Aesthetics, Transcendental Philosophy and the Refusal of Reciprocity in Kant’s Third Critique

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1. Introduction

Intersubjectivity poses itself both as a problem and as a solution only within the regime of representation that has prevailed since Descartes -- although it was foreshadowed by post-Scotist scholasticism.

Effectively, with Descartes, the soul died, and the subject was born. One might suppose that to invoke the soul is to conjure up ontological dualism and psychic solipsism, yet the reverse is the case. For the notion of the soul traditionally conjoined motion and manifestation: it was equally the site of both. Whether or not a world-soul or panpsychism were explicitly espoused, the idea of anima was in some continuity with the notion of animation in general, as spontaneous force in matter, irreducible to mechanical causation. Likewise it was in some continuity with the notion that there are formae or eide, inherently meaningful coherencies out there in the world and constituting all things. Thus for Aristotle and Aquinas the human soul was primarily the form and principle of motion of the human animal body, while in its exercise of one specific intellectual power it was forma formarum and capable of initiating rationally willed motions also (‘willed’ at least for Aquinas). Precisely as soul the human being was not closed within its own interior space, but radically opened outwards in the very heart of its interiority to become ‘in a manner all things.’ Nor was it set over against the body: first of all it was the body’s form, and second, for both Aristotle and in his wake Aquinas, the operation of the senses on the surface of the body as all in some sense ‘touch’, proves that the body exists only as the mediation between soul and informed matter permitting that metaphysical distance
through which alone that which of its nature manifests, can, indeed be manifested. (It is this conception of the body that was renewed by Merleau-Ponty). Nor was neoplatonism in its Proclean branch, nor Augustinianism, any less committed to the non-dualistic, mediating conception of anima. For both these currents, the human soul, while time prevails, is within time and subject to change and mutation. If, for Augustine, the immortality of the soul is proved by its contemplation of eternal objects (for example geometric realities) which fully exist only within the soul, these objects nonetheless constitute in some measure also the physical world -- which would not exist and would not be construable without, for example, points and surfaces. For Augustine, after the stoics, the geometric point is itself the power to generate a line, while the soul is compared to a point or number possessed of force (De Quantitate Animae) In Augustine also, from De Musica onwards (and contrary to many readings), memory is a primarily ontological reality, such that things first of all exist within ‘time-spans’ not ‘space-spans’, meaning that they exist as self-recording. Finally, for all these traditional construals of anima, interobjective events themselves involved something approaching the subjective ‘reading’ of one reality by another, since form responded to form according to an objective order of affinity, hierarchy and aesthetic convenientia (to use Aquinas’s term), which nevertheless did not necessarily preclude the emergence of radically new conjunctures.

It is clear then, that under the regime of ‘soul’, what we today tend to think of as objective and subjective were thoroughly confused. Radical spontaneities, representational recording of self and others, inherent objective meaning (underwritten by the eternal), existed ‘out there’ in the world of objects and were not just the property of subjects. Inversely, the conscious, free, all-representing soul was still primarily inserted within the world of time and motion. Psyche was primarily an
event or series of events, one might say. And nothing could be further from the truth than the common notion that modernity is primarily the loss of a radical passivity, with its over-stress on human construction. To the contrary, Descartes substitutes for the soul as event, an empty, void, contentless subject which first of all stares at the world of objects, which are given to it unequivocally. Only on the basis of this unequivocal giving from a spatialised domain, is the subject then able to exercise a power of pure techne now indifferent (unlike an earlier poesis) to ends underwritten by transcendence. (As subject of passions as well as representation, the Cartesian subject is no less a passive slave, since what it thinks it feels, in fact subserves mere survival).

