

Kant on Faith

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“she made very little effort to understand someone else's intellectual context” N. Branden.

Introduction

- a. Kant's Preface to the 2nd edition of the CPR
- b. Contents of preface to the 2nd edition of the CPR
- c. Rand's concept of faith
- d. Glaube in Kant
- e. Meditations on Kant's meaning
- f. Concluding Unscientific Postscript: Kant's can at most be the second most evil man in mankind's history.

INTRODUCTION

“I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*.” This is one of the most often quoted sentences from Kant in the Objectivist literature. Leonard Peikoff's use can be found on p. 25 of *The Ominous Parallels*.¹ George Walsh not only quotes the Kantian original, but closes his article “*Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant*” with an Objectivist paraphrase of the original quotation from Kant. At the end of his article he writes in Rand's voice “I have affirmed that knowledge is unlimited, leaving no room for faith.” Rand's discussion of this issue can be found in PWNI, chapter 8, “From the Horse's Mouth.”

¹ See also his [Lectures on the History of Philosophy](#), Vol. 2, I, Lect 3.

Undoubtedly this is an important text for Objectivists.² But as far as I know, no one has asked about the text's meaning or its context. It is simply assumed that since Objectivism has shown knowledge to be good and faith to be bad, and that Kant uses the word "faith" with the same meaning as the Objectivists, then he must be wrong. But let's take a look.

Of Peikoff and Walsh, only the former cites Kant's text; Walsh cites Peikoff. Peikoff quotes the N. K. Smith translation. During Rand's lifetime, two other translations were available, Meiklejohn who renders the text as follows: "I must, therefore, abolish *knowledge* to make room for *belief*." And the old Müller translation which reads, "I had therefore to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*."

Notice that all of the translations emphasize both knowledge and faith (belief) and all put a full stop after the word "faith." But neither the emphasis nor the period is in the German original. Let me explain the latter point first. Kant's German makes for difficult reading. All translators take the liberty, and Smith admits as much, "of restating the content of each of the more complex sentences in a number of separate sentences."³ As to emphasizing words that Kant does not, I have no explanation. But let's see the German, at least to the comma that all of our translators replace with a period.

Ich mußte also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben⁴ Platz zu bekommen, . . .

² Rand herself never quotes the sentence in question, but she often comments on its meaning in Kant. The closest she comes is in the essay "From the Horse's Mouth," reprinted as chapter 8 in PWNI. See p. 95 where she quotes Paulsen's thoughts on "knowledge and faith." The last two sentences of the quotation from Paulsen is important for our purposes: Kant drew a clear ". . . dividing line between knowledge and faith. This gives to knowledge what belongs to it—the entire world 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."

³ See p. vii of Smith's translator's preface to the Critique of Pure Reason.

⁴ Smith has a footnote on the word "faith" and gives the German as "glaube" not "glauben."

Note that Kant does not emphasize either Wissen or Glauben, unlike all the translators. It is as if they were trying to tell us that these words are the most important words of the ‘sentence.’ And they certainly are for Objectivists. But what do they really mean for Kant? What was he trying to communicate?

Before doing that however, let’s establish Kant’s context. Where does this sentence occur in Kant’s body of work?

A. Preface To The 2nd Edition. The sentence in question appears in the preface Kant wrote for the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that came out in 1787, six years after the first edition. Readers familiar with Hegel know that he wrote with some disdain about prefaces and with respect to specifically philosophical works, thought them “superfluous,” and “even inappropriate and misleading.”⁵ His reason for this negative judgment was his belief that it was the execution and not the mere result that was the important and essential factor in a philosophical work. This is the same point that the Good Witch of the North makes to Dorothy at the end of the *Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy had to go through the horrific adventures in order to learn that “there’s no place like home.” People can’t tell you that and have it mean anything--you have to learn it for yourself.

In other words, you can’t learn Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* by taking a sentence out of his 2nd preface. You have to read the whole *Critique*, something Nathaniel Branden claims Rand never did.⁶ But I doubt if many Objectivists will be willing to give up this sentence based on Hegel’s argument, so let’s move on to determine the context of the quotation.

