Kant’s Transcendental Reflection: An Indispensable Element of the Philosophy of Culture

Simon Truwant

Toward the end of the “Transcendental Analytic” in the Critique of Pure Reason, Immanuel Kant rather poetically depicts the domain of the understanding, which he has just analysed, as “the land of truth.” This land, however, is actually an island [that is] surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean […] where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end.1

It quickly becomes clear, in the “Transcendental Dialectic,” that the “stormy ocean” refers to the faculty of pure, theoretical reason. Traditionally, the domain of this faculty was regarded as the domain of philosophy par excellence. For Kant, however, it rather resembles the Bermuda Triangle: While we can more or less identify the boundaries of this area by means of three orientation points—the ideas of reason—we should nevertheless not enter it with any hope of returning from an enriching expedition—or of returning at all. It is not until the Critique of Practical Reason that Kant finds himself an entirely different kind of ship—the moral law—and that a metaphysical journey becomes once again a reasonable endeavour.

Taking into account Kant’s entire oeuvre, the picture of a stormy ocean may also refer to the territories of aesthetics and teleological thinking discussed in the Critique of Judgement. Governed by the power of judgement, these fields also lie outside “the land of truth” that is ruled by the faculty of understanding. Yet, unlike speculative metaphysics, Kant’s critical assessments thereof result in positive, influential theories on aesthetics and teleology. Hence, the second

and third Critiques show that Kant is ultimately interested in a much broader territory than that which he has called “the land of truth.”

It seems appropriate, therefore, to exchange Kant’s limiting topographical sketch of reason for a more encompassing transcendental topology, that is, a map of the different concepts and principles that reason employs in order to interpret the world. For this purpose, I suggest a new reading of Kant’s account of transcendental reflection, the subjective power that outlines a limited transcendental topology in the appendix of the “Transcendental Analytic,” which is entitled “On the Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection.” Most literature on this chapter focuses on its philosophical-historical value because here Kant most sharply opposes his position from that of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and that of John Locke. However, inspired by Rudolf Makkreel’s hermeneutical, or “orientational,” reading of the Critique of Judgement, I will focus on the systematic role of transcendental reflection in the first Critique instead, and I will expand it to Kant’s critical philosophy as a whole. Finally, I will indicate the (hitherto neglected) importance of this kind of reflection for Ernst Cassirer’s attempt to transform the critique of reason into a full-blown critique of culture.

1 Makkreel on Orientation and “Sensus Communis”

By approaching the Critique of Judgement as a part of Kant’s epistemology, Makkreel counters the contemporary hermeneutical critique that “the main shortcoming of Kant’s transcendental philosophy is that it is foundational and appeals to a priori starting points that are not subject to reevaluation.” While he agrees that “Kant’s interpretation of nature in the first Critique was merely an extrapolation of reason from [understanding’s] reading of experience, [and

---

2 CPR, B, 316–46. I will hereafter refer to this text as the “Amphiboly” chapter.
4 Rudolf Makkreel, Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the Critique of Judgment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). I will hereafter refer to this text as “IIK.”
5 IIK, 154.