

## *Nature and Source of Transcendental Illusion*

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### I

#### *The Inevitability of Transcendental Illusion*

A brief mention of the structure of *Critique of Pure Reason* is necessary in order to arrive at a correct understanding of the nature and source of transcendental illusion. Kant divides the *Critique of Pure Reason* into two broad parts, viz., Transcendental Doctrine of Elements and Transcendental Doctrine of Method. The former is further divided into two parts: (i) Transcendental Aesthetic and (ii) Transcendental Logic. In the Transcendental Aesthetic he analyses the nature of human sensibility and says that space and time are its a priori forms through which all intuitions, which constitute the material of human knowledge, are given. In the Transcendental Logic he makes a further distinction between Transcendental Analytic and Transcendental Dialectic. In the Transcendental Analytic he is concerned with delineating the a priori forms and the principles of pure understanding which are responsible for synthetic a priori judgments in natural sciences. Transcendental Aesthetic and Transcendental Analytic together account for Kant's theory of knowledge which can be stated as follows: There are synthetic a priori judgments in mathematics and natural sciences as these judgments have for their ground the a priori forms of intuitions and a priori forms of understanding. Kant puts his position in a nutshell :

"We cannot think an object save through categories; we cannot know an object so thought save through intuitions corresponding to these concepts. Now all our intuitions are sensible; and this knowledge, in so far as its object is given, is empirical. But empirical knowledge is experience. Consequently, there can be no a priori knowledge except of objects of possible experience."<sup>1</sup>

Having stated his position like this, Kant thinks it necessary to make a clarification. He says that so far as knowledge is concerned, categories

of understanding are necessarily limited by the conditions of our sensible experience but so far as thought is concerned, they have an unlimited field.

"It is only the knowledge of that which we think, the determining of the object", says Kant, "that requires intuition....The use of reason is not always directed to the determination of the object ..."<sup>2</sup>

This clarification leads us to the part entitled Transcendental Dialectic of the Transcendental Logic. The a priori principles, which Kant argues to be the necessary condition of all objective knowledge, are the presuppositions of Newtonian science and of commonsense objective experience. But these metaphysical presuppositions of mathematics or natural sciences or of common sense experience must be carefully distinguished from the absolute metaphysical presuppositions. The absolute metaphysical presuppositions are

"not the necessary conditions of the objective character of a non-metaphysical theory, but apparently constitute the body of an autonomous science. They are not about the possibility of objective experience, but about some peculiar subject matter of their own."<sup>3</sup>

When we take the subjective necessity of a connection of our concepts for an objective necessity in the determination of things in themselves, there arises transcendental illusion. This is an illusion arising out of the transcendent judgments. Transcendental illusion is to be distinguished from empirical illusion as well as logical illusion. Empirical illusion; for example; optical illusion, arises when the faculty of judgment is misled by the influence of imagination; there is nothing wrong in the empirical employment of the rules of understanding. Logical illusion, for example the illusion of formal fallacies, arises from lack of attention to the logical rule. When attention is drawn to them, the illusion completely disappears. The case is different with transcendental illusion. It continues to persist even after it has been detected and its invalidity clearly revealed by transcendental criticism. The reason for this lies in the fact that we take the subjective necessity of the categories of understanding in regard to the world of possible experience to be the objective necessity in the determination of things which are not objects of any possible experience. Transcendental illusion, therefore, can no more be prevented than the astronomer can prevent the moon from appearing larger at its rising. The purpose of transcendental dialectic, then, is not to prevent the transcendental illusion; its purpose is to expose

the illusion of transcendent judgments and at the same time caution us against being deceived by it. The illusion is natural and inevitable. It is grounded in the "subjective principles and foist them upon us as objective,"<sup>4</sup> Kant writes:

"There exists, then, a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason – not in which burglar might entangle himself through lack of knowledge, or one which some sophist has artificially invented to confuse thinking people, but one inseparable from human reason, and which, even after its deceptiveness has been exposed, will not cease to play tricks with reason and eventually entrap it into momentary aberrations ever and again calling for correction."<sup>5</sup>

## II

### *Seat of Transcendental Illusion*

The source of transcendental illusion is reason itself. When reason is occupied merely with itself and there is a supposed knowledge of objects (metaphysical objects) arising immediately from this brooding of reason over its own concepts, there arises transcendental illusion. It must be noted here that Kant is using the term 'reason' in a sense quite distinct from 'understanding' although in the earlier body of *Critique of Pure Reason* he is not strictly adhering to the distinction. Understanding according to him stands for the faculty of rules; reason for the faculty of principles. Kant writes:

