

Phenomena/Noumena & The Dialectic of Reason

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1 *Phenomena & Noumena*

- Positive vs. Negative conception of “noumena”¹
 - Positive: objects that can be known only by a non-sensible (intellectual) intuition
 - Negative: objects that cannot be sensibly intuited or connected via sensible laws to such an intuition²

2 *Transcendental Idealism, Things in Themselves, & Noumena*

- Things in themselves exist since they are the basis of appearances³
 - Transcendental Idealism posits the existence of noumena in the negative sense only

3 *The Aims of the Dialectic*

- Critique of traditional metaphysics/metaphysical reasoning
- Articulation of the root of metaphysical error
 - The role of reason in metaphysical error
 - * Transcendental Illusion
 - * The “Ideas of Reason”

4 *Transcendental (Dialectical) Illusion*

- The intellectual illusion that we have access to non-sensible objects—viz. God, the soul, and the world-whole⁴
 - Principles that are only legitimately applied to objects of a possible experience are applied outside the context of any possible experience, as if they were nevertheless legitimate
- Transcendental Illusion is an unavoidable product of our reason⁵

¹ If by a noumenon we understand a thing **insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition**, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it, then this is a noumenon in the **negative** sense. But if we understand by that an **object of a non-sensible intuition**, then we assume a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition, which, however, is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand, and this would be the noumenon in a **positive** sense. (B307)

² the doctrine of sensibility is...the doctrine of the noumenon in the negative sense, that is, of things which our understanding must think without reference to our mode of intuition, therefore not merely as appearances but as things in themselves. (B307)

³ from the concept of an appearance in general...something must correspond to it which is not in itself appearance, for appearance can be nothing for itself and outside of our kind of representation; thus, if there is not to be a constant circle, the word “appearance” must already indicate a relation to something the immediate representation of which is, to be sure, sensible, but which in itself, without this constitution of our sensibility...must be something, i.e., an object independent of sensibility...from this arises the concept of a *noumenon* (A252)

⁴ **transcendental illusion** [contains principles] which instead, contrary to all the warnings of criticism, carries us away beyond the empirical use of the categories, and holds out to us the semblance of extending the pure understanding. (A295/B352)

⁵ The cause of this is that in our reason (considered subjectively as a human faculty of cognition) there lie fundamental rules and maxims for its use, which look entirely like objective principles, and through them it comes about that the subjective necessity of a certain connection of our concepts on behalf of the understanding is taken for an objective necessity, the determination of things in themselves. [This is] an illusion that cannot be avoided at all. (A297-B353-4)

4.1 Reason & Explanation (Reason in its “logical use”)

- The three faculties
 - Sensibility provides the material for concepts & judgments
 - Understanding generates concepts and judgments from what is given in sensibility
 - The faculty of reason aims to connect judgments in inferential chains (syllogisms)
- Reason seeks to *explain* what is given to it by the understanding⁶
- Two uses of reason
 1. *Descending*
 - movement from condition to conditioned
 - subsuming objects of cognition under general principles
 2. *Ascending*
 - movement from conditioned to condition
 - articulating general principles under which objects of cognition may be subsumed
 - Reason seeks the condition for anything that is given to it until it finds the *unconditioned* condition of everything
 - Reason seeks to *unify* cognition, so as to subsume the largest number of objects of cognition under the smallest number of principles⁷

⁶ what is unique to reason on Kant's view is that it demands a complete explanation for given facts. The function of reason is not to generate experience in the first place, which is the task of the understanding working together with sensibility (A307/B363–4). Instead... judgments about experience are the starting points or input for reason. Reason's basic function is to ask about any given empirical judgment: *why?* Moreover, once reason finds an answer to this question, it subjects that answer in turn to the same question: *why?* (Rohlf (2010), 195)

⁷ reason, in inferring, seeks to bring the greatest manifold of cognition of the understanding to the smallest number of principles (universal conditions), and thereby to effect the highest unity of that manifold. (A305/B361)

5 A Critique of Pure Reason

- Reason's demand for the unconditioned condition of everything causes it to illegitimately apply logical principles in a metaphysical way
- Kant critiques reason in its “pure” (a priori/real/non-logical) use – we can have no knowledge through reason alone, but only the illusion of knowledge⁸

⁸ the question is: Does reason in itself, i.e., pure reason, contain a priori synthetic principles and rules, and in what might such principles consist? (A306/B363)

5.1 Transcendental Ideas (Reason in its “real use”)

Idea: a concept made of up notions, which goes beyond the possibility of experience (A320/B377)

