

Kant and Lacan on the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary About Anticipation and Metaphysics

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Abstract

It is argued that different viewpoints on anticipation are determined by different metaphysical backgrounds. Three metaphysics are discussed and compared: one related to Greek philosophy, one related to Kant's viewpoint in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and one related to the Lacanian viewpoint on the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

Keywords: Kant, Lacan, Real, Symbolic, Imaginary, Anticipation, Metaphysics.

1. Introduction

As described in "Anticipatory Systems: a short philosophical note" (Van de Vijver, 1998), ancient Greek philosophy linked anticipatory processes to the capacity of designating things by a universal vocabulary while having experience only with particular instances of those things. For the Greeks, anticipation is the capacity of the human mind to possess and use abstract ideas, *before* the immediate perception of the object. This viewpoint illustrates that the basic point in anticipatory processes is not their overt time-relatedness or time-reversal – by which a future state is anticipated by being incorporated in some way in the current state, and is thus seen to come *before* its actual realisation – but rather the capacities of abstraction making such anticipatory processes possible in the first place.

More in particular, the Greek viewpoint can teach us:

- (i) that anticipation paradoxically rests on the capacity (or the belief in the capacity) to build universal, allegedly time-less concepts that permit to capture on an *a priori* basis the particular instantiations that occur in sensation;
- (ii) that the issue of universal versus particular requires an account of the ways in which certain systems (*in casu* human beings) deal with or are (intentionally) directed to their surroundings that are accessible through the senses;

- (iii) that the account of the relation between human systems and their surroundings can vary, depending on the priority given, either to the *a priori* universal categories under which the particular sensations are subsumed, or to the particular and ever changing sensuous presentations, or to any hybrid form situated in between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* options.

Today, it has become clear that the type of answer that is given in relation to the latter point, e.g. the priority given, either to the universal categories or to the particular sensations, is determinative for the metaphysical (ontological) frame within which epistemological and even ethical issues are settled. In other words, it makes a difference to give priority to universal categories or to particular sensations. It makes a difference in the sense that different types of questions and answers become relevant or irrelevant. Therefore, beyond similarities and differences in *vocabulary* (universal-particular, abstraction, reason-sensitivity, ... supplemented by representational accounts, local/global viewpoints, cf. Van de Vijver 1998, 2000), it becomes crucial to trace down the *ontological, metaphysical* shifts that occurred since the first Greek proposition.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a clarification of these background by developing two brief examples, between which a certain tension can be seen to exist. The first concerns the Kantian viewpoint, that apparently shares important terminological choices with the Greek viewpoint, but that can be shown to diverge from it in essential ways, basically because it is a post-Cartesian viewpoint that starts from Cartesian ontological options (different from the Greek ones). The second concerns the Lacanian viewpoint on the relation between the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary, that illustrates in a sense a return to the Greek viewpoint, but meanwhile incorporates language as the fundamental structure in which, as Lacan puts it, the subject precipitates itself. Both examples will provide the opportunity to illustrate that in assessing and articulating anticipation as a relation between universal and particular, between *a priori* concepts (reason) and sensitive presentations, another term plays a crucial role, namely imagination.

2. Kant's Basic Metaphysical Gesture

In his letter to Marcus Herz of February 21, 1772, Kant states the following (Zweig, 1967: 71-72): "What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call 'representation' to the object? If a representation is only a way in which the subject is affected by the object, then it is easy to see how the representation is in conformity with this object, namely, as an effect in accord with its cause, and it is easy to see how this modification [*Bestimmung*] of our mind can *represent* something, that is, have an object. Thus the passive or sensuous representations have an understandable relationship to objects, and the principles that are derived from the nature of our soul have an understandable validity for all things insofar as those things are supposed to be objects of the senses. In the same way, if that in us which we call 'representation' were active with regard to the object, that is, if the object itself were created by the representation (as when divine cognitions are conceived as the archetypes of all things),

the conformity of these representations to their objects could be understood. Thus the possibility of both an *intellectus archetypi* (on whose intuition the things themselves would be grounded) and an *intellectus ectypi* (which would derive the date for its logical procedure from the sensuous intuition of things) is at least intelligible. However, our understanding, through its representations, is not the cause of the object (save in the case of moral ends), nor is the object [*Gegenstand*] the cause of the intellectual representations in the mind (*in sensu reali*). Therefore the pure concepts of the understanding must not be abstracted from sense perceptions, nor must they express the reception of representations through the sense; but though they must have their origin in the nature of the soul, they are neither caused by the object [*Obiect*] nor bring the object itself into being".