⁵ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface, p. 1, Miller trans.

⁶ Kelley also makes this claim about Objectivists. On p. 57 of *The Contested Legacy of Ayn Rand* he writes that he has “met Objectivists who casually denounce Kant as the most evil man in history without having read a word of what he wrote.” This criticism applies to those who have only read our text sentence. Kelley claims that in order to assess the rationality of a work of an author “that we actually read the work.” I concur.

B. The Contents of the 2nd Preface. The 2nd preface is about 22 pages longer than the 1st. It runs from Bvii to Bxliv. Our text appears on p. xxx. How does Kant lead up to the sentence? He begins by telling us that knowledge is either scientific or “a merely random groping.” (Bvii) He then tells us that metaphysics is in the latter category, unlike logic, mathematics and physics, which have entered the “sure path of a science.” (Bx) He wants metaphysics to enter that sure path, i.e., he wants it to be a science rather than a “merely random groping.” How is that to be achieved? By looking at those disciplines that have already found the “sure path of a science” and asking What is the key to the success of the sciences?

Kant tells us that logic, mathematics and physics are secure sciences because they *limited* their domain of inquiry.⁷ (Bxiii) Maybe he got this idea from Aristotle, who distinguishes metaphysics from all the sciences by the fact that the “special sciences . . . cut off a part of being and investigate the attributes of this part--this is what the mathematical sciences for instance do.”⁸

The important point is that, for Kant, *limitation* is the key to the success of the sciences. Rand, to the contrary, berates Kant for telling us that the science is limited, and she places “limited” in scare quotes. The special sciences are limited because “they are valid only so long as they deal with this world. . .”⁹ But this isn’t a criticism, it’s a truism. Physics is valid only so long as it deals with this world, and should it attempt to deal with the supersensible world, it would have exceeded its limitations and hence cease to be a real science. If physics studies matter in motion, it clearly is *limited* to that domain. It doesn’t deal with the subject matter of chemistry or biology, to say nothing of angels, souls etc. All of this is quite in keeping with the Aristotelian notion of science.

⁷ Note Kant’s use of the word “limited,” which for him is obviously an honorific, and compare it to Walsh’s use of the same word but with a negative spin. Walsh’s quote is “I have affirmed that knowledge is unlimited, leaving no room for faith.”

⁸ MTPH Bk. 4 1003a22-1003a32

⁹ FNI, p. 32.

In order, therefore, to set metaphysics on the sure path of a science, we must limit it. But to what? Before we can answer that question we must realize that Kant follows the medievals in dividing metaphysics into two parts, general and special metaphysics. The former is akin to metaphysics in Aristotle's sense of a study of being qua being, whereas special metaphysics, or metaphysics in its second part, is concerned with the questions of God, the soul and the cosmos. We must limit metaphysics to general metaphysics. We can put metaphysics on the sure path of a science if we limit her to "those concepts *a priori* to which the corresponding objects, . . . can be given." The limits are the limits of a possible experience.

But won't critics complain that this is not much of a treasure to "bequeath to posterity." (Bxxix) It seems to be merely negative, "warning us that we must never venture with speculative reason beyond the limits of experience." (Ibid) Metaphysics is reduced to detailing the universal and necessary conditions of empirical knowledge.

Here Kant makes two additional distinctions. The first is between reason in its speculative vs. reason in its practical employment. The former is limited to the evidence of the senses, but the latter is free to employ moral concepts (and other practical concepts, e.g., teleology).

The second distinction is between knowledge and thought and is the one I really want to explore. At Bxxvi Kant writes "that though we cannot *know* [*erkennen*] these object as things in themselves, we must yet be in position to *think* [*denken*] them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears."¹⁰ (Emphasis in Kemp Smith, not in German original.) In a footnote to this sentence, Kant expands on the difference between these two concepts as

¹⁰ This is an early indication that in the 2nd edition Kant is going to push his realism to ward off those simple minded interpretations of him as an Idealist. See especially his "Refutation of Idealism" (B274-9) section which he added for the 2nd edition. But I'll not pursue that thesis here, I'm more interested in the knowledge/thought distinction.

follows: “To *know* an object I must be able to prove its possibility, . . . But I can *think* anything I please, provided only that I do not contradict myself . . .”

