

Mikel Dufrenne

The Notion of the A Priori.

Trans. Edward S. Casey; Preface by Paul Ricoeur.

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The Notion of the A Priori is the English translation of Mikel Dufrenne's 1959 work *La Notion D'A Priori*. This edition is a re-publication of the 1966 translation by Edward Casey, containing a new introduction by the translator and a preface by Paul Ricoeur. It investigates the *a priori*, a topic central to post-Kantian philosophy. The argument proceeds dialectically, exploring one conception of the *a priori* before discussing a neglected antithetical aspect. Following the introduction, the first part discusses the *a priori* as objective, and the second part addresses its subjective aspect. The final part considers the possible unity of the subjective and the objective *a priori*.

The introduction criticizes the Kantian *a priori* which confers meaning on experience while remaining 'independent of experience and...not compromised by it' (5-6). Dufrenne argues that this relation cannot be one of simple anteriority. While functioning as the principle of experience, the *a priori* is given in experience (7). '[P]ossible experience implies [a] real experience' which realizes and restricts the *a priori* categories (8). And if the Kantian *a priori* both (a) is the formal condition of experience, including concrete self-experience, and (b) issues from the nature of the mind, then is the subject fundamentally constituting or constituted (16)? Further, '[h]ow can the *a priori* structure the *a posteriori*'; how does it reach and impose its law on nature (31)?

The paradoxes of Kant's philosophy remain a constant reference point in Dufrenne's rethinking of the *a priori*. Part 1 examines the *a priori* not as the constitutive action of an objectifying subject but as a structure immanent in the object (45). This position does not collapse into empiricism because 'perception has a meaning' which 'requires an *a priori*' (49), that is, which accounts for the subject's ability to apprehend this meaning (52). And although the apprehension of meaning is an event in time, meaning itself cannot be explained in terms of time. The *a priori* is pre-historical and the subject is in this sense unengendered (54). The second chapter critiques the Kantian and Husserlian determination of the *a priori* as universal and necessary. This formalization is, Dufrenne argues, a phenomenologically ungrounded restriction. For example, the Kantian forms of intuition presuppose a prior original givenness of space and time (58-9). The formal is not immanent in the content but 'is the result of formalization' (67). The third chapter turns from the formal *a priori* to its material givenness. Such material *a priori* are 'fully given and... irrecusably present' eidetic essences (73). They are expressed by objects. To 'discern something savoury in the taste of fruit, grace in a dancer's movement or youth in a child's countenance' is to 'immediately discover the essence of the savoury, the

gracious, or of youth' (82). Yet Dufrenne concludes that the understanding of the *a priori* as material remains tied to formalization as it has a 'certain logical independence with respect to a particular content' (84).

The fourth chapter argues we must consider the perceptual givenness of the *a priori*. A Kantian objection, however, states that perception is already intellectualized and the condition for this intellectualization cannot be found in perception itself. Yet 'Kant's examples suggest that the idea of a necessary relation need not be introduced by the understanding' (86). I do not objectify my perceptions when I look at the various parts of a house but I do objectify my successive apprehensions of a moving boat. This suggests that 'causality is perceived in the event' (86). The fifth chapter then turns to the limits of the given, objective *a priori*. The *a priori* cannot appear to us without being subjected to knowledge and so must 'also be present in subjectivity itself' (115).

Part 2 examines this subjective *a priori*. Chapter 6 argues the subject 'has the capacity for comprehending the *a priori* proffered to him and, once given, recognized by him' (121-2). Although this knowledge has empirical circumstances for its actualization, it is not itself empirical. When 'an object reveals an affective quality or value to me, I have the impression that I am already familiar with the meaning thus revealed, and I can give a name to it' (122). Moreover it is only in relation to this virtual knowledge that worldly events are given. The 'virtual is the principle of genesis, not its effect' (125). Chapters 7 and 8 consider whether the body is the seat of *a priori* virtualities (137). Chapter 7 rejects a substantial dualism between mind and body, and consciousness is interpreted as an act rather than a quality (146). Dufrenne detects a fundamental correlation between temporal self-awareness and corporeality. Temporal passivity 'in turn manifests corporeality' (143). Chapter 8 directly address the immanence of the *a priori* in the body. Such a position is implicit in Kant, since sensibility implies incarnate receptivity. The schemata are a corporeal pre-language by which 'consciousness becomes sensitive to certain experiences that language can later render explicit' (159). But as the body aims at the world and surpasses itself (162), the social and historical dimension of the *a priori* must be examined. Chapter 9 rejects historical determinism, emphasizing the ambiguity of the relation between the individual and society. '[F]irst, I am *it*, and to this extent it structures and limits me; secondly, it is I, and to this extent I structure and limit it' (178). History manifests itself to the I who is not its product but its inheritor.

Part 3 examines the relation between the subjective and the objective *a priori*. Chapter 10 argues for the equality of man and world. The Kantian idea of the world as an objective totality itself implicitly refers back to subjectivity. Moreover 'science is linked to perception and can [not] deny it without being false to itself' (197). Dufrenne further rejects the naturalistic conception of man as engendered by the world as a mere chronological anteriority (206). As transcendental the subject stands in reciprocal and equal relation to the world: 'the world comprehends the subject, and the subject comprehends the world' (208). This suggests, Chapter 11 argues, not only equality but a

reciprocal affinity and finality: ‘the world is for the subject, and the subject is for the world’ (210). This affinity cannot be accounted for solely by the subject. The transcendental synthesis of the Kantian imagination ‘must find something correspondent in the nature of things, in the manifold of intuition’ (213). Dufrenne situates himself between Kant’s conditional affirmation of harmony between nature and judgment and Leibniz’s unconditional affirmation of harmony as a metaphysical fact (224). This reciprocal affinity is a primary fact but is ‘not homogenous with other facts; [and]...cannot be explained by them’ (226).

The final chapter examines whether this primary fact of reciprocal affinity or harmony can itself be elucidated. He proceeds through a critique of Heidegger who, he claims, ‘strives to consider Being as against which subject and object appear afterwards’ (232). Yet this background is itself unthinkable, and this ‘*a priori* of the *a priori* does not allow a transcendental deduction of the *a priori*’ (232-3). Yet in poetry an affective accord between man and world is given that ‘is so complete that it may look like a unity’ (239). But philosophy should not become poetry, as to summon an absolute through incantation is to succumb to dogmatism. Philosophical experience ‘must be put to the test in [rational] discourse’ (239).

Despite his critique of Kant, Dufrenne’s conclusion remains thoroughly Kantian. The affinity between man and world is beyond the bounds of the thinkable for philosophy. But is this boundary of the philosophically thinkable necessary or is it historical and contingent? A further particular point of interest lies in comparing his work with the better known phenomenologies of Heidegger and Levinas. For example, Dufrenne insists that the *a priori* is nontemporal in that it does not have a chronological origin in personal experience, nature or history (54, 124, 128, 206). Yet should this past be described as *nontemporal*—or does it indicate that temporality must not be primordially conceived as *chronology*?

The Notion of the A Priori is an important, wide-ranging and lucid work which draws upon the continental, analytic and enlightenment traditions of philosophy. It raises fundamental questions about and gives original and provocative answers to a problem central to post-Kantian philosophy.

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