

The Way of Perceiving the World for Human: Understanding Kantian Epistemology from the Perspective of Ananda's Debate

Lin Tian

School of Humanities and Social Science, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, 710049, China

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Abstract: This paper compares Kantian epistemology with “seven arguments and eight ways of return” in *the Shurangama Sutra*, and understands Kant’s explanation of “how human perceives the world”. The mind can be understood as Kant’s reason. “Seeking the existence of the mind from seven arguments” corresponds to the problem of the location of reason in Kantian epistemology. There is always a distance between human cognition and thing-in-itself, and this is where traces of the mind (reason) are found. “Discerning the mind in eight ways of return” corresponds to the boundary and freedom of reason in Kantian epistemology. We can touch the boundary of reason to perceive thing-in-itself through phenomena. The mind (reason) lies between freedom and unfreedom, which is not itself conditioned by cause and effect, but is conditioned by its results. From the above, Kant constructed freedom and morality based on reason, and demands that people should know the world rationally, freely, and morally.

1. Introduction

The subjective cognition of humans is inseparable from the perception and understanding of the real material world, so it is necessary to explore whether people can correctly understand the world and how human perceives the world, and Kantian epistemology plays a key role in reconciling empiricism and rationalism. It is an innovative method for Chinese scholars to understand Kant from the perspective of Confucianism and Buddhism. Wang Guowei studied Kantian philosophy four times from 1903 to 1907, and integrated Kantian philosophy into his book *Poetic Remarks on the Human World*, and discussed how do I perceive things. Liang Qichao published an article titled *The Theory of Kant, the Greatest Philosopher in modern Times* in *Xinmin Series Newspaper* in 1903. He said: “Comparing Kant with the ancient Eastern philosophers, the pure theoretical part of his theory is like Sakyamuni, the practical part of his theory is like Confucius, and the process from the pure theory to practice is like Wang Yangming”^[1]. There are many similarities between Kant and Buddhism^[2], which can be interpreted and understood in comparison^[3]. Kantian philosophy is similar to the theory of consciousness-only^[1]. Mou Zongsan explained phenomenon and thing-in-itself through “one mind and two doors” in *the Awakening of Mahayana Faith*^[4]. Both *the Shurangama Sutra* and Kant discuss the following issues: How do I know and perceive things? What is the difference between things and me? How do I exist? Therefore, this paper compares

Kantian epistemology with “seven arguments and eight ways of return” (“seeking the existence of the mind from seven arguments” and “discerning the mind in eight ways of return”).

2. Kantian epistemology and “seeking the existence of the mind from seven arguments”

2.1. The cause and process

When Ananda made a wish to cultivate yourself according to the religious doctrine and seek supreme wisdom because of the thirty-two beautiful images of the Tathagata, the Tathagata asked how he perceives these. Ananda said he saw it with his eyes and used the mind to feel.

The eyes here can be correspond to Kant’s the cognition of concepts. Intuitions which are possible a priori can never concern any other things than objects of our senses^[5]. The human can form perceptual intuitive knowledge through their own perceptual experience (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body), and understand the perceptual performance of the objects, which is the innate cognitive ability of the human.

The mind here can be correspond to Kant’s idea of reason. People need to perceive the real world through reasoning, and give full play to the innate cognitive ability of the human, even though “we can know objects only as they appear to us (to our senses), not as they are in themselves”^[5]. Things themselves “do not conform to our understanding, but it must conform itself to them”^[5]. Kant’s Copernican philosophical revolution holds that experience can never teach us the nature of things in themselves^[5]. Thing-in-itself is unknowable, and distinct from phenomena, and “we know the object (though it remains unknown as it is in itself) by the universal and necessary connection of the given perceptions”^[5].

The combination of eyes and mind is the knowledge obtained from the combination of sensibility and understanding stated by Kant, and then sublimated to reason and obtained the truth based on it. People of similar experiences and emotions will have similar understanding, so people perceive the universally valid and necessary parts of things and the world through the conventional causal relationship. And this causal relationship in the linear process of time shows that humans gradually deepen their perception of things and the world through the three processes of sensibility, understanding, and reason. For Kant, “alone judgments can become objectively valid and be called experience”^[5]. Experiences constitute sensibility and understanding, and the experiences of sensibility and understanding combined with reason guide humans to obtain the correct perception of things.

