Chapter 22

Immanuel Kant:

The Ideas of Reason and the Rejection of Speculative Metaphysics

Key Words: Ideas of reason, transcendental dialectic, reason, understanding, things-in-themselves, noumena, antinomies, transcendental illusion, transcendental ideal, philosophical theology.

This chapter will deal with the notion of the “ideas of reason”, which is central to Kant’s philosophy. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Kant’s first Critique can be understood by elaborating the three transcendental approaches; transcendental aesthetic, transcendental analytic and transcendental dialectic. We have already discussed the first two in the previous chapter and in this chapter we shall focus more on the third. Kant says that the human mind is constituted of two aspects; understanding and reason. We have already seen the function of understanding in the previous chapter. Kant places reason slightly above understanding in terms of its importance in the process of knowledge acquisition.

Transcendental dialectic, as Kant conceived, is a critique of understanding and reason. Here he critically examines their [understanding and reason] abilities to provide knowledge of things-in-themselves. In other words, he intends to expose the limitations of these human rational faculties, when the question is about noumena. Human reason falls short of the comprehension of the ultimate reality of things or things-in-themselves. He thus warns about the misuse of the a priori concepts and principles and affirms that the use of these two aspects of the thinking faculty in order to comprehend things in themselves lead to certain insoluble contradictions. He thus cautions us about the illegitimate extension of the a priori concepts from the objects given in sense intuition to things in general.

The transcendental dialectic thus affirms that the cognitive function of the categories are limited to the objects of sense intuition or phenomena and it is not possible to have universal and necessary or a priori knowledge of anything non-perceivable. Kant has no doubt about the existence of such a world of things in themselves or noumena lying behind the sensible world. But this noumenal domain cannot be comprehended employing the usual faculties of reason and understanding. Yet the mind has a tendency to conceptualize them and to contemplate about them, which Kant warns, can lead to certain riddles. The human mind tries to frame conceptions of God, freedom and immortality that
constitute the noumenal reality. But this may lead to confusions and contradictions. Applying the categories of understanding to noumena leads to illusions. He maintains that thought can never explore what lies behind nature or the thinkable world as its ultimate ground. Noumena can never become a proper object of our investigation. Hence Kant contends that metaphysics as a science is impossible.

**The Impossibility of Metaphysics**

According to Kant, metaphysics attempts deducing *a priori* synthetic knowledge from the pure concepts of the understanding. He says that this is to employ concepts alone without precepts. For example, when a metaphysician talks about cosmos or the totality of existence, there are certain concepts employed, but there are no perceptions corresponding to them. Kant categorically asserts that, in such cases no genuine knowledge is derivable, as concepts without intuitions are empty. This asserts the impossibility of metaphysics. Kant further points out that, applying *a priori* concepts to thinks-in-themselves leads to antinomies. Therefore, he excludes metaphysics as a possible source of objective knowledge. Questions which are legitimate when asked about the world of experience are meaningless when asked about the transcendental reality. For example, notions like cause and effect, substance and accident are legitimate when applied to the phenomenal order. But once we attempt to employ them to legitimise the functioning of the noumenal world, they lead to nonsense.

**Transcendental Illusion and Transcendental Dialectic**

As indicated above, the principles of understanding are immanent principles. They are in us, imposing limitation on our abilities to comprehend the world. They also function as preconditions of our cognition, as they can be effectively employed for objectively comprehending the phenomenal reality. But as mentioned above, their application should be limited to the phenomenal domain, as these principles which enable us to cognize the world are essentially subjective and not objective. Kant argues that mistaking immanent or subjective principles for objective or transcendent principles may result in error and illusion. The application of subjective principles to things-in-themselves leads to what Kant calls transcendental illusion. The transcendental dialectic is intended to free us from this dogmatical or transcendental illusion. It is therefore, a critique that will limit our speculative pretensions to the sphere of possible experience. In other words, transcendental dialectic intends to free us from our transcendental illusions. It also explores the role of transcendental ideas in our thinking. This aspect of the critical philosophy deals with an examination of the faculty of reason and its negative and positive roles.
Negative and positive Roles of Reason

In connection with the critique of reason, Kant identifies its negative and positive roles. On the negative side, as we have seen above, reason leads to transcendental illusion. Thus it is the source of all metaphysical errors. It also leads us to antinomies.