(Emphasis only in Kemp Smith.)

He then immediately proceeds to give a most important example of this distinction. We know that everything in nature is determined by prior efficient causes. We also know that morality presuppose free will. I cannot *know* that I am free, but I can *think* it. At Bxxviii Kant writes “But though I cannot know, I can yet think freedom; that is to say, the representation of it is at least not self-contradictory, provided due account be taken of our critical distinction between two modes of representation, the sensible and the intellectual, and of the resulting limitation of the pure concept of understanding and of the principles which flow from them.”

In the next two paragraphs beginning four lines before Bxxix, Kant uses the word “thought” three times, all concerning morality.

So when he begins the paragraph in which our text occurs, i.e., just when his argument is about to come to a conclusion, the focused reader is expecting him to say something to the effect that he “found it necessary to limit *knowledge* to make room for *thought*”¹¹ and not “I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*.” I don’t know why he wrote the word “faith.” I am, however, convinced that he meant *thought*, and it is the distinction

¹¹ Let me cite three authors on Kant use of “thought.” First, George Walsh, among Objectivists, is aware of the distinction between the two. See his “Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant, p. 99 in JARS, vol. 2 # 1. Second, Hannah Arendt in her book *The Life of the Mind* writes that Kant “‘found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith,’ but all he ‘denied’ was knowledge of things that are unknowable, and he had not make room for faith but for thought.” (63) Finally, Nickolas Rescher, in his *Kant and the Reach of Reason* has a section entitled “KANT’S EPISTEMIC DUALISM OF KNOW VS. THINK AND THE ROLE OF A RATIONAL CONVICTION in which he writes, “To translate *Glaube* as ‘faith’ in a Kantian context is deeply problematic in its mistaken suggestion that a matter of religion or of personal ideology must be at issue.” Rescher suggests a better translation might be “rationally justified belief.” The adjective rationally certainly takes the wind out of the mystical sails associated with the word “faith” for Objectivists.

between knowledge and thought that we find at play throughout the body of the *Critique*.¹²

C. Rand's concept of "faith."

Next, let us take a look at what the concepts "faith" and "knowledge" mean for Rand and most Objectivists. We will see that, given the way Rand uses the words "knowledge" and "faith," Kant's sentence expresses just about the worst idea anyone could put into words.

Rand defines knowledge as "a mental grasp of a fact(s) of reality, reached either by perceptual observation or by a process of reason based on perceptual observation."¹³ Faith is "the acceptance of allegations without evidence of one's senses and one's reason. [It is] the claim to some non-sensory, non-rational, non-definable, non-identifiable means of knowledge . . ."¹⁴ [Since faith for Rand is a claim to knowledge, or at least a claim to a strange kind of knowledge, and that is precisely what Kant is denying, it should be obvious that his use of the word "faith" is radically different from Rand's. For more on Kant's use of the word Glaube, see the next section.

Now it is an interesting fact that Rand's definition of knowledge corresponds fairly closely with Kant's. But I'm going to be concerned with "faith," certainly one of those concepts that Objectivism regards as denoting an unmitigated evil. Rand gave a talk at several places titled "Faith and Force: The Destroyers of the Modern World."¹⁵

¹² Kemp Smith has the following subheading under "Thought" in his index, viz., "as opposed to knowledge" and gives the following pages that the interested reader may consult: 27-8, 161, 162, 169, 173, 174 n, 193, 270-71, 368, 426 and 468. There is no subheading titled "knowledge as opposed to faith."

¹³ ITOE, 35..

¹⁴ Strictly speaking this is Rand's definition of "mysticism" but on p. 80 of the same essay she seems to equate the two when she writes "Faith and force are corollaries" every period of history dominated by mysticism, was a period of statism, of dictatorship, of tyranny."

¹⁵ Reprinted in PWNI as chapter 7.

If Kant means by faith (if he even means faith at all, which I deny) what Rand means by faith, then Objectivists are properly condemnatory of him.

