

Fall 1980

## The Guardians at the Gate: Archetypes, Angels and A Priori Forms

Philip Novak

*Department of Religion and Philosophy, Dominican University of California, [philip.novak@dominican.edu](mailto:philip.novak@dominican.edu)*

**Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.**

---

### Recommended Citation

Novak, Philip, "The Guardians at the Gate: Archetypes, Angels and A Priori Forms" (1980).  
*Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 136.

<https://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty/136>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty and Staff Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact [michael.pujals@dominican.edu](mailto:michael.pujals@dominican.edu).

*A discussion of two distinct forms of consciousness  
in the works of Plato, Plotinus, Aquinas, and Kant*

# THE GUARDIANS AT THE GATE: ARCHETYPES, ANGELS AND A PRIORI FORMS



by  
PHILIP NOVAK

**I**n response to the growing cross-disciplinary interest in the transformability of human consciousness, this paper explores the doctrines of consciousness as found in the work of four great Western metaphysicians—Plato/Plotinus, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Immanuel Kant. In Plato and Plotinus, in St. Thomas, and possibly in Kant as well, there lie oft-overlooked doctrines of at least two distinct forms of consciousness—a normal, egoic, subject-object consciousness on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a transcendental consciousness in which one understands the true end of human life to be knowledge of and union with God.

Our concern with God or Ultimate Reality in the Western philosophical tradition has been manifested perhaps too exclusively in terms of Reality's objective pole—Being—to the neglect of Its subjective pole (our essential Identity), Intelligence or Consciousness. In its linguistic pursuit of Being, objective metaphysics in the West has largely ignored or, at best, left implicit the possibility of an interior metaphysics, an "ontology of the subject" which takes the radical transformability of consciousness as its keynote. The experiential living-out of such a philosophy was largely left to the unsystematic mystics, men and women whose utterances have been

considered, generally speaking, to be noetically invalid by a philosophical tradition whose canons of epistemology had no place for noetic events such as, let us say, "intellectual intuition" or ecstatic union. An objective metaphysics of Being asks a relatively static human subject to fathom the truth of Being in logical propositions; a metaphysics of the interior, however, in no way denies the value of the mental discipline inherent in ontological system-building, but it keeps its most ideal eye focused on the human subject not as one who is potentially able to utter the truth of Being but rather as one who can be absorbed by it.

In any case, the danger inherent in lopsided attention to "objective" Being came forth in the history of modern philosophy. The living realities which the words "God" and "Being" represent became so objectively distant that they began to degenerate into mere ideas. The reality of the kingdom within was left prey to misguided rationalisms.

However, in the last decade a veritable explosion of writings from the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, and religious studies have in myriad ways attempted to develop a more complete understanding of human consciousness and its transformative possibilities. As a result of this effort, it is becoming increasingly recognized

that consciousness, like light, is a spectrum and that our normal waking-thinking consciousness is but one limited band of that spectrum (Wilber, 1977).

Much of this interest in consciousness came about as a result of the influx into the West of Asian spiritual methods and doctrines. Yet the great Western thinkers, too, had their notions of a higher consciousness. This is quite clear in the cases of Plato, Plotinus, and St. Thomas. It is not as clear in Kant's thought, though I believe it is implicit.

My entree into each philosopher will be the archetypes of Plato/Plotinus, the angels of Aquinas, and the *a priori* forms of Kant. These concepts will serve as propaedeutics in each case, but they are also instructive when taken together, for they all hover on the threshold of ultimacy. But whereas for Plato, Plotinus and St. Thomas, these concepts served to beckon the human intellect to reunion with its transcendent Ground, Kant's *a priori* categories seem to stand sentinel, proclaiming, "Beyond us you cannot go."<sup>1</sup>

---

---

## MIGHT NOT angels be understood as ontological correlates or reflections of higher states or dimensions of human consciousness?