On the positive side, Kant sees that reason has a necessary and crucial role, as it is the source of the necessary ideas and principles that play vital roles in scientific theorizing. It thus examines the higher processes of reason to see whether it is possible to discover the ultimate nature of things in themselves. In this sense, it is also the source of the transcendental concepts or ideas of the self, the world and God.

With the explication of these transcendental principles, Kant’s philosophy presents itself as a complete system, which links the immanent principles with the transcendental realities in order to explain the very idea of rational knowledge and its possibility. The immanent principles are also known as a priori concepts of understanding. They are subjective principles that are applied within the confines of possible experience. On the other hand, transcendental principles are known as the concepts of reason, or ideas of reason. They are principles that transcend the confines of possible experience and are necessarily objective. Kant insists that, in order to avoid confusions, we have to distinguish the subjective a priori concepts of understanding which are immanent from the objective ideas of reason which are transcendental.

To understand the positive function of reason, we may have to see how Kant has distinguished it from understanding. Kant assigns a higher status to reason as he conceives it as representing a higher function of the mind than the understanding. Reason is understood as the mind's activity which inquires about its own operations. Kant in this context affirms that metaphysics is the occupation of reason with itself. On the other hand, understanding deals with objects of knowledge in experience. As we have already seen, understanding here refers particular percepts to general concepts or the categories of understanding in order to obtain knowledge about the phenomenal realm.

The positive functions of reason now become clearer and the transcendental dialectic addresses this issue. As mentioned above, the transcendental dialectic examines pure reason as a faculty distinct from understanding and also attempts to determine what are the transcendental ideas of pure reason. It tries to find out the legitimate and proper function of the ideas of pure reason. For instance, the metaphysical ideas of a cosmos and a self are being examined. We can never have synthetic a priori knowledge about them. Kant warns us against the extension of the application of the categories and
concepts of pure reason in understanding them. On the other hand he affirms that these ideas of pure reason have a very important role in human thinking. Transcendental dialectic tries to find out their legitimate function. Kant maintains that they arise in us through the very nature of our reason and reason has to find it out within itself, by turning its gaze to itself.

The transcendental dialectic therefore, explores the proper function of the ideas of pure reason, which are determined by the constitution of our reason. It also warns us against its misuse. It shows that the ideas of purer reason are inherent in the nature of reason itself and therefore, are not derived empirically. Nevertheless, they are not innate. Kant repeatedly maintains that they are the transcendental ideas produced by pure reason and reason contains within itself the source of these Ideas. They are the foundations for reason's construction and account of the systematic unity of experience, without which no knowledge would be possible. The synthetic function of reason is reflected in the construction of the transcendental ideas of the self, cosmos and God. The self is conceived as a permanent substantial subject, about which we can never have synthetic a priori knowledge. But Kant says that the self should exist as a transcendental idea. The same is the case with cosmos. For Kant the world as a totality of events which are causally connected with each other exists. The transcendental idea of God is more important than the other two, as it accounts for the totality of all existence. It is conceived as the unity of the objects of thought in general. Kant calls it a transcendental ideal, as even the other two, cosmos and self, are united in God.

Kant maintains that, the human mind continually swings back to these ideas of reason. He refers to the human propensity to grasp things as a whole and the ideas of reason enable us to do this. But they are not merely fictional or arbitrary, as they project an ideal toward which knowledge is directed. Kant affirms that they are not given through the ordinary channels of experience, but they arise in us through the very nature of our reason. In other words, they have their function determined by the constitution of our reason. At the level of understanding itself—where the mind applies concepts to percepts—an important synthesizing function is performed. Kant argues that, with the ideas of reason, reason tends completing the synthesis achieved by the understanding.

To provide a justification for his arguments, Kant turns to syllogistic reasoning and argues that the ideas of reason are deduced from the forms of mediate inference or syllogistic inference. He realizes that the processes of reason is essentially syllogistic and ventures examining the three forms of syllogistic procedure; categorical, hypothetical and disjunctive. Corresponding to the categorical syllogism, there is the psychological idea of the self, to the hypothetical syllogism, the cosmological idea of the world and to the disjunctive syllogism, the theological idea of God.
Thus in the three forms of syllogistic procedure the three types of possible mediate inferences are reflected. Kant says that, corresponding to them, there are three categories of relation; substance, which is represented by the self, cause, represented by the idea of cosmos and community or reciprocity represented by God. He further argues that corresponding to the three types of inferences there are three kinds of unconditioned unities, postulated or assumed by the principles of pure reason. Each idea of reason thus represents a unity.