SECTION D. The meaning of *Glaube* in Kant's CPR.¹⁶

Let us ask ourselves about the German word that all of the translators render with the English word "faith." *Glaube* is the word that Kant uses on p. xxx. Smith translates this German word with two English words, viz., "belief" and "faith." He uses the latter only twice, once in the now famous quotation that is the text we are examining, the other on A470/B498. The rest of the time he uses "belief."¹⁷ Let us look at this latter use, remembering that for Kant there is only one word, viz., *Glaube*, and it is the translators that have rendered that word by the two English words, viz., "faith" and "belief."

In a section that occurs late in the book, that is, section 3 of chapter II of the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method" and bears the title "Opining, Knowing, and Believing,"¹⁸ (A820/B848-A831/B859) Kant writes, conviction, which has to do with "the holding of a thing to be true" and has "three degrees: opining, believing and knowing." (A822/B850) Opinion means there are neither subjective nor objective grounds for holding a judgment. But belief is different. Kant writes, "If our holding of the judgment by only subjectively sufficient, and is at the same time taken as being objectively insufficient, we have what is termed *believing*." Knowledge is, of course, both subjectively and objectively sufficient.¹⁹

After telling us that it is only from a *practical* point of view that belief is

¹⁶ Kant discusses *Glaube* all over the place. Interested readers may consult his *Logic*, Introduction, IX. D.; *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, Ak. VI, the n. on 153-4; *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in One's Thought*, Ak. VIII, 140-47; *On The Dignified Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy*, Ak. VIII, n. 395-7; Most of these references are from the Critique of Judgment, trans. By Pluhar, p. 360.

¹⁷ Meiklejohn uses belief all the time except at B498.

¹⁸ Cf. *Logic* cited in n12.

¹⁹ Kant means by "subjective" something about the subject whereas by "objective" he means something about the object.

possible, Kant then divides belief into that having to do with skill versus that having to do with morality.

As an example of the former he instances a physician who, not *knowing* the nature of the illness and judging only by the symptoms exhibited, *believes* the patient to be suffering from phthisis (asthma or tuberculosis). (A814/B852)

An example of a moral belief would be “the doctrine of the existence of God.” (A826/B854) But here Objectivists must be extremely careful, for Kant does not mean by God, a substantive or constitutive concept, but rather merely a regulative one. Recall what this distinction means for Kant. He writes about it in some detail in the appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic in a section titled “The Regulative Employment Of The Ideas Of Pure Reason.” (A642/B671-A669/B697) The sole aim of a regulative idea is not to give us knowledge but rather “to bring unity into the body of our detailed knowledge, and thereby to approximate the rule to universality.” (A647/B675) In other words, to enable us to achieve a “systematic unity of the knowledge of understanding, . . .” (Ibid.)

If I were a believer, I would find this notion of God no consolation. As Nicholas Rescher once said to me when I asked him if he thought that Kant believed in God, he said that any man who regards “God” as a *regulative* concept does not believe in God. Like Rand’s usage of “Aquinas’ angels” to make a point concerning human psycho-epistemology, Kant regards the ideas of God etc. as merely heuristic concepts. He writes, “The idea [of God] is thus really only a heuristic . . . concept.” (A671/B699)

Imagine! The sole purpose for the postulation of a God (in the regulative sense) is to enable man to “have guidance in the investigation of nature.” (A826/B854) God is placed by Kant into the service of science, our way of knowing nature. If we pretend there is a God who orders things systematically, then we can hope to find that system.

God here serves for Kant the same function that the equator has for geography. The equator does not have objective reality, but it does have objective validity. That is, with its use as a regulative rather than constitutive

concept, we are able to organize and integrate our knowledge of the earth. But we know that the equator is not a possible object of perception.

The equator, the continental divide, and the Arctic Circle,²⁰ are not observable but and idealized objects. Thought-fictions if you will.

