UNTANGLING THE METAPHYSICAL KNOT: KANT AND WHITEHEAD ON THE REAL

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to compare Immanuel Kant and Alfred North Whitehead on the nature of the real. The focus will be on Kant's 1766 essay "Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics." This essay, in contrast to the first critique, brings Kant and Whitehead together in that the former claims that *if* we had to give a plausible account of what reality is *in itself*, Leibniz points the way in his panpsychism, a view that is similar to Whitehead's in certain key respects. Kant and Whitehead together can help to untangle the metaphysical knot created by a confused mixture of dualism and reductionistic materialism.

KEYWORDS: Immanuel Kant; Alfred North Whitehead; Panpsychism; Metaphysics

The purpose of the present short article is to explore the question "What is reality?" in light of two major figures: Immanuel Kant and Alfred North Whitehead. As Derek Malone-France has noted, each started their careers as mathematicians and logicians, then each shifted from pure mathematics to mathematical physics, and then eventually each devoted their intellectual energies to philosophy in order to assimilate and interpret a basic shift in the theoretical models of their time: for Kant the shift to the Newtonian view and for Whitehead the shift to relativity physics. Further, each thinker produced a magnum opus: Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Whitehead's *Process and Reality*. However, the focus of this article will not be Kant's first critique, but a lesser-known work from 1766 in his pre-critique period: "Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics." Whereas Kant and Whitehead are (understandably) usually contrasted regarding the question of the real, with Whitehead emphasizing the thesis that the *res verae* are momentary experiences that go all the way down in nature and Kant taking an agnostic stance in

theoretical philosophy regarding what reality is in itself, the two are much closer than one might suspect when the "Dreams" essay is considered.

In "Dreams" (part 1, chapter 1) Kant speaks of the human body as a machine driven by various ropes and levers, as it were. But he is also inclined to assert the reality of immaterial natures in the world, including his own soul. The community between a spirit and a body, however, he finds mysterious, even if it seems to him that the two are combined in the most intimate fashion. Every material reality, he thinks, must have *some* sort of inner activity. It is for this reason that Kant in two different passages thinks that we ought not ridicule Leibniz by suggesting that when drinking our morning tea, say, we may be ingesting sentient atoms. Rather than laugh at Leibniz's panpsychism, which has an affinity to Whitehead's view, we would be better advised, Kant thinks, to take his monads seriously. *If* we had to give a plausible account of what reality is *in itself*, Leibniz points the way, he thinks! The only other plausible alternative to Leibniz's stance is to demur altogether from the question of what reality is in itself, given the inadequacies of dualism and materialism. This agnostic approach is that taken by Kant in the first critique, an approach that is prefigured in "Dreams."

The thesis of this article is not that Kant had a consistent view in "Dreams." Rather, the chapter in "Dreams" that is examined exhibits what Kant himself calls "a tangled metaphysical knot" that includes a confused mixture of dualism, materialism, *and* panpsychism. At least two recent authors have returned to Kant's knot metaphor (David Ray Griffin and Timothy Eastman) with a Whiteheadian prescription: In order to avoid both the bifurcation of the real in dualism and the attenuated version of the real in materialism, the metaphysical knot can be untangled only through panpsychism or some kindred position. It is a pleasant surprise to learn how close Kant came to this prescription. Kant emphasizes his personal experience of localized pleasure and pain, which takes us to sentiency at the microscopic level of cells, at least. But he then also refers to his "body-machine." One would have thought that localized and intense pain would have convinced Kant that the real world is composed of more than machines; indeed, that the real is quintessentially organic.

Kant's "Dream" essay is related to lectures he delivered during the winter semester of 1765-1766, one major theme of which is the idea that "knowledge" of higher things is not a necessity but an adornment. Nonetheless, these lectures in

one sense are congenial to process thinking in that Kant's pedagogy emphasizes that students should not learn thoughts but thinking; one should learn not philosophy as a static body of knowledge but rather learn how to philosoph*ize*. A teacher should indeed lead students but not carry them because philosophy is characterized by the "zetetic," from the Greek infinitive *zetein*: to inquire or to seek.

The aforementioned tangled metaphysical knot, it seems, is largely a function of certain assumptions Kant makes. For example, he thinks that God is ultimately unthinkable, but this seems to be due to his belief that God had to be an absolutely necessary substance who exhibits no contingency whatsoever; God is for him a strictly active being with no ability to receive influence from others. We should not be surprised that such a being is seen as unthinkable, given the fact that it is hard for us to even imagine what a living being would be like who is utterly immune from influence. On a human level, Kant is tempted to take an agnostic stance regarding souls because, despite his report of localized pain in his toe, which indicates the importance of sympathy, as a machine he has a hard time accounting for the presence of sympathy with living cells in one's body. Kant is tied in knots because his being lured into mechanism and materialism is at odds with his belief that there are living things in the world (and indeed in our own bodies). This is why he is reluctant to join in the common ridicule of Leibniz's panpsychism.

