

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



**The Narrative *A Priority* of Meaning over Truth in Dufrenne's Phenomenology**

Michael Berman

[mberman@brocku.ca](mailto:mberman@brocku.ca)

Brock University

**Prologue**

Mikel Dufrenne's *The Notion of the A Priori* (1966) is a classic example of the second wave of phenomenology. Standing on the foundations laid by Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Scheler, Dufrenne's seminal text re-engages Kant's critical philosophy in order to rescue the *a priori* from the static and transcendental prisons of mere formalism and universality. He identifies a menagerie of *a priori* types in order to explicate the fundamental meaningfulness of experience. This is evidenced in the distinct, yet intimately connected subjective and objective *a priori*, which function in harmonious relationships. These latter are exemplified by the affectual immediacy of (ethical) values given in experience. Knowledge and truth are only products of explication and reflection, performed by *persons*, and which rely on meaningful experience. The understanding that for humans that *what is* is to be judged by what

ought to be, needs to be re-evaluated, for what ought to be is given in what is, and hence is not judged from a *distance*, but rather in the *instance*. For Dufrenne, the poetic, narrative in its most creative mode, presents us with the instance and immediacy of feeling and meaning from which truth flows.

### **Entry 1: Kant**

Dufrenne has a problem with Kant. Kant's critical philosophy reconceived and radicalized the philosophical understanding of the *a priori*. According to Kant, *a priori* concepts were abstract, non-contingent, non-empirical, objective, formal, necessary and universal. Furthermore, these concepts were housed in the mental faculties of rational (human) beings. Kant's faculty psychology (of reason, understanding, sensibility, judgment, and imagination) varied across his three *Critiques*, in terms of structure and functions.

The *Critique of Reason* and the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* aimed to explain what it is that we can know, the limits of our knowledge, and how knowledge is generated. Kant's arguments are complex. We can have two kinds of knowledge: empirical knowledge grounded in our experiences and expressed through synthetic *a posteriori* judgments; and metaphysical knowledge expressed by analytic *a priori* judgments (Hume's relations of ideas) and synthetic *a priori* judgments. Analytic judgments are simply definitions and do not add to our knowledge; however, synthetic judgments add to our knowledge, thus making synthetic *a priori* judgments the focus for Kant's establishment of a science of metaphysics.

Dufrenne's claim, and he is not alone in this for Merleau-Ponty, Scheler, and Samuel Todes also recognize the issue, is that Kant has overly intellectualized the *a priori*. In Kant's schematism, our synthetic *a posteriori* judgments are propositions that refer to phenomena. These phenomena appear in our empirical cognitions. Cognitions are constituted out of the

manifold that is presented to the faculty of sensibility. This constructive synthesis employs the various *a priori* concepts of the understanding and judgment, rendering experience intelligible. Hence, intelligibility is firmly ensconced within cognition; the realm of thought is the only place where understanding occurs. The external world, the source of phenomena, the noumena that “stand behind” the manifold, remains forever out of reach; intelligibility has no place “there”. But is this the case? Is it that the world outside of the mind is senseless? To which Dufrenne (and these others) answer: no. There are resources in Kant to escape the mental prison of transcendental philosophy.

The Kantian schematism injects objectivity via *a priori* concepts into appearances. These concepts are the conditions for knowledge, but *a posteriori* judgments have two further grounds: time and space. These conditions for the possibility of experience are derived from the faculty of sensibility, that is, Kant identifies some of his *a priori* (time and space) with our perceptual capabilities. Consequently the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* share an intimacy that Dufrenne is going to explore.<sup>1</sup> This point can be further supported by way of Kant’s treatment of the imagination; while he does say that the transcendental imagination is the transcendental understanding, this holds only when the two are considered solely with respect to or is limited to their formal functions, not when their synthetical functions are treated.<sup>2</sup> This latter occurs during that “lucky chance”<sup>3</sup> or “happy accident” when over the course of experience, the imagination, in service to the understanding, “always” correctly delivers the raw “data” (intuitions) of the manifold from sensibility to the appropriate concepts in the understanding in order for empirical cognitions to be generated.<sup>4</sup> The imagination would seem to have both a pre-conceptual understanding of what understanding demands, which might be explained by the identity of their formal functionality, but this may also be the case because the imagination is *informed* by the

“raw” data from sensibility’s passive receptivity; “... in a sense it [the manifold] already possesses meaning beforehand; it is as if it [the subject] had always already found it” as meaningful.<sup>5</sup> The imagination can properly associate empirical intuitions with Kant’s *a priori* concepts: “In brief, for there to be association, the given must be associable, and this characteristic of the given cannot be the product of the principle of association.”<sup>6</sup> This demonstrates that the manifold, in terms of time and space, conjoined with its own proclivity for certain conceptual schemes, bears some intelligibility that is non-cognitive, which while anathema to Kant, is nevertheless evident.

