

PURE REASON AND METAPHORS: A REFLECTION ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF KANT'S PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract. *The article debates the problems of metaphors in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The most important four Kantian metaphors analyzed here are: the Copernican revolution, the island of truth and the stormy ocean of illusion, the starry heavens and the moral law, and the vision of perpetual peace. Besides the extensive analysis of these four metaphors and of some criticism directed towards some of the core problems of Kantianism, these pages try to answer to the question if Kant's metaphors are still capable of stimulating our systematic thinking.*

Keywords: metaphors, Immanuel Kant, the Copernican Revolution, the island of truth, the starry heavens, the moral law, perpetual peace

I. On the Role of Metaphors in Philosophy

Great philosophers are more often remembered for their central metaphors and other figures of speech, than for their sophisticated doctrines. Usually, Plato's name is associated with the allegory of the cave, familiar even to those who have never read a single line of his magnificent dialogues. Hegel's name may evoke his pronouncement of "the end of history," or the beautiful image of the owl of wisdom, Minerva, who spreads her wings at dusk, when the face of the world has already grown old. The resonant metaphor associated with Nietzsche might well be his call for the re-evaluation of all values, culminating in an image of the pitiless superman. The name of Wittgenstein probably brings to mind the phrase "language games," or perhaps the perplexing conclusion of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; there he first claimed that "we must ... throw away the ladder after having climbed up on it," and then concluded his book with a memorable statement: "Of what we cannot speak we must be silent."

Such metaphors have been remembered not only for their rhetorical beauty, but also because they manage to compress intricate philosophical doctrines of great thinkers, their vision of the big picture, into a few vibrant images and captivating phrases. They find their place in our collective memory not only for what they claim or imply, but more importantly because they re-orient and re-shape how we look at the world, and view our own place and role in it. This suggests that metaphors are not simply external ornaments and mere effective summaries; they are not only figures of speech, but also figures of thought. As such,

metaphors may belong to the very foundation of thinking and be the true motivating forces that, in the first place, lead philosophers to develop and articulate their thoughts in a systematic way.¹

II. Kant's Central Metaphors

Immanuel Kant was unquestionably one of the greatest philosophical minds of all times, and it is of interest to remind ourselves of the central metaphors that gave expression to his main concerns and convictions. Kant's central philosophical preoccupation was with the nature and limits of "pure reason". Nevertheless, although always trying to examine and develop our rational thinking to its utmost boundaries, Kant did not shy away from occasionally using figurative representations. What is more, Kant probably believed that the use of metaphors could help us better to grasp the true nature and limits of pure reason. The four such metaphors that made the strongest impression on his contemporaries and his successors are as follows: (A) the Copernican revolution; (B) the island of truth and the stormy ocean of illusion; (C) the starry heavens and the moral law; and (D) the vision of perpetual peace.²

(A) The First Metaphor

The first of the above listed metaphors occurs in the Preface for the second edition of Kant's masterly *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge.³

This approach to metaphysics is very different from the Hegelian owl of Minerva whose main task is to reflect on and understand what has already happened. For Kant, as for Plato, the central task of philosophy is not descriptive and reflective, but normative and revolutionary. Yet Kant's conception of philosophy is even more radical than that of Plato. Reason is not just a mirror of the world, or even a mere lamp by the light of which we can distinguish shadows and images from things as they truly are. In yet another of his imaginative and vivid metaphors, Kant compares reason to an appointed judge and lawgiver, determined to bend this world into something better than it has been heretofore. Kant's

¹ For further discussion, see Colin M. Turbayne, *The Myth of Metaphor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

² For a very different discussion of metaphors in Kant's philosophy, see, for instance, David W. Tarbet, "The Fabric of Metaphor in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6 (1968), pp. 257-270. See also Lewis White Beck, "Kant's Strategy," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 28 (1967), pp. 224-236.

³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), Bxvi.