Because soul is event, because it mediates reason and the body, representation and motion, it is also the case that contemporary analytic attempts to ‘explain consciousness’ reductively, entirely miss the point concerning the relation of the notion of soul to the experience of consciousness. Assuming that the soul is something like a Cartesian ethereal inner observer within and behind the brain, they suppose that correlation of observable brain processes with reported phenomenological awareness, explains away the psychic. In fact even this attempted correlation has long since proved impossible beyond a certain point, and the materialists are driven to mystical talk of ‘emergent properties’ and the like. But even were it possible, nothing of course allows a bridge to be constructed between the discourse of empirical observation of the measurable and the phenomenological discourse of what is apparent to awareness. However, this does not indicate the pure privacy of the latter (as attacked by Wittgenstein); rather the point is that all human life and understanding presupposes the manifestness of things, such that we cannot make sense of the idea of a being that cannot show itself (as already set out in Plato’s
Sophist). By contrast, we can, indeed imagine all brain functions being performed unconsciously by a race of zombies (apart, perhaps, from the non-functional exercise of prudential and poetic judgement) – rendering any functional account of consciousness a priori impossible. What we cannot imagine, since it is meaningless, is a world of things in no sense appearing to other things or affecting them, or indeed a world of things altogether outside the way they appear to us: certainly the notion of the zombie does not really make sense, but only in the same way that thinking of a world altogether outside the way it makes itself known to us makes no sense.

Hence it is not that mind simply beams a light upon things; for while it does illuminate, it is only able to do so because it meets an answering beam coming from things themselves. If we are conscious and aware of being conscious, then we cannot separate this power from the power of things to come to consciousness. Consciousness, then, like psyche, is prior to the subjective/objective division, and is an ontological, before it is a psychological or epistemological matter. I should not say that, after sleep, my consciousness awakes, rather I should say ‘I awake to consciousness’. And, indeed, we do talk like that. (Even though, of course, certain physical conditions inside me have to be fulfilled before I can come to consciousness). Things as well as minds contribute to consciousness, and bodies mediate this. Consciousness is always presupposed and cannot be explained, any more than we might hope to explain primal manifestness, which is convertible with primary being.

Where mind is supposedly reduced to brain, then if one is not satisfied with the scientifically nonsensical ‘emergent property’, then the phenomenological must be regarded as the epiphenomenal illusion of illusion somehow entertained by zombies — and things have got more remarkably mystical still. (Not that such mysticism can be ‘disproved’). Ironically, though, the reduction of mind to observable objectivity
remains with just what it imagines it dismisses: namely a Cartesian or Kantian theoretical subjectivity transcendentally removed in its gaze from the scene of activity. If it is observable that the mind is brain, then this is supremely and clearly manifest ...........and to what? Clearly to nothing that could itself be observed, else we have entered a vicious regress.

From the above remarks, I hope that two points start to become apparent. First of all, that where the regime of anima prevails, there is no problem of intersubjectivity, and nor does intersubjectivity offer itself as a reserved sphere of Kantian practical reason, I/Thou encounter, or whatever. Instead, ‘intersubjectivity’ (It’s the wrong term really, but I will still use it), simply rides on the back of interobjectivity, although it intensifies the latter to an extraordinary degree. And because of this riding, the interaction of souls is always reciprocal, and always involves the concrete exchange of concrete specificities. It is neither a one-way respect for the other, nor mere mutual respect for freedom -- these tend to be the limited options for intersubjectivity in the wake of Descartes and Kant.

The second emerging point is that the real issue is soul versus subject. In order to reject the subject (of representation) we would have to recover the soul – or no doubt rework it in a postmodern fashion which stressed even more its links to time, embodiment and language (mere recuperation would not be enough). This recovery would in itself provide us with the full richness of reciprocity, beyond the thinned-out intersubjectivities on offer today. Compared with this issue, the current debates are mere shadow-boxing. For it turns out that opposition to the subject, ethical intersubjectivity and subjectivism without individualism all in actual fact remain with the modern, representing – and individualist – subject.
Briefly, I want to indicate why this is so, in each of these three cases. First of all, ‘postmodern’ opposition to the subject. Ever since Spinoza, some writers have put an alternative spin upon the univocity of being, by stressing immanence before subjectivity. This partially restores the soul, by placing the subject back within the flux of events. However, Spinoza’s debt to Descartes is no accident. For if the confinement of being to immanence and temporal flux clearly appears, then, as Alain Renaut rightly notes in his *Era of the Individual*, one must assume that it appears to a reserved meta-subject, not caught up within the flux after all. The emptiness and lack of fixed substantive identity of this postmodern subject, is actually none other than the emptiness etcetera of the Cartesian subject. It is still one and the same frozen, spatialised subjectivity, immanently rapt out of time. And inversely, the various shifting identities taken on by subjects caught back up inside the flux of events, are evanescent, since they do not participate in eternal, true identities within the Logos of God. Since these subjects are only subjects of change, in so far as they remain subjects they are also, after all, just like the observing meta-subject, emptily self-identical (substantive without qualities) and punctiliar modern subjects. Only when they dissolve altogether into flux, do they lose this characteristic; but then this supposed pure dissolution into objective flux must be observable by the privileged meta-subject. Thus the supposed postmodern dissolution of the subject is in fact a shuttle between two modern subjectivities locked in irresolvable ontological conflict.