## **Entry 2: The *a priori***

To explain Dufrenne, it pays to “cheat” with his arguments, that is, to begin with his conclusions and work backwards. *The Notion of the A Priori* aims to explicate the harmonious accord that is experienced between human beings and the world. This does not mean that Dufrenne holds that this is the best of all possible worlds, but rather that just as humans can comprehend the world, so too the world can comprehend human beings; comprehension here means understanding and grasping within a relationship of “indispensable reciprocity”<sup>7</sup> or “reciprocal envelopment”.<sup>8</sup> The subject, which Dufrenne sees as being too abstract and prefers the material and existential term “person”, is a being in the world: “The finite subject is the person: the universal in the singular, the transcendental in the empirical.”<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, the mortal dualism that humans encounter and with which we contend is necessary and positive. This necessity is succinctly expressed by Merleau-Ponty’s claim that we are “condemned to meaning”.<sup>10</sup>

Human experience is intrinsically meaningful. How does Dufrenne justify this and explain how meanings are generated? *The Notion of the A Priori* examines, contra Kant, the

realm of the objective *a priori*. The objective *a priori* are constitutive of objects. “The objective *a priori* is the meaning which exists in the object and with which the subject is in primordial accord.”<sup>11</sup> This accord is characterized by reciprocity and harmony. The objective *a priori* present, or better yet, *express* themselves in both formal and material aspects. The formal objective *a priori* are the universal characteristics shared amongst particular classes of objects: “the idea of a formal *a priori* recommends itself by the priority it grants to logic...in Kant...[these] criteria are the necessity and universality which may characterize a proposition.”<sup>12</sup> The material *a priori* of objects are the intrinsic properties of individual things. These objective *a priori* give themselves to persons. “The *a priori* is the meaning present and given in both the object and subject, and it assures their communication while maintaining their difference.”<sup>13</sup>

Persons, on the other hand, are constituted a bit differently. Dufrenne calls this their existential *a priori*, the sum total of the *a priori* of and in the individual: “The existential *a priori* is the summation of those *a priori* which (insofar as they are subjective) determine the field of my intention [*visée*] and *the style of my relationship* with the world.”<sup>14</sup> The nature of the existential *a priori* both generalizes and singularizes.<sup>15</sup> The subjective *a priori* are readily available for the transcendental subject who can reflect upon and make explicit the meanings given by the objective *a priori*. The subjective *a priori* are a reserve of *virtual* knowledge that is seemingly already and always known. “[The] *a priori* is known *a priori*. In other words, we are not merely receptive in our relation with the world; we go out to meet it, and always anticipate it. There are things we do not learn; we know them from the beginning, as if we had always been familiar with them—as if comprehension implies connaturality.”<sup>16</sup> Persons are passive, i.e., receptive, and perhaps more importantly, active in their engagement with the world—we go out to meet it. Dufrenne likens the connaturality of the *a priori* to innate knowledge, but it must be

noted that he adheres to the Lockean<sup>17</sup> and general empiricist rejection of such knowledge as propositional; rather, virtual knowledge is more akin to “knowing how” (to grasp the object in its meaningfulness) as opposed to “knowing that” (an object has this particular meaning). The subjective *a priori*, “in its original state...is neither explicit knowledge nor a condensed knowledge put into storage. It is a power of anticipating and revealing, a nonacquired familiarity with certain aspects of the world; this power exists in the subject like a mode of being.”<sup>18</sup> Persons experience the *a priori* as *immediate* and *affective*. Feelings, especially aesthetic, but also moral emotions are indicative of our grasp of an object’s meaningfulness; for example, Dufrenne refers to how music can evoke joy and youthfulness, just like a child’s bright smile does. What is presented in these experiences calls forth, solicits, or provokes<sup>19</sup> our subjective *a priori*, and the meaningfulness we perceive is as if we had previously, *before* the experience, knew what they would evidence. These *a priori* are given to us “in presence”, and as such they can be “actualized by representation”.<sup>20</sup> Representations are said and can be verified or falsified. True statements thus rely on the prior perception of the *a priori*. Through reflection and language the *a priori* are made explicit; cognition and speaking translate the virtual into the actual, the meaningful into meaning, expression into saying.<sup>21</sup>