Copernican turn presents the most powerful expression of a change of the basic paradigm, the change initiated by Descartes and carried out by modernity: It is not the subject who has to direct himself toward the object, but the other way around. Kant's famous declaration that "we can know *a priori* of things only what we ourselves put into them"⁴ found its full development in the Transcendental Aesthetics, where space and time are explained as *a priori* forms of intuition, and in the Transcendental Analytic, where Kant systematically arranged the categories as the basic *a priori* concepts of understanding. All experience of which human beings are capable is made possible through these *a priori* elements.

(B) The Second Metaphor

Kant never tired of emphasizing the active and creative powers of man, but he also never forgot to point out their unsurpassable boundaries. His 'creative man' was nowhere near Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (superman), and was also far more limited in creative abilities than Schiller, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling were inclined to believe. In contrast to these German idealists, whom he inspired, but who failed to acknowledge that man's creativity is exercised in a world man did not create, Kant used the beautiful image of a "land of truth." This land is described as an island

surrounded by a vast and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog-bank and many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprises which he can never abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion.⁵

This land of truth is man's realm, the realm in which he is a creator and legislator; yet it is nothing more than a knowable island in the ocean of an unknowable universe. Unlike Wittgenstein, who declared a metaphysical moratorium on speech at the very end of the *Tractatus* ("Of what we cannot speak we must be silent"), Kant was convinced that it is of the utmost importance to talk about and critically examine why we can never know those metaphysical issues to which we are drawn so irresistibly. They express the deepest concerns of pure reason, and for their sake a critique of pure reason needed to be written. He held that these concerns ultimately reduce to three: the immortality of the soul, the existence of God, and the possibility of freedom in a mechanically determined world. Their examination helps us avoid illusions and self-deceptions with regard to who we are and what we are capable of achieving. Kant's Transcendental Dialectic shows us, for instance, that we can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God. It also leads us to recognize what Kant called "the most fortunate discovery" of pure reason: namely, the existence of the antinomies of reason. The antinomies are the seemingly contradictory assertions – four theses and four antitheses – which claim equally strong support for themselves and reveal the permanent boundaries of human reason.

This impasse of pure reason led Kant to several fundamental realizations. Although Kant always gladly followed Aristotle in emphasizing that we are rational beings, the antinomical impasse allowed Kant to free himself – at least partially – from the arresting

⁴ *Ibid.*, Bxvii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, A235-6/B294-295.

intellectualism which had dominated philosophy since the time of the Greeks. It also enabled him to resolve the unbearable tension between science and religion, by finding it “necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.”⁶ Kant’s great insight was that some fundamental claims of reason cannot be decided based on evidence alone, but must nevertheless be resolved. They can be resolved following the “needs and interests of reason,” which led him to substitute the foundations of intellectualism for a moralism, and to claim “the primacy of practical over theoretical reason.”⁷

(C) The Third Metaphor

Kant elaborated what he meant by that primacy in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the conclusion of the latter work he famously stated:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me... The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an animal creature, which must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came, the matter which is for a little time provided with vital force, we know not how. The latter, on the contrary, infinitely raises my worth as that of an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals a life independent of all animality and even of the whole world of sense – at least so far as it may be inferred from the final destination assigned to my existence by this law, a destination which is not restricted to the conditions and boundaries of life but reaches into the infinite.⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*, Bxxx. As Friedrich Paulsen argued, the significance and vitality of Kant’s philosophy will principally rest upon his fixing the limits of knowledge and faith and thereby furnishing a basis for their honorable and enduring peace. “This gives knowledge what belongs to it, – the entire realm of phenomena for free investigation; it conserves, on the other hand, to faith its eternal right to the interpretation of life and of the world from the standpoint of value.” Quoted from Paulsen, *Immanuel Kant: His Life and Doctrine*, trans. J. E. Creighton and Albert Lefevre (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1963), p. 6.