In another part of "Dreams" (part 1, chapter 2) Kant notes that hylozoism *invests* everything with life, in contrast to a materialism that *deprives* everything of life. Kant distances himself from the "fashionable mockery" of hylozoism, just as he distances himself from ridicule of Leibniz. Further, in the life sciences he thinks that the vitalist Georg Stahl is closer to the truth than mechanists like Friedrich Hofmann and Hermann Boerhaave. Kant's reluctance to distance himself from several positions that have a family resemblance to each other (panpsychism, hylozoism, vitalism) is noticeable. However, he is also reluctant to succumb to the dreamlike world of metaphysics, which involves, he thinks, an unfortunate mixture of imagination and empirical evidence.

The problem with dreams is that they do not deliver us into a common world (part 1, chapter 3). Like madness or drunkenness, they lead to a type of confusion, even if seers allege themselves to be quite awake. In a memorable turn of phrase,

Kant insists that the upward wind of heavenly inspiration is hard to distinguish from downward flatulence. In metaphysics we can expect only opinion but not knowledge, at best, or outright ignorance, at worst (part 1, chapter 4).

The parts of "Dreams" with which scholars are most familiar, if in fact they are aware of this work at all, deal with Kant's scathing critique of the then-popular pronouncements of Emmanuel Swedenborg (predictions of the future, extra-sensory perceptions, etc.). Kant thinks that there is not a single drop of reason in what Swedenborg says. No doubt it was the fear that he might be associated with this sort of "metaphysics" that led Kant to be skittish about committing to panpsychism. He does, however (part 2, chapters 1-3), think that there are two advantages to metaphysics: (1) it allows reason to spy on or take a peak at hidden things; and (2) more importantly, it establishes a safe boundary for empirical concepts, beyond which we ought not to do more than take a peak, even if Kant admits that he is still searching for the proper location of this empirical limit. Reason cannot fly so high that it can reach "the other world" that was allegedly so familiar to Swedenborg. Like Voltaire, we would be better served tending our respective gardens.

Charles Hartshorne has noticed how close Kant is in "Dreams" to a Whiteheadian view. One impediment in Kant's way is his assumption that if we took Leibniz's panpsychist path to the real we would crash into the difficulty of trying to explain how a monadic subject could interact with other monadic subjects so as to form a dynamic system of monads. This difficulty rests on Leibniz's assumption that monads are windowless. Hartshorne thinks that this difficulty is resolved through the most important discovery made by Whitehead: prehension. A dynamic-unit-reality does not so much accidentally have the ability to grasp others as it *essentially consists in* a complex act of grasping other units. That is, reality is essentially social, on the process view, in contrast to the isolated atoms found in Hume and Kant. A unit-reality is an experient occasion where objects of experiencing are themselves other such experient occasions (Hartshorne 158-159). It is understandable, however, why Kant could not commit more firmly to panpsychism when it is realized that a rock bottom premise of most modern thinkers is the idea that the fundamental units of the real are material ones devoid of all experience, as Griffin has noticed (Griffin, *Unsnarling* 83-84).

Of course, Kant's aims in "Dreams" must be considered. His pre-critique effort to reconcile Newton and metaphysics was coming to a close in this work. Indeed, Martin Schonfeld claims that Kant was tormented by the fact that this effort was a failure. Kant responded to this failure with laughter and irony in "Dreams," as in the above-mentioned comment about sentient atoms in one's morning beverage. But we have also seen that he did not laugh at panpsychism or hylozoism, nor did he encourage others to do so. Although most critics who have examined "Dreams" see Kant on the verge of a conceptual breakthrough that occurs explicitly in the first critique, process thinkers cannot help but notice in "Dreams" a missed opportunity. Kant was surely correct to lampoon Swedenborg's visions of another world, but he was premature in thinking that metaphysics had to be associated with a sort of cosmological dualism such that the goal of a metaphysician is to pole vault, as it were, from this world into the next (Schonfeld vi, 234-238).

If metaphysical belief is, like virtue, its own reward, then there is no need to catapult oneself into another, allegedly higher, world. The metaphysical naturalisms of Whitehead, Hartshorne, and Griffin (in contrast to a pejorative supernaturalism) are instructive regarding how Kant could have avoided the less-than-desirable associations between metaphysics and Swedenborgian escapism. As is well known, Kant remained a metaphysician by redefining the field. Rather than seeing metaphysics as the transcendental search for the common characteristics and presuppositions of all that is real, Kant transformed metaphysics into the transcendental search for the common characteristics and presuppositions of what is subjectively real. This is not as momentous a shift for panpsychists like Leibniz and Whitehead as it is for other thinkers, however, because feeling or subjectivity of a rudimentary sort goes all the way down, so to speak. The common characteristics and presuppositions of the subjectively real are also those of all that is real. Perhaps one reason why Kant was reticent to follow Leibniz more thoroughly is the latter's guilt by association with Swedenborg, who was a Leibnizian in the peculiar sense that he saw preestablished harmony among angelic monads (Schonfeld 239-241).