### **Entry 3: Saying**

For Dufrenne, the *a priori*, subjective or objectiven can be *expressed*. Expression is akin to manifestation or appearance.<sup>22</sup> Self-expression is a special kind or mode of expression. This involves a paradox:

[It] is immanent in the expressive object, yet knowable and thus able to maintain a certain independence from this object. Hence, whatever expresses itself is worthy of being termed a “self”; it expresses itself because it is a self, and it is a self to the extent that it is more than a self—i.e., to the extent that the self is no longer a mere empirical particularity, but the positing of a universal. Expression implies *self-expression*, the act of a subject who solicits the attention of others and also presupposes them within himself. This is why we

may say that an expressive object is a quasi-subject; it partakes of humanity when we participate in it; this is especially true of a work of art, though also of any object that “speaks” to us.<sup>23</sup>

The Dufrenne’s claims certainly hearken to his interests in aesthetics, where the latter’s mode of being acts like the humanity (which is an ideal or task<sup>24</sup>) from which it stems. Persons are self-expressive, which is a mode of their being, which presupposes others. While Dufrenne never mentions him, Martin Buber’s insights from *I and Thou* can aid in unpacking this relation. Buber writes, “In the beginning is relation—as category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul; it is the *a priori* of relation, *the inborn Thou*.”<sup>25</sup> The other is innately structured in the subject. This fits into Dufrenne’s recasting of the *a priori*, for it plays a constitutive role as an element in one’s existential *a priori*. Yet Dufrenne radicalizes this insight:

I do not recognize my fellow man by projecting onto him a certain idea that I have of him: I know him before knowing myself, and I learn to know myself through him. Even before saying that he is similar to *me*, I have to realize that I am similar to *him*; this is perhaps the most irritating discovery, one that we are careful to dissimulate and forget; yet it is the primary discovery, even in the order of reasons: I am made in the image of the other.<sup>26</sup>

The other has an ontological priority or constitutive *a priority* for persons who become who they are through the other. The person’s individuality is not simply a product of their particular embodiment, because this also requires action. For the subject, “Consciousness is the act rather than the possession of the subject...”<sup>27</sup> and one of the qualities of this actor is that “[in] every consciousness, it becomes conscious of itself as unique and irreplaceable.”<sup>28</sup> This uniqueness and irreplaceability also marks the other: “Uniqueness is certainly what we admire in another person, but it does not constitute him, at least with respect to our knowing him; this uniqueness evades all apprehension and definite meaning.”<sup>29</sup> Buber similarly distinguishes between the human ability to say his two basic word pairs, “I-You” and “I-It”: “I-You” is open and authentic, spoken with one’s whole being to a person who reciprocally responds with their whole

being and maintains an explicit understanding that the “You” so addressed remains beyond conceptualization, i.e., apprehension and definite meaning (Dufrenne). On the other hand, the basic word pair “I-It” involves conceptually mediated statements, such as intentions or means-ends propositions. “I-It” is the language of representational and propositional knowledge. It is spoken by a person who withholds parts of themselves, keeping something of themselves in reserve. Only in speaking the “I-You”, for Buber, can one fully actualize oneself for it can only be spoken with one’s whole being.

Dufrenne likewise distinguishes specific self-expressions: *authentic expressions* express the *a priori*. These expressions express “the total meaning unifying the being that expresses itself: to express oneself is to be completely present in one’s expression.”<sup>30</sup> The similarity to Buber is astonishing, for him presence is only encountered in a dialogical relation between persons. However, each such saying always has the fate or doom of falling back into the language of “I-It”. In this regard, Dufrenne offers a description that borders on a prescription for avoiding the imposition of categories or facades: “To put on an air is to ‘act’ and to choose a mask instead of a manner of being. It is also to act *upon* the other person instead of offering oneself to him. Authentic expression does not *intend* to say something: it *says* it.”<sup>31</sup>

Drawing together these considerations, we can provide a corrective for Buber and open the narrative elements of Dufrenne’s *a priori* of the poetic. Self-expressive persons, in saying authentically, disclose themselves. Ideally, their authentic self-expression discloses their existential *a priori*, but not in a reductive manner. It is not as though such an expression grants “true” knowledge about the speaker, but rather just as the objective *a priori* solicit the subjective *a priori* of the perceiver whose response is a seemingly innate familiarity with the object in the world, the speaker evokes their connaturality with the addressee, and the addressee’s reciprocity



occurs (is encountered) in the meaningfulness of perception: "...the *a priori* is first of all perceived. For the apprehension of an expression by feeling is the highest moment of perception, the moment when perception is fully achieved and when the subject somehow becomes the perceived object [subject]—at least experiencing the object [subject] to the point of losing himself in it."<sup>32</sup> The speaker's disclosure, their confession or profession, conveys meaning whose veracity is neither here nor there for it bears no relevance for the encounter or expressed existential *a priori*.