⁷ See Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:119-121. Except for *Critique of Pure Reason*, all references to Kant’s other works will be given with respect to the “Akademie Ausgabe” (Ak) of Kant’s works: *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin und Leibzig: de Gruyter, 1902ff). The first number refers to the volume, and the second to the page number of the Academy edition. Paulsen correctly points out that Kant’s shift from the theoretical to the practical reason was influenced by Hume, and especially Rousseau, who “had great weight, especially in putting an end to Kant’s over-estimation of things intellectual, and teaching him that wise simplicity and a good heart are more than all metaphysics and natural theology.” But, adds Paulsen, “On the other hand, one may assume that the estrangement from the school metaphysics was essentially a development from within”; see *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁸ *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:162-163.

Kant's friends were so impressed by this metaphor that they had the words "the starry heavens above me, the moral law within me" inscribed on his gravestone. They emphasize the two deepest poles of his thought: the cosmos, toward which his youthful passion was directed, and the moral law, the object of the almost mystical enthusiasm of his old age. In marked contrast to the cave allegory, the proper attitude toward these two worlds is not that of "either-or." Unlike Plato before him, or Hegel after him, Kant was convinced that we are citizens of two worlds – worlds that partially overlap, yet cannot be reduced to one. Just as we cannot simply choose one of the antinomical pairs and then abandon the other, we cannot but participate in both worlds; both are genuine, both reveal authentic aspects of our complex and divided nature. This irrevocable dualism does not make it easier but more difficult to find our proper place and role in reality. The phenomenal world that we can know seems to annihilate our importance as moral and spiritual beings; the noumenal world, toward which we strive and which dignifies our existence, we cannot rationally apprehend and know. Nevertheless, although ignorant of it, we should not be indifferent toward that transcendent world, and our proper attitude toward it is that of professing faith.

(D) The Fourth Metaphor

Kant believed that such a leap of faith need not be fully irrational, and tried to convince us – not always very persuasively – of the possibility of rational faith. He had different answers to the question regarding the proper object of that faith.⁹ In his moral writings, it was the commensurability of virtue and happiness, under the conception of the highest good. In his writings on the philosophy of religion, it was the hope of the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. In his historical and political writings, the focus was the magnificent vision of perpetual peace, as expressed in his famous essay "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch."

By no means a naïve or utopian thinker who would believe in an inevitable progress of humankind, Kant warned us that the words "perpetual peace" were inscribed over the entrance of an inn together with a picture of a graveyard. While a graveyard may be a more romantic version of a state of perpetual peace than a nuclear wasteland, they both portray essentially the same "solution" to the tensions burdening the world in which we live. Our hope is that this is not the only solution, and that the archetypal ideal of eternal peace may still generate some positive energy, that it may help to inspire a radical transformation of our desperate world.

May we, then, hope for perpetual peace? To distinguish this aspiration from an empty wish, Kant understands hope as a belief in something that is at least possible; unlike an empty wish, hope has to be legitimized. In this spirit, Kant clarifies that his question: What may I hope?, should be understood in connection with: What ought I to do? This means that we should approach our hope for perpetual peace in the following way: If we do what we ought to do, can we hope for perpetual peace?

Kant's hope was that our rational ability and moral conscience would be strong enough to steer us away from the abyss of self-destruction, away from the "idyllic" peace of the graveyard, and direct us toward the creation of a much better and more just world. His thoughts about how we could become worthy of such an ideal were expressed in yet another

⁹ For further discussion, see Kant's essay "Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren?" (What is Orientation in Thinking?), Ak 8:131-147.

memorable metaphor: The world could become a place in which human beings can live dignified and peaceful lives only if politics bends its knee before morality.¹⁰