---

---

Be this as it may, my own exploration of archetypes, angels and the *a priori* has in each instance led to a single, central doctrine, namely, the doctrine of the two intelligences (or two distinct forms of consciousness). This observation, in conjunction with the core doctrines of Asian metaphysics and much of the cross-disciplinary work in consciousness mentioned above, leads me to my conclusion: The idea that we are intimately connected with, and in fact grounded in, while somehow unconscious of, a Consciousness or Intelligence that is universal and transcendent is the *sine qua non* of any theory—philosophical, religious, or psychological—which claims to do justice to the profundity of man's being and the capacity of his consciousness.

### Plato, Plotinus<sup>2</sup> and the Two Intelligences

When the fire of gnosis was kindled in Plato's soul, he realized a vision whose linguistic expression was to become the central pillar of his entire philosophical edifice,

that is, the theory of archetypes or Forms. For Plato the Forms were synonymous with the realm of pure Being. The "Being" of Plato's predecessor Parmenides had a solitariness that the Platonic Forms did not share, but as Paul Friedlander reminds us, "It is the very predicates of Parmenidean Being—whole, simple, and immutable—that Plato transferred to his archetypes" (1969, p. 20).

The Being-realm of the Forms was not, however, the summit of Plato's ontology, for Plato had in the Idea of the Good, which was in some way transcendent to the realm of Forms, the notion of 'beyond existence' or 'beyond being'. Friedlander considers this notion important enough to devote an entire chapter to it, and, in making an exegesis of a section of the cave allegory in the *Republic*, he writes,

At last still another dimension becomes visible above the level of being. As the cause of becoming is not in itself becoming, so the source of being is not in itself being. Then we encounter the highest paradox: not itself being, but beyond being. While there is still knowledge about being, though not purely conceptual knowledge, there can be no knowledge about what is "beyond being" (1969, p. 63).

Plato's notion of "beyond being" is the original of the Plotinian One. Plato and Plotinus also share the idea of a World Soul of which individual souls are participants. Having made these connections, however, we leave them behind in order to zero in upon the ontological plane 'between the Primary beyond-being and the Tertiary Soul. For Plato this secondary realm was the Being-realm of the Forms. For Plotinus it is the first emanation of the One, i.e., the *Nous* or Intelligence, the source from which all else below emanates. At one time or another Plotinus had to face the problem of how to reconcile the unicity of his *Nous* with the plurality of Plato's *Eidos* since they seemed to claim exactly the same ontological status.

According to Philip Merlan (1963), Plotinus borrows Aristotle's doctrine of the Intelligence as he found it in *Monopsychism*, *Mysticism*, *Metaconsciousness* and *De Anima III*. This doctrine asserts that the intelligence and its intelligibles are identical. For Plotinus, then, the *Nous* becomes identical with its objects.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not Merlan is correct about Plotinus' borrowing from Aristotle, other commentators agree that Plotinus' doctrine of the *Nous* includes the ultimate identity of the *Nous* and its intelligibles.<sup>4</sup>

Since Plato identified his archetypes with the realm of Being, Plotinus too asserts that *Nous* is both the Being

and the Intelligence in which all intellectual beings participate. All individual intellects, in other words, are in some manner in the one *Nous*. But another problem that Plotinus faced, and that St. Thomas faced as well in only a slightly different wording, was that if the human intelligence was in some way derived from or connected with the one *Nous*, why was it not automatically omniscient?

Plotinus' answer to this problem lies in his casting of the doctrine of the two intelligences. It is the same doctrine that Aquinas will resort to when he faces the same problem. And, indeed, it is the doctrine that can be glimpsed in the background of Kant's musings on the relationship between individual, empirical consciousness and the transcendental apperception or root consciousness upon which all individual consciousness is based, and by which it is originally made possible.

Now the most obvious manifestation of the importance of this doctrine in Plotinus is its connection with the fall of the soul. If *Nous* is the Form of the soul, that is, if soul receives its being, its reality and its consciousness from *Nous*, then our soul, by reason of its connection with *Nous*, is still in some way not fallen. We are not, however, conscious of its hidden life, i.e., of its still being united with the ever-intelligizing Intelligence. Viewed in this way, the plight of the soul is not as mournful as might be gathered from some of Plato's pronouncements. "By the application of this doctrine," writes Merlan, "the pessimistic aspects of Plato's . . . philosophy are almost overcome."

