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### Kant's Criticism of Metaphysics

Kant's famous Copernican Revolution revolutionized traditional metaphysics by upholding it and, at the same time, humbling it. In particular, Kant is famous for having claimed that the idea of the "soul" is objectively invalid, and thus cannot be cognized. On the flip side, Kant adds that though an unconditioned entity cannot be proven to exist, the attempt to find one is rewarding in of itself. That being said, I argue that Kant errs when he says that the ideas are objectively invalid, for if that were to be true then there would be no proof of the existence of external objects, something Kant must have in order to distance himself from material idealism.

Kant's primary critique of traditional metaphysics is that it allows reason to overstep its boundaries, particularly through the employment of illusions. To be clear, Kant distinguishes between empirical illusions and transcendental illusions. Empirical illusions occur when "the faculty of judgment is misled through the influence of the imagination" (B351). The error here is not in the faculty of the understanding but rather the structure of the imagination, which has somehow synthesized the manifold of intuition incorrectly. The most understandable example would be an optical illusion; take the phi phenomenon. The phi phenomenon is an optical illusion in which lights placed side-by-side and turned on and off rapidly one after another gives the perception that there is a movement of light. Here, the error is in the imagination, which has incorrectly synthesized the manifold of intuition to be something that it is not. Nevertheless, the understanding does its best to apply empirical concepts to this manifold, an effort that it cannot

be faulted for. Thus, in all empirical illusions, the imagination has erred, while the understanding has not.

But the soul, what this paper is primarily concerned with, does not exist at the empirical level. We arrive at the existence of the soul through a transcendental paralogism, which is a syllogism that “has a transcendental ground for inferring falsely,” and which will also “have its ground in the nature of human reason” (B399). Thus the soul is a transcendental illusion, which is an illusion that occurs at the level of pure reason. To clearly understand the error of transcendental illusions, we must embrace Kant’s idea that true knowledge and objective validity can only be found “within the limits of possible experience” (B352). Reason, however, tempts us to take subjective ideas, which exist wholly outside of the bounds of experience, as objective and true, and thereby commit a transcendental illusion.

For example, when I was a child, I believed that at the end of a rainbow sat a leprechaun with his pot of gold. My reason, encouraged by snatches of conversation and TV shows, led me to err by logically concluding that such a leprechaun must really exist. Though my reason did not arrive at this conclusion paralogistically, it gave me something subjective and harmfully convinced me that it was objective. But in fact, this conclusion that I took for truth was not objectively valid; my sensibility had never handed me a manifold of intuition that justified this thought. And it is precisely when we take subjective ideas like this leprechaun to be objective that we commit the error of a transcendental illusion. For by even theorizing about their qualities, we assume that they do not lie in the realm of the unknowable super-sensible but rather in a realm of experience, which is the definition of something being objectively valid.

But perhaps we can glean more from Kant’s reasoning if we examine a specific transcendental illusion carefully, namely the soul. In the Antinomy of Pure Reason, Kant asserts

that “reason demands this in accordance with the principle: If the conditioned is given, then the whole sum of conditions, and hence the absolutely unconditioned, is also given” (B436).

Through paralogistic inference, we arrive at the conclusion that the absolutely unconditioned entity is what Kant believes traditional metaphysicians refer to as the soul, something that he ultimately seeks to show is a transcendental illusion.

How exactly does paralogistic inference arrive at this conclusion? Kant begins by saying that “in every inference there is a proposition that serves as a ground, and another, namely the conclusion, that is drawn from the former, and finally the inferences according to which the truth of the conclusion is connected unfailingly with the truth of the first proposition” (B360).

Inferences, however, vary far and wide, and the type of inference that we are interested in are categorical syllogisms. The structure of the major premise, minor premise, and conclusion is as follows:

All As are Bs (where A is a subject, B is a predicate)

C is an A

Therefore C is a B.

One example we could consider has the major premise “All philosophers are smart,” followed by “I am a philosopher,” and therefore reach the conclusion “I am smart.” But reason, being a greedy faculty that lusts for knowledge, will seek to learn more through prosyllogisms, a process by which we take the minor premise (which in this case is “I am a philosopher”) and take it to be the conclusion. Essentially, I’m asking myself, “how exactly did I know I am a philosopher?”

The process would look something like this:

All people taking philosophy courses are philosophers

I am taking a philosophy course

Therefore I am a philosopher.

But reason will then consider the next prosyllogism: how do I know that I'm taking a philosophy course? Indeed, reason will continue to climb this ladder until the "subject... is no longer a predicate" (B379). Or put another way, through prosyllogisms, we "proceed to the unconditioned... to a subject that is no longer a predicate" (B379). This subject, Kant claims, is the soul, an entity that is always conditioned and never unconditioned. Now, it's important here to recognize that the only faculty at play while climbing this ladder is reason, for I made no use of the sensibility. Thus, Kant concludes that the soul is an idea i.e a product of pure reason.

So far we have shown that the form of the syllogisms gives us the ideas. However, Kant then claims that the rationalists are guilty of a transcendental illusion by then taking the idea of the soul to be objectively valid. He writes that "the procedure of rational psychology is governed by a paralogism" (B410) i.e a fallacy of equivocation. A careful examination of Kant's argument in B410-411 will show that the rationalists' line of logic is indeed flawed with an ambiguous middle, for the "being" referenced in the major premise of the syllogism is not the same "being" that is referred to in the minor premise. Through this investigation, Kant exposes the rationalists' error and shows that the soul has "no objective reality at all" (B412) i.e it only exists in the realm of pure reason.