III. Critical Remarks

Reflecting on the previous history of philosophy, Kant would emphatically disagree with Wittgenstein that we should throw away the ladder of reason after we have climbed up on it. Even when insisting on leading metaphysics to a secure path of science, he had no illusion that philosophy would ever become a closed body of knowledge, or that we should approach any philosopher with an expectation that his theory comprises the definitive pronouncements of truth. Just as there is no end of history, there is no end of philosophy. Kant thought in that spirit both as a philosopher and as a teacher of philosophy. In the *Announcement of the program of his lectures for the winter semester of 1765-66*, he warned that a student naively thinks that “he is going to learn philosophy. But that is impossible, for he ought to learn how to philosophize.”¹¹ In our own learning how to philosophize, Kant advised us to take his following words seriously: “The philosophical writer ... upon whom one bases one’s instruction is not to be regarded as the paradigm of judgment. He ought rather to be taken as the occasion for forming one’s own judgment about him, and even, indeed, for passing judgment against him.”¹²

In taking Kant’s philosophy as an occasion to form our own judgment, there is much to praise, yet also a great deal to criticize. We shall divide our criticisms into two parts, the first dealing with Kant’s theoretical and the second with his practical philosophy.

(A) Criticism of Kant’s Theoretical Philosophy

Let us reconsider, one more time, Kant’s famous Copernican turn. The difference between the old approach, focused on ontology, and Kant’s new approach, centered on epistemology, can be represented by the following models.

Model 1: The ancient and scholastic view of the priority of object over subject. Being and thinking are not *ontological* equals. Being is treated as having its own firmly established identity and unity, independent of and indifferent to whether it is known. To be is to be a definite kind of thing. If our thinking is to disclose what being is, it must adjust itself to its properties.

Model 2: The modern view of the epistemological prevalence of subject over object. Being and thinking are not *epistemological* equals. Thinking has priority over being, insofar as it is more easily accessible than being. In order to be known, being must “adjust” to the structures of thinking. To be is to be an object of possible knowledge; it is to be knowable as a certain kind of thing.

¹⁰ Kant, “Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf,” Ak 8:370.

¹¹ *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Ak 2:306.

¹² *Ibid.*, Ak 2:307.

A careful analysis of these models seems to reveal that Kant himself perhaps overlooked that his Copernican turn consists not of one but of two steps. The first step minimizes or even denies the ontological priority of the object over the subject, of being over thinking (Model 1). The second step establishes a new paradigm by affirming the epistemological priority of the subject of the object, of consciousness and reason over being (Model 2). We are accustomed to making both steps together, without pausing to see whether the first needs to be followed by the second. A closer look shows that the first step does not necessarily lead to the second, for it allows for a possibility of an interactive cooperation between the subject and the object.

Thus, in developing his Copernican turn, Kant did not pause enough to realize that instead of the two possible model relations of the object and the subject, there are actually three. The first model, which his turn abandons, is the one in which object is treated as independent of and superior to subject. Kant reverses this pattern without seeing that their relation does not have to be one of subordination, but can be one of cooperation. When Kant formulated the basic law of all synthetic cognition, namely that “the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are likewise [the] conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience,”¹³ he did not realize that this agreement does not necessarily imply either transcendental subjectivism, or transcendental idealism. All that this law of cognition presupposes is that the principles of cognizing subject and the principles of the cognized object must overlap – if not fully, then to a significant degree. They could overlap for different reasons, however, and not necessarily because either the subject or the object would impose itself on the other member of the relation. The overlap of the basic principles may be due to a correlation of the principles originally present in both, or it may be created in an interactive process of cognition. Kant occasionally hinted at that latter possibility, for instance when he claimed that “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, he quickly turned away from exploring the idea that cognition may essentially be an interactive relation, and so missed an opportunity to develop a new and interactive metaphysical model.¹⁵

The metaphorical contrast of the land of truth and the ocean of illusion indicates why philosophical movements such as empiricism, positivism, and pragmatism are both right and wrong. They are right insofar as they limit us to the only land that we can justifiably claim to be ours, the land we can control and manipulate to suit our purposes. But they are wrong insofar as they assume that the stormy ocean should cease to stir our imagination and tempt us

¹³ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A158/B197.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, A51/B75.