The soul is not really imprisoned in the body. Nor is it hampered in living on the higher plane of intelligence. We are, if we may say so, simply distracted by all the noise of the sensible world; therefore, we are not aware of the true condition of the soul (1963, p. 13).

As we shall have cause for referential mentions of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus in the next section, we close the present one with Merlan's summary of the result of his study of Plotinus *vis à vis* the doctrine of the two intelligences:

Plotinus teaches the unicity of the soul and, *a fortiori*, the unicity of the intelligence (intellectus). He teaches the possibility and the desirability of the transformation of our ordinary intelligence into that higher intelligence. He teaches that such a transformation takes place in ecstatic experience. . . . The higher intelligence, though it transcends our intelligence, is in some way present and (incessantly) active in us, though we are not aware of its

presence or activity. But obviously when we become united with it a *sui generis* enlargement of our consciousness takes place. This enlarged consciousness we would call metaconsciousness. . . . Quite obviously, this newly acquired consciousness is a consciousness of a higher order. In the moment of union it is not we who intelligize—it is the superior intelligence who intelligizes us. Of course, it could also be said that only in this moment is it we who intelligize, *viz.*, our true we. In this condition man has divinized himself and this means he has truly become man.<sup>9</sup>

### St. Thomas, Angels, and the Agent Intellect

In the Thomistic hierarchy of being and knowing, both angels or separate intelligences and the Divine Ideas seem to occupy the ontological space of the Platonic archetypes, i.e., once removed from the *ens perfectissimum*. Support for this surmise comes from Frederick Copleston:

St. Thomas utilizes the position of St. Augustine in regard to the Divine Ideas, a position which . . . was derived from Neo-Platonism . . . Aristotle rejected the exemplary ideas of Plato, as he rejected the idea of the Demiurge; both of these notions, however, are present in the thought of St. Augustine transmuted and rendered philosophically consistent . . . and St. Thomas' acceptance of these notions links him on this point with Augustine and so with Plato and Plotinus rather than with Aristotle (19, p. 148).

For St. Thomas . . . the Intelligences really become separate universals, though not, of course, in the sense of hypostasized concepts. It was one of the discoveries of Aristotle that a separate form must be intelligent, though he failed to see the historic connection between his theory of separate intelligences and the Platonic theory of forms (19, p. 50).

For St. Thomas, angels fill the gap between man and God in the hierarchy of being. But in the previous section we attempted to consider the Platonic archetypes and the Plotinian *Nous* not ontologically but rather epistemologically—not solely as markers of an ontological space but as indicators of the possibilities of human intelligizing, avenues of potentiality opening out into the celestial realm and the infinite. The quote from Merlan at the end of the previous section was meant to highlight

an understanding of *Nous* as a doctrine which called for the transformation of a lower intelligence into the Higher and, thus, for man's divinization. Might a similar understanding be appropriate to St. Thomas' angels? After all, Intellect-Light-Consciousness is the thread which connects man, angels, and God. Might not angels be understood as ontological correlates or reflections of higher 'states' or dimensions of human intellect?

We should be clear about the fact that St. Thomas himself entertained no such notion. For him, angels are wholly distinct orders of beings just as real, or more so, than ourselves, and certainly not anything like a symbol of man's potential powers. But this consideration does not and should not prevent us from thinking about the symbolic meaning of angels: 1) One of the most interesting things about angels is that they are defined by their state of consciousness and this, in turn, is determined by their relative 'proximity' to God. They are able to gaze upon God in perfect felicity and eternity, that is, from 'moment to moment' without memory or anticipation, in pure presentness. 2) There is a hierarchy in the angelic world; there are levels of intelligences. The structure of medieval monastic orders was based upon the angelic hierarchies. 3) "Microcosm mirrors macrocosm" (psychology mirrors cosmology): How far shall we moderns take this turn of phrase, a phrase that ancient and medieval philosophers and poets found perennially pregnant with meaning? 4) The majority of testimony from sages and religious visionaries of all lands and times suggests that we are separated from God only by our "blindness"—i.e., an inferior dimension of consciousness.

