

From Descartes to Hume: Existence Cognition in the Context of Pre-Kantian Epistemology

Xiaoyu Wang^{1,a,*}

¹*Shanxi Experimental Secondary School, Binhe East Road Side Road, Xiaodian, Taiyuan, Shanxi, China*

a. 2605574650@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In order to explore the function of Kant as a ‘reservoir’ in the history of philosophy, this paper reviews the thought of several important philosophers who preceded him from an interpretive perspective. It analyses Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am’, mainly in terms of the ‘unity of subject and object’, and then examines how Hume’s refinement of empiricism was transformed by the influence of purely theoretical thinking. Finally, the two are explained in the context of Kant’s thought, which leads to subsequent developments.

Keywords: epistemology, reason, being cognition, Descartes, Hume, Kant

1. Introduction

The existence problem, as the main line of Western philosophy, has been mentioned in every philosopher’s thought. However, according to Heidegger, the real existence problem has been forgotten in the history of metaphysics. As the clearest path in the early exploration of modern philosophy, epistemology’s origin is exactly what we need to discuss in order to tease out a clue of historical significance and consider it. Epistemology builds its ideological system on the basis of different investigations of reason, and the meaning and analysis methods of “reason” are different in the context of different philosophers. This paper will attempt to clarify the clear path of this vein by developing several innovative philosophical systems within a historical context.

2. Descartes

As the philosopher who first set up the basis of thinking with reason and then extended on this basis, Descartes’ innovation undoubtedly needs us to give priority to study.

First of all, we need to review Descartes’ main philosophy. The priority should be to observe that his reconstruction of the basis of thought begins with a kind of crazy skepticism. In Descartes’ view, the later period of empiricism was a chaotic one. Each empiricist was constantly adding entities to explain his doctrine. Given that these entities were derived from their sensory experiences, and that experiences and senses were constantly deceiving us, we must question whether these posterior cognitions had any real properties. It is worth noting that this suspicion of the “absurdity” of posteriori thought is regarded by Husserl as the germ of the desire of modern philosophical phenomenology, precisely because it returns to the inner in continuous reflection and overturns and rebuilds the outer “muddy” dogma influenced by it from birth in the depths of the soul.

“Now I feel that thought is a property that belongs to me and cannot be separated from me by it alone. There is me; my existence is assured; but for how long? I exist as long as I think, for if I stop thinking, it is very likely that I will cease to exist at the same time.... As a result, strictly speaking, I am only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, a reason, or a reason with names whose meanings I did not previously understand. Then I am a real thing. But what is it? I said, It’s a thing of the mind [1].”

Descartes, being a genius, used this doubt to find a truly pure intuition, the cogito, which was an unshakeable base that came from nothing but itself. He then built a universal system of philosophy on top of the cogito. Under this motive, the purity of thinking speaks for itself. It is in this purity that the real, direct connection between thinking and being can be established. Descartes’ musings are extremely solitary. He first abandoned the original spiritual support, turned to the original knowledge and common-sense attack, and finally, in a continuous detour (the separation of experience and perception), sought the truth. The basis emerges as follows: in the process of doubt, I am thinking of the fact that it is certain and cannot be doubted. Attached to this is the fact that this “happening” is its “being [2].” So Descartes says, “Je pense, donc je suis.” It is more appropriate to translate this sentence in French as “I think, therefore I am” using “Therefore” instead of “and” to emphasize this simultaneity. It should be noted that this “truth” is derived from Descartes’ fixation on the investigation of reason, which is embodied in the method of reflection: a suspending body and examining one’s actions before the mirror of thought, an examination of the intentional act of conceiving the self. The reality here is that I am, not the reflection of my existence captured through the “mirror,” nor the fact that I exist when I reflect; in fact, “I” already exist in this kind of action. Descartes follows the fundamental clue that subject and object are one another not only in this process of reflection and primordial impulse, but also in the essential simultaneous nature of the truth. In reflection, I exist at the same time as the reflection in the mirror. In practice, thinking and being occur simultaneously. This main line was first germinated by Descartes. Although it is still very imperfect, its enlightening effect cannot be ignored. As the originator, Descartes not only created and demonstrated a unique methodology, emphasizing that there is not God but intention and action, but also built a bridge between logos and eigos, allowing the spiritual ideal of independent judgment to finally break through the cage and lead thinking to a clearer and freer path, seeking a firm starting point for pure reason. This open consciousness begins with a general doubt (later called Cartesian doubt), flourished in the self-existent God, leading to the two separate and coexisting entities of mind and body, and finally to the obsession with nature, where miracles were performed.

However, Descartes was the first to experience the unity of being and thinking, according to his keen perception, but his interpretation of this point is vaguer and more contradictory. Nowadays, Descartes’ theory is often seen as a kind of “mind-matter dualism,” which emphasizes the opposition between mind and matter entities, i.e., the subject and object, in his theory. The two entities were proposed through pure rational thinking and finally come down to the “I” as a body and mind harmony of the whole, but in connecting the unity of the two, Descartes empirically sought the “pineal gland” to establish its connection with the third entity, God, which obviously violates the original request of “pure reason” to reject the principle of extension. The so-called unity of subject and object was only a germ in Descartes’ theory, and it is for this reason that his theory was eventually known as dualism.