¹⁵ How should we understand the relation of interaction? A preliminary consideration reveals three elementary points that should be kept in mind. (1) Interactive relations are always reciprocal; this is what distinguishes them from one-directional relations such as actions or reactions. This reciprocity can take many forms, depending on the elements involved. We can distinguish, for instance, between interdependence, interchange, intercourse, interlinking, interfusing, interplaying, and so on. (2) Interactions are dynamic, not static, relations. Their conditions, parameters, or even objectives can change with different circumstances and over a period of time, without thereby interrupting the interactive quality of the relations themselves. (3) Interactions can take place between quite heterogeneous elements; homogeneity is not a prerequisite for interaction. For further discussion, see my book *Between Truth and Illusion: Kant at the Crossroads of Modernity* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

away from the familiar shore. Our needs are neither exhausted nor fully satisfied by what we can measure, control, or possess. To Kant's regrets, metaphysics may never again recover its ancient status of the queen of all sciences, but its attraction is not going to fade away.

(B) Criticism of Kant's Practical Philosophy

Kant was convinced that our attraction for metaphysics should not cease, especially if metaphysics is understood as pertaining to the domain of morals. But then the metaphorical medium presents itself in a very different way. In the case of his vision of perpetual peace, the metaphor is – at least on the surface – temporal rather than spatial. Although expressed in the language of forthcoming political changes, Kant's warning about a politics that must bend its knee before morality carries within itself another message. Highly impractical and almost impossibly demanding – like the Judeo-Christian vision that inspired it – at its heart, his vision is the expectation of an inner, not an outer change; of an individual, not a social transformation. The vision of perpetual peace is an extension of Kant's most deeply rooted conviction that the ultimate test of our humanity and dignity is moral rather than political. He would agree with Aristotle that man is both a rational and a political animal. But, above all, Kant insisted, he is a moral agent.

We should not embark on a journey to some far-away ocean or to a distant planetary system in the starry heavens, but rather to the hidden depths of our souls: the moral law does not echo from the high sky above us, but from within us. It is indeed fully appropriate that the words inscribed on his grave should be those reminding us of the starry heavens and the moral law, for this is Kant's best, and also his worst, metaphor.¹⁶ This is his best metaphor, for none other could so succinctly capture the fundamental conviction behind his multifaceted, revolutionary, and – above all – profound philosophy. But this metaphor is also his worst, for it reveals some of his deep biases and misconceptions. Kant's vision of the complex and internally divided human nature is not complex and divided enough. As our experience of art and religion reminds us, we are members of many more worlds than just the phenomenal and the noumenal. Yet in Kant's philosophy, everything that may stand outside the mechanical law of nature and the moral law of the rational agent is denied its neutrality and reverted to

¹⁶ Nicolai Hartmann had Kant's metaphor in mind when he wrote the following paragraph: "The naïve view always regards the world anthropocentrically; everything in it turns upon man, who is the essential kernel of the whole. The critical and scientific view sets up the antithesis: man in comparison with the whole is a speck of dust, an ephemeral, a negligible, phenomenon. Ethics synthesizes these extremes; the cosmic insignificance of man is not the last word; besides the ontological there is still an axiological determination of the world, and, in this, man plays an integrating role. In this his insignificance is overborne – without a reintroduction of anthropocentric megalomania. Man, a vanishing quantity in the universe, is still in his own way stronger than it: he is the vehicle of a higher principle, he is the creator of a reality which possesses significance and value, he transmits to the real world a higher worth. Nature is bound down to its own laws; man alone carries in himself a higher law, whereby he – or more correctly the law through him – creates in the world, or from Non-Being brings forth into Being, that which was prefigured in its ideality"; quoted from Hartmann's valuable yet unjustly neglected book by Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1926), XVII (c). I cited from the English translation of Hartmann's work: *Ethics*, trans. S. Coit (New York: Macmillan, 1932), vol. 1, pp. 243.

one of these two laws. Despite Kant, however, beauty has an independent significance of its own and cannot be reduced to “a symbol of morality,” as he argued in the *Critique of Judgment*. Nor can religion be neatly curbed into an understanding of duties “as divine commands,” as he proposed in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

Kant belongs to the great majority of philosophers who seem to believe that – in their approach to any kind of problem or issue – they have a choice between either monism or dualism. Kant clearly and always opted for the latter, but to be faithful to the variety and richness of human experience, he could have reconsidered the whole issue. More precisely, I believe that Kant should have opened up his dualistic approach and try to embrace a genuine pluralism, especially with regard to values and moral issues. Yet he did not. In moral writings, he insisted on the dualism of either heteronomy or autonomy, of either inclinations or duties, as if no interdependence of the internal and external values and elements is possible.

