

TRANSCENDENTALISM: A BRIEF VIEW

BY E. BRUCE GLENN

"By a true philosopher we understand a man who, by the means above treated of [experience, geometry, and reason], is enabled to arrive at the real causes, and the knowledge of those things in the mechanical world which are invisible and remote from the senses; and who is afterward capable of reasoning *a priori*, or from first principles or causes, concerning the world and its phenomena. . . ."

Forty-seven years after these lines were published in the first chapter of the *Principia*—and nine years after the author's death—their whole import was challenged by a work which also threw the whole intellectual world of Europe into a whirlwind of speculation. The work was *A Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant—a Scotsman transplanted three generations before into the thorny yet fertile fields of German thought, and who never traveled more than sixty miles from his birthplace of Königsberg, Prussia. The latter fact seems trivial; but its sharp contrast to the wide travels of Swedenborg and of other philosophers of the day is symbolic of the man's methods of thought and philosophic conclusions. For with Kant's two critiques—of "pure" and "practical" reason—was born modern transcendentalism, the theory of innate knowledge that transcends what we learn from experience and reason, and stands within us as a moral guardian of all our ideas and decisions.

The idea of such intuitive guidance of the mind was, of course, not new with Kant. Plato, twenty-one centuries before, had given it literary exposition in the *Meno* and the *Republic*, in his doctrine of the Idea by which all is created and which lies hidden as the unseen reality below the surface of every man's conscious thought. But Platonic idealism was only a vague, unformed concept compared with the immense abstractions of Kant's philosophy.

Nor was Kant a philosophic idealist. He accepted the material reality of the things experienced through the senses. What he rejected was the view that we can ever know these things as they are in themselves, as "noumena"; we can know them only as "phenomena," interpreted by the senses. "Things which we see are not by themselves what we see. . . . They cannot, as phe-

nomena, exist by themselves, but in us only. . . . We know nothing but our manner of perceiving them, that manner being peculiar to us, and not necessarily shared in by every being, though, no doubt, by every human being. This is what alone concerns us.”¹

All knowledge thus derived *a posteriori* is necessarily partial and limited. Final reality, the goal of all philosophic thinking, lies elsewhere than through the channels of the senses and our reasoning thence.

That is, our *pure* or speculative reasoning. Critics of the *Critique of Pure Reason* were quick to insist that Kant had destroyed both science and religion as avenues to the truth that lies beyond experience, since all they could do was hypothesize on the basis of experience, whether of revelation or the laboratory. Speculation was, in the end, only speculation. What remains?

Kant did not wait till the *Critique of Practical Reason* to give his answer. In a preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) he had this to say: “Our critique, by limiting speculative reason to its proper sphere, is no doubt negative, but by thus removing an impediment² which threatened to narrow or even entirely to destroy its practical employment, it is in reality of positive and of very important use, if only we are convinced that there is an absolutely necessary practical use of pure reason (the moral use), in which reason must inevitably go beyond the limits of the senses, and though not requiring for this purpose the assistance of speculative reason, must at all events be assured against its opposition, lest it be brought in conflict with itself. To deny that this service . . . is a positive advantage would be to deny that the police confers upon us any positive advantage, its principal occupation being to prevent violence which citizens have to apprehend from citizens, so that each may pursue his vocation in peace and security. . . .”³

The chief end of Kant’s transcendental theory turns out to be the discovery of a new basis for the tottering faith of his day. Later in the same preface he declared the greatest benefit of his work to be “to put an end forever to all objections to morality and religion.” We recall Swedenborg’s dictum in the *Principia*, that

¹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, Vol. II, p. 37.

² An impediment discovered and brilliantly exploited by David Hume in his attacks on Berkeleyian idealism—to Kant’s chagrin.

³ Preface to Second Edition, xxx.

which guided all his preparatory labors: "True philosophy and contempt of the Deity are two opposites."

Swedenborg in his search for truth relied upon rationality grounded both on the *a posteriori* studies of science and the self-evidencing reason of the Word. The transcendental philosopher rejected both of these, and turned instead within the mind itself. Here he found that which reason could not discover within its sensual limits, which experience could not prove—the intuitive necessity by which the mind binds itself to moral duty, and thus discovers the reality of its being. This sense of moral necessity Kant called the "categorical imperative"; its agent in the mind he named "practical reason."

At the outset of the *Critique of Practical Reason* he offered a definition of the term: "Practical principles are propositions which contain a general determination of the will. They are subjective, or maxims, when the condition is regarded by the subject as valid only for his own will. They are objective, or practical laws, when they are recognized as objective, i.e., as valid for the will of every rational being."

