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Chapter 1 : Kant's Critical Philosophy for English Readers

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The Rejection of Ontology general metaphysics and the Transcendental Analytic Despite the fact that Kant devotes an entirely new section of the Critique to the branches of special metaphysics, his criticisms reiterate some of the claims already defended in both the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Transcendental Analytic. In this connection, Kant denies that the principles or rules of either general logic e. This position, articulated throughout the Analytic, entails that independently of their application to intuitions, the concepts and principles of the understanding are mere forms of thought which cannot yield knowledge of objects. For if no intuition could be given corresponding to the concept, the concept would still be a thought, so far as its form is concerned, but would be without any object, and no knowledge of anything would be possible by means of it. So far as I could know, there would be nothing, and could be nothing, to which my thought could be applied. B We thus find one general complaint about efforts to acquire metaphysical knowledge: In turning to the specific disciplines of special metaphysics those concerning the soul, the world, and God , Kant devotes a considerable amount of time discussing the human interests that nevertheless pull us into the thorny questions and controversies that characterize special metaphysics. These interests are of two types, and include theoretical goals of achieving completeness and systematic unity of knowledge, and practical interests in securing the immortality of the soul, freedom, and the existence of God. Despite their contributions to metaphysical illusion, Kant tells us that the goals and interests in question are unavoidable, inevitable, and inherent in the very nature of human reason. Reason, in short, is in the business of ultimately accounting for all things. As Kant formulates this interest of reason in the first Critique, it is characterized by the logical maxim or precept: Controversially, Kant does not take it that this demand for the unconditioned is something we can dismiss, nor does he take the interests we have in metaphysics to be merely products of misguided enthusiasm. Although the demand for the unconditioned is inherent in the very nature of our reason, although it is unavoidable and indispensably necessary, Kant nevertheless does not take it to be without problems of a unique sort; for the very same demand that guides our rational scientific inquiries and defines our human reason is also the locus of error that needs to be curbed or prevented. Reason plays this role by generating principles and interests that incite us to defy the limitations of knowledge already detailed in the Transcendental Analytic. Kant refers to this capacity of reason as one that leads to the specifically transcendent judgments that characterize metaphysics. This problematic principle is formulated by Kant as follows: Kant, however, complicates things somewhat by also stating repeatedly that the illusion that grounds metaphysics roughly, that the unconditioned is already given is unavoidable. Moreover, Kant sometimes suggests that such illusion is somehow necessary for our epistemological projects cf. What the ideas do not do, according to Kant, is provide the concepts through which we might access objects that could be known through the speculative use of reason. At the heart of that rejection is the view that although reason is unavoidably motivated to seek the unconditioned, its theoretical efforts to achieve it are inevitably sterile. The Dialectic is concerned to undermine three distinct branches of special metaphysics in the philosophical tradition: This being stated, the Dialectic proceeds systematically to undermine the arguments specific to each of these disciplines—arguments about, for example, the nature of the soul and the world, and the existence of God. Despite the difference in their objects, however, there are a number of problems shared by all the disciplines of special metaphysics. For this reason alone, the efforts of the metaphysicians are presumptuous, and at the very least, an epistemological modesty precludes the knowledge that is sought. See also Ameriks , Dyck First, Kant offers an account and critique of the ideas of reason specific to each discipline. In the same way, that is, that the prescription to seek the unconditioned appears to reason as an objective principle, so too, the subjective ideas appear to reason as objects existing in a mind-independent way. As we shall see, Kant

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unfortunately is not as clear as we might like on this issue. Sometimes, he seems to argue that the ideas and principles of reason play a merely heuristic role in guiding and systematizing the knowledge already obtained. Other times, he suggests that these ideas are deeply essential to the project of knowledge acquisition, and that their presupposition is utterly necessary if we are to acquire knowledge. Indeed, it appears to be precisely the rational constraint to move to the ideas of reason that binds us to our metaphysical propensities and which thus demands a critique of the kind offered by Kant. Alternatively, a most general, formal, principle that would only hold for things in general is taken, by itself alone, to yield knowledge about appearances. Ultimately, Kant will also seek to reveal the very specific formal fallacies that vitiate the metaphysical arguments, to demonstrate that although they have the appearance of soundness the positions in each case are implicitly grounded in, or deploy, dialectical uses of terms and concepts, misapplications of principles, and conflation of appearances with things in themselves. The Soul and Rational Psychology One historically predominant metaphysical interest has to do with identifying the nature and the constitution of the soul. Partly for practical reasons, partly for theoretical explanation, reason forms the idea of a metaphysically simple being, the soul. The branch of metaphysics devoted to this topic is Rational Psychology. Rational psychologists, among whom Descartes or Leibniz would serve as apt historical examples, seek to demonstrate, for example, the substantiality, simplicity, and personal identity of the soul. In other words, Kant takes the rational psychologist to slide mistakenly from formal features of our self concept to material or substantive metaphysical claims about an alleged super-sensible object the soul. For Descartes, this move is unproblematic: Kant denies that the metaphysician is entitled to his substantive conclusions on the grounds that the activity of self-consciousness does not yield any object for thought. Nevertheless, reason is guided by its projecting and objectifying propensities. To elucidate the ways in which the rational psychologist is nevertheless seduced into making this slide from formal representations of self consciousness to a metaphysics of the self, Kant examines each of the psychological arguments, maintaining that all such arguments about the soul are dialectical. Kant suggests that in each of the syllogisms, a term is used in different senses in the major and minor premises. Consider the first paralogism, the argument that allegedly deduces the substantiality of the soul. In the A edition, Kant formulates the argument as follows: That the representation of which is the absolute subject of our judgments and cannot be employed as determination of any other thing, is substance. I, as thinking being, am the absolute subject of all my possible judgments and this representation of myself cannot be employed as determination of any other thing. Therefore, I, as thinking being soul, am substance. What Kant appears to mean is this: As such, the major premise simply offers the most general definition of substance, and thus expresses the most general rule in accordance with which objects might be able to be thought as substances. Nevertheless, in order to apply the concept of substance in such a way as to determine an object, the category would have to be used empirically. Unfortunately, such an empirical use is precluded by the fact that the alleged object to which it is being applied is not empirical. This same kind of complaint is lodged against each of the paralogistic syllogisms that characterize Rational Psychology. The personal identity of the soul is attacked on similar grounds. In each case the metaphysical conclusion is said to be drawn only by an equivocation in the use or meaning of a concept of the understanding. The hypostatization of this idea, therefore, although it may be natural, is deeply problematic. The arguments, in other words, involve fallacies that vitiate their conclusions. More specifically, the demand for the unconditioned, and the idea of the soul to which it gives rise, may be construed regulatively as devices for guiding inquiries, but never constitutively – never, that is, as yielding grounds for any a priori synthetic knowledge of a metaphysical self given immediately to pure reason. There are also excellent discussions to be found in Allison, Bennett, Buroker, Guyer, Wuerth, Bird, Ameriks, Melnick, Dyck, Proops. Not only does Kant address himself to the task of discounting the metaphysical arguments in cosmology, but the resolution to some of these conflicts provides, he claims, an indirect argument for his own transcendental idealism. Thus, the case here differs from the paralogisms and, as we shall see, from the Ideal. The reason for this difference resides in the nature of the idea of reason in question. Unlike the soul and God, which are clearly supposed to be non-sensible metaphysical