Moreover, Kant overestimated the autonomous power of a rational moral agent, by reversing the relation of volition (*Wollen*) and the moral ought (*Sollen*). As in his Copernican turn in which the subject imposes his own *a priori* cognitive principles on the object, in his metaphysics of morals the moral law must be peculiar to the will itself, the expression of its true innermost tendency. The practical reason must prescribe its own law; the essence of good will lies precisely in this legislation. The problem is that the relation of volition and the ought is thereby distorted, for the ought does not determine volition, but volition determines the ought. While this position is problematic and deficient even when taken by itself, it becomes even more so when we have to explain not only the problem of evil, but any free choice that deviates from the moral law: How is it conceivable that the will should first give the law and then transgress it?¹⁷

As a philosophical theory, morality often seduces us into the illusion that moral problems are essentially intellectual problems, that they are philosophical questions in need of philosophical answers. But this is certainly not so. Ethical problems and ethical norms do not have any privileged status, intellectual or otherwise. They are but a fragment of a broader constellation of problems, that concerning the art of living. If, as Kant argued, truth is related to rationality as such, and not only to knowledge and theory, and if a way of living can be rational and irrational, then it can also be true and false. Kant should have argued not for the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason, but for the primacy of the practical realm over the theoretical realm. The deepest and most important truths and illusions are not those that we think, but those that we live by.

Many such illusions deal with the precise nature and function of moral norms. Despite Kant's insistence, ethics cannot be merely normative, for moral laws by themselves are powerless. Moral laws know nothing about living, concrete individuals, whose lives are the only battlefields of morality. Even when morality is to be understood in terms of our duties and responsibilities, as Kant insisted, it is not to be understood as a dyadic relationship between a fallible rational agent and an untouchable rational norm. By its very nature, the moral relationship is triangular: moral laws and norms are only mediators between an individual on the one side, and other individuals and reality as a whole, on the other. Moral laws and norms are only means of our interacting with the situations in which we find ourselves; they are only guidelines for our orientation in reality. Like cognition, morality may not consist either in action, or in reaction, but in interaction.

¹⁷ For further discussion along these lines, Hartmann, *op. cit.*, chapters 11-13, especially 11a.

Kant not only believed in the autonomous position of morality but elevated it to the highest possible pedestal. No one before Kant and – significantly – no one after, attempted a metaphysical reconstruction of morals that would abstract from all anthropological considerations and present a system of principles and duties binding not only for all human but all rational beings. Yet are there other rational beings besides us, human beings? Even if they exist, what is to assure us that their rationality and morality are sufficiently similar to our own? More importantly, are all human beings even to count as rational? Are we so merely potentially and in principle, or only when we actually act as rational beings? It seems more important to focus on human beings and their moral struggles, rather than to speculate about possible rational beings, whose existence or non-existence does not affect our morality anyway.