The primary importance of angels in this context, however, is that it leads, in my reading of St. Thomas, to the same doctrine of the two intelligences that we have just encountered in Plotinus. In Thomistic language, the two intelligences are the agent intellect and the possible intellect, and "during the thirteenth century, no topic engendered more controversy than the Aristotelian doctrine of the agent and possible intellects" (Robb, 1974, pp. 5-6).

The central difference between the Thomistic concern with the two intelligences and that of Plotinus hinges on the ontological standing of the agent intellect. For Plotinus the agent intellect, or *Nous*, was Being itself, or God—but it was the *second* God, since it was the first emanation of the unfathomable One. Thomas, however, did not work with a concept of a God beyond God as such, even though such a concept was present in the mainstream of Christian metaphysics in Pseudo-Dionysus' Super-Essential Godhead. Thus the only place for the agent intellect in Thomas' vision would seem to

be the place for the *ens perfectissimum*, the Divine Intelligence Itself. The fact that both are described to be, in some mysterious way, "in act" with respect to all intelligible being seems to support this view. Yet the Christian exoteric perspective which demands that things human be kept absolutely distinct from things divine prevents St. Thomas from overtly equating the two; his refusal to do so has created the traditional Thomistic problem of finding in his system an ontological habitation for the agent intellect. This problem arises because without a "beyond being" transcendent to Being, the agent intellect could not function in Thomas' system as the intellectual/psychological correlate of Being itself, as did the Plotinian *Nous*.

There is quite a bit of material in St. Thomas which would lead commentators to conclude that man is an incarnate, diminished, and finite spirit. ("Spirit" and "Intellect" will here be interchangeable since for Thomas, not to mention Plotinus, to be an intellectual being is to be a spiritual being). But after a long study of Aquinas and now a recent thorough re-reading of him, Professor James H. Robb says that he feels quite sure that we have "not done full justice to the thought of St. Thomas in describing man in his doctrine as a finite spirit." Crucial to his enterprise is none other than the doctrine of the two intelligences, and Professor Robb begins where we left off—the ontological and epistemological status (though he does not use these particular terms) of the agent intellect.

---

---

*FOR KANT reason is the guardian at the gate, forever barring us from transcendental consciousness.*

---

---

We do not have space to recapitulate Robb's entire study, so we must confine ourselves to quotes and short descriptions of his most salient points. Nevertheless, the thrust of his argument will be clear enough.

We can enter Robb's discussion by recalling how Plotinus had to face the problem that if the human intelligence was somehow connected with the Intelligence per se, why did the human intelligence not immediately see the Forms, i.e., gain true vision and become omniscient? Plotinus' answer is that our human intelligence, being distracted by the noise of the sensible world, had trouble turning back upon itself in order to gaze upon its source, the ever-intelligizing Intelligence. The exact nature of the



relation between the "two" intelligences and the exact nature of the dynamics of the process by which the intelligence turns toward the light he leaves unspoken.\*

Robb finds St. Thomas musing on much the same problem:

But how these two powers are rooted in a single substance [the soul] is difficult to understand. For it does not seem that it could be characteristic of a single substance to be in potency with respect to all intelligible forms, as the possible intellect is, and also to be in act with respect to all such forms as the agent intellect is, for otherwise\*\* the agent intellect could not produce all intelligible forms since nothing acts except so far as it is in act (Robb, 1974, pp. 12–13).

Robb comments that here, as elsewhere, Thomas' style is so plain that we are apt to miss part of what he is actually saying, and so he comments:

If through our possible intellect we are able to know whatever is intelligible, and in the philosophy of St. Thomas there are no limits ultimately to what is intelligible other than the limits of being, and being for St. Thomas comprises both the finite and the infinite, then it is likewise true that we possess a power of operation, which is truly our own, rooted in each of us, which is as fully actual as the possible intellect is potential. That is to say, it is actually, somehow, the likeness of all there is or can be (1974, p. 10).