Here too Kant derives the three kinds of unconditioned unity from the three types of syllogistic inferences. He explains how the three ideas of reason are derived. He argues that, ascending by a chain of categorical syllogisms reason seeks something which is always a subject and never a predicate. This is the idea of the self. Again, ascending by a chain of hypothetical syllogisms, reason demands an unconditioned unity which is an ultimate presupposition. The cosmos is such a presupposition. Finally, ascending by a chain of disjunctive syllogisms reason demands an unconditioned unity, which is found in the idea of God.

In order to explain the legitimacy of the syllogistic process, Kant falls back on the natural propensity of the mind to expect that its knowledge should be capable of unification and systematisation. Hence the nature of the syllogistic procedure suggests the metaphysical ideas of God, of self and the world. This propensity forces us to see the particular cases in the light of the universal which accounts for them. Human thought looks for some complete, central and all-comprehensive idea.

**Ideas of Reason and Metaphysics**

In the domain of metaphysics, these three ideas of reason have corresponding representatives and the three ideas of reason correspond to the three branches of speculative metaphysics. There is the notion of the “thinking subject”, which psychology deals with, the “world” which cosmology deals with and “God”, which theology deals with. They are not given in experience and they do not constitute part of the phenomenal reality. For Kant, this metaphysics is impossible as we can have no genuine knowledge about them. Kant thus examines each one of them. For instance, the idea of the self. Kant says that this notion is the result of the mind’s propensity to seek for a common ground for all phenomena that occur in consciousness. Here it demands the possibility of a subject, which is always a subject, and never a predicate of some other subject. For the possibility of experience all representations should be related to the unity of apperception and the conception of the self is rooted in this assumption. The self therefore, is the *I think* that accompanies all experiences. Reason seeks to complete the synthesis of the inner life in the idea of a central self or the absolute subject of our
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experiences. It passes beyond the empirical and the conditioned ego to the unconditioned substantial subject.

Kant observes that, psychology studies the empirical ego, which is an object in time and is reducible to successive states as the self. It is a part of the world of experience. On the other hand, the Transcendental ego is a necessary condition for experience. It is not given in experience and hence we cannot apply the categories of substance and unity to it in order to comprehend it. It does not belong to the world and hence cannot be studied scientifically.

Similarly, the idea of cosmos represents the underlying system of order and of law that ground all objects of knowledge. What makes us possible to know the world is this underlying order. The idea of cosmos therefore stands for the idea of a comprehensive world system. It represents the totality of causal sequences. Our faculty of understanding synthesizes the manifold of sense intuition according to causal relation, while the faculty of reason tends to complete the synthesis by reaching an unconditioned unity conceived as the totality of causal sequences. Hence reason postulates an ultimate presupposition of the totality of the causal sequences of phenomena. Kantian scheme criticizes any attempt to study this ultimate presupposition by making it an object. He thus critiques speculative cosmology, which conceives the world as the totality of the causal sequences of phenomena. He argues that, attempting to extend our knowledge of the world, as a totality of phenomena, through synthetic a priori propositions leads to antinomies.

The Problem of Antinomies

Antinomies are mutually contradictory propositions, each of which can apparently be proved following the procedure of reason. According to Kant antinomies appear when we apply forms of intuition and the categories of understanding to things that are not experienced. Any speculation concerning the nature of the world leads to antinomies. They arise when we change thoughts into things and hypostasize them. We build an imaginary science on these things. Kant says that there are four antinomies.

As mentioned above, an antinomy consists of mutually contradictory propositions, one of them asserting something and the other denying it. Kant maintains that, both their assertion and denial are the result of illusion. For instance, the first antinomy has a thesis which asserts that “The world has a beginning in time and is also limited as regards space” and an antithesis that asserts, “the world is infinite and has no beginning in time and is not limited to space”. Kant says that both of them can be proved.
In the second antinomy, the statement, “Everything in the world consists of simple part” is the thesis and “There is nothing simple, but everything is composite” is the antithesis. The third antinomy has the statement, “There are two kinds of causality: one according to the laws of nature and the other that of freedom” as the thesis and “There is only causality according to the laws of nature” as the antithesis. In the fourth antinomy “There is an absolutely necessary being belonging to the world either as its part or as its cause” is the thesis and “There is not an absolutely necessary being existing in the world, nor does it exist outside the world as its cause” is the antithesis. As mentioned above, each of these pair consists of two contradictory statements, though both can be proved using logical arguments.