The great defect of the transcendental philosophy would seem to appear at this point. How, we may ask, does a being become rational in order to recognize the validity of these practical principles? Kant—and after him Hegel, after him Coleridge in England and Emerson in America—has separated the will and the understanding in a way quite different from the Divinely-ordained severance made necessary by man's fall from the celestial state. All the development of the understanding, from sensory to scientific, from scientific to cognition and thence to spiritual enlightenment—all this is set aside by them as being at best only an accessory to the discovery of truth, and at worst a complete hindrance. Direct admonition within the will by intuitive perception—this is the way and the truth to the transcendentalist. Every man becomes his own authority, not only in matters of final reality and thus of faith, but in matters of action as well. With the gentle professor of Königsberg and the quiet sage of Concord such a tenet remains comparatively harmless. With Carlyle in England, for one example, it turned a passionate lover of mankind into a proto-Fascist, advocating the rule of an elite group of "heroes" who alone could see the vision of practical reason, and who there-

fore could make their own wills "objective, i.e., valid for the will of every rational being."

Such a moral emphasis is not misplaced when considering transcendentalism, even in the pages of a learned journal. The Kantians themselves demand it by insisting on the will as supreme over the understanding. And when a man plumbs the depths of his own heart without the aid of those sternly absolute measuring rods of the Word and of nature which the understanding alone can furnish him, the implications of his search are inevitably carried into life.

Swedenborg's "true philosopher" as depicted in the *Principia* is also a man of moral implications; but unlike the Kantian ideal his morality is not divorced from theological faith. Swedenborg remarkably touches on the great defect of transcendentalism when he points out that "no man seems to have been capable of arriving at true philosophy since the age of that first of mortals who is said to have been in a state of the most perfect integrity, that is to say, who was formed and made according to all the art, image and connection of the world, before the existence of vice."⁴ Later in the chapter he describes the unbroken harmony of all the parts of what the Writings were to name the celestial man, both within himself in mind and body, and with all his surroundings in which he read the Word of his Creator. This picture of finite perfection Swedenborg then compares with the "perverted and imperfect" state of all later men. It is characteristic that R. W. Emerson, the leader of transcendentalism in America, annotated in approving terms the first passage, but completely ignored the second. Yet Swedenborg's purpose in making the comparison was to show why "all our wisdom or true philosophy must be acquired by the use of means; and that the way to reason and things prior is to be opened by experience or *a posteriori*; thus, that our body and external senses are our only teachers and leaders, leaving but little to the mind, from which, nevertheless, as its fountain, all reasoning must proceed, or to which all things must have reference."⁵

That fallen man can no longer rely on intuitive perception to find truth and thus to live rightly is revealed abundantly throughout the Writings, in full accord with Swedenborg's early realization. That this is so every reader of this journal is aware, and it

⁴ *Principia*, Ch. I.

⁵ *Ibid.*

needs no reiteration in detail here. Two passages, however, may be cited in conclusion—the first in refutation of the idea that truth may be transcendently sought and found on the earth today, the second as a contrasting picture of the only true way to find that reality of moral and spiritual uses for which Kant and other transcendentalists sought sincerely but mistakenly:

“At this day it is unknown what perception is. It is a certain internal sensation, from the Lord alone, as to whether a thing is true and good; and it was very well known to the Most Ancient Church. This perception is so perfect with the angels that by it they are aware and have knowledge of what is true and good; of what is from the Lord, and what from themselves. . . . The spiritual man has no perception, but has conscience. A dead man has not even conscience; and very many do not know what conscience is, and still less what perception is.”⁶

“That man has enlightenment who shuns evils because they are sins, and because they are against the Lord, and against His Divine laws. With this man and with no other, the spiritual mind is opened, and so far as it is opened, the light of heaven enters, from which light is all enlightenment in the Word. For man then has a will for good, and this will, when it is determined to that use, becomes in the understanding first the affection of truth, then the perception of truth, soon by means of rational light the thought of truth, thus decision and conclusion, which as it passes thence into the memory also passes into the life, and so remains. This is the way of all enlightenment in the Word, and also the way of reformation and regeneration of man. But first the memory must needs have knowledges both of spiritual and natural things, for these are the stores into which the Lord operates by means of the light of heaven.”⁷

⁶ *Arcana Coelestia*, 104.

⁷ *De Verbo*, 28.