The second contemporary attempt to escape the Cartesian subject is ethical intersubjectivism which has many exponents, but is now most associated with the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Ever since Kant, at least, the problem has arisen of how to conceive of ethical knowledge, if knowledge is fundamentally possessed by a single subject representing to himself objects in so far as they appear to him according to the
(perhaps transcendentally objective) canons of his subjective awareness. This problem is, indeed, only one aspect of the problem of communication and understanding between subjects. However, the extreme problem of solipsism is perhaps not one ever very seriously entertained; no one ever really thought they were alone in a world of objects and zombies. To the contrary, the reduction of one’s own essential interiority to an empty receptacle meant that one readily supposed one knew by projection the essential interiorities of all other subjects. If anything is a problem here, then it is more to do with the basis for the continuity of the individual subject in time and of the collaboration of essentially unco-ordinated individuals across space. In either case, various occasionalist, semi-occasionalist, pre-establishmentarian and immanently providential (‘hidden hand’) solutions were resorted to. In this sense, God, who primarily upheld the individual psychic essence, had to be again invoked, as idolised ontic intervener (not as genuine creative cause of esse) to explain the appearances of the intersubjective.

The case of the ethical was, however, a little different. Here, after Kant, one could avoid treating oneself and others as known objects, if one isolated another sort of intersubjective reason which was a kind of direct angelic knowledge possessed by one spiritual noumenon of itself and of others, even though this knowledge had to be materially mediated by objects, in a way that finally undoes Kant’s conception, as we shall later see in the body of this essay. The Kantian conception has today been radicalised by Levinas, such that the address of the other to self first arouses self, ensuring that ethics, not theory, is the fundamental horizon for all subjectivity, knowing and therefore being (given the continued pull of a transcendental phenomenology).
However, Cartesian dualism is so rigorously preserved by Levinas, albeit in altered form, that any visibility of the other, any spatial characterisability, and therefore any characterisability as such, renders the other supposedly no longer other and no longer subjective. But in that case, as both Ricoeur and Derrida in very different ways suggest, the purity of the other in its non-appearing must after all be accorded the characteristics of free subjectivity and suffering undergone from our own private inner experience which we project outwards. Levinas cannot at all accommodate the Wittgensteinian lesson that even experienced pain is inseparable from sign and gesture, since for Levinas appearing betrays the pure beyond-being of the subjective other. Certainly, one can accept that first of all I am a ‘you’ adressed by another ‘I’ (as explained for example by Lacan), such that first of all one is an object to oneself and only later does one internalise the ‘I’, which then of course includes the entire project of imitation and adaptation of the character of the other. But this scheme assumes that intersubjectivity is embedded in the appearing and grammatically ‘said’ (not just ‘saying’ as Levinas requires) world of interobjectivity.