The Tathagata asked Ananda: “Where are the eyes and the mind?” Ananda’s first answer was “the mind that perceives everything is inside the body”. The Tathagata denied and explained: “If the mind is in our body, then we should first see what is inside the body before we see what is outside the body”. Ananda’s second answer was “the mind that perceives the world actually resides outside the body”. The Tathagata denied and explained: “When we see things the body and mind recognize things together”. This shows that phenomena are based on the senses^[5]. Ananda’s first two answers only show that existence in space is a sensory phenomenon, or the accumulation of perception, and not a judgment based on reason, or even experiences^[5]. Ananda’s third answer was “the mind that perceives the world resides in the eyes”. The Tathagata denied and explained: “When we see the mountains and rivers we cannot see our own eyes”. Ananda’s fourth answer was “the mind that perceives the world exists in the blink of eyes between light and dark, that is, in the between of the body of inside and outside”. The Tathagata denied and explained: “When we open our eyes and see light, we should see the outside of the body, but we do not see our face, and if we see our face, it means that the body and the eyes are two kinds of mind”. From the Kantian perspective is that the mind is complete and not partial, so eyes, inside, outside, light, and dark are the mere representations, “whose use is only immanent, or refers to experience, so far as it can be given.

Whereas the concepts of reason aim at the completeness, i.e., the collective unity of all possible experience, and thereby transcend every given experience. Thus they become transcendent”^[5]. Reason that perceives the world is transcendental and a unified whole of the set of human experiences, not a single body organ. Ananda’s fifth answer was “the mind exists in the combination of thoughts and things”, which is similar to Descartes “I think therefore I am”. The Tathagata denied and explained: “Whether one thought is combined with many things, or many thoughts are combined with one thing”. The appearance and disappearance of thoughts and things are the manifestation of the existence of the mind, and posteriori consciousness and thoughts are not the mind itself. Kant pointed that “the business of the understanding is to think. But thinking is uniting representations in one consciousness”^[5]. However, thinking is not a mere accumulation of representations, understanding is not a mere accumulation of thinking, experiences are not a mere accumulation of understanding, and reason is not a mere accumulation of experiences. Ananda’s sixth answer was “the mind that perceives things is in the middle of the body and external phenomena”. The Tathagata denied and explained: “The middle is a vague concept of relative existence, and cannot be clearly marked. And another question arises as to whether the mind connects the two ends of the body and external phenomena. If the mind is connected to both ends of the body and external phenomena, then the bias of the mind (reason) will lead to the absence of the middle. If the mind is not connected to both ends of the body and external phenomena, then the mind cannot know things, and the middle does not exist at all”. Ananda’s seventh answer was “the mind exists everywhere and nowhere”. The Tathagata denied and explained: “All things that appear in the void are called everywhere, and nowhere is also an existence”. If the mind exists everywhere and nowhere, then there is no need to discuss “where is the mind?” Just as Kant said: “If the pure concepts of the understanding do not refer to objects of experience but to things in themselves (noumena), they have no signification whatever”^[5].

2.2. Where is the mind (reason)

First, the mind perceiving the world is from perception to experience, and is a sublimation of the combination of perception and experience, that is, everything in the world is the manifestation of the mind, and the causal connection of everything is the action of the mind. Kant illustrated that cognition is limited for humans, and the process from perception to experience is inseparable from cause and effect and the world with an example of the sun warms the stone^[5].

Second, the mind that perceives the world is separated from *reine apperception*. The mind that is fixated on distinguishing things and gaining knowledge is *apperception*, and it is the process of connecting appearances to the self in a universally valid way, and in this process “there is no subject’s *apriori* knowledge can be derived from the concept of *apperception*”^[6]. The Tathagata also put forward that “the mind that has left the discrimination and thinking of things is the pure mind”, it shows that the mind which does not change because of the awareness of external things is the pure and immortal mind.

Third, the mind that perceives things is the pure reason of the completeness of intellect according to experiences. In the process of recognizing things, we need “bring the cognition of the understanding as near as possible to the completeness represented by that idea” with the help of completeness of the use of the understanding in the system of experience, which “can be a completeness of principles only, not of intuitions (i.e., concrete at sights) and of objects”^[5]. So there is an insurmountable cognitive barrier between humans and the real world, that is, the irreducible distance between the pure reason and the thing-in-itself. And this distance is exactly the trace that proves the existence of reason (mind), but it is also this distance that leads to people’s wrong cognition of the completeness of things. And “whatever errors may slip in unawares, can only be

discovered by pure reason itself, a discovery of much difficulty”^[5]. The mind that is aware of the existence of the mind is not the true mind. The wrong cognition is corrected through the constant overturning and limiting of the subjective cognition of things by reason itself, but this correction is repeated and continuous, constantly coming and going from the distance between the mind and the real world.