Kant expected a quick solution to this problem, as he announces in this letter that he purports to finish his work, that he intended to call at that moment *The Limits of Sensibility and Reason*, and that would be called later *The Critique of Pure Reason*, within three months. The problem he poses here in terms of conformity between a representation and its object, is apparently more complex than he expected, as the *Critique of Pure Reason* will only be completed ten years later. However, the question looks straightforward: how to explain the conformity of representation and object, between an 'input' of reason and an 'input' of sensation? But is it really so straightforward?

The reason to quote this extensive passage, is that it is indicative of Kant's metaphysical background¹ that differs substantially from the Greek one. Remember that the Greek philosophers were concerned with the relation between universal and particular, and this is exactly the relation Kant is concerned with too. But does he therefore ask the same question? In our opinion, he doesn't. In that regard, we agree with Whitehead, who considered Kantian thinking as a genuine trap that is substantially different from the Greek one and that, in Whitehead's view, is to be avoided by all means.

In order to make this point clear, let us attempt to be as explicit as possible about Kant's basic epistemological assumptions. These are twofold: (i) On the one hand, Kant assumes that the problem of knowledge is to be articulated on the basis of the relation between two terms, concepts of reason and objects given through sensitivity. Those two terms are heterogeneous and are dealt with by different faculties. (ii) On the other hand, he assumes that an agreement or conformity can exist between these two terms, which asks for an explanation. Kant indeed accepts that objective knowledge, that is, universal

¹ A metaphysical frame or background can be intuitively seen as a window on the world, a way of asking questions and refraining to ask others. We take inspiration here from Lynn Rudder Baker's account of metaphysical backgrounds (1995), articulated within the frame of philosophy of mind. In that domain, she is one of the rare philosophers to have argued for the need to clarify the metaphysical backgrounds out of which certain presuppositions arise, and out of which solutions are proposed. This she has shown with regard to the discussions about causality and explanation in relation to human action. In this regard, she has described unbridgeable divergences of viewpoints about reality, causality, and human behaviour, underlying these discussions. For a further treatment of this topic, see Van de Vijver (2004).

and necessary knowledge, is possible, as it is given in the form of Newtonian mechanics.

Starting from these two assumptions, Kant meets two *challenges*: to show that the system of *a priori* concepts that he proposes is necessary and universal, and to show that it is genuinely related to the things given through sensation.

The first challenge is what the *Critique of Pure Reason* is basically about. There, Kant takes up the initial questions he had communicated to Marcus Herz, and purports to argue for the fact the system of concepts is indeed the only possible one in view of making objective knowledge possible. The transcendental deduction is about the justification of the concepts in terms of their necessity as conditions of possibility of objective knowledge. In his first *Critique*, Kant will consider that those *a priori* universal concepts can be found, and that the particular instantiations of experiences have to be subsumed under them. This is a Greek way of phrasing the issue. And Kant's answer is clear: those concepts cover all possible experience, in that all possible experience needs to meet the requirements of these universal concepts. The trap Whitehead had in mind, however, is that Kant, although he criticizes Descartes and rejects dogmatic rationalism, basically adopts Descartes' way of phrasing the issue. The terms he starts from, reason on the one hand and sensation on the other, are two heterogeneous terms, and it is between these two that a conformity has to be looked for. This is not a Greek, but a Cartesian way of putting the problem.

The second challenge concerns the *heterogeneity* between the categories of reason (concepts) and the sensory input given in intuition (image). Actually, this challenge was also the one of Greek and medieval philosophy, namely the one of grasping how our thinking is to be related to our senses. At this point, Kant introduces a third term, in between reason and intuition, in between the particular sensory image and the conceptual idea, which is the schema. The schema has to serve the function of building a connection between the two heterogeneous terms. The problem of schematism is to answer the question about how *a priori* categories are applicable to images provided through sensation. More specifically, its aim is to build a bridge between intuition and the pure concepts of reason, between the image and the general idea. For Kant, it is not sufficient that in the transcendental deduction the existence of universal concepts is proven. It is also imperative that the applicability of such concepts is argued for. Starting from the transcendental deduction, it became clear to him that pure concepts of understanding are totally heterogeneous with regard to an image, and can never be found in any intuition whatsoever. Hence the need for a third term, which restores homogeneity in a certain way. The problem of schematism thus contains the following two aspects: "How are categories applicable to appearances and their mere form?" and "How [do] what Kant calls 'sensible concepts' become connected with images through their schemata?". Alexis Philonenko (1982) clearly shows how the schema should not be confused with the image. It is the *general procedure*, the general rule on the basis of which an image is procured to an *a priori* concept. The schema gives an outline of the conditions by which a sensory input is to be determined in relation to a logical function or concept. Where the image is the product of productive imagination, the schema is the product of the pure imagination *a priori*. It is homogeneous with, but not similar to, the

image and the concept.²

Two remarks can be added here:

- Firstly, the innovating aspect of Kant's approach is the focus on the active pool in the construction of knowledge: knowledge is no passive reception or submission, knowledge is the development of a procedure by an active instance.