- Reason produces its own concepts
 - Assumes the existence of supersensible objects of those concepts
 - * Assumes that we can have synthetic a priori knowledge of such objects⁹

⁹ this logical maxim [to find the condition for a given conditioned claim] cannot become a principle of **pure reason** unless we assume that when the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself unconditioned, also given (i.e., contained in the object and its connection). Such a principle of pure reason, however, is obviously **synthetic**; for the conditioned is analytically related to some condition, but not to the unconditioned. (A307-8/B364)

THE THREE TRANSCENDENTAL IDEAS OF REASON:¹⁰

1. Psychology: the conditions of the unity of the subject
 - The soul
2. Cosmology: the conditions of unity of the series of appearances
 - The world whole (or cosmos)
3. Theology: the absolute unity of the conditions of all objects in general
 - God

¹⁰ If the understanding may be a faculty of the unity of appearances by means of rules, then reason is the faculty of the unity of the rules of the understanding under principles. (A302/B358-9)

6 Problems

6.1 Some Objections

1. Reason's two "parts" in ascending and descending, lack unity
 - Ascending reason is non-inferential
 - Descending reason is purely inferential
 - Kant's focus on syllogism and on categorical syllogism in particular threatens the generality of his claims
2. There is no clear distinction between the understanding and reason
 - Understanding "ascends" and "descends" too
 - Reply: focus on the kinds of "unities" that result from the activities of the distinct faculties¹¹
3. Is transcendental illusion really *necessary*?
 - Does Kant's position merely reflect the interests of German philosophy at his time?

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6.2 Worries About Derivation

- What is Kant's route to the specific ideas of the soul, cosmos, and God?¹²
 - Connection between the forms of syllogism, the categories of relation, and the ideas seems *arbitrary*, or at least artificial

¹² Now what is universal in every relation that our representations can have is (1) the relation to the subject, (2) the relation to objects, and indeed either as appearances or as objects of thinking in general. If we combine this subdivision with the above division, then all the relation of representations of which we can make either a concept or an idea are of three sorts: (1) the relation to the subject, (2) to the manifold of the object in appearance, and (3) to all things in general... The thinking subject is the object of psychology, the sum total of appearances (the world) is the object of cosmology, and the thing that contains the supreme condition of the possibility of everything that can be thought (the being of all beings) is the object of theology. (A333–4/B390–1)

7 *The Structure of the Dialectic*

- The dialectical syllogisms
 - Categorical (the soul)
 - * The Paralogisms
 - substantiality, simplicity, unity/identity, relation to outer objects
 - Hypothetical (the cosmos)
 - * The Antinomies
 - Mathematical, Dynamical
 - Disjunctive (God)
 - * The Ideal of Pure Reason
 - The transcendental ideal, Ontological argument, Cosmological argument, Physico-theological argument (argument from design)

8 *Reason as Regulative*

- The ideas of reason can have a positive use by acting as maxims for theory construction and the creation of a unified theory of nature¹³
- Reason lacks a “constitutive” use in that it has no genuine objects, other than what may be given to it by the understanding (A643-4/B671-2)
- The error of traditional metaphysics is thus to mistake a “regulative” principle for a “constitutive” one¹⁴

References & Further Reading

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- Gardner, Sebastian. 1999. *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Routledge.
- Grier, Michelle. 2001. *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rohlf, Michael. 2010. “The Ideas of Pure Reason.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, edited by Paul Guyer, 190–209. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹³ This unity is, of course, only a “projected” unity (A647/B675), a mere ideal, but it has significance for how we approach the empirical world. Kant gives the following illustrations: under pressure from reason, we will search for fundamental (chemical) elements and powers in nature (A646/B674, A648–9/B676–7), employ concepts of ideal entities not to be found in nature (e.g. pure earth, water and air, A646/B674), develop hypotheses advancing universal laws of nature (A646–7/B674–5) and classify the organic and inorganic natural worlds into genera and species (A653–7/B681–5). The operative maxims are the three principles of “genera”, “specification” and “affinity”, instructing us to seek out respectively “homogeneity”, “variety” and “continuity” among natural forms (A651–64/B679–92). (Gardner (1999), 144)

¹⁴ the transcendental ideas are never of constitutive use, so that the concepts of certain objects would thereby be given, and in case one so understands them, they are merely sophistical (dialectical) concepts...however, they have an excellent and indispensably necessary regulative use...of directing the understanding (A644/672)