"Understanding may be regarded as a faculty which secures the unity of appearances by means of rules, and reason as being the faculty which secures the unity of rules of understanding under principles. Accordingly, reason never applies directly to experience or to object, but to understanding, in order to give to the manifold of knowledge of the latter an a priori unity by means of concepts, a unity of reason, and which is quite different in kind from any unity that can be accomplished by the understanding."<sup>6</sup>

Kant attaches such a great importance to the problem arising out of the transcendent use of the concepts of reason that he goes on to say that the previous inquiry concerning the possibility of pure science and pure mathematics is only a means to the inquiry regarding metaphysics. He says:

"This part of metaphysics, however, is precisely what constitutes its essential end, to which the rest is only a means, and thus this science is in need of such a deduction for its own sake."<sup>7</sup>

The question he is referring to relates to the root and peculiarity of metaphysics, that is, reason's occupation with merely itself. Reason must answer this question. It is in the very nature of reason to raise this question and it can never rest satisfied without finding an answer to this question. Reason limits the pure understanding to empirical use only. But this limiting function does not "fully satisfy the proper calling of reason."<sup>8</sup> Without getting a proper response to this calling reason remains restless. "Every single experience", Kant writes:

"is only a part of the whole sphere of its domain, but the absolute totality of all possible experience is itself not experience."<sup>9</sup>

Yet exactly this totality of all possible experience is a necessary problem for reason. The solution of this problem requires concepts which are quite different from the pure concepts of understanding. The pure concepts of experience relate to the sense data available in experience. Their use is immanent. The concepts of reason aim at completeness of experience. Since this completeness of experience is not available in experience, the concepts of reason transcend every given experience. Thus they become transcendent.

'Idea' is the special term given by Kant to the concept of reason. As the categories are inherent in the understanding, so ideas are inherent in the nature of reason. Categories give rise to knowledge as they apply to the given sense-manifold; ideas give rise to illusion as they are put to transcendent use by reason and in so doing reason

"transcendently refers to the object that which concerns only its own subject and its guidance in all immanent use."<sup>10</sup>

Pure cognitions of the understanding, therefore, have two distinct features: (i) their concepts presents themselves in experience and (ii) their principles can be confirmed by experience. The transcendent cognitions of reason, on the contrary, lacks both these features. Ideas do not appear in experience and the propositions built up on ideas can neither be confirmed nor refuted in experience. Therefore, whatever errors may slip in by the transcendent use of the ideas, can be discovered by reason itself because it is reason itself which becomes dialectical by means of its ideas. The error, which as remarked earlier, is natural and

unavoidable, cannot be limited by any objective investigation into the nature of things. It can be exposed only by a subjective investigation of reason itself because reason itself is the source of ideas responsible for transcendental illusions.

In the metaphysical deduction of the categories of understanding Kant finds a clue to the discovery of all pure concepts of the understanding in the four logical functions of the understanding in judgments. Reposing his faith in the completeness of traditional logic, he now finds a clue to the list of ideas in the three forms of syllogism or forms of mediate inference. He believes that just as categories are embedded in the judgment-forms, the ideas are embedded in the forms of inference. Understanding, as Kant holds, is the power of making objective perceptual judgments by the application of categories. Understanding, in other words, is the faculty of immediate inference. As against this, reason is the power of making mediate or syllogistic inference. In the process of making syllogistic inference reason does not concern itself with intuitions as understanding does in the process of making immediate judgments. Reason, therefore, is concerned with concepts and judgments. It has no immediate relation to objects and intuitions thereof. Understanding brings about the unity of experience by means of intuitions and application of its concepts on those intuitions. The unity sought by reason is not the unity of possible experience; it seeks the unity of judgment through arranging them in syllogistic order. Stated otherwise, reason tries to find the 'unconditioned' ground to the 'conditional' knowledge of the understanding so that the latter be brought to its completion. What Kant means by this is that reason tries to find a more general major premiss for every one of its syllogistically arranged judgments and thus the ultimate premiss in every chain of syllogism. This can be explained by the following example. From the major premiss that 'all men are mortal', it follows that 'all scholars are mortal' because all 'scholars are men'. Now, since the premiss or the premises (major premiss and minor premiss) in this argument are used to prove the conclusion and they are themselves not proved, we must look for further premiss if we want to prove them. Thus, in order to prove the premiss 'all men are mortal' we should be able to show that it follows from a more general proposition, say, 'all animals are mortal'. 'All animals are mortal' is thus a common major premiss not only with regard to one conclusion, that is, 'all men are mortal', but also with regard to many other conclusions, such as, 'all kings are mortal', 'all elephants are

mortal' and so on so forth. This premiss connects all these propositions and gives them systematic unity which they do not possess if regarded as separate judgments. In this manner such a unity of judgments increases with every further arrangement of them into syllogistic forms.