Spinoza, as the inheritor of this doctrinaire position, naturally corrected Descartes’ contradictions. For Spinoza, there is only one entity: nature as a whole, that is, God. God is self-causing and therefore can only be known through himself. It is important to note that Spinoza’s criticism of the Cartesian method of analysis (in which the cause is sought from the manifestation of the effect) differs from the synthetic analysis that Spinoza employed, which had its roots in Aristotle [3]. In this way, Spinoza proposed that thought and extension, as the two attributes of God, are united in this one entity, expressed in the various embodiments (les affections), and that by the expression of this manifestation, the process of reduction downward from the universal entity to the original entity of “the one” is

examined. Based on the preceding investigation, it is clear that Spinoza's unity of subject and object here stands on an objective basis, which means, looking back on the entire nature through the expression of different embodiments and patterns rather than raising patterns to concepts and perceiving existence as objects through free will. Although Spinoza's theory of entity monism is indeed a revision of Cartesian dualism, it is ultimately limited to the potential existence of patterns and lacks self-awareness of the perception of objective absolute existence, which is what later philosophy needs to complete.

3. Hume

The development of rationalism has had a profound influence on the academic world, which makes empiricist scholars set foot on a new road through continuous self-correction. As the successor to Locke and Barclay, Hume, with a very normative analytical approach, is a good synthesis of the two tendencies, as an empiricist committed to skepticism. We shall examine this turn of events as a priority here.

Hume's first concern is the origin of human knowledge, i.e., the origin of empiricism. In Hume's opinion, perception, as something derived from experience and evolves directly into knowledge, must be analyzed first and clearly established as the foundation of empiricism. He divided perception into impressions and ideas, the main difference between them being that they enter our consciousness with varying degrees of stimulus. Hume only defined and distinguished the two from a qualitative point of view, but he did not measure the degree with a clear standard of step and definite ratio, so this classification is not accurate enough. Impression is primal and always emerges first: the concept of what we perceive first appears and remains in our mind as an impression. Accordingly, the derived perception, which is repeated in the subsequent recall, is the idea. In this view, all ideas seem to derive distinctly from the sensory impressions that precede them. This is an important principle: he overcomes and revises Locke's vague tendency on this subject, insists on the thoroughness of empirical philosophy, and tries to solve the problem of the origin of ideas.

"If we confine our speculation to the appearance of an object before our senses and do not further inquire into its true nature and function, we are free from all difficulties and are never perplexed by any question. If we were to extend our inquiry beyond the phenomenon of an object being in front of the senses, I am afraid that most of our conclusions would be filled with skepticism and uncertainty [4]."

Locke regards ideas as the material of knowledge gained through experience and reflection. Ideas act as both feelings and thoughts. Locke's account of its origin is very general, and Hume's distinction between impression and idea revises this ambiguity and explains it. However, Hume does not embody the essence in his explanation of the origin of ideas. He does not use the primitive method of explaining the formation of ideas in terms of the active action of the entity, the mind, but instead simply distinguishes the two types of perception. He did not ignore the problem, but he thought in the beginning that the problem was outside the cognitive capacity of man because the cognitive capacity of man is through nature and physics. Here, we need to make a premise clear. Before German idealism, people's cognition of existence was usually only a kind of "nature" and "objective whole" with a wide range, which was a self-caused entity outside the division, while empirical philosophy searched for the starting point of thinking through the interaction with existence and the perception of the outside world, so Hume would fall into doubt on the origin of consciousness. His skepticism is not subjectively idealistic because he does not deny the reality of objective materials. He has more of a phenomenalist view of the present, which is that there is an objective world that we cannot recognize or perceive. We perceive only empirical phenomena and not reality itself. Hume's view showed the end of empiricism in this period and inspired later metaphysics with an obvious phenomenological feature: Since there are objective things outside consciousness that do not depend on consciousness,

so that perception can be produced externally rather than from our cognition, then all empiricism is incomplete.

Hume's skepticism is a kind of mild skepticism. Though we cannot answer how this quantized, unconnected nature of the elementary senses, in its continuous generalization and experience, forms a perception and image that persists within us, and it does not appear chaotic in the process of association (although the association is often interrupted and one-sided and gradually makes the cognition contradictory), we still need to confirm that the common sense and belief we construct in this sense are absolute or natural, without which we cannot perceive and act. What Hume doubts is not the practicality of everyday ideas, but their objectivity. Here, the natural concept and the suspicious tendency obviously conflict, and Hume can only regard habitual cognition as the mental illusion of human beings so as not to fall from skepticism to nihilism.

