CHAPTER 2

TOWARDS A RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION OF KANT’S METAPHYSICS OF EXPERIENCE

PART I: KANT’S RIDDLE OF EXPERIENCE

1. ON RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES

There are two possible approaches to a historically given philosophical system. Let us call them the method of direct interpretation and the method of rational reconstruction. Whenever we try to analyse and describe in a systematic way what a philosopher really meant we follow the first line of thought. And only if we are convinced that this procedure will be successful can we look for the true interpretation of his ideas. In many cases, perhaps in most cases where we deal with a philosopher of the past we’ll be quickly at a loss in such a search for a true interpretation. This is mainly due to the fact that our standards of clarity and precision with respect to a philosophical conceptual framework are stronger than were the standards in his time. So more often than not we would be forced to say that the concepts he used were mostly vague and ambiguous and therefore did not have a clear meaning at all. The same criticism would carry over to his formulations and solutions of the problems he was concerned with. Our only appropriate reaction would then be to reject this philosophy, not because of the falsity of its conclusions but, more fundamentally, because of its abstruseness and incomprehensibility. Some of the main points of the philosopher in question could still somehow be reproduced but only in a picturesque way which would satisfy some of our merely historical interests but certainly none of our serious philosophical intentions.

Many contemporary philosophers, especially philosophers of science, seem to think that in the case of Kant’s theoretical philosophy we cannot do more than give such a vague picture. According to this view Kant’s philosophy can not even be stated as a reasonable and consistent theory.

Let us take it for granted that such an attitude would be correct if we were restricted to the method of direct interpretation. Then there is still
another way open to us: We can try to give a rational reconstruction of the philosophical system in question or at least of relevant parts of that system. The expression 'rational reconstruction' is normally used within systematic contexts; but under appropriate circumstances it is applicable to the historical case as well.

The restriction to suitable circumstances is essential because we can not claim general applicability of this second method. There are favourable cases where a reconstruction is not needed and there are — presumably many more — unfavourable cases where a reconstruction is not possible. It is not needed if the transmitted writings of that philosopher already meet our standards of clarity; and it is not possible if they reveal such a degree of irrationality that we can not construct anything comprehensible out of the amorphous mass of his ideas.

Neither the favourable nor the unfavourable reasons for exclusion of the second method seem to apply to Kant's theoretical philosophy. The least we can say is that there are no unsurmountable difficulties for giving a clear account of large parts of this philosophy. On the other hand the way Kant introduces his basic concepts as well as the way he formulates his problems and solutions is mostly very unsatisfactory, though it has to be admitted that this standard of preciseness is to be considered as a high one if compared with the writings of his contemporaries.

Instead of belaboring the concept of rational reconstruction I'll formulate three principles which a rational reconstruction of a historically given philosophical system has to fulfill:

1. the theory has to be presented in such a way that it remains in accordance with the basic ideas of the philosopher;
2. as far as possible it has to be presented in precise terms;
3. it is to be presented as a consistent theory, if possible (i.e. if not all rational accounts meeting requirements (1) and (2) turn out to be inconsistent).

Principle (1) is admittedly vague. This vagueness is unavoidable because it refers to the philosophy before an attempt has been made to reconstruct it. This principle is to prevent rational accounts of a given philosophy from becoming arbitrary. It forces us to combine our constructive activity with the historical method. Only on the basis of a careful preliminary interpretation and comparison of texts can we get enough presystematic insight into the thinking of a philosopher to venture in a second step the kind of reconstruction that satisfies our philosophical mind and not only our historical curiosi-