- Secondly, Kant admits that schematism is a mysterious thing: "an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to bring up to our gaze".³ For him, it follows that the theory of the psyche has only a descriptive status, for one can hardly analyze a living activity. Psychology should confine itself to the description of this method of schematism, as opposed to all that presents itself as the construction of intellectual operations, and for which one could give an *a priori* rule. So, schematism indicates, once again, the dualism between two heterogeneous terms that need to be brought into conformity. The two terms are on the one hand the concepts of reason that have a legislative, constitutive status, and on the other hand the images given in intuition that are to be subsumed under these concepts. Even if this dualism differs on many points from the one of Descartes, it does fit into an ontological space that remains basically faithful to the one initiated by Descartes, and that, as such, differs substantially from the Greek viewpoint.

Indeed, in Greek philosophy, the problem of knowledge was not defined as a problem of bringing two heterogeneous terms into conformity. The space within which epistemological issues are raised, is not dualistic in a Cartesian sense. For Aristotle, for instance, the attention for the soul is to be equated with the attention for an animating principle. He was convinced that the soul is the principle on the basis of which life can be explained. His concern for the human soul, is thus a concern for the living, sensitive, moving body, not a concern for a disembodied mind situated above or aside of the body. Animation refers in the first place to the moving body (cf. Burwood et al., 1999; De Preester, 2004).

This has as a consequence that questions of knowledge (e.g. having representations) are settled from within an embodied perspective, in which the moving body plays a

² In his *Critique of Pure Judgment* Kant had emphasized both the importance of the method and the distinction between a schema and an image. "So, wenn ich fünf Punkte hinter einander setze, ist dieses ein Bild von der Zahl fünf. Dagegen, wenn ich eine Zahl überhaupt nur denke, die nun fünf oder hundert sein kann, so ist dieses Denken mehr die *Vorstellung einer Methode*, einem gewissen Begriffe gemäß eine Menge (z. E. Tausend) in einem Bilde vorzustellen, als dieses Bild selbst, welches ich im letztern Falle schwerlich würde überschauen und mit dem Begriff vergleichen können. Diese Vorstellung nun von einem allgemeinen Verfahren der Einbildungskraft, einem Begriff sein Bild zu verschaffen, nenne ich das Schema zu diesem Begriffe." (E. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, BIII, p. 189; B180, A140-141, our cursivation). We are quoting Kant from the edition of the Collected Works by Wilhelm Weischedel, published by Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977. The reference from the Suhrkamp-edition is each time followed by the reference from the original edition: the pagination of the second edition B is mentioned first, then followed by the first edition A.

³ "... eine verborgene Kunst in den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele, deren wahre Handgriffe wir der Natur schwerlich jemals abratzen, und sie unverdeckt vor Augen legen werden" (E. Kant, [1956]: 190, B181-182, A142, our translation).

crucial role. This is radically different from a Cartesian perspective, in which knowledge, or at least its truthfulness, is situated apart from or above the body. In addition, the metaphysical difference between Cartesian and non-Cartesian approaches can become clear from the role of *imagination*. For the Greeks, it is acknowledged that imagination is different from perception, but the connection between both is always stressed: imagination is a movement generated by an actual perception. Therefore, the challenge for philosophers like Aristotle, and later Thomas Aquinas, is to explain how different orders, animated and non animated, body and soul, different kinds of movement (perception, representation, cognition, ...) at some point interact with each other and are at other moments differentiated. Most of the time, these ideas are expressed by using the distinction between form and matter. Moreover, most of the time the process of abstraction is thought of in causal terms. For example, for Aquinas, imagination is the reservoir of images that are the similarities of certain things that are captured by the senses. Those images are not yet immaterial. The sense receives the form of things without matter, but not yet without the material conditions (which refers to the material individuating conditions of those things). So, the aim is to abstract from the material conditions, and the more this process of abstraction proceeds, the more it is perfect.⁴ These ideas are completely in opposition to Kant's conception, with the constitutive, legislative function of the concepts of reason, and the attempt to subsume under them the images given through sensation.

