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978-0-521-66791-3 - Kant and the Reach of Reason: Studies in Kant's Theory of Rational Systematization

Nicholas Rescher

Excerpt

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Introduction

An oft-repeated truism has it that every important thinker of the past needs to be reinterpreted in the light of the changed intellectual circumstances of a later present. But there is not only a diachronic variation of circumstances; there is also a perspectival variation of philosophical outlooks in the present. Sooner or later, a student who becomes closely engaged with the work of one of the great thinkers of the past tends to develop a characteristic vision of its impact and bearing. And so it is in this case. For the Kant depicted here is a protopragmatist who differs in significant respects from the Kant envisioned by various other contemporary interpreters.

First and foremost, these essays see Kant as a problem solver whose favored instrument of work is the distinction. Whenever we look to Kant we find him preoccupied with what he sees as essential distinctions: analytic–synthetic, a priori–a posteriori, formal–material, efficient–final, knowledge–belief, theoretical–practical, means–ends, moral–prudential, categorical–factual – the list goes on and on. And all of these distinctions afford tools for addressing philosophical problems that must – as Kant sees it – be resolved through the development of suitable conceptual and doctrinal instrumentalities. The Kant I envision is one who is pervasively concerned with solving philosophical problems by undoing knots of thought by means of distinctions.

A second key point is that the Kant envisioned here is a dedicated systematizer. A follower of Leibniz and Wolff, he not merely seeks answers to questions and solutions to problems, but answers and solutions that fit into a coherent and systematic whole. And this systematic approach indicates that the proper way to

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illuminate a Kantian position is not just from the local context of its treatment in a particular Kantian work, but by adducing cognate discussions in Kantian texts in areas that may seem remote from the particular discussion at hand.

Though produced on various occasions over many years, the essays collected together here exhibit a thematic and interpretative unity. While most of them are topically focused on specific issues (on things-in-themselves, moral causality, the Categorical Imperative), all of these essays are somehow concerned – and most of them centrally concerned – with the overall nature of Kant's system, his deepest philosophical intentions and most basic commitments. More than most past and recent commentators have done, these essays stress the specifically practical aspect of Kant's idealism, interpreting this as an explicative idealism that brings his thought into touch with the sort of pragmatism espoused by Peirce.

The book falls into three parts. Chapters 1–3 deal with Kant's approach to things-in-themselves and the realm of noumenal causality. Chapters 4–6 consider his approach to the methodology of rational inquiry and, in particular, his view of the methods of cognitive systematization, with special attention to his position regarding the limits and prospects of philosophizing itself. Finally, the third division, Chapters 7–9, deals with the role played by the Categorical Imperative alike in Kant's theoretical as in his practical philosophy. The aim, throughout, is to show that in an important sense Kant is prepared to assert the primacy of practical over theoretical philosophy.

Taken together, these studies accordingly unfold a continuous story line with a characteristic overall plot of its own, which runs roughly as follows: the conception of things-in-themselves or noumena, is not a doorway through which we can project our knowledge from the phenomenal realm into the problematic sphere of mind-independent reality (Chapter 1). Kant's use of causal expressions in relation to noumena represents a use of the "Principle of Sufficient Reason" grounded in the cognitive approaches of reason itself, rather than rooted "dogmatically" in an ontologically independent reality that reason endeavors to know (Chapter 2). The ideas projected by pure reason do not represent

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objects proper (real things in space time) but serve merely to furnish reason with thought instrumentalities. For objectification one must look not to pure reason as such, but to the contingently given resources of the human intellect (Chapter 3). Pure reason's concern is not with the obtaining of knowledge, but with its systematization (Chapter 4). And it is a peculiar feature of the human mind that it requires that such systematization proceed in the purposive terms of a design that provides for a causality of purpose behind the causality of nature (Chapter 5). Since philosophizing itself is an exercise in pure reason that prescind from theoretical reason's focus on issues of real-world applicability, it follows that the proper work of philosophy lies on the side of practical reason (Chapter 6). And it is thus crucial for Kant that the reach of pure reason is greater in practical than in strictly theoretical/cognitive matters, so that the range of warranted acceptability (of what we can and must think to be so) is greater than that of actual knowledge (Chapter 7). This is vividly illustrated in the way in which the necessity and universality of moral principles is rooted in the Categorical Imperative fundamental to Kantian morality (Chapter 8). For the universality of the Categorical Imperative is absolute; what is fundamentally at issue here is a principle of reason that holds not just for moral/practical matters, but across the whole board of reason's concerns; theoretical as well as practical (Chapter 9).