A few pages later, Robb pens a comment which we must quote in full for it is, *in nuce*, his entire argument:

In speaking of the agent intellect, of the need to posit it, of its location within man, St. Thomas has said again and again that there must be a power in us, capable of making whatever is not actually intelligible to us to become intelligible to us, and since something can cause only insofar as it possesses actuality, such a power must be *in act* all that is intelligible in the universe in which we live. There is, therefore, in us, according to St. Thomas, a principle of being that is the likeness, actually and

virtually, although not determinately, of all that is or can be known by us.\* Nor dare we forget that "virtually" is not a weak term; after all, according to St. Thomas, God is virtually, although not formally and distinctly, the likeness of all there is or can be. Might not this similarity between the agent intellect and God, as well as the fact that our agent intellect has no cause of its causing—in its own order it is simply first, and therefore in one sense at least is an uncaused cause—might not these characteristics. . . be the reason why St. Thomas does not hesitate in his *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* to call the human soul divine, when in speaking of the work of divine providence, he states that God did certain things 'propter divinitatem animae rationalis' 'on account of the divinity of the rational soul,' or when he speaks of 'quod est divinus in homine,' 'that which is divine in man; namely, his intellectuality' (1974, pp. 11–12).

### *Kant and the A Priori*

"The synthetic, transcendental unity of pure apperception": locked within these marvelous words is the reality of transcendental consciousness, the state of being in which we may discover the end of all our seeking and the knowledge of who we are. The transcendental unity of pure apperception, as others have pointed out<sup>6</sup>, is the undifferentiated oneness of the continuum we call Reality (call it "Being" of "Consciousness" as well) 'before' it is broken up in the moment of knower and known thus generating the 'illusions' of duality and time. S. Körner describes it as "a necessary condition of objective experience and of objective cognition since without it no object would be thinkable. It is the form of the understanding in the same sense in which space is the form of outer perception" (1974, p. 62). It is Kant's version of the domain presided over by the Plotinian *Nous* and the Thomistic agent intellect. Yet whereas in Plotinus and in the Catholic mystics' practice of St. Thomas' theory this higher consciousness lies within the scope of human possibility, in Kant we are forever barred from this realm by the omnipotence of the inherent categories of reason, the fierce guardians of the Gate that Kant called *a priori* forms. Unlike angels and archetypes, they do not beckon the pilgrim metaphysician onward, but rather repel him.

According to Plato, the highest knowledge possible

\*The highly evolved and elaborately recorded spiritual *methods* of the East seem to give Asian metaphysics an advantage in this regard.

\*\*In order to facilitate the understanding of this passage the words "for otherwise" in line six should be replaced by "but if it were otherwise." This interpolation is justified by Robb's subsequent comments.

<sup>6</sup>For a fine discussion of what omniscience means in terms of a philosophy of consciousness, see F. Merrell-Wolff's *Pathways Through to Space*, pp. 42–44, Julian Press, N.Y., 1936, 1973.

was "in no way expressible like other subjects of teaching." Plato's vision, in other words, could not be taught. But it could be realized. The technique, par excellence, for giving birth to that realization was the dialectic (i.e., metaphysics). Though nothing could be *said* within the dialectic that could convey Plato's vision and this "true knowledge," the form of the dialectic itself was a "long communion" to a point "where light is kindled in the soul by a leaping spark (Friedländer, 1969, p. 20). This, says Paul Friedländer, is the basis of all of Plato's teaching. It is the non-sensible, or purely intellectual, intuition which Kant expressly denies.

In a quite similar vein, Karl Jaspers writes of Kant:

Kant wishes to think beyond the dichotomy [of subject-object] to the ground from which it springs but he can only do so by means of categories and objectivizations which themselves belong to the dichotomy. This is the inevitable difficulty and the greatness of Kant—he does not abandon himself to the mystical ecstasy of uncommunicable unthinkables. Remaining within the lucidity of the natural consciousness he enters into relationships which, though thinkable, conceal something that is unthinkable, yet indirectly disclose it and thus, within the confines of consciousness, touch upon the ground and root of consciousness (1957, p. 32).

