

Introduction

From the Transcendental, through the Extraordinary, to “Perpetual Peace”

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In the following paragraph of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant, reflecting on how we speak of the difference between appearances and reality, recapitulates the basic argument he formulates in favor of transcendental idealism, the word *extraordinary* assumes the extraordinary function of explicating the meaning of the word *transcendental*:

If, therefore, we say: The senses represent objects to us as they appear, but the understanding as they are, then the latter is not to be taken in a transcendental but merely an empirical way, signifying, namely, how they must be represented as objects of experience, in the thoroughgoing connection of appearances, and not how they might be outside of the relation to possible experience and consequently to sense in general, thus as objects of pure understanding. For this will always remain unknown to us, so that it even remains unknown whether such a transcendental (extraordinary [*außerordentlichen*]) cognition is possible at all, at least as one that stands under our ordinary [*gewöhnlichen*] categories. With us understanding and sensibility can determine an object only in combination. If we separate them, then we have intuitions without concepts or concepts without intuitions, but in either case representations that we cannot relate to any determinate object.¹

Nowhere else in all of his extant writings does Kant explain the cardinal attribute of his technical vocabulary, *transcendental*, with reference to the colloquial term *extraordinary*. As if the substitution of *transcendental* by *extraordinary* were not extraordinary enough, he emphasizes the point by describing the categories of the pure understanding as nothing less than “ordinary.” Since, however, the demonstration of the objective reality of these categories derives from a transcendental deduction—this is, of course, the cornerstone of the critical program, which Kant considers so important that he accomplishes it twice—the passage cited above can be rephrased as following: the extraordinary yields the ordinary; more precisely, only by virtue of an extraordinary deduction can the ordinariness of the categories be recognized. Even as Kant denies the possibility of extraordinary cognition, at least for human beings, he admits, if only by way of substitution, that the ordinariness of cognition derives from the extraordinary.

De lo extraordinario—which was first published in 2001 and appears here under the title *Modernity as Exception and Miracle*—makes us acutely sensitive to the subtle semantic event that happens in this brief passage of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. A new kind of “hermeneutics of suspicion” emerges from the pages of Sabrovsky’s production of a new table of quasi-categories, which, congruent with the Kantian one, derives from a “transcendental (extraordinary)” deduction. Whereas the genealogical inquiries of a Nietzsche or a Foucault prompt the suspicion that power is everywhere implicated in even the most apparently neutral ends or benign techniques, the analysis that ensues in this volume alerts its readers to the fact that the forms and functions of contemporary order and ordinariness derive from the extraordinariness and out-of-ordered-ness of Modernity itself. It is for this reason—and in contrast to the Kantian program of grounding the sciences in the “transcendental (extraordinary)” unity of apperception—that Sabrovsky’s study does not present Newtonian or classical mechanics but, rather, statistical thermodynamics as the exemplary modern science: every semblance of order is understood in advance to be extraordinary, a deviation from the state of equilibrium toward which bodies and fields, matter and energy move. And it is for the same reason that Sabrovsky’s analysis takes its point of departure from a general conception of language that is so altogether ordinary within the context of Modernity, including and especially its exact sciences, that we fail to recognize its extraordinariness—the conception, namely, that denies without the slightest compunction the possibility that certain words acquire their meaning and thus become words in the proper sense of the word only because they are ultimately grounded in the order of reality. In

other words, Sabrovsky precisely locates the Modernity of Modernity in the total victory of late scholastic nominalism over early scholastic realism. It is for this reason, finally, that the original publication of *De lo extraordinario* bore the subtitle *nominalismo y modernidad*: the quasi-categories of modern philosophy, science, literature, art, and politics derive from a generally occluded memory of nominalism's triumph, which required each of these spheres of knowledge, action, and judgment to represent a version of the extraordinary—the exceptional, the miraculous—in which the battle would continue, and the victory could be repeated and forgotten *ad infinitum*.