But they are not mere fictions, idle fancies issuing from a playful imagination. They play a serious role in our cognitive endeavors and make an essential contribution to our comprehension of the world. For while they do not have the objective reality of the world's physical furnishings, these products of subjectivity--of human thought--nevertheless secure an objective legitimacy though their essential role in helping us to organize and coordinate our knowledge about those real features of the world. It is through this instrumental utility for the organization of our knowledge that such thought constructions secure a claim to objectivity and cognitive legitimacy. (Rescher 136)

Now contrast the Kantian notion of belief (or faith) with Rand's. Recall Rand's definition of "faith." Faith is "the acceptance of allegations without evidence of one's senses and one's reason. [It is] the claim to some non-sensory, non-rational, non-definable, non-identifiable means of knowledge . . ." Now it is easy to see that the two thinkers have radically different notions in mind when they use the word faith--*Glaube* for Kant. She means it to be some kind of knowledge, or more correctly, some "means of knowledge." Which is exactly what Kant is at pains to deny. For Kant, all knowledge must be a combination of both the sensory and the rational. Hence we cannot *know*, e.g., God, but we can *think* him. And while one might claim that such thinking is non-sensory, it is certainly rational, at least for Kant, since it must conform to the law of contradiction.

E. Meditation on Kant's meaning.

"I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*." Or "I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *thought*." Before concluding this study one might ask who

²⁰ That this notion is rather mundane was brought home to me when I had occasion to cross the Arctic Circle for the first time. As we approach it, the pilot made the plane bounce and ask if we felt the Arctic Circle. All nine passengers laugh pleasantly. We knew that the circle is just an imaginary line, and not a real physical line.

are Kant's enemies here? Who is not letting him, or us, **think** about the thing in itself. Who says we *can* know the thing in itself. The dogmatists (i.e., rationalists) are one group that Kant names on the very page that contains our text. They think we can "make headway in metaphysics without a previous criticism of pure reason" and are "the source of all that unbelief [Unglaube], which wars against morality." But what is the argument here. How is rationalism a threat to morality?

I think the argument goes something like this. The rationalists are members of what can be called "the metaphysics of the month club. Unlike logic, math and physics, which are sciences as can be seen by the unanimity of their contentions, metaphysics is constantly starting over and can never reach conclusions that find agreement among those engage in this endeavor.

At this point the skeptics (about the value of metaphysics) enter and say, "See what a bunch of bullshit metaphysics is. Let's stick with physics." But when we do that we find that we must jettison any belief in free will and hence morality, since the latter presuppose the former.

In order to save morality, Kant critiques pure reason but his conclusions cut both at the rationalist and the skeptic. Since we cannot know the thing in itself, neither the rationalist nor the skeptic can make positive, constitutive claims. The rationalist is denied **knowledge** of freedom, God and the immortality of the soul. But so is the skeptic denied **knowledge** that there is no freedom, no God, no soul. Both are denied **knowledge** of the thing in itself.

Now before we get too cocky, remember that, although Objectivism has settled the question of God and the immortality of the soul, free will is still one of the perennial questions of Objectivism.²¹ Objectivism certainly agrees with Kant that morality presupposes free will. But Kant was living in the shadow of Newton's clockwork deterministic physics which seemed to imply that freedom

²¹ As recently as 2001 at the TOC summer seminar, David Kelley delivered a series of lectures titled "Perennial Questions of Objectivism" which included a full lecture devoted to "Free Will vs. Determinism."

was impossible.²² Kant's solution is, of course, not Objectivism, but surely his heart was in the right place.

It was all the rage during the enlightenment to be a deist. But Kant, I think, was either an atheist (if Rescher is right) or somewhere between deism and atheism. Deism is a kind of minimalist theology, but it does use the concept God as constitutive, which CPR forbids.

Kant denies the existence of God as a constitutive concept, but allows the use of God as a regulative concept, so that puts him, it seems to me, in between deism and atheism. That places him nearer to Objectivism than most of his Enlightenment deist contemporaries, at least on this issue.

F. Concluding Unscientific Postscript

If the above analysis is correct, one can only conclude that Kant has to be demoted. Instead of being the most evil man in mankind's history, perhaps he is the only the second most evil man.

²² See the "Third Antinomy of Pure Reason" A444/B472ff for more on this from Kant.

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