#### **Entry 4: Narratives**

In the Buberian encounter, the self stands in relation to the other. This relation is one of wholeness, meaning that the self expresses itself completely in addressing the other, who reciprocates. This is the essence of Buber's dialogical philosophy as expressed in the presences of the self and other to each other. But to what end? This question highlights a problem in the encounter: what is the content of addressing the other with one's whole being? What is said in saying the "I-You" basic word pair? Dufrenne's notion of the *a priori* can be used to fill in this lacuna. Authentic self-expression is not simply the complete or absolute offering of oneself to the other, saying with one's whole being, but rather an expression of one's existential *a priori*. Granted in self-expression, one says *about* oneself (propositionally), but more importantly one says *of* oneself (meaningfully). Dufrenne's *The Notion of the A Priori* culminates in a treatment of the poetic. While this is heavily indebted to the later Heidegger, looking at the poetic as narrative in its most creative mode opens for viewing the content of the presence in authentic self-expression. "[Poetry] is the expression of an experience which refuses to be enclosed in a system and which is its own self-revelation."<sup>33</sup> Through "self-revelation" *qua* self-expression, that content, perceived "apriorily", comprehension of and by the self and other occurs. Personal

narratives move us, *affect* us, say something *of* the speaker *and* the listener, for “poetry is not only feeling in the poet, but also an aspect of the world.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, “Poetry moves within the sphere of feeling. There is poetry when something is communicated to us which is communicable in this way alone: all art is poetic.”<sup>35</sup> Poetry communicates the world, “for the world is nothing more than the manifestation of feeling, and feeling is the soul of the world.”<sup>36</sup> Feeling denotes that unmediated harmonious accord between human beings and world in which meanings are expressed. Hence, Dufrenne insightfully asserts, “Truth signifies the necessity with which something gives itself to us...[this is] the necessity of meaning.”<sup>37</sup>

Dufrenne’s book aimed to revitalize the *a priori*. His success in this regard opens new avenues for not just Kantian scholarship, but phenomenology. Persons are embedded in a world of expressive *a priori* which always and already calls for us to *say* more. This is the necessary truth of our lives.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dufrenne, Mikel. (1966). *The Notion of the A Priori*. U.S.A. Northwestern University Press, 101.

<sup>2</sup> Dufrenne, 213.

<sup>3</sup> Dufrenne, 215.

<sup>4</sup> See my treatment of this in Berman, Michael, “The Happy Accident: Merleau-Ponty and Kant on the Judgment of God”, *The European Legacy*, (16:2, pp. 223-236, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> See note 1 above; Dufrenne 101.

<sup>6</sup> Dufrenne, 213.

<sup>7</sup> Dufrenne, 208.

<sup>8</sup> Dufrenne, 209.

<sup>9</sup> Dufrenne, 165.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), xix.

<sup>11</sup> Dufrenne, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Dufrenne, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Dufrenne, 46; see also 218.

<sup>14</sup> Dufrenne, 163, italics added.

<sup>15</sup> Dufrenne, 163-64.

- 
- <sup>16</sup> Dufrenne, 121.  
<sup>17</sup> Dufrenne, 79.  
<sup>18</sup> Dufrenne, 155.  
<sup>19</sup> Dufrenne, 95.  
<sup>20</sup> Dufrenne, 161.  
<sup>21</sup> Dufrenne, 94.  
<sup>22</sup> Dufrenne, 105; see note #3.  
<sup>23</sup> Dufrenne, 112.  
<sup>24</sup> Dufrenne, 198.  
<sup>25</sup> Buber, Martin, *I and Thou* (U.S.A.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 27.  
<sup>26</sup> Dufrenne, 171.  
<sup>27</sup> Dufrenne, 146.  
<sup>28</sup> Dufrenne, 146.  
<sup>29</sup> Dufrenne, 109.  
<sup>30</sup> Dufrenne, 110.  
<sup>31</sup> Dufrenne, 111.  
<sup>32</sup> Dufrenne, 110.  
<sup>33</sup> Dufrenne, 235.  
<sup>34</sup> Dufrenne, 235.  
<sup>35</sup> Dufrenne, 237; see also 132.  
<sup>36</sup> Dubrenne, 238.  
<sup>37</sup> Dubrenne, 238.