Levinas in fact produces a bizarre inverted egoism, which, while conserving a mode of Cartesian dualism (indeed a mode of manichean dualism), privileges the other I and not I myself. On the ethical plane the result is a reactive ethics which falsely identifies self-obliteration with the final good, and requires the good to be predatory upon pre-existing suffering. Against this conception of the ethical, Paul Ricoeur has rightly advocated the reciprocity of Aristotelian friendship, in which ideally giving is met with counter-gift. However, there are some grounds for wondering whether Ricoeur has the full measure of the pre-modern sense of reciprocity and does not confuse it with the Kantian categorical imperative. Indeed, he first of all seems to think that intersubjectivity depends upon a projection of an alter ego, even if this is
balanced by an equally co-originary experience of the other. But this would be refuted by a consideration of how we internalise the ‘I’ as indicated above. And it is clear that while we sometimes imagine what it would be like to be inside the other, most of the time we construe their psychic reality perfectly well by experiencing their external words and free spontaneities which reveal their singular and unique judgement, from their spatially and temporally unique perspective, just as if real people were characters in a book. Secondly, Ricoeur explicitly says that reciprocity is summed up in the golden rule, and that the latter is re-formulated by Kant. However, reciprocal friendship in the Middle Ages involved much more than this. Agreement in the good, upon which friendship was based, did not mean merely respect for the dignity of each other’s freedom. Instead it meant an orientation to a finally unknown, transcendent good, nonetheless ceaselessly and newly mediated through concrete historical circumstances. Hence friends shared specific concrete goods in the context of a society seeking to orientate itself towards justice, and therefore recommitting specific roles and specific virtues for its members. Friends were characteristically bound together as kin or quasi-kin in terms of local affinities and relatively circumscribed tasks. In Thomas Aquinas, for example, one will find – shockingly, perhaps to us – not a word which construes charity as the neutral altruistic love for the remote, but much about a hierarchical, preferential exercise of charity according to specific relations and affinities – including that towards the arriving stranger. For Aquinas, we are to exercise charity as finite animals and anything else would be hubris: but there is no indifference to the remote or alien involved here, since within the *ecclesia* the remote for us is close to the warmth of charity for others, and all are close to God. This mediaeval charity excluded not at all eros and preference and affinity, and even extended this thinking to its conception of the divine-human relation. In this way its sense of reciprocity was
linked to the contingency of events and a binding exchange of specific things: this rather than that. Ricoeur, I sense, does not grasp this, and instead endorses Kant as capturing the essence of the reciprocal. However, I shall argue below that in Kant the rejection of a ‘thick’ sense of reciprocity as I have just described, is actually central to his entire critical project. By contrast, his intersubjective ethics reduces to respect for freedom which we must respect in the other simply in order to be consistent with our own free and rational self-identity. And in promoting freedom, or the formal self-sustaining of freedom, as the supreme value, Kant actually elevates value above finality of purpose: that is to say, above actual ontological realisation according to nature. This value above the actual and the directed is of course indeterminate possibility, or freedom, which therefore when actualised can only appear as the arbitrary, the violent.

The third contemporary attempted modification of Cartesian subjectivity is ‘subjectivity without individualism’ -- associated with Alain Renaut and the somewhat bizarre French late 20th C revival of liberal humanism. Here, once again, one has to do with a defence of Kantian ethical reasoning. I have already indicated why I do not think that this reasoning is non-individualistic, and this will be much elaborated below. If this conclusion is correct, then the removal of the soul as ‘subject’ away from interobjectivity is irredeemably tied to modern social and political liberal individualist contractualism. Indeed, any ‘ethics of finitude’ as Renaut desires, is bound to appeal to some immanently total foundation which echoes finitude’s supposed circumscription – whether this be the individual or the collectivity, which is but the individual writ large. However, it will also be implicitly contended against Renaut, that in Kant’s case we are not offered an unequivocal ethics of finitude. Instead the Kantian ethical subject is uneasily (and in the end disastrously) bifurcated
between a newly constructed empty ‘sublime’ transcendence on the one hand, and a self-enclosed totalised ‘beautiful’ finitude on the other.

My final desire, then, is that we should abandon the attempt to modify the regime of subjectivity with transhumanism or else intersubjectivity, and instead attempt to recover the regime of the soul. However, desiring, of course, is not enough. And the regime of subjectivity has not, it would seem, been first of all established in the ethical domain, but rather in that of theoretical knowledge.