4. Kant

Hume's skepticism was rejected by Kant, and thus Kant established transcendental philosophy. As a revolutionary but involuntary revolutionary philosopher, Kant does not want to deny what came before him, nor does he look forward. Kant tried to solve the metaphysical mystery, and based on this, he wanted to explain the legitimacy of science. In this respect, he is more in line with Aristotle's tendency to believe that metaphysics is boundless and unsolvable, and his quest is to explain why these problems are unsolvable [5]. This meant that Kant had to come up with a new position to explain metaphysical thought and the so-called "first guiding principle." It was the discovery of the nature of metaphysical problems that made Kant a revolutionary.

Skepticism acknowledges that the laws of the world exist and are experienced but cannot be recognized. This almost denies that there are rules in experience. Kant first clarified that knowledge of nature's regularity is the result of rational analysis. He distinguishes two kinds of concepts, namely analytic judgment and synthetic judgment. Analytic judgment require no additional concepts in the process of reasoning and emphasize a kind of identity. It's a proposition that's only true in terms of word meaning and logical law. It is a process of downward reduction, interpretation, classification, and sorting. By adding to the original concept, synthetic judgments emphasize propositions that are extended in reasoning, that are extended beyond the intended meaning of the words, and that are true only under certain conditions. In the definition of the two, it is obvious that the analytic can be understood innately. Even made-up words can be understood through a priori knowledge in the process of interpretation, while many synthetic propositions can only be understood through acquired experience, which must be restricted and related. Thus, there are two forms of knowledge, namely, the innate analysis and the acquired synthesis, which Hume called (for him) the "relations of ideas" and the "matters of fact" of human objects of study [6]. But for Kant, synthetic a priori proposition still exists. This is, in fact, the fundamental proposition of all philosophy, of pure mathematics, and indeed of all the natural sciences [7]. In explaining this, Kant invokes a kind of Copernican thinking. Copernicus assumed that the stars moved around the observer, but he could not explain the motion of the celestial bodies. Then he tried to look at the rotation itself outside the observer and assumed that the celestial body was at rest, and he finally succeeded in proposing the heliocentric theory. Metaphysically, if people intuitively follow the character of the object of observation, that is, the impression and idea it leaves us, then they have no knowledge of the principle of knowing things a priori. Then we must conform the object, the perceived object, to our intuitive ability to produce shape, and we can consider the possibilities. Kant contends that if our bodies, nature, and the ideas and concepts they leave us are derived from our experience of the objects we know, then our knowledge of experience must have an a priori component. But if, in our reflection upon ourselves, we find the most basic form of such ideas and concepts, from this form of thought all the objects of knowledge are derived. This form is inevitable and universally applicable, and therefore a priori synthetic

judgment is possible. In this sense, Hume's doubts about the law of nature and the law of causality can be explained.

This new critical position needs to be further explained and developed. Kant's Copernican revolution first gave up building a new path on the theory of knowledge. Since the metaphysical object, existence, or noumenon, is immense and unknowable, our investigation and discussion of it are doomed to be futile. However, this in itself can be thought about, so we need to reject this path of knowledge of "reason over noumenon." to a more active, practical role. In metaphysics, since reason has the a priori ability to unify understanding in principle and construct intellectual knowledge based on its consistency, and we have demonstrated in the previous paragraph that it is feasible and necessary to use reason in the tracing of metaphysics, we need to give priority to the guiding role of reason in the development of metaphysics in the progress of practice. The speculative theory stipulates that the idea cannot be realized transcendently and places constraints on the rules' implementation, whereas practical rationality requires the idea to directly guide the transcendence of reason, which has no epistemological significance. This transcendence does not imply making intellectual judgments based on appearances, but rather the meaning of moral practice as a means of providing motivation for behavior and self-awareness. The fundamental significance of Kant's Copernican revolution lies in that he took a critical stance and corrected the tendency of human reason to explore the transcendental noumenon after manifestation, making it pursue the inner transcendence in practice and morality on the principle of rational action rather than on the principle of the material of the desire to explore [8]. This significance points out the direction for the development of post-metaphysics with a new philosophical attitude and has a far-reaching influence on the history of philosophy.

5. Conclusion

As the main line running through the history of metaphysics, the existence problem, in the context of pre-Kantian epistemology, has opened up a path of rationalism since Descartes' "pure" existence cognition led by self-doubt, which was subsequently modified and deepened by Spinoza. Subject and object are united not only in this solipsistic position but also in other philosophical systems in the history of philosophy. The consistent cognition induced by Descartes influenced subsequent empiricists, and English empiricism developed as a counterpoint to rationalism. The two were embodied as dogmatism and skepticism before Kant, and they were rescued from the dilemma of contradiction under the critical position constructed by Kant, so that they were unified under the new philosophical perspective, from the traditional theory of knowledge to practical philosophy. Kantian philosophy is an important peak in the history of philosophy. Pre-Kantian philosophy is convergent and innovative here, and post-Kantian philosophy is rooted in this. We have studied only the narrower side of Kant's philosophy, and the guiding effect has been so clearly examined that it is enough to show the vast and complete system.

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