It is on the basis of a clarification of the metaphysical frames that the relation between universal and particular, that we intrinsically linked to the issue of anticipation, needs to be situated. With the Greeks, anticipation, conceived of as the capacity of the human mind to possess and use abstract ideas, *before* the immediate perception of the object, is to be viewed from within a metaphysics in which the moving body plays the first role. With Kant, anticipation, very similarly conceived of as the capacity to capture/subsume particular things in sensation through general concepts, is interpreted as the capacity to build bridges between two intrinsically heterogeneous orders, reason and sensation, the former being legislative, the latter being contingent and to be subsumed under *a priori* laws.

To be fair, Kant's viewpoint on the relation between universal and particular was nuanced and supplemented in his third *Critique*, the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) in which he did take into account the living organism. As a matter of fact, Kant questioned, precisely with regard to the living organism the adequacy of attempting to subsume the particular under the universal. According to him, living systems intrinsically resist any attempt of this sort, and have, as such, a very specific status. These insights didn't lead, however, to a basic shift in what functioned at that moment

⁴ This has implications of the relation between body and soul. According to Aristotle and Aquinas, the essence of the soul is to in-form the body, the soul is the formative principle of the body. But the soul is as a form united with the body. Form does not exist for the sake of the body, it is the opposite: matter exists for the sake of the form. Form explains matter and not the inverse. In other words, the soul is not accidentally united with the body, but essentially. The soul can only understand something through sensory images (for a discussion, see De Preester, 2004).

as his metaphysical background. Neither did it bring him to question the implications of this metaphysical background that differed so substantially from the Greek one.⁵

2. The Lacanian Viewpoint

Let us now come to Lacan's viewpoint on the relation between universal and particular. Our aim is not so much to show that Lacanian psychoanalysis is faithful to the Cartesian heritage, or that it deals with epistemological issues in terms of the problematic relations between different, heterogeneous orders. Our aim is instead to show that Lacan conceives of this heterogeneity in structural terms, and to examine the epistemological and ontological consequences of this structural viewpoint. In this regard, it turns out that it is impossible to talk about anticipation without a clear understanding of what is involved in the idea of anticipative *structures*. This will bring us to a clarification of Lacan's metaphysical frame that is quite radically different from the Greek as well as from the Kantian view.

It is well known that Lacan's thinking involves three orders of psychic functioning: the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary (RSI). It is on the basis of these three "orders", these different kinds of organisation, that Lacan gives shape to a basic heterogeneity in the heart of psychic life. What, however, is meant by these psychic "orders"? It is certainly tempting to conceive of the distinction between Real, Symbolic and Imaginary along the lines of the distinctions classically made in philosophy. The Real then could be taken to refer to the body, the Symbolic to language or to the concepts of reason, and the Imaginary to the image or at least to what sensitively produces the image. A close reading of Lacan's texts, however, indicates that it is better to resist this temptation.

Indeed, in Lacan's viewpoint, *the Symbolic* refers to the regulation and structuring of the social world on the basis of certain laws, an idea borrowed from structuralist anthropology. The most basic form of social exchange is communication. Law and structure are unthinkable without language. Even if the symbolic is not to be equated with language, it is essentially a linguistic dimension. The symbolic dimension of language is that of the signifier: a dimension in which elements are purely constituted by virtue of their mutual differences. The Symbolic therefore is first and foremost a structural idea, and is not referring to meaning or significance (Evans, 1996).⁶

The Imaginary starts from the formation of the ego in the mirror stage, a process by which the ego is formed through imaginary identification, e.g. identification with the image in the mirror. Alienation is constitutive of the imaginary order (Lacan, 1988, for a discussion, see Van de Vijver et al., 2002). The Imaginary therefore has connotations of illusion, fascination, and seduction. In the linguistic dimension, the Imaginary refers to the side of the signified and signification, and exerts, as in the mirror image, a

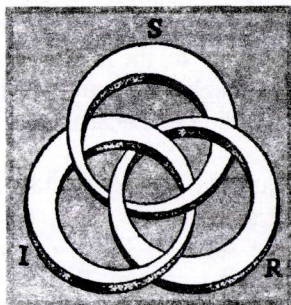
⁵ His reasons for thinking differently in relation to living systems are various and too complex to be discussed in this article. We can refer, however, to the following publication that deals with this issue: Van de Vijver et al., 2004.

⁶Quite similarly, In Freud's work, the signifier refers to the word-*form* or the sound-*form*, not to the meaning.

captivating power. Clearly, the imaginary is related to the image, and to the signification of the image. It therefore can provide meaning to the signifier and as such stop or freeze the structural functioning of the symbolic. But it is not in itself a structure.