We cite this quote from Jaspers, who will be our guide in this section, in order to show the similarity between Plato and Kant concerning an intellectual yoga which finally transcends the discursive tool by which it has built its base. But we do not applaud Kant as loudly as Jaspers does. First of all, to use the metaphor of the light spectrum that we mentioned at the outset, the "natural consciousness" in which Kant remains is only one band of the rich spectrum, and though monumentally valuable to man, it is finally limited (as Kant so persuasively demonstrates). Second, refraining from "abandonment to uncommunicable unthinkables" is not the same as declaring invalid those realizations in human knowing that transcend Kant's categories. To make such a declaration, which Kant of course did, is to deny the human intelligence its validity within modes of consciousness that transcend the mode in which discursive reason is at play.

Needless to say, I think Kant was mistaken here. The remainder of this article, then, will consider Kant's predicament. In so doing we shall catch a glimpse of the doctrine of the two intelligences in the background of his thought and offer the germ of a critique of his critical philosophy.

In order to unearth the "non-empirical roots" of

knowledge as they are discussed in Kant, Jaspers begins with the question, "What is the cognitive subject?"—that which Kant calls "consciousness as such" or the "transcendental apperception."

He answers: "It is not the individual [ego-consciousness] but the 'I think,' the *cogito* of 'consciousness as such.' The validity of our judgments is based not on accidental opinion, but on categories inherent in the 'I think.'" (1957, p. 30).

Here, already, the problem presents itself. That there are innate categories of the mind seems true enough, and Kant proposes to explore them by the process of "transcendental deduction." But how can one ever grasp the pure subject who explores, deduces, and investigates? Is this not like trying to smell one's own nose? Jaspers is aware of this problem and in coming to grips with it he gives us an analogue to the doctrine of the double consciousness or double intelligence with which we have been dealing:

This awareness of being in the 'I think' is something quite remarkable. The consciousness of my empirical existence in time must be expressly distinguished from the consciousness of my timeless 'I think.' The 'I think' does not itself become an object of 'intellectual intuition,' but remains a mere self-certainty because, having no existence accessible to temporal intuition, it is timeless and eludes our grasp. All inner intuition (like outward intuition) is subject to the condition of time. If there were such a thing as intellectual intuition, it would have to apprehend the timelessness of the 'I think' and the 'I am.' That is not possible (1957, p. 31).

Not possible for whom? The passage should be read as a personal confession and not a statement of general fact. Moreover, what does Jaspers mean when he refers to the "all-encompassing field" in the following passage?

The Kantian revolution in philosophy is expressed in the formulation of problems none of which can be considered the ultimate or only question. . . . But in Kant—as in Plato and Augustine—the problems themselves are transcended in an all-encompassing field. Through his formulation of problems we can attain to the source of the problems; this is the goal which, surpassing themselves and their answers, they seek to attain (1957, p. 33).

And so, is this "vision" attainable or is it "not possible"? Is there intellectual intuition by which we can attain the source of the problems in an "all-encompassing

field" or is there not? Frithjof Schuon is quite eloquent on this point. Referring initially to Kant's *a priori* categories, Schuon writes,

... in terms of what can the intelligence limit itself, seeing that by its very nature it is in principle unlimited or it is nothing? And if the intelligence as such is limited, what guarantee do we have that its operations, including those of the critical philosophy, are valid? For an intellectual limit is a wall of which one has no awareness. One cannot, therefore, have it both ways: either the intelligence by definition comprises a principle of illimitability or liberty, *whatever be the degree of its actualization*, in which case there is no cause to attribute limits to it ... or else, on the contrary, the intelligence comprises ... a principle of limitation or constraint in which it no longer admits to any certitude and cannot function any differently from the intelligence of animals, with the result that all pretension to a critical philosophy is vain (p. 34). [Emphasis mine.]

