

Dialectical Illusion & the Ideas of Reason

PHIL 871

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1 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'

2 Transcendental (Dialectical) Illusion

- The intellectual illusion that we have access to non-sensible objects—viz. God, the soul, and the world-whole¹
 - 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 reason²

2.1 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 understanding³
- Two uses of reason
 - *Descending*
 - * movement from condition to conditioned
 - * subsuming objects of cognition under general principles
 - *Ascending*
 - * movement from conditioned to condition
 - * articulating general principles under which objects of cognition may be subsumed

¹ **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)

² 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)

³ 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)

- * 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 principles⁴

⁴ 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)

3 *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 knowledge⁵

⁵ 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)

3.1 *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 objects⁶

⁶ 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:⁷

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

⁷ There will be as many concepts of reason as there are species of relation represented by the understanding by means of the categories; and so we must seek an **unconditioned**, **first**, for the **categorical** synthesis in a **subject**, **second** for the **hypothetical** synthesis of the members of a **series**, and **third** for the disjunctive synthesis of the parts in a **system**. (A323/B379)

4 *Problems*

4.1 *Some Objections*

- 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
- 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 faculties⁸
- Is transcendental illusion really *necessary*?
 - Does Kant's position merely reflect the interests of German philosophy at his time?

⁸ 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)

4.2 Worries About Derivation

- What is Kant's route to the specific ideas of the soul, cosmos, and God?⁹
 - Connection between the forms of syllogism, the categories of relation, and the ideas seems *arbitrary*, or at least artificial

⁹ 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)

5 The Structure of the Dialectic

- The dialectical syllogisms
 - Categorical (the soul)
 - * The Paralogisms
 - substantiality
 - simplicity
 - unity/identity
 - relation to spatial 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)

6 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 nature¹⁰
- 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' one¹¹

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¹⁰ 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)

¹¹ 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)