

gustav / December 23, 2009 11:53PM

[Is Kant's Transcendental Idealism Compatible with Nagarjuna's Middle Way?](#)

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A Proposal

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What's the problem?

Here I raise a question: whether Kant's transcendental idealism is compatible with Nagarjuna's Middle Way or not.

The background of the present proposed problem is a care about the conflict between Dignaga and the later Madhyamika thinkers, such as Candrakirti and Santideva. On the one hand, the compatibility between Dignaga's epistemic approach and Kant's, especially with regard to their soteriological purpose, is quite defensible in my intuition; on the other, Nagarjuna's middle way seems to me to be identical with the way Kant's transcendental idealism cutting in between the rationalists and the empiricists. On the side of Kant's own, transcendental idealism is the core of his philosophy, and the special idealism and his special epistemology explain each other. If the above two intuitions can be well grounded, maybe there's a way to reconcile the conflict in India, or, on the contrary, if the intuitions are correct and nonetheless the two judgments cannot be reconciled, identify the schizophrenia in Kant's system and in the discussions of his followers. The present proposed question aims at the second intuition above.

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How's the present scholarship?

It's greatly obliged to many outstanding scholars including Tuck (1990), Wood (1994), 萬金川 (1997), 林鎮國 (1997), 劉婉俐 (2000), the western philosophical interpretative approaches to Nagarjuna are well organized and introduced. One can thereby find the major scholars who compare Kant and Nagarjuna, or Madhyamika in general, include Stcherbatsky (1927) and Murti (1955); the former initiates the comparison by applying Kantian terminology to his interpretation of Madhyamika classics while the latter conducts a systematical comparison between Nagarjuna and Kant. Ben-Ami Scharfstein (1998), agreeing with Murti, thinks the comparison is promising, even though there indeed exist great differences between Kant and Nagarjuna, rather than the relatively fruitless one of Kant with Dignaga and Dharmakirti (505-06). Westerhoff (2009) also shows his approval of the comparison reconstructing a Nagarjuna's system in terms of a conception of "cognitive shift" in Madhyamika.

On the contrary, there are also quite a number of scholars disagree with the comparison. Robinson (1957) holds that Kant's or Hegel's "metaphysical" systems cannot be compatible with any Indian systems at all, and especially that Nagarjuna, or Madhyamika in general's, approach is against any metaphysical "-ism" (extreme), though a logic therein to him is still traceable. 鄭學禮 (1982) criticizes the western understanding of Nagarjuna in general, arguing that Nagarjuna indeed has no stand at all, which makes himself never compatible with any of the western philosophers.

The investigation task proposed here is not going to directly answer to the opponents. The task also distinguishes itself from the above-mentioned by starting the comparison with an intrinsic clarification of the core in Kant's critical philosophy: transcendental idealism, which shall go further than Murti's putting Kant amidst dogmatism and speculative metaphysics, as well as rationalism and empiricism (293); in stead, the clarification puts Kant amidst the a priori and experience. Besides, Scharfstein already pays attention to Kant's later development of thought in his Third Critique, but the attention is too sketchy; such a development crucially participates in the clarification in the present proposed task as well.

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A proposed approach: a comparison from the very core

Kant starts his "Transcendental Deduction" (1st Edition) with a very confusing paragraph which makes many people even think Kant contradicts his own goal of the deduction here, to prove that there indeed exist concepts a priori which relate to objects in experience, or even the whole transcendental philosophy:

That a concept, although itself neither contained in the concept of possible experience nor consisting of elements of a possible experience, should be produced completely a priori and should relate to an object, is altogether contradictory and impossible. (A 95)

The confusion is mainly due to the ignorance of the word "produced" (erzeugt). If there were concept that were completely produced a priori, that would not be Kant's categories at all, for these pure transcendental concepts only "occur" in cognition. From this subtle clarification one can find the proof for Kant's stand that the transcendental elements, given aesthetic or logic, are not self-existents, but cognition-dependent. Further, one can find that, behind his struggle between the rationalists and empiricists, Kant actually aims at "establishing" a middle space between the completely a priori (self-generated devoid of cognition) and the innocent experience. The transcendental elements' being non-self-existent can "roughly and for the time being" answer to the later Madhyamika thinkers' criticism against pramana as self-existent, and, more importantly here, echo with Nagarjuna's criticism about svabhava. The subtle ignorance occurs to many Kant interpreters, including great figures in German Idealism and those who do not buy his transcendental idealism at all but adore his "logic", as the consequence of which no wonder scholars like Ameriks (2006) and 李淳玲 (2009) begin to wonder whether Kant has decent legitimate heirs or not at all. If the kernel of Kant's transcendental idealism has kept being not appreciated enough, what on earth do the scholars like Murti take as materials to compare with Nagarjuna? The present investigation task will proceed with full appreciation of this kernel, strictly follow the middle way in Kant, and compare with Nagarjuna's middle way.

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Edited 11 time(s). Last edit at 12/24/2009 08:11PM by gustav.

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