The general theme of the approach to Kant taken in these pages is that of demystification. Kant's project, as portrayed here, is not one projecting a realm of mysterious items detached from the reality of this world: things-in-themselves, noumenal causes or transcendent purposes, or unrealizable duties. He is not the projector of a theoretical zoo populated by strange philosophical entities that are not of this world. His procedure is the effective opposite of this: to project on the screen of mind certain ideas that are serviceable in clarifying what the things of this world are through a contrast with what they are not. His use of idealizations is always negative: to provide an explanatory contrast with the actualities of the realm of our knowledge and existence. His idealities accordingly have a status that is not ontological, but functional and, if you will, pragmatic – to provide thought tools that

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are serviceable in clarifying the world's realities. Thus, for, example, even his highly idealized ethics is portrayed here as part of the stage setting of a wider moral theory, which, as such, contrasts with an applicative casuistry indispensable to rational decision about the acceptability of actions amidst the difficult circumstances of an uncooperative world.

In this way, the essays gathered here provide for a unified account that views the ideal of comprehensive systematization which Kant deems a characteristic of reason in general as also providing the key to the articulation of his own philosophy. Systematization is pivotal both *in* Kant's thought about the nature of knowledge and also *for* Kant's philosophy itself, whose central formative concept mechanism it provides.

The book is the product of the labors of a working philosopher who has for many years found the periodic preoccupation with Kantian texts to be a source of stimulus and inspiration. Its main concern is not with current controversies in Kant interpretation and the critique of rival Kant exegetes. Rather it endeavors to set out a systemically cohesive line of Kant interpretation as suggested by the author's own efforts to get clear on the issues. To a large extent the book keeps its distance from current scholarly debates and controversies and concentrates on setting out its own characteristic effort at a comprehensive reading of Kant.

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Chapter 1

On the Status of "Things-in-Themselves" in Kant's Critical Philosophy

1. ARE THINGS-IN-THEMSELVES MERELY VESTIGIAL DOGMATISM?

Kant's distinction between "appearances" and "things-in-themselves" is construed by various commentators along the lines of the traditional philosophical contrast between appearance and reality. There are, on the one hand, the phenomena of the "realm of appearance" (whose status is mind correlative and whose being lies in their being present to a mind) and, on the other hand, the realm of extramental reality, the domain of "what really exists as it really exists," wholly and entirely apart from the sphere of human thought and knowledge.¹ Now if this be so, then the conception of things-in-themselves encounters grave difficulties because of the obvious problem of "getting there from here," where "here" represents the fundamental commitment of Kant's critical philosophy. Thus A. C. Ewing flatly asserts: "Kant gives no grounds for believing in things-in-themselves, but merely asserts their existence dogmatically."² And if things-in-themselves indeed constitute a domain of altogether mind-external reality, it is hard to see how the matter could be otherwise on Kantian principles. Accordingly, it is often held that Kant's thing-in-itself is the (highly questionable) concession to a dogmatically rooted extra-mental reality of a philosophy whose "Copernican Revolution" everywhere else rejects metaphysical dogmatism and puts the creative activity of the human mind at center stage.

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This discussion will endeavor to show that the preceding perspective is very much mistaken. It will argue that it is quite incorrect to think of Kant's conception of a thing-in-itself as an inappropriate concession to a metaphysical stance that is totally at odds with the fundamental thrust of Kant's philosophy.

2. NOUMENAL REALITY AS AN INSTRUMENTALITY OF THOUGHT

For Kant, human thought proceeds at three (closely interrelated and interconnected) levels, corresponding to the three major faculties of the human mind:

1. *Sensibility*, which conforms our sense perception of objects to the (characteristically human) "forms of sensibility," namely space and time.
2. *Understanding (Verstand)*, which conforms our various individual judgments regarding objects to the (characteristically human) categories of thought.
3. *Reason (Vernunft)*, which conforms the collective totality of our judgments regarding objects to certain structural requirements of systemic unity.