Idea of God

Out of the three ideas of reason, the third one, the transcendental idea of God, is more peculiar and unique, as it is treated as a transcendental ideal. This ideal is necessary because reason seeks an unconditioned unity, which is the final idea in which the thought can rest satisfied. It is conceived as the supreme condition of the possibility of all that is thinkable. Kant argues that, the human mind’s search for more unity and comprehensiveness makes it move toward some higher centre of unification. The mind refers both the self and the world to an all-comprehensive idea, which grounds both the self and the world. This idea is the idea of God.

God therefore, is the idea of the sum total of all possible predicates, containing a priori the data for all particular possibilities. It is the idea of the aggregate or sum total of all possible perfections. In God we have the idea of the most perfect Being, which is also the most real Being. It represents the union of the unlimited, pure perfections in one simple being. God therefore, is the grand idea that encompasses everything.

Critiquing Philosophical Theology

Though the idea of God is an extremely important idea of reason and it is presupposed by all acquisition of knowledge, we nevertheless, cannot have synthetic a priori propositions concerning its nature or function. Even to know it in the usual sense of the term is problematic. Reason seeks the unconditioned unity of all possible predicates which cannot be found empirically. Here Kant criticizes all the philosophers and theologians who try to prove the existence of such an ideal being. He maintains that reason has to pass beyond the conditioned and hypostatize an individual being who is perfect. But as mentioned above, its existence cannot be proved as no synthetic a priori propositions about God are possible.
On the other hand, reason views all cognitions as belonging to a unified and organized system. The architectonic nature of reason enables and prompts it to move from the particular and contingent to the universal. It thus seeks higher and higher levels of generality in order to explain the way things are. But Kant here argues that the ideas of reason have an important theoretical function. His transcendental dialectic thus deals with the regulative use of the ideas of pure reason. He thus argues for some proper immanent use for reason. He also seeks to establish a necessary role for reason's principle of systematic unity. Kant argues that each of the ideas serves as an imaginary point towards which our investigations hypothetically converge. He therefore argues that our metaphysical propensities are grounded in the nature of human reason. The idea of the soul serves to guide our empirical investigations in psychology and the idea of world grounds investigations in physics. They thus represent the systematic unity we aspire in all our empirical studies.

The idea of God, which is the transcendental ideal, grounds the unification of these two branches of natural science into one unified Science. The idea of God, therefore, enables to conceive that every connection in the world happens according to principles of a systematic unity. We can assume that all have arisen from one single all-encompassing being: supreme and all-sufficient cause.

Quiz

1. According to Kant, what are the two aspects that constitute the human mind?
   (a) God and Soul (b) Understanding and reason (c) Noumena and phenomena (d) Knowledge and intuition

2. What is the function of transcendental dialectic?
   (a) To critically examine the function of the forms of sensibility (b) To critically examine the function of categories (c) To critically examine the abilities of reason and understanding in providing knowledge of things-in-themselves (d) To critically examine the abilities of reason and understanding in providing knowledge of phenomena.

3. According to Kant, the idea of God is not:
   (a) The benevolent creator of the universe (b) The sum total of all possible predicates (c) The transcendental ideal (d) The grand idea that encompasses everything.

4. According to Kant, the ideas of reason are?
   (a) Inherent in the nature of reason itself (b) Are not derived empirically (c) Are innate to the mind (d) Are part of phenomena.

5. Which of the following is not true of the ideas of reason?
(a) They are not given in experience  (b) They do not constitute part of the phenomenal reality  
(c) We can have no genuine knowledge about them  (d) They are given through the ordinary 
channels of experience.

Answer Key

1. b  
2. c  
3. a  
4. b  
5. d  

Assignments

1. Explain the functions of the transcendental dialectic.  
2. Discuss how the three ideas of reason are derived.  

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Web Resources

