I am): "that 'I am, I exist' is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind." This initiates a new direction in the history of philosophy by making the self-certainty of the subject, i.e., of self-consciousness as such, the foundation of philosophical inquiry and the essence of truth (*ens verum = ens certum*). "Everything I perceive clearly and distinctly is true," and "truth and being are the same."

- yet there is a fundamental ambiguity in this project: on the face of it, the "Archimedean point" Descartes discovers lies in the self-certainty of the subject. However, the security of this Archimedean point has three related requirements: to eliminate all possible doubt that arises from the hypothesis that there may be a powerful evil demon that even in my self-certainty still otherwise corrupts reasoning; to establish with certainty that what the subject knows with self-certainty has to do not just with the subject's self-consciousness enclosed upon itself but holds as the absolute measure of truth for all reality; and to account for the fact that the self-certain subject is able to recognize itself as finite and fallible. To meet all three requirements, Descartes provides a proof for the existence of God. This proof makes God the ultimate foundation that ties together self-consciousness' certainty of itself and true knowledge of the world.

- arguably, however, this ambiguity is resolved on the side of self-consciousness. In the end, God operates in Descartes' system as simply the principle that secures the authority of the self-consciousness subject, a principle that the subject 'proves' by reflection upon itself and its own

ideas. Roughly speaking, Descartes argues that under the strict conditions of meditation and radical doubt, I discover “that ‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.” But under these same meditative conditions, as a self withdrawn altogether from the world and corporeal being, my knowing that ‘I am’ is still knowing that ‘I am’ as a finite self-conscious subject in time, and thus as an imperfect being. This knowing myself as imperfect requires under the conditions of meditation that I have the idea of God, that is, the idea of perfect being, and the condition of my having that idea is that God exists as the cause of that idea in me. Thus, under the conditions of meditative withdrawal from the world, from “I think therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*) Descartes reasons to God’s existence (*ergo Deus est*). With this argument, Descartes establishes the existence and perfection of God in a way that transforms the meaning of faith. His system implies that the true life of faith is not one of accepting opinions on authority, but of exercising one’s God-given ‘natural’ reason in the proper way, that is, in the way Descartes sets out, by affirming as true only that which one conceives clearly and distinctly. One’s faith then consists in a faith in the ultimate rationality of the world.

- the *Meditations* is explicitly a text on “first philosophy” and thus has explicitly a metaphysical or ontological intent. The question about the certainty of our knowledge is at one and the same time a question about the reality of what is real. Descartes’ central thesis in this regard is that (1) being and truth are the same; (2) everything I conceive clearly and distinctly is true; hence (3) the reality of what is real conforms to truth as the clearness and distinctness of our conceiving.

- in the genealogy of existential philosophy, two aspects of this Cartesian view are especially significant: (1) the re-situating of the human subject in the place of God at the center of philosophical concern in such a way as to find God as the foundation of thinking and being and their relation in the subject’s own self-certainty; (2) the self-knowledge of the subject, so re-situated, becomes the effective measure of what is real and true.

Kant

- in the genealogy of existential philosophy, Kant is seen as appropriating and developing the turn to the subject initiated by Descartes.

- problem: historically, Descartes’ turn to the subject gives rise to two mutually exclusive, yet in Kant’s view also unacceptable, philosophical positions: dogmatism (e.g., Leibniz, Spinoza, Wolff) which believes that genuine metaphysical knowledge is possible by the exercise of human reason alone independent of experience, and skepticism (e.g., Hume) which denies that such knowledge is possible.

- the problem with dogmatism is that there is no assured means outside the merely negative criterion of logical coherence to verify its claims. The result is that the ‘dogmatic’ exercise of ‘self-certain’ reason has given rise to competing metaphysical systems and claims, with no experiential verification and hence no certain way to adjudicate among them. The problem with skepticism is twofold: it robs those sciences that genuinely do give us knowledge of any ontological or

epistemological foundations, and more importantly, it abandons to skepticism the knowledge that would serve as the basis of morality and moral life.

- Kant's solution:

theoretical philosophy: insofar as it is "metaphysical," our knowledge of nature must be strictly a priori (i.e., universal and necessary, and thus independent of experience); yet in order to be secure knowledge of nature, it must also be positively verifiable by reference to experience. These two criteria can be met, Kant argues, only if such metaphysical knowledge is a knowledge that we always already (tacitly) have in virtue of our rational cognitive faculty itself, and if this knowledge is the universal and necessary condition of the very possibility of experience as a whole.

- Kant's "Copernican hypothesis" (which replaces Descartes' Archimedean metaphor) is proposed to test whether these conditions can be met, by assuming that all objects of experience as such must in some way conform a priori (i.e., universally and necessarily) to our knowledge (i.e., to the very structure of our cognitive faculty). The test of this hypothesis is not made with reference to this or that object *within* experience but in terms of the very possibility of experience as such. What Kant ventures to demonstrate, then, is that, even though all of our knowledge of nature begins with experience, it does not all arise out of experience, that indeed the very possibility of experience itself depends upon how the knowing subject orders and structures a sensuous manifold a priori. It is this a priori ordering and structuring ("what reason puts into nature beforehand") that makes possible positive sciences and constitutes what genuine metaphysical knowledge we can have.