The Real lies beyond the Symbolic, it is inassimilable to language: "that which resists symbolization absolutely" (Lacan, 1988), and is therefore traumatic. It is not conceived of in structuralist terms of oppositions between presence and absence: "there is no absence in the real" (Lacan, 1988a). It is the Symbolic that introduces a cut in the Real in the process of signification. The Real has also connotations of matter, implying a material substrate underlying the Imaginary and the Symbolic, and as such links to the realm of biology and to the body in its brute physicality (Evans, 1996). However, it does not have to be thought of as unstructured in itself. On the contrary, the biological body is a complexly organized dynamical structure. But the way in which it can be captured through the symbolic, is as an absence.

So, Lacan conceives of psychic functioning in terms of a very specific coupling between three orders, that are heterogeneous to each other but that nevertheless have a connection. This connection is metaphorically expressed through the Borromean knot. The three orders, the Real the Symbolic, the Imaginary, are intertwined in a Borromean knot:



What can be deduced from this viewpoint about anticipation and metaphysical backgrounds?

- Firstly, the Lacanian viewpoint conceives of the psyche as a system that is essentially structured on the basis of language. It is the way in which the subject is in language that determines its specific access to the biological body, as well as to the image. In a sense, language is determinative for or concomitant with ontological issues. In his Seminar III, for instance, Lacan writes: "I have begun to distinguish three spheres of language as such. You will remember that we can, inside the phenomenon of language itself, integrate the three planes of the symbolic, represented by the signifier, the imaginary, represented by signification, and the real, that is the discourse genuinely held within it diachronic dimension." (Lacan,

1993: 75-76, our translation)⁷

- Secondly, the psychic system, by being thus constituted of different orders, is intrinsically heterogeneous, but this heterogeneity is ultimately seized from within a symbolic perspective. In other words, it is the symbolic structure that has a determinative as well as an anticipative function for the constitution of the human subject. More correctly, it is through the Symbolic that the human subject can acquire an anticipative capacity, towards the body on the one hand, and towards the image on the other.⁸ In this, the particular intertwinement, illustrated by the Borromean knot, is indicative of the particular developmental history of the human subject.
- Thirdly, the Symbolic is the "flesh" of which the subject is made. It should not be conceived of as something that "finishes off" the human subject, a kind of veneer, something with superficial effects. On the contrary, the Symbolic has constitutive impact. As such, it determines the space within which the subject can move and develop. "A subject speaks as it moves, and moves at it speaks".
- Therefore, conceiving of the Symbolic in structural terms, and considering the emergence of the subject as a particular instantiation of the symbolic, implies a structural viewpoint on anticipatory processes. Indeed, anticipatory processes cannot but witness of the structure within which they take place. The merit of Lacan, and more broadly of structuralism, is to have shown that anticipatory processes are constrained by and even require dynamical structures.

3. Conclusion

Lacan has given shape to the idea that a human subject is first and foremost a speaking subject. Its essence lies in its modality of speaking. Once the human subject is characterized thus, and once the account of the subject is embedded into a structural viewpoint, it becomes impossible to phrase the issue of anticipation in classical philosophical terms, such as those of Greek philosophy, or even those of Kant. The relation between universal and particular is indeed to be grasped from within the capacities and limitations the human being has as a speaking being. For instance, any account of the universal will have to be seen as the result of very particular, embodied interactive practices, of which language practices are the exquisite example. An account of concepts of reason in terms of legislation or constitution, as Kant sustained, becomes highly problematic. At first sight, Lacan could be seen to come closer to the Greek viewpoint, and metaphysically speaking, there is something to say for this idea. As a matter of fact, Lacan's psychoanalysis witnesses of a highly dynamic, embodied viewpoint on knowledge and epistemology. But the similarity is to be limited, in as far

⁷ "Séminaire III, Les Psychoses, pp. 75-76: "J'ai commencé par distinguer les trois sphères de la parole comme telle. Vous vous rappelez que nous pouvons, à l'intérieur même du phénomène de la parole, intégrer les trois plans du symbolique, représenté par le signifiant, de l'imaginaire, représenté par la signification, et du réel, qui est le discours bel et bien tenu réellement dans sa dimension diachronique."

⁸ For a discussion of the identificatory logic at work in the constitution of the subject, see Van Bunder et al. 2004.

as the Greek did not consider language as a tool that participated in the dynamics of living, that determined the essence of the subject, and that also determined its way of being in the world. For Lacan, and also for Freud, the subject constructs its home in and through language. In language, it can be more or less comfortable, but it is the only home it has. It is within this home that anticipatory practises take place on the basis of which the human being gets a grip on his sensitive contacts with their surroundings

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