Their interrelation is crucial in Kant's theory of the thing-in-itself.

As Kant sees it, the conception of a thing-in-itself arises through abstraction, through removing in thought and by hypothesis certain conditions which are there in fact – namely, the particular limiting conditions of operation of our human sensibility (*CPuR*, B307). Specifically, what we can "think away" are, in the first instance, our particular forms of sensibility (sight, touch, and the rest) and then, by extension, any and all forms of sensibility. We thus arrive at the hypothesis of a being (God?) who does not perceive objects sensuously at all, but "intuits" them "directly," in a sensuously unmediated act of the mind (*CPuR*, B310). Now, when the conditions of sensibility are thus thought away, what remains is the conception of an object that is accessible to a mind that can apprehend things nonsensuously, and this in turn engenders the conception of objects that are purely intelligible or noumenal in nature:

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[I]f we entitle certain objects, as appearances, sensible entities [*Sinneswesen*: phenomena], then since we thereby distinguish the mode in which we intuit them from the nature that belongs to them in themselves it is implied in this distinction that we place the latter, considered in their own nature, although we do not so intuit them . . . , which are not objects of our senses but are thought as objects merely through the understanding, in opposition to the former, and that in so doing we entitle them intelligible entities [*Verstandeswesen*: noumena]. (CPuR, B306)

We might (mistakenly) reify such items into genuine yet unexperientable things – things as a pure, sensuously unmediated, wholly intuitive understanding perceives them:

If by “noumenon” we mean a thing so far it is *not an object of our sensible intuition*, and so abstract from our mode of intuiting it, this is a noumenon in the negative sense of the term. But if we understand by it an *object of a non-sensible intuition*, we thereby presuppose a special mode of intuition, namely, the intellectual, which is not that which we possess, and of which we cannot comprehend even the possibility. This would be a “noumenon” in the *positive* sense of the term. (CPuR, B307)

This positive approach is wholly improper, since we cannot even begin to conceive of such an intuition. A negative variant, however, is quite legitimate:

The concept of a *noumenon* is thus a merely *limiting concept*, the function of which is to curb the pretensions of sensibility; and it is therefore only of negative employment. At the same time it is no arbitrary invention; it is bound up with the limitation of sensibility, though it cannot affirm anything positive beyond the field of sensibility. (CPuR, A255 = B310–11)

When we “think away” the particular conditions of our own sensibility, this still leaves us with something (CPuR, B312 = A254). And what we arrive at is the conception of a thing-in-itself, a noumenon in its negative guise:

[A]pppearance can be nothing by itself, outside our mode of representation. Unless, therefore, we are to move constantly in a circle, the word appearance must be recognized as already indicating a relation to something, the immediate . . . which . . .

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must be something in itself, that is, an object independent of sensibility. There thus results the concept of a *noumenon*. It is not indeed in any way positive, and is not a determinate knowledge of anything, but signifies only the thought of something in general, in which I abstract from everything that belongs to the form of sensible intuition. (CPuR, A251–52)

And again:

[W]e must bear in mind that the concept of appearances, as limited by the Transcendental Aesthetic, already of itself establishes the objective reality of *noumena* and justifies the division of objects into *phaenomena* and *noumena*, and so of the world into a world of the senses and a world of the understanding [*mundus sensibilis et intelligibilis*], . . . For if the senses represent to us something merely *as it appears*, this something must also in itself be a thing and an object of a non-sensible intuition, that is, of the understanding. In other words, a “knowledge” must be possible, in which there is no sensibility, and which alone has reality that is absolutely objective. Through it objects will be represented *as they are*, whereas in the empirical employment of our understanding things will be known only *as they appear*. (CPuR, A249–50)

The thing-in-itself is accordingly a creature of understanding (*Verstandeswesen: ens rationis*) – a product of abstraction – arrived at by prescinding from the conditions of sensibility.