3. Kantian epistemology and “discerning the mind in eight ways of return”

3.1. The cause and process

After listening to the Tathagata’s seven instructions on the existence of the mind, Ananda asked the Tathagata to instruct him on three questions: the first question was whether the mind perceiving the world would change; the second question was how to distinguish between the true and false feelings that arise when one perceives the world; and the third question was how to distinguish the change of thoughts from the unchanging mind, and how to prove the unchanging mind. The Tathagata answered the questions by some examples. First, through a question-and-answer discussion with the king of Bosne, the Tathagata explained to Ananda the truth that the mind does not change and the mind cannot be returned. The king of Bosne asked whether the mind would also die and disappear with the body. The Tathagata answered that the mind which perceives things always exists like the Ganga river. Second, the Tathagata gave another example of the movement of hands and fingers. As Kant said, “the difference between similar and equal things, which are yet not congruent (for instance, two symmetric helices), cannot be made intelligible by any concept, but only by the relation to the right and the left hands which immediately refers to intuition”^[5]. The Tathagata demonstrated the shaking of the mind by rotating the hand, and explained that people attach the mind that perceives things to the material world, but do not know that the material world is the manifestation of the mind. It is not that things themselves can be perceived by people, but that people take the initiative to know things. Everything in the world is the existence given to them by human cognition. “Reason by all its a priori principles never teaches us anything more than objects of possible experience, and even of these nothing more than can be known in experience”^[5]. Objects naturally conform to human cognition because they are established by human subjective cognition, so that the mind that perceives things does not become other things and does not disappear. Third, the Tathagata used the analogy of “the finger pointing to the moon” to explain that the mind does not change. The mind is like the moon does not change even though covered by clouds, and if someone uses a finger to show us where the moon is, then we should look at the moon but not the finger, because the finger is not the moon, and the moon does not exist the place of the finger’s indication. Therefore, eliminating the interference of the appearances of things can distinguish “who is the self-body and who is the object”, so as to find the existence of reason that perceives the world across the appearances, and criticize reason itself. Then, the Tathagata taught us to know thing-in-itself and to seek the place of reason through the phenomena manifested in thing-in-itself, and took “discerning the mind in eight ways of return” for examples to teach Ananda, which means that when return the various aspects of the world to their original causes and places, and abandon all knowledge, there still a thing that cannot be returned and does not change, this is called the pure mind. So reason itself is the innate cognitive ability possessed by human beings, and the natural tendency of reason is metaphysics.

The mind can perceive things from multiple angles, and recognize noumenon through representation, that is, reason is to know the phenomena of things that conform to its own ideas, and thing-in-itself cannot be the object of reason’s investigation. The process of exploring reason is to discover the essence through phenomena, and reason can examine the experiential materials provided by sensibility and understanding and form judgments on the world. The Tathagata gave

examples of “discerning the mind in eight ways of return” for further explanation.

The first is “return the light to the sun”. If we return the mind to light, we cannot see darkness when the sun sets, whereas we can see both light and darkness in reality. The second is “return the darkness to the black moon”. If we return the mind to darkness, we cannot see light when the full moon rises, whereas we can see both light and darkness in reality. The third is “return the openness to the windows and doors”. If we return the mind to openness, we cannot see non-openness when windows and doors are blocked, whereas we can see both openness and non-openness in reality. The fourth is “return the blockage to the wall”. If we return the mind to the blockage, we cannot see openness when the wall does not exist, whereas we can see both the blockage and openness in reality. The fifth is “return the connection to different parts”. If we return the mind to connection, we cannot see disconnection when there is no connection, whereas we can see both the connection and disconnection in reality. The sixth is “return the invisible things to emptiness”. If we return the mind to invisible things, we cannot see visible things when it is not empty, whereas we can see both the visible and invisible things in reality whether it is emptiness or not, and even emptiness itself. The third to sixth illustrate that “space is the form of the external intuition of this sensibility, and the internal determination of every space is only possible by the determination of its external relation to the whole space, of which it is a part (in other words, by its relation to the external sense). That is to say, the part is only possible through the whole, which is never the case with things in themselves, as objects of the mere understanding, but with appearances only”^[5]. The seventh is “return the muddy things to the dust”. If we return the mind to muddy things, we cannot see clean things when they are not stained with dust, whereas we can see both the clean and muddy things in reality. The eighth is “return the clear sky to sunny days”. If we return the mind to the clear sky, we cannot see the dark sky when it is not sunny days, whereas we can see both the clear and dark sky in reality.