Kant's metaphysics of morals is a glorious construction, in the best spirit of the metaphysical tradition he himself criticized. He offered a vision of what ought to be, of the highest ideal to which a rational being can aspire. Unfortunately for Kant, it turned out that there was not much that was necessary about his vision of the metaphysics of morals and the noumenal world. It was at best one of many possible ideals of what could be; it was a product of Kant's creative imagination ironed by his reason. How appealing was this vision of perfect and absolutely binding duties? If we take our willingness to act in accordance with a vision as a test of its validity and truthfulness, then Kant's vision could not be judged favorably. For his part, Kant would have emphatically disapproved of the test, for he believed that even if no action was ever done from duty, this does not speak against the idea of duty, which is an Idea of reason and not derived from experience.¹⁸ Logically speaking, Kant was right. Even if no action was ever performed out of duty, this does not preclude the potential value of the conception itself. The ideal of acting from duty may be a sufficient reason for action, yet this ideal is not necessary. Moreover, Kant was fully aware that all too frequently we opt not to act according to this ideal, and even when we do, we cannot be certain that our motives are not untainted by heteronomy. There is a significant discrepancy between what we do and what Kant believed we ought to do. How is this discrepancy to be resolved? We could hardly do any better than to follow Kant's own suggestion and recall one more of his metaphors:

If a ball does not pass through a hole, should one say that the ball is too big, or that the hole too small? In this case, it is indifferent how you choose to express yourself; for you do not know which of the two is there for the sake of the other. By contrast, you will not say that the man is too tall for his clothing, but rather that the clothing is too short for the man.¹⁹

Kant's rationally constructed system of the metaphysics of moral is just like that clothing. Although it may be perfect for an ideal rational being, it is unsuitable for the real man.

¹⁸ See Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:407-408.

¹⁹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A490/B518; Kemp Smith's translation modified.

IV. An Occasion for Further Reflection

If we are correct in taking seriously his central metaphors, an important question for the overall evaluation of the actuality of Kant's thought deals with their estimation: Are they still capable of stimulating our systematic thinking and prompting us to penetrate deeper into the mysteries of ever elusive, yet vitally important philosophical problems?

However we intend to answer this question, it must be noted that all of Kant's central metaphors work together and point toward an active and creative subject. We have already indicated that his subjectivist turn has to be reconsidered, not necessarily by returning to the old doctrine of the primacy of the object, but by seriously considering how the subject and the object interact in cognitive and non-cognitive relations, and what each may contribute toward making such interactions possible. In connection with the very nature of metaphors, however, Kant's philosophical approach leaves open the following questions: Would he argue that metaphors are something created by us, as an expression of our active and creative nature? Or would he, along the lines of his discussion of genius in the *Critique of Judgment*, claim that the subjects expressing metaphors are to be regarded more as the vehicles of some force not controlled or understood by us, as revelatory of the nature of reality itself? Put differently: Are metaphors the expression of our creativity, or of the limitations of our creativity?

It must also be noted that all of Kant's central metaphors are about boundaries and "divided lines": between what subjects and objects contribute to cognition; between the known and the unknown; between the world of mechanical determinism and moral choice; between what is and what ought to be. This may be the reason why Kant's own initial title for the work now known as *Critique of Pure Reason* was "On the Boundaries of Sensibility and Reason."²⁰

Some of Kant's successors – whether neo-Kantians, or positivists – wanted him to stay on this side of the divided line and eschew any further talk about things in themselves and noumena. Their motto was: "Keep the unknown out of it, stick to the known and the knowable," but this certainly was not Kant's own motto. For him, a boundary is something that belongs to both sides of the fence and keeps them in touch and related, however different they might be. For Kant, metaphors are by their nature not only the signpost of boundaries, but also the mediators between what can and what cannot be known. Their role is not only to reveal the edge of the known, but also to create a bridge – however imperfect – to the unknown.

At the very end of this essay one more remark is in order. Experience teaches that the masterpieces of any field distinguish themselves for what might be called "their hidden treasures." We can return to them and always discover there something vital and stimulating, and become aware of something we failed to notice before. Therefore, the main purpose of this essay was not only to reconsider whether his already familiar metaphors are still vital and stimulating, but also to suggest a direction for future inquiries: If we revisit Kant's great works – most notably his three *Critiques* – would we be able to find in them some new metaphors and new sources of inspiration?

Kant would, no doubt, encourage us to critically discuss this question and ... come up with our own conclusion.

²⁰ See Kant's Letter to Marcus Herz, of February 22, 1772; *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Ak 10:129.