What Sabrovsky discerns in the following passage drawn from the eleventh and final chapter of *Modernity as Exception and Miracle* precisely captures what Kant admits almost as an aside in the passage quoted above from the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

[T]he nominalist, who asserts the radical unknowability of the Real (its primordial alterity in connection to our language), knows, however, of the Real—precisely as something unknowable, as other. In other words, nominalism seeks to exclude the projection of the forms of reason into the Real and thus to ban, once and for all, the passage between being and thought. But insofar as its unknowability is in itself an unverifiable postulate (for in order to verify it, a sort of “thinking of thinking” would be necessary, which would face again the same problem), it can be nothing but a projection. Thus . . . the nominalist postulate is violated at the very instant that it is asserted. However, nominalism, as well as the modern world instituted by it, are not “refuted” by this paradox. Rather, the paradox is the source of energy that keeps modern reason working. (142)

Just as Sabrovsky concisely restates the epistemic aporia around which Kant's critical program revolves, in which the unknowability of things-in-themselves is of a different order of knowledge than the knowledge of the object of experience in general, so does he subtly indicate the exact point at which Modernity becomes exceptional from within the context of its exemplary science. Because the “postulate” from which Modernity emerges remains only a demand, not an axiom that can be demonstrated through some form of intuition, the “source” of its “energy” is inexhaustible. Modernity is thus akin to a perpetual-motion machine, which statistical thermodynamics, emerging from the industrial revolution as the crux of the modern sciences, does not

so much disallow in accordance with some metaphysical principle as declare inadmissible in the real world, including its ideal models of energy transfer. By virtue of the inexhaustibility of its dynamic source, however, Modernity must view itself as an infinitely unlikely exception to the probabilistic laws and thus the only legitimate miracle. Of course, the same argument proceeds in the opposite direction: since we cannot know, after all, whether or not the source of Modernity's energy is in fact inexhaustible, there is no end to the number of ways in which its end can and will be imagined. Insofar as such speculation is itself a source of energy, however, the anticipation of its exhaustion results in its replenishment.

To my knowledge, there is only one previous attempt to understand Modernity as a *perpetuum mobile*, namely, Kant's little treatise of 1795, *Zum ewigen Frieden*, which is often, and for good reason, translated as "Perpetual Peace." In certain passages, Kant suggests that an end to warfare—not only political but also metaphysical—can be accomplished without a total exhaustion of living forces only through the establishment of a system of mutually sustaining and enlivening states that would represent the analogue in the sphere of freedom to a perpetual-motion machine in the sphere of nature. Even if Sabrovsky never mentions "Perpetual Peace" in *Modernity as Exception and Miracle*, the passage of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in which Kant first speaks of a lively peace maintained in perpetuity is the point of departure not only for his analysis of the extraordinary quasi-category of history in the second chapter but, in retrospect, for all of the subsequent quasi-categories, insofar as each of them, as modern, is historical in the relevant sense.² For Kant, of course, Newtonian science, along with arithmetic and Euclidean geometry, is the exemplary science. Even as his very first book, *Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces*, written some fifty years before "Perpetual Peace," gingerly enters into the century-long debates concerning what eventually would be called the first law of thermodynamics, he had no access to the kinds of investigation Sabrovsky analyzes in his fourth chapter, "Works of Science." Nevertheless, he was well enough aware of the relevant conjectures and experiments to recognize that he could associate his proposal for perpetual peace with the idea of a *perpetuum mobile* only if he self-consciously adopted an attitude of ironic detachment, for it is not only princes and politicians but also natural philosophers and protoscientists who would scoff at any such proposal.³ Here, if anywhere, a hermeneutics of suspicion is warranted since what else could be behind a proposal that everyone familiar with the modern sciences knows to be impossible—a system of forces that mutually sustains and enlivens each and all of its members?

Despite all of this justified mockery and suspicion, however, the proposal stands unrefuted and, indeed, irrefutable. *Modernity as Exception and Miracle* is one of its genuine successors, for it retrieves that infinitely fine balance of argument, style, and tone through which “Perpetual Peace” retains the possibility that global Modernity as a whole—however little this “whole” can be represented by a universal term, including *Modernity*—may be its own miracle, an exception to the laws that govern the universe.