

Kant's Epistemology

Part V: The Regulative Use of Reason

The Regulative Use of Reason

- Kant asked, “. . . are we to conclude, as the empiricists did, that the concepts of God, self, and totality are vain and chimerical illusions?”
- To do so would fly in the face of those practical interests that Kant considered to be the foundations of morality and religion

The Regulative Use of Reason

- Kant held that nothing in nature is “in vain” and thus he thought that those concepts did have a use (assumption)
- Even in his critique of rationalistic metaphysics he did not attack the concepts themselves
- His point is that rationalists misused the concepts

The Regulative Use of Reason

- Kant held that the rationalists went wrong, first, in supposing that self, God and totality are *objects* like desk or Mount Everest
- Second, in trying to cognize them by means of the categories, which are appropriate only to the interpretation of objects (the categories apply only to experience)
- So, then, the question is: “What constitutes a legitimate employment of such concepts as God, self, and totality?”

The Regulative Use of Reason

- The answer, according to Kant, whatever it proves to be, it must be within the limits of, or in connection with, experience
- The function of most concepts is to organize experience
- If we set up classificatory systems we may notice that some concepts however, instead of functioning in the direct classification of experience, **serve as maxims that guide us in the business of classifying**
 - Occam's razor is an example of that
 - Nothing in nature is "in vain" is another example
 - Kant called this function **the regulative use of concepts**, since concepts thus employed "regulate" our use of concepts in ordinary ways

The Regulative Use of Reason

- These concepts have an indispensable regulative employment—that of directing the understanding toward a certain goal
 - They do this according to the rules the concept marks out
 - **This gives the impression it is more than a mere idea**—a *focus imaginarius*—but since it is outside the bounds of possible experience, it cannot take us to any kind of reality
 - But, it serves to give the other concepts the greatest [possible] unity combined with the greatest [possible] extension

The Regulative Use of Reason

- This function gives rise to the **illusion** that the concepts have as their source real objects lying outside the field of empirically possible knowledge
 - Kant illustrates this principle of 1) needing these principles and concepts in science (uses chemistry as an example) and 2) claiming these concepts cannot be derived from experience

The Regulative Use of Reason

■ God, Self and Totality as Regulative Concepts

- Kant next applied the notion of the regulative use of concepts to the ideas of God, self, and totality
- He wants to show how these three ideas **function as important regulative maxims in scientific inquiry**

The Regulative Use of Reason

- Kant wants to say that there is a “great difference between something being given to my reason as an object absolutely, or merely an object in the idea”
 - Former case: our concepts are employed to determine the object
 - Latter case: there is in fact only a schema for which no object, not even a hypothetical one is directly given; it only enables us to represent to ourselves other objects in an indirect manner—in their systematic unity (from relation to this idea)

The Regulative Use of Reason

- Kant asserts that the concept of God (highest intelligence) is a mere idea, that is to say, its objective reality is not to be taken as consisting in its referring directly to an object
- It is only a schema constructed in accordance with “the conditions of the greatest possible unity of reason”
- Kant thought the things of the world must be viewed *as if* they received their existence from a highest intelligence (some see the roots of phenomenology)

The Regulative Use of Reason

- Kant thought God (as well as the concepts of “self” and “totality”), even though do not directly relate to, or determine, any object corresponding to them, nonetheless, as rules of empirical employment of reason lead us to “systematic unity”
- Kant thought these concepts were **NOT** “constitutive” principles for the extension of our knowledge to more objects than experience can give, but rather **regulative principles**

The Regulative Use of Reason

■ Kant tries to clarify this in the following ways:

- Reason is “endeavoring to represent all determinations as **existing in a single subject**, all powers, so far as possible, as derived from a single fundamental power, all change as belonging to the states of one and the same permanent being, and all *appearances* in space as completely different from the actions of *thought*”
 - Simplicity and other properties of substances are intended to be only the schema of this regulative principle and **are not the actual ground of the properties of the soul**
 - We can know nothing, according to Kant, of the actual ground of the soul

The Regulative Use of Reason

- Regarding the world in general (or “totality”)—the absolute totality of the series of . . . conditions. . . Is an idea which **can never be completely realized in the empirical employment of reason**, but which yet serves as a rule that prescribes how we ought to proceed in dealing with such series. . . .**as if** it were itself infinite, that is, **as if** it proceeded *in indefinitum*. . . .all this shows that the cosmological ideas (word in general or “totality”) are nothing but simply regulative principles, and are very far from positing, in the manner of constitutive principles, an actual totality of such series

The Regulative Use of Reason

- What Kant calls the “third idea of pure reason”—God— contains a merely relative supposition of a being that is the sole and sufficient cause of all cosmological series is the idea of God
 - He thought we “did not have the slightest ground to assume in an absolute manner (to suppose in itself) the object of this idea”
 - He thought “the idea of such a being, like all speculative ideas, seeks only to formulate the command of reason” (my interpretation: Reason is trying to organize things in this manner “as if” it were that way)
 - Kant thought he had shown that the concept “God” had no other purpose than to prescribe its own formal rule for the extension of its empirical employment and not any extension beyond all limits of empirical employment