And, along the same line, he continues:

... if there is nothing to prove that our intelligence is capable of adequation—in that case, what is intelligence?—there is likewise nothing to prove that the intelligence is competent to doubt, and so forth. If the optic nerve has to be examined in order to be sure that vision is real, it will likewise be necessary to examine that which examines the optic nerve, an absurdity which proves in its own indirect way that knowledge of supra-sensible things is intuitive and cannot be otherwise than intuitive. Moreover, since philosophy ... could never limit itself to the description of phenomena available to common observation, it is forced to admit, in good logic at least, the intuitive and supra-logical character of the faculty of knowledge it claims to possess. Logic, in other words, is perfectly consistent only when exceeding itself (pp. 45–46).

Schuon is defending only those metaphysical systems which have, so to speak, an experiential twist at their apogee, systems like Plato's which are not fully understood until the un-wordable intuition descends. They are rational metaphysics to be sure, but they lead, finally, beyond reason to the "gnosis" evident in the accounts of saints and sages of all times and traditions. Kant's inquiry into the possibility of metaphysics concerns itself solely with the utterable, man's pretension to capture the omnipresent truth of Being in a box of propositions. The

proliferation of metaphysical systems had, by Kant's time, placed the reality of God and the role of religion in a rather unflattering light. Looked at from this angle, Kant's philosophical purpose might be seen not so much as an attempt to delineate the limits of human knowing, but as an attempt to save the highest concerns of religion from standing or falling with inevitably incomplete metaphysical systems. This is surely a noble motive, but its result is totally inimical to those metaphysics that work with reason but also *beyond* it—as in the cases of Plato, Plotinus, and St. Thomas.

In the following passage, Jaspers exposes the difference between the "old" metaphysics and Kant's new attempts. But if we keep in mind the distinction just made between purely rationalistic metaphysics and metaphysics whose *raison d'être* is to transcend its own rational structure, we shall see that Jaspers' description is a false one. Jaspers writes:

... the old objective metaphysics, thinking in the objective world, 'transcended' it (inverted commas ours) to arrive at a supersensible object, at pure being or God. Kant transcends objective thinking backward, as it were, seeking to arrive at the condition of all objectivity. His goal is no longer metaphysical knowledge of another world, but knowledge of the origin of knowledge. Instead of seeking the origin of all things, he seeks the origin of the subject-object dichotomy (1957, p. 35).

The reader must note that Jaspers is here setting up false oppositions. For in Plotinus and St. Thomas, and *a fortiori* for Asian metaphysics, to arrive at the origin of the subject-object dichotomy is exactly to arrive at the origin of all things. Whether one calls this arrival "enlightenment," "metaphysical knowledge of another world," "gazing upon *Nous*," or "becoming one with the Self" is quite beside the point. Jaspers closes the reflection above with this sentence:

The end is not an object to be known as in the older metaphysics but an awareness of the limits of our knowledge.

In the first place, the true end of metaphysics is not an object to be known—unless you say in the same breath that it is also a subject to be known. That is, the end of such metaphysics is a realization of that state of consciousness where knower and known, subject and object are one, the same, and undivided. In this state no "object" is known. Jaspers sometimes hints that this was Kant's aim also. But then what of this last sentence



adducing Kant's goal as an awareness of the limits of knowledge? To assume that such limits exist is virtually to set the limits which you are setting out to discover. An exploration of human intelligizing through a perspective of limits is a limited perspective. Kant builds himself a very neat epistemological squirrel cage.

Not surprisingly, however, Jaspers is quite aware of and eloquent at expressing the difficulty in Kant that makes this sort of confoundedness possible. "The fundamental difficulty," says Jaspers,

is that Kant, in striving to disclose the conditions of all objectivity, is compelled to operate within objective thinking itself, hence in a realm of objects that must not be treated as objects. He tries to understand the subject-object relationship in which we live as though it were possible to be outside it. He strives toward the limits of the existence of all being for us; standing at the limit [hardly!] he endeavors to perceive the origin of the whole, but he must always remain within the limit. With his transcendental method he strives to transcend while remaining in the world. He thinks about thought. Yet he cannot do so from outside of thought but only by thinking (1957, p. 35).