"Dreams" contains both a critique of traditional metaphysics' search for the common characteristics and presuppositions of the real as well as a self-critique. But once the self-critique is inflicted on Kant's earlier views, one is still left with

the knotty problem of the relationship between the material and the immaterial such that both dualistic and materialistic "resolutions" of the problem leave one all tied up in confusing ways, as Griffin in particular has ably argued. Reconciliation of both the empirical and the metaphysical (and the contingent and the necessary) seems to require *some* sort of ontological monism, but not of the reductionistic sort, as Schonfeld admits. Mind or soul must *somehow* be the same sort of stuff as spatial bodies because nature is one (Schonfeld 242-243).

Although the pre-critique (Schonfeld says "pre-critical") project collapsed, its relevance remains with us today in modified form. That is, harmonizing mind and matter is a perennial project. Because neither dualism nor materialism bring about such a harmony (whereas dualism is especially disharmonious, materialism achieves a faux harmony by leaving much of the real unexplained), the knot remains a Gordian one without *some* variety of ontological monism of a nonreductionistic sort. Kant is famous (or infamous) for his practical rather than theoretical access to the real, to the noumenal realm. Much scholarly attention has been given to evaluating this view, which arguably involves the claim that there is a role for both the material and the immaterial even in the later Kant in that each is present to the other in what is ultimately a single world. Michael Friedman, following Karl Ameriks, adopts this stance (Schoenfeld 244).

Whitehead's philosophy of organism is, in a way, an inversion of Kant's philosophy. For Kant, subjective data pass into the appearance of an objective world; whereas, for Whitehead, objective data pass into subjective satisfaction (Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 88). But Kant's philosophy clearly outweighs Whitehead's on the scale of history. It makes sense for scholars such as Malone-France to try to rectify this imbalance. One way to do this is to trace Kant's transition from transcendental realism to transcendental idealism and then to point the way back to a reformed transcendental realism on the basis of Kant's own grounds. One feature of this effort to bring Kant and Whitehead together is the importance of time in each thinker. For Kant, time is a necessary feature of all human experience; whereas, for Whitehead, temporality is necessary for all forms of reality. Although Whitehead did not call his view panpsychism, he did not object to others using this label to refer to his philosophy (Whitehead, *Harvard Lectures* 435).

For both Kant and Whitehead there is an opposition to any realm beyond the

temporal or historical, a prohibition that applies even to Whitehead's "eternal" objects, which are pure potentials that can be described only in terms of their possibility of ingressing into the becoming of actual occasions of experience (Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 22-23). This means that, for process thinkers, metaphysics should consist in the study of historicity as such. The assertion of time as inescapable to experience is itself a transcendental claim. But Whitehead (unlike Kant) does not equate experience with consciousness or rationality.

Any sort of rapprochement between Kant and Whitehead on the real requires a consideration of the distinction between Kantian noumena in a negative sense and noumena in a positive sense. The former consist in things-in-themselves that are not objects of sensible intuition. The latter are rejected by Kant as objects that we can really know even if noumena in a positive sense do function as limit concepts. It is crucial to notice for the purposes of the present short article that there *are* well-known passages in the first critique where noumena in the positive sense are at the very least assumed to exist and are presupposed by the experience of phenomena. Many Kant interpreters over the years have argued that Kant's transcendental idealism actually *requires* reference to some positive noumenal object, as Malone-France has astutely noted. That is, Kant wavers between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism. The ontological dimension of Kant explored by Ameriks and Olav Bryant Smith (in contrast, say, to Henry Allison) is what is correctly defended by Malone-France. As before, *if* we had to say what reality is *in itself*, Leibniz's (and, I might add, Whitehead's) panpsychism points the way.

It would be a mistake, I think, to assume that Whitehead's dependence of the knower on the known is incompatible with certain versions of perspectivalism that have understandably flourished since the time of, and due to the influence of, Kant. Avoiding this mistake might help to make Whitehead's view more appealing to latter-day Kantians. Further compatibility between Kant and Whitehead can be seen when Whitehead is interpreted by Malone-France as offering a critique of pure feeling, in only partial contrast to Kant's critique of pure reason. Seen in this light, Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic" in the first critique could (or perhaps should) have been his main topic (see Falkenstein). If Kant had emphasized more this part of his magnum opus, then he would have been both closer to Whitehead's view that to be is to experience and nearer to his

own friendly approach to Leibniz in the "Dream" essay.

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