- in the genealogy of existential philosophy, this theoretical solution has three significant implications: (1) although, contrary to the skeptical position, it holds that we do have genuine metaphysical knowledge, contrary to the dogmatist position, it holds that we cannot have such knowledge beyond the range of possible experience and its a priori conditions. The key ontological issue thus shifts from the traditional concern with what something is as a thing in itself (which being wholly beyond experience is also unknowable, for Kant), to how something comes meaningfully to be *in* experience; (2) experience, however, is not simply something we have or undergo, but something we "make" and in this "making" lies the very source of our metaphysical/ontological knowledge. (3) **But** if we "make" experience (or as Kant puts it, if our "reason has insight only into what it *produces* after a plan of its own"), can we know ourselves ontologically, unless in some essential sense we make ourselves?

practical philosophy: not all our knowledge is object-knowledge that we have as spectators of nature. Some knowledge we have as participants forced to act in the world. Thus of moral obligation I do not say "it is certain" but "I am certain". But this latter certainty is no less certain than the former: I do not merely *feel* obligated, I *am* obligated ~ the certainty is of a *truth*.

- this practical certainty is independent of philosophy. I do not need philosophy to tell me that I am obligated, and if I were to lack that knowledge *as an agent in life*, philosophy could not provide it.

- rather moral philosophy depends upon the practical knowledge of moral obligation I have as an agent in life. I do have philosophical knowledge of my moral freedom, but only because it is presupposed by the obligation of which I have moral knowledge. The range of philosophical knowledge does not exceed that of the moral knowledge: I can understand and demonstrate how the fact of my freedom is possible, but I do not have knowledge of its nature, i.e., of how my moral freedom and causal necessity would be united in a single system of divine knowledge.

- yet philosophical does not reduce to moral knowledge, but the relation is one of mutual dependence. Obligation is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, i.e., it is that in virtue of which freedom is recognized as such, and thus not just as the indifferent choice of this or that, but as moral freedom, the choice between good and evil. Freedom is the *ratio essendi* of obligation, i.e., it is that which makes obligation and our knowledge of it possible. In the practical sphere, then, philosophy accomplishes two fundamental things: it analyses the concept of duty to make explicit the principle operative a priori in all possible moral experience; and by achieving a grasp of the whole structure of experience it demonstrates the *possibility* of freedom. In virtue of this philosophical knowledge, sophisticated moral consciousness is then able to do what naive moral consciousness does all along, i.e., assert along with the actuality of obligation, the actuality of freedom.

- what is most relevant here to the genealogy of existential philosophy is the idea that the philosophical truth of freedom has its basis in our life as agents compelled to act in the world. It does not extend beyond but only authenticates and legitimates the knowledge of moral obligation that we have in experience, existentially. Still, it is a *truth*, one that is tested against the whole range of human experience, not merely a fictitious supposition of morality.

general: in the view of his post-Kantian interpreters, Kant espouses a two-worlds dichotomy. The world of nature as observed and known, including human being as a part of nature, is only the world as it *must* appear to us. As appearance, all things in nature, including human beings, are determined by general laws. In moral experience and moral action, however, human being does not observe and know itself as an appearance; it knows what it ought to do. Moral knowledge thereby reveals more than appearance.

- in Kant's view, reason is essentially a *self-activity*. Hence in the theoretical sphere, experience (or what is the same for Kant, empirical knowledge) is possible only in virtue of what reason puts into nature in advance, as it were, by the way in which a priori it structures all experience. In the practical sphere, moral experience is possible only in virtue of our practical reason determining itself according to the rational moral law.

limits: for an essentially finite rational being, this self-activity of reason has its limits: theoretical reason without a given sensuous manifold is “empty”; practical reason, although free, operates in the context of natural inclinations that are determined and never wholly removed.

- the two-worlds dichotomy cannot be surmounted – Kant’s reconciliation of freedom and necessity precludes a divine perspective from which knowledge of the nature of freedom and of necessity, and how the two combine into one known world, one known reality, could be had. If ontological knowledge is a form of making, then we could only know ourselves ontologically in and as we make ourselves. But that we make ourselves is a thesis Kant expressly denies.

Hegel

In terms of a genealogy of existential philosophy, Hegel can be seen as both explicitly laying the very foundations for existential philosophy by affirming that the self is essentially self-making, yet presuming to demonstrate the actuality of absolute form of self-making in which the self transcends its initial, necessary but not sufficient finite limits.