Overall, the rationalists err when they assume the soul to have certain characteristics that are knowable, thus falling prey to a transcendental illusion. Kant's reply is that "the sole text of rational psychology" is in fact the "I think" (B401), that is, the apperception that is involved in making representations one's own. The soul, on the other hand, and its traits of substance, simple, and the like, are "falsely held to be a science of pure reason" (B403) for the soul is in fact a "wholly empty representation" (B404) that we can say nothing about. It is, as we've said

above, an empty concept that tempts us to take it as objectively valid, as Kant charges the rationalists with doing.

What, then, is the purpose of the ideas, if they seem to only lead us astray? For initially, it seems that if we believe Kant's sweeping claims and biting criticisms, then we must abort all attempts to cognize anything that exists outside of the realm of the sensible, an action that is heartbreaking for the committed philosopher. But fortunately, Kant has another plan in mind. He makes it clear that in regards to the ideas of pure reason, "it is merely their misuse which brings it about that a deceptive illusions arises out of them" (B697). Naturally then, the proper usage of the will bring about favorable results. The proper usage is to treat each idea as "only a heuristic and not an ostensive concept" (B699). An idea like the soul urges you to "seek after the constitution and connection of objects of experience in general" (B699). Just as we arrived at the soul through the rigorous process of prosyllogistic reasoning, so it returns the favor by urging us to always reason with dedication and discipline. In this way, the ideas of reason serve as "regulative principles for the systematic unity of the manifold of empirical cognition" (B699). Indeed, reason drives us to continue the process of prosyllogistic reasoning, which originally brought us to the ideas. Though we now know that its ultimate findings may be empty and invalid, its diligence will allow us to learn more about reason in general, and thus learn more about the experiences that we have.

To make his point truly hit home, Kant describes this regulative task specifically in the context of the soul. He urges us to consider these questions "as if the mind were a simple substance that ... persists in existence with personal identity" (B700). By assuming such an entity exists, he claims that "we...only extend the empirical unity of these objects through the systematic unity for which the [soul] gives us the schema" (B702). For instance, a cup of water

left out in the sun will eventually evaporate. At least, that's what we can know, given the fact that we have learned about states of matter and the like. But suppose we have a philosophical thinker who is unfamiliar with the basics of chemistry but well-learned in Kantian metaphysics. What is stopping him from simply concluding that the water disappeared, and that it no longer exists? Nothing, if not for the fact that he believes that there is an unconditioned something, that is, the soul, that persists through time. With this, the philosophical thinker will be encouraged to think deeper and identify what is persisting when the water evaporates, and if it is indeed the soul, an entity that he yearns to learn more about. Here, we can see the regulative use of the soul in play. Because our thinker believes that there is an unconditioned entity that persists through time, he is motivated to delve deeper into the process of water evaporating, which in turn will reward him by giving him knowledge of the states of matter, the structure of atoms, and the like. Thus, though the lofty goal of theorizing the soul is unattainable, the thinker will learn much in the process.

Yet I hesitate to agree with Kant when he claims that the soul and the other ideas are not objectively valid. Indeed, I believe that Kant's entire notion of objective validity is hypocritical and on questionable grounds. I begin my objection in the Refutation of Idealism, where Kant feverishly lays his defense for why his metaphysical theory is that of formal idealism, not material idealism. To be clear, Kant is saying that his theory is idealistic to the degree that the appearance of objects depends on the structures of our mind, but their existence does not. In the Refutation of Idealism, Kant begins by claiming that consciousness of oneself involves being conscious of temporal orderings, and "All time-determination presupposes something persistent in perception" (B275). Thus, we are conscious of our own existence only through perception of external objects. But here, you begin to see the workings of a circular form of logic. For doesn't

perception itself also begin with the sensibility, a structure that is internal to each individual? Upon close examination, it seems that Kant is in fact saying that we are conscious of our own existence only through our own sensibility. In regards to consciousness of oneself, we have not even gone past the boundaries of our own senses and faculties. Thus I cannot see how Kant believes that this leads to the proof of the existence of external objects.

But here, Kant would perhaps be livid with me, claiming that I'm mistaking his formal idealism for material idealism. For though appearances are grounded in our own structures of thinking, objects in-of-themselves are not; they exist but only in the supersensible realm of things-in-themselves. But then, is this not also the realm in which the ideas of the soul and God exist as well? But how can we accept the fact that objects exist while denying that these ideas do? Surely, there is a fallacy in the logic here, and thus Kant must either choose to embrace the ideas as objectively valid or embrace material idealism while letting go of his hard-won formal idealism.

Overall, Kant's criticism of metaphysics is questionable but not indefensible. Indeed, Kant's ideas of pure reason, though problematic and tempting for reason to take as objectively valid, present themselves as a lofty goal that we must all aim for. For even if we aren't able to ever uncover the truth about the ideas of pure reason, we will have gained a systematic understanding of the world around us. For if we shoot for the moon but fall short, we will land among the stars.