Here the obstacle to be overcome is less the first establishment of the regime by Descartes, but rather its more formidable re-establishment by Kant. Even today, it seems to me, this issue is evaded, and Kant is still primarily taken on his own terms as having instituted a ‘critical break’ from which there is no going back. Even Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Wittgenstein and the pragmatists all in the last analysis see themselves as re-working a transcendental turn, albeit now described as ‘quasi-transcendental’. All of them, therefore, still think that in some way permanently identifiable ‘boundaries’ of what there is to be known, or of what there is, ‘appear’ to human reason. And yet even intuitively this appears to be a problematic claim, and two further considerations render it explicitly so. First of all, it would seem that what Kant thought of as ‘metaphysics’ had only existed since early modern scholasticism, and was not a legacy of the ancient Greeks and the earlier middle ages. This ‘metaphysics’ was itself very nearly ‘epistemological’ in orientation, suggesting that Kant’s metaphysics completes, as metaphysics, the very metaphysics that it claims to overturn. Secondly, the conviction that ‘bounds’ will ‘appear’ seems to repeat the assumption made by a construal of being as univocal, that finite being is fully comprehensible on its own terms, and does not require to be referred by analogical attribution to the infinite: in the body of the paper, we shall see that the heart of
Kantian critique is little more than a mutilated analogy of being erected on the basis of an assumed univocity. Thus theology is bound to ask, is not the supposed critical turn in philosophy merely the result of pursuing one option within theology, and therefore not at all something that theology must somehow ‘come to terms with’? On the contrary, it would seem that theology, alone, can call the critical turn into question. But just because it can rationally do so, the turn becomes, even for philosophy, questionable.

Uncertainty about the ‘Kant issue’ perhaps hovers over contemporary phenomenology. Can one radicalise Husserl’s orientation to Berkeley rather than to Kant -- an orientation which permits manifestation and meaning to belong to things in themselves, ontologically. At present the notion of reduction to given donation still seems to continue a transcendental quest for bounds, even if these are now located (as by Jean-Luc Marion in *Etant Donné*) in the anonymous and always missed appearing of an absolutely pure, self-donating transcendent subject to a purely grateful and equally uncharacterisable finite subjective recipient of whom the donor is essentially unaware. Even here there seems to persist some refusal of analogical participation and ontological reciprocity on the basis of a claim somehow passively ‘to know’ within pure philosophy the confines of our finitude, which are correlated with a still somewhat emptily sublime construal of the transcendent (as ‘saturated phenomenon’).

By contrast, abandonment of a transcendental phenomenology would mean also abandonment of the modern passive subject standing over-against objects. Instead, it would allow the emergence of a phenomenology linked with the soul and not the subject, for which appearing, and even intuiting and intending in some measure would belong to objects as much as subjects. And conversely, appearance-to-a-subject would
be seen as inseparable from the contingency of events and their occurrence in part through memory and judgement.

But is this really a possibility, and can one really question the Kantian legacy? What follows is an attempted contribution to such an enterprise. It focuses upon the third Critique, because it will be argued that only here, within the aesthetic domain, is the critical turn fully secured. Elaborated, this argument turns out to mean that the entire critical project in fact depends upon the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. If this distinction is questionable, therefore, then the transcendental turn is also questionable. But the distinction did not exist in Longinus, nor in Boileau, his reviver, and the reasons for its later being made turn out indeed to be questionable, as will be indicated. Effectively, the distinction produces a new empty transcendence, which in turn allows a self-enclosed world to hover perpetually before its brink. Moreover, and decisively, it will turn out that certain of the reasons for the distinction have to do with the refusal of reciprocity. The sublime cut off from the exalted character of beautiful configuration no longer, as with Longinus, concerns rhetorical expression and political effect; while the beautiful cut off from sublime depths of the undisclosed in the disclosed no longer introduces us to the mystery of the other (object or subject), but instead concerns the gaze of an individual upon a circumscribable surface.

Thus the entire problematic can be inverted. It would seem that the regime of the subject in the theoretical sphere prevents reciprocity and permits only a restricted ‘intersubjectivity’; but instead the claim now is that the regime of the subject is itself most fundamentally the ungrounded refusal of reciprocity within the practical sphere.

This is what will now be argued.