The Regulative Use of Reason

- So Kant, here, was not considering concepts like “soul,” “God,” and the desire to seek a totality as merely **nonsense**, as did many empiricists; but he didn’t do much better either—he **relegated** them as only “real” in the sense they organize our empirical experience and that they cannot be supposed to refer to any real object in itself
- He thought if the concepts were understood as regulative maxims there were no problems; but if you thought of them as constitutive of objects all kinds of problems remained—like hypostatization
- The regulative concepts do have an empirical object, but not in the sense of being directed toward some particular concrete thing, but they do in the sense of performing an integral function in empirical knowing

The Regulative Use of Reason

■ Switching now to: Things-In-Themselves

- The exact relationship between the concept of thing-in-itself and “noumenon” is a much debated item by Kantian scholars
- Kant’s view of all experience is of a spatiotemporal manifold organized by the mind through its synthesizing concepts
- Exegesis #1: It seems to follow from this that things in themselves have a nature of their own right, but we can never have the remotest idea of what such things are like (or so many Kantian exegetes think)

The Regulative Use of Reason

- That we are forever excluded from knowledge of noumenon is clearly the conclusion to be drawn from Kant's epistemology
 - Kant used terms like “problematic,” “unknowable,” and “merely limiting concepts” when talking about the noumenon
 - The following diagrams tries to represent these distinctions

Exegesis #1: Terms Kant Used For Noumenon

“Unknowable”

“ we are unable to comprehend how such noumenon can be possible, and the domain that lies beyond the sphere of appearances is for us empty.”

“Problematic”

“ . . . If the objective reality of a concept cannot be known, while **yet the concept contains no contradiction** & also at the same time is **connected with other modes of knowledge** that involve given concepts which it serves to limit, I entitle that concept problematic.”

“Limiting Concept”

“ . . . necessary to prevent sensible intuition from being extended to things in themselves—it limits the objective validity of sensible knowledge”

“the function of which is to curb the pretensions of sensibility; and it is therefore only of negative employment

Exegesis #1: Senses of Term Noumenon

Noumenon

Negative sense: “. . .we mean a thing so far as it is **not an object of our sensible intuition**, and so abstract from our mode of intuiting it. . . .”

Positive sense: “. . . if we understand by it an object of **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.”

The Regulative Use of Reason

- So from this point of view the concept of noumenon (thing-in-itself) is simply another regulative idea—*focus imaginarius* for each individual thing (desk, Mount Everest), just as the concept of totality is a *focus imaginarius* for the pursuit of scientific truth

The Regulative Use of Reason

- The other conception of noumenon as **objects** that exercise a **causal efficacy** in the phenomenal world (Exegesis #2)
 - Some philosophers see Kant inconsistent here—applying of the categories of substance and causality would be illegitimate as any of the applications that Kant himself criticized in discussing rationalistic metaphysics
 - “Noumenal self” & “noumenal object” taken as things not as “regulative” or “limiting” concepts

The Regulative Use of Reason

- These two interpretations can be visualized as follow:
 - Interpretation #1

Intuitive forms of
space and time

Categories of the
Understanding

Regulative Ideas

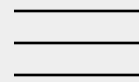
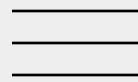
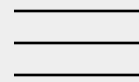
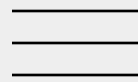
Creates greater unity of reason than just with
the categories of the understanding

Sensations directly shaped
by:

S

T

Imagination



World

Self

God

Noumenon

Phenomena

The Synthesizing Activities of the Mind



Intuitive forms of
space and time

Categories of the
Understanding (constitutive)

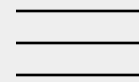
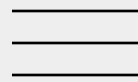
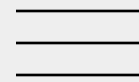
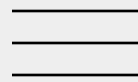
Regulative Ideas

Creates greater unity of reason than just with
the categories of the understanding; establish
relationships to world, self, God

Sensations directly formed
by:

S

T



World

Self

God

Noumenon

Imagination

Phenomena

The Synthesizing Activities of the Mind



The Regulative Use of Reason

- These two interpretations can be visualized as follow:
 - Interpretation #2

Intuitive forms of
space and time

Categories of the
Understanding

Regulative Ideas

Creates greater unity of reason than just with
the categories of the understanding

Sensations directly shaped
by:

S

Imagination

World

Self

God

T

Noumena

Ding an sich
Things in Themselves
Unknown X

Phenomena

The Synthesizing Activities of the Mind



Intuitive forms of
space and time

Categories of the
Understanding (constitutive)

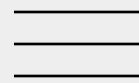
Regulative Ideas

Creates greater unity of reason than just with
the categories of the understanding; establish
relationships to world, self, God

Sensations directly formed
by:

S

T



World

Self

God

Imagination

Noumena

Ding an sich
Things in Themselves
Unknown X

Phenomena

The Synthesizing Activities of the Mind



The Regulative Use of Reason

- This concludes our analysis of Kant's epistemology
- We move now to a discussion of Kant's views of facts and values