In this regard, Hegel believes Kant to be on the right track in investigating how reason constitutes experience, but he thinks that Kant’s project falls short of realizing its own intrinsic possibilities. An evident consequence of this shortcoming is that Kant abandons philosophy’s traditional aspiration to divine knowledge, limiting genuine knowledge to that obtained by a finite rational being. Yet in the process, Hegel claims, Kant leaves himself in the untenable position of having to posit the reality of ‘things in themselves’ as the necessarily thinkable ground (n.b., but not the known cause) of appearances, yet leaving things in themselves wholly, utterly unknowable. Kant leaves us, Hegel says, to “feed on husks and chaff.”

- Hegel himself thinks that dogmatism had the virtue of uniting reason and reality, thought and being, and of insisting on knowledge of things in themselves. His explicit task, then, is to fulfill the demands of dogmatism for philosophical knowledge, not, however, by denying Kant’s critical turn and returning straightforwardly to dogmatism. Rather his task is to show *pace* Kant how these demands can truly be met by appropriating and transforming Kant’s thought into absolute idealism. This appropriation has four basic dimensions:

1. Hegel accepts Kant’s view that reason is a self-activity, but radicalizes this view, seeking to demonstrate that reason is an *infinite* self-activity that raises itself to absolute or infinite knowledge. In Hegel’s view, human reason does presuppose finitude and otherness. Yet the philosophical task is to show that human reason is not simply limited by the finite, but in and through its own self-activity penetrates and over-reaches all finitude to establish its identity with reality. In this view, self-active reason *is* reality. But this thesis cannot simply be asserted over against all finite experience. Rather, that reason is a self-activity, and that ultimately it is an infinite self-activity, is a truth that must already be realized in experience in and through the rational self-activity that constitutes experience. What philosophy does, then, is not dogmatically to assert this truth over

against all experiential evidence to the contrary, but appropriates and explicates this truth as already immanent in experience.

2. likewise, then, Hegel radicalizes Kant's insistence that philosophy must have an experiential or existential matrix. But whereas Kant limited himself principally to moral experience and empirical knowledge, and secondarily to aesthetic experience, Hegel examines how reason is at work (i.e., is actual) in all of the essential forms of experience: in barbaric and civilized life, in natural science, art, religion, ethical life, etc.

- thus, despite the common positivist caricature, Hegelian philosophy does not construct an absolute rationalist system in itself by some strange a priori thesis-antithesis-synthesis method. To the contrary, it systematically appropriates, explicates, and transfigures all of the essential forms of experience in order to demonstrate the actuality of reason in and as reality. In order to realize the goal of absolute knowledge, then, it must do justice to, and comprehend rationally, all essential forms of experience without exception, showing that the conditions for realizing this goal are already present in life.

3. unlike Kant, Hegel argues that the self is self-making, that human beings "are what they do," and that what they do essentially is to realize reason (in both senses of the English term 'realize', i.e., recognize and make actual).

4. Hegel thus presumes to reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable requirements: complete and radical openness to all the claims of experience; and complete conceptual comprehension of all reality.

- yet the thesis of self-making requires that the actuality of the rational be not an abstract truth of dogmatic thought, but a concrete historical achievement, evidenced in and through the life of peoples. The rationality of the actual, which philosophy then demonstrates, thereby has its historical, existential pre-condition.

- if absolute knowledge is realizable, then, it is because its conditions with respect to the actuality of the rational have already been attained in life in and through our (collective) rational self-making.

Existential Philosophy

existential philosophies tend to appropriate two aspects of Hegel's thinking, while rejecting three other aspects:

(1) They accept the doctrine that in some sense the self in order *to be* a self must be essentially self-making, and so conversely, that a self as such is never *simply* the product of something essentially 'other'.

(2) They accept the thesis that for truth effectively to be truth it must be concretely realized in the world in and through our self-making in both senses of the English term 'realise,' i.e., both recognized and made actual.

(3) Yet, existential philosophies reject the Hegelian thesis that the essential form of self's self-making is the realization of reason.

(4) Existential philosophies also reject the claim that there is for human selves an infinite 'unsituated' form of self-making whereby in and through that self-making the self is able in its knowledge to transcend all its finite limits, rendering them inessential in and for its knowledge.

(5) *On the basis of an appeal to experience* existential philosophies reject the Hegelian demonstration of absolute knowledge and the identity of reason and reality. On the one hand then, existential philosophies qua philosophy remain avowedly and ineluctably finite and situated. But precisely for that reason, their very status *as philosophy* is contested insofar as philosophy to be philosophy must achieve a transcending grasp of all experience.

General thesis: In matters having to do with philosophical truth, all existential philosophers *in some sense* place human *existence*, understood as acting, willing, deciding, choosing, committing, above detached, passive speculation and reflection. In holding to this thesis, existential philosophers tend to adhere to four basic theses:

(i) the question of human being as such is a matter of selfhood, and selfhood is essentially a matter of self-consciousness

(ii) questions of *philosophical* truth are inextricably connected to the question of selfhood of the self

(iii) a self not simply a product of something "other" (be it non-self, e.g., natural conditions, or self, e.g., other selves or God) but is essentially self-making, self-constituting, self-choosing

(iv) the human self is inescapably finite and hence always subject to situating limits.