To be sure, such “creatures of the understanding” do not carry us beyond the domain of phenomena and their grounding:

The understanding . . . does indeed think for itself an object in itself but only as transcendental object, which is the ground of appearance . . . The critique of the pure understanding accordingly does not permit us to create a new field of objects beyond those which may be presented to it as appearances, and so to stray into intelligible worlds: of these it does not even allow us to entertain a concept. (CPuR, A288–89 = B344–45)

The only objects with which we can even deal are therefore those connected – however tenuously – to the domain of appearances.

Of course, we could not possibly *know* about noumenal objects.

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For, as Kant sees it, knowledge, strictly speaking, is confined to the objects of (sensory) experience. And given that they are, *ex hypothesi*, sense inaccessible, noumena lie beyond the reach of that sensibility through which alone objects can be given to us. But we can certainly *think* them – that is, we can meaningfully assume or suppose (and indeed posit or postulate) such things. We thus have a cognitive (or, at any rate, intellectual) route to things-in-themselves independent of outright knowledge of them, and fortunately so, since knowledge of them is altogether unrealizable.³ This think versus know distinction is thus crucial. Were Kant to hold that we can know things in themselves, or even that we can know something of them (e.g., that they exist), then this would contradict his characteristic critical doctrine that any and all positive knowledge of objectively real things must, for us, be mediated by the sensibility.

However, this denial of positive knowledge of noumena does not produce a complete vacuum of information. There is (as Kant's own practice makes clear) a good deal that can be said about them, seeing that we have no alternative but to suppose that there indeed are noumena (that appearances are appearances of something) and that they are somehow grounded in a nonphenomenal reality. To be sure, this does not go very far. And the rest of what we have is negative and generic – that noumena are not spatio-temporal, subject to the categories, etc. Moreover, note that all this is not a matter of things in themselves as individual things, but is always something generic, something pertaining to the concept of noumena as such. At the level of particularity (of concrete objectivity) we can know nothing of noumena, for such knowledge would have to be synthetic, and this sort of knowledge simply cannot be obtained in regard to noumena.

The information we have regarding noumena is always packaged in analytic, objectively vacuous, negative stipulations to the effect that nothing of such and such a sort (phenomenal, spatio-temporal, subjectively conditioned, etc.) could validly be counted by us as a noumenon. The idea of a noumenal reality is thus something of which we can make no positive applications of any sort. Nevertheless it is a highly useful device:

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What our understanding acquires through this concept of a noumenon, is a negative extension; that is to say, understanding is not limited by sensibility; on the contrary, it itself limits sensibility in calling things in themselves (things not regarded as appearances) *noumena*. But it at the same time sets limits to itself, recognizing that it cannot know them through any of the categories, and that it must therefore think them only under the title of an unknown something. (CPuR, A256 = B312)

The thing-in-itself, as such, is literally vacuous, "since that X (the [mind-external] object) which corresponds to them [viz. to our representation] is nothing to us, being, as it is, something that has to be distinct from all our [sense-based] representation" (CPuR, A105). Things-in-themselves are, accordingly, literally nothing for us in their status of identifiable "things." But the conception of things in themselves (at the generic level) is quite another matter – something we can certainly get a grip on. It is a contrivance of the mind, a creature of our understanding to which we stand fully and irrevocably committed:

The understanding, when it entitles an object in a [certain] relation mere phenomenon, at the same time forms, apart from that relation, a representation of an *object in itself*, and so comes to represent itself as also being able to form *concepts* of such objects. And . . . the understanding . . . also supposes that the object in itself must at least be *thought* . . . and so is misled into treating the entirely *indeterminate* concept of an intelligible entity, namely, of a something in general outside our sensibility, as being a *determinate* concept of an entity that allows of being known in a certain [purely intelligible] manner by means of the understanding. (CPuR, B306–7)

And again:

We cannot call the noumenon such an *object*; signifying as it does, the problematic concept of an object for a quite different intuition [namely, *nonsensuous* intuition] and a quite different understanding from ours, it is itself a problem. (CPuR, B334 = A287)

To assume a change with regard to our forms of sensibility means that the understanding too will not be unaffected, because our