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entities, the sum total of all appearances refers specifically to spatio-temporal objects or events. For with respect to each problem addressed the finitude vs. More specifically, one can either think the unconditioned as an intelligible ground of appearances, or as the total even if infinite set of all appearances. Unfortunately, each of these conceptual strategies is unsatisfying. Worse, the antithesis arguments, in refusing to go beyond the spatio-temporal realm, end up being just as dogmatic as their opposites, for the assumption is that whatever holds within space and time also holds generally. To assume this is to take what are for Kant merely subjective features of our intuition forms of sensibility, space and time to be universal ontological conditions holding of everything whatsoever. If the conditioned is given, then the whole series of conditions, a series which is therefore itself absolutely unconditioned, is also given. Objects of the senses are given as conditioned. Consequently, the entire series of all conditions of objects of the senses is already given. There are a number of problems with this argument, according to Kant. The rational assumption that the total series of all conditions is already given would hold only for things in themselves. In the realm of appearances, the totality is never given to us, as finite discursive knowers. As finite sensible cognizers, however, we shall never achieve an absolute completion of knowledge. To assume that we can do so is to adopt the theocentric model of knowledge characteristic of the dreaded transcendental realist. This hypostatization of the idea of the world, the fact that it is taken to be a mind-independent object, acts as the underlying assumption motivating both parties to the two mathematical antinomies. The first antinomy concerns the finitude or infinitude of the spatio-temporal world. The thesis argument seeks to show that the world in space and time is finite, i. The antithesis counters that it is infinite with regard to both space and time. The second antinomy concerns the ultimate constitution of objects in the world, with the thesis arguing for ultimately simple substances, while the antithesis argues that objects are infinitely divisible. The alleged proponent of the antithesis arguments, on the other hand, refuses any conclusion that goes beyond the sensible conditions of space and time. According to the antithesis arguments, the world is infinite in both space and time these being infinite as well, and bodies are in accordance with the infinite divisibility of space also infinitely divisible. In each of these antinomial conflicts, reason finds itself at an impasse. Satisfying the demands placed by our rational capacity to think beyond experience, the thesis arguments offer what appears to be a satisfying resting-place for explanation. How does Kant demonstrate this? Both the thesis and antithesis arguments are apagogic, i. An indirect proof establishes its conclusion by showing the impossibility of its opposite. Thus, for example, we may want to know, as in the first antinomy, whether the world is finite or infinite. We can seek to show that it is finite by demonstrating the impossibility of its infinitude. Alternatively, we may demonstrate the infinitude of the world by showing that it is impossible that it is finite. This is exactly what the thesis and antithesis arguments purport to do, respectively. The same strategy is deployed in the second antinomy, where the proponent of the thesis position argues for the necessity of some ultimately simple substance by showing the impossibility of infinite divisibility of substance, etc. Obviously, the success of the proofs depends on the legitimacy of the exclusive disjunction agreed to by both parties. The world is, for Kant, neither finite nor infinite. The opposition between these two alternatives is merely dialectical. In the cosmological debates, each party to the dispute falls prey to the ambiguity in the idea of the world. Kant thus structures his analysis of the mathematical antinomies by appealing to the general dialectical syllogism presented at the end of section 4. Problems stem from the application of the principle expressed in the first premise to the objects of the senses appearances. Here again, Kant diagnoses the error or fallacy contained in this syllogism as that of ambiguous middle. The minor premise, however, which specifically refers to objects in space and time appearances, is committed to an empirical use of the term.

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