Obviously, we have not done justice to the enormous complexity and richness of Kant, but we do feel that what has been said has touched Kant's Achilles' heel. A more detailed exploration awaits another opportunity. But such opportunities will certainly not be lacking. For in Kant's name, or through his direct or indirect influence, two phenomena have come about that seem to us to be clearly inimical to human be-ing. First, the philosophy of mysticism and along with it metaphysics, far from being seen as a science of the Absolute with respect to human potential, has instead been relegated to a murky corner in a philosophical closet and has been treated as some sort of bizarre hybrid concocted by ancient dreamers, poetic logicians who, much to their discredit, knew nothing of the constipating wonders of critical analytical methodology.

Second, religion tends to beat a forced retreat into the moral, regulative dimension only. This is not only a tragic paralysis of the great religious traditions and a fruitless surrender of their noetic nobility, but also a suicide of the intelligence in its deepest sense and a renunciation of our birthright. The present cross-disciplinary interest in human consciousness is a manifestation of the will "to revision" a science of man which, while not blind to man's smallness, accords him that same nobility which the esoteric domain of religious traditions has always

proclaimed. It is a journey which endeavors to regain the vision of man, to use Robb's words, as infinite spirit.\* Slowly, the forbidding features of Kant's guardians of the gate are giving way to the welcoming smiles of the angels.

---

**Philip Novak** received his Ph.D. from the Department of Religion at Syracuse University and is presently an assistant professor of philosophy at Dominican College in San Rafael, CA.

## Notes

1. In *Idealistic Studies*, Fall 1977, Charles Scott has noted that Jungian psychological theory owes much to Kantian epistemology. And Eugen Bar, in *Philosophy Today*, Summer, 1976, in an article entitled "Archetypes and Ideas: Jung and Kant" argues for the logical isomorphism of Kantian "ideas" and Jungian "archetypes." Kantian epistemology and Jungian psychology must always be taken into critical consideration in any attempt to frame a noetic based on the transformation of consciousness. Cf. my "C. G. Jung in the Light of Asian Psychology" *Sophia Perennis*, Fall, 1978.

2. In this paper I will be speaking of Plato and Plotinus in the same breath. To regard Plotinus' systems as the truest offspring of the Platonic core is not a move that would meet with universal acceptance among Plato specialists. Yet those students of Plato who move along the same interpretive lines as J. M. Findlay would support this move. For in his work, *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines*, Findlay writes:

We have summarized the Platonism of Plotinus at some length, because . . . it is to utterly true to its paradigm . . . . Hardly at any point does Plotinus say anything that cannot be fairly regarded as a relatively slight bringing together or carrying further of drifts that are found in Plato . . . . It is also in the light of a Plotinian interpretation that Plato assumes his full stature and that the drift of his doctrine is fully assessed. There were sides of the doctrine that Plotinus could not understand [Plato's deep mathematical concerns, for example, but this is not relevant to our present theme] . . . but on those that he did understand his guidance is not merely useful but mandatory (Humanities Press, New York, 1973).

3. Of course, in Plotinus' eyes Aristotle's intelligizing intelligence occupies too high an ontological place (namely, the first), and Plotinus blames Aristotle for associating it with the ultimate principal Reality rather than, as in Plotinus' own view, with the secondary principal Reality—*Nous*.

4. In fact, the ancient doctrine, of which Plotinus was one proponent, was that ultimately knower, known and medium of knowing were one, a tri-unity. W. I. Inge (*The Philosophy of Plotinus*, vol. 2, Greenwood Press, N. Y., 1968 [1929] p. 29) elaborates this doctrine by quoting Maimonides in a French translation by Bouillet. Here follows our English translation of this helpful passage: You know the celebrated proposition that the philosophers have announced in

---

\*"As is the man, so for him is God." The reverse of this is also true and reflection upon it will disclose one grand reason for the malaise apparent in the lives of so many moderns." (Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 111.)