From the above, there are differences in things, but the mind is not swayed by the influence of things. The appearances, as mere intuitions, occupying a part of space and time, and the perception does not itself occupy any part of space or of time^[5]. So, it is the mind affects thing-in-itself and produces different views on things, and “grounds of reason give to actions the rule universally, according to principles, without the influence of the circumstances of either time or place”^[5]. Things are numerous and complex, but only one reason, which does not increase or decrease as things change, and reason itself has no dialectic of right and wrong. “The world of sense contains merely appearances, which are not things in themselves, but the understanding must assume these latter ones, viz., noumena”^[5]. Phenomena and things in themselves are both things contained in reason, so it is reason that makes things different, not things that make reason change.

3.2. The boundary and freedom of the mind (reason)

Reason “is neither confined within the sensible, nor straying without it, but only refers, as befits the knowledge of a boundary, to the relation between that which lies without it, and that which is contained within it”^[5]. Although reason is not bound by things and the environment, it has its own boundaries, scope, and limitations, and it cannot go beyond experiences to know thing-in-itself. If we can not correctly understand thing-in-itself and the phenomenon, there will be a paradoxical situation where reason itself is split in two, which are Kant’s four sets of antinomies. This is similar to “false perceptions caused by personal karma” and “false perceptions caused by common karma” proposed by the Tathagata. In Kant’s view, antinomies are the dialectic of reason itself, its criticism of itself, and its exploration of its own boundary, and “founded in the nature of human reason, and hence unavoidable and never ceasing”^[5].

Although reason has boundaries, Kant’s third dialectics of pure reason (the third set of antinomy about free will) debates the question of the freedom of reason. The thing itself is the result of

reason's cognition of it, and the freedom of the result is because of the large number, so the causality of reason is freedom, that is, the rise of the mind and the movement of thought are both cause and effect. The freedom of reason does not interfere with the laws of nature which need to be followed when the phenomena of things exist, nor does the laws of nature interfere with the freedom of reason in practice. In the practice of reason, reason freely defines the phenomena of things, things constantly conform to people's subjective cognition, and things always follow the laws of nature, so reason naturally follows the same laws of nature, and does not produce contradictions. Reason is a free being that is free from the mechanical causality of natural laws, but it is also a being that naturally submits to the causality of natural laws, so reason is "as one exercise of freedom limiting another"^[7].

4. Conclusion

Kant associate morality^[8] and freedom with the mind (reason)^[9]. Human legislates nature through reason. The rational human has free will according to the laws of nature, and takes the initiative to know and change the world, so that cognition and practice are naturally linked together. The process from cognition (pure reason) to practice (practical reason) embodies the effect of reason. In the recognition phase, "reason has the sources of its knowledge in itself, not in objects and their observation, by which latter its stock of knowledge cannot be further increased"^[5]. Thing-in-itself is unknowable, thing-in-itself is outside the scope of one's reason, that is, outside the perceptual world, and therefore it is free from the causal constraints of the phenomenal world. The pure reason itself is also free from the causal constraints of phenomena from the metaphysical point of view, but its practical results are restricted by phenomena, and the use of reason in moral practice is restricted by the natural laws of causality. Therefore, a metaphysics of nature is inadequate for a metaphysical understanding of human moral^[10]. In the practice phase, the practical reason mentioned by Kant is the subjective thinking ability to guide people's moral behavior without the necessity and causality of nature. The principle of practical reason is freedom, and the moral practice guided by practical reason should also be free, but Kant believed that the more self-discipline the more freedom, the real freedom is not to do what one does not want to do, that is, limited freedom is freedom. Reason exists in the freedom of not to do involuntary things. Therefore, the freedom of moral practice is in fact self-discipline. Self-discipline is freedom, self-discipline is morality, morality is self-discipline, morality is freedom. In conclusion, the consistency of reason, freedom, and morality in the process of cognition and practice lies in the fact that Kant constructs freedom and morality based on reason, so as to explore the problem of how human perceives the world in cognition and practice, and this also reflects Kant's request that the human should understand the world rationally, freely and morally.

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