Now as the origin of the categories was sought in the four logical forms of judgments of the understandings, it is natural for Kant to seek the origin of ideas in the three forms of syllogism. Syllogisms are formally divided into categorical, hypothetical and disjunctive forms. Accordingly, the concepts of reason founded on them contain: (i) the idea of the complete subject, (ii) the idea of complete series of conditions and (iii) the determination of all concepts in the idea of a complete complex of that which is possible. The first is the idea of the absolute and unconditioned unity of a thinking subject, the second is the idea of the absolute unity of the series of conditions of appearance and the third is the idea of the absolute unity of the condition of all objects of thought in general.<sup>11</sup> The first idea is psychological and gives rise to paralogisms, the second is cosmological and gives rise to antinomy and the third is theological and gives rise to the ideal of reason.

### III

#### *The transcendental ideas: their use and value*

Kant starts with a discussion of the meaning of idea in Plato's philosophy. By idea Plato means

"something which not only can never be borrowed from the senses but far surpasses even the concepts of understanding (with which Aristotle occupied himself), in as much as in experience nothing is ever to be met with that is coincident with it. For Plato ideas are archetypes of things themselves, and not, in the manner of categories, merely keys to possible experiences."<sup>12</sup>

Plato's ideas, says Kant, originate from highest reason. But, as Plato has said, human reason is no longer in its original state. It therefore tries to recall by a process of reminiscence<sup>13</sup> the old ideas which have become obscured. In Plato's theory of ideas Kant finds a support to his own theory of transcendental ideas. He gives Plato the credit of realizing that our faculty of knowledge feels a much higher need than merely to explain



appearances. Plato knew that our reason naturally exalts itself to modes of knowledge which transcend the bounds of experience in such a way that no given empirical object can ever coincide with them. However they are not mere fictions of brain; they have reality of their own. It is ironical, says Kant, that Plato's theory of ideas should have been criticized on the ground of impracticability. It is said to be impractical because

"it is judged in accordance with precisely those empirical rules, the invalidity of which regarded as principles, it has itself demonstrated."<sup>14</sup>

It is particularly in realms of morality, legislation and religion where the experience itself is made possible by the ideas. Kant therefore says of Plato

"....the philosopher's spiritual flight from the ectypal mode of reflecting upon the physical world - order to the architectonic ordering of it, is an enterprise which calls for respect and imitation."<sup>15</sup>

After approvingly referring to Plato's theory of Ideas Kant cautions us to be careful in the use of expression 'idea' so that the term is not used to mean anything and everything. Elucidating the meaning of idea Kant writes:

"I understand by idea a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense experience. Thus the pure concepts of reason are—transcendental ideas."<sup>16</sup>

They look upon all knowledge gained in experience as being determined through an absolute totality of conditions. The ideas, however, are not arbitrarily invented. They emanate from the very nature of reason itself and stand in necessary relation to the whole employment of understanding. And, as they overstep the limits of all experience, no object adequate to the transcendental idea can ever be found in experience.

In this sense the transcendental concepts of reason are *only ideas* but this does not mean that they are superfluous and void. They are of great service to the understanding as a canon for its extended and consistent employment. Understanding does not obtain more knowledge of any object by this "service" but for the acquiring of such knowledge it receives better and more extensive guidance. Moreover, the concepts

of reason make possible a

"transition from the concepts of nature to the practical concepts, and in that way may give support to the moral ideas themselves, bringing them in to connection with the speculative knowledge of reason."<sup>17</sup>

It must be clearly understood that the ideas of pure reason can never be dialectical themselves. They arise from the very nature of our reason and it is impossible, says Kant, "that this highest tribunal of all the rights and claims of speculation should itself be the source of deceptions and illusions." Therefore, when there is misemployment of the ideas of reason they give rise to deceptive illusion. Good use or misuse of the ideas consists in their immanent and transcendent use respectively. When the ideas are put to transcendent use and they are taken to be concept of real things, they give rise to deceptive knowledge. Transcendental ideas therefore do not have constitutive employment. If so employed and conceived to be supplying concepts of certain real objects, they become pseudo-rational and dialectical concepts, but they have an

"excellent and indeed indispensably necessary, employment, regulative employment, namely, that of directing the understanding towards a certain goal upon which the routes marked out by all its rules converge, as upon their points of intersection. This point is indeed a mere idea, a *focus imaginarius*, from which...the concepts of the understanding do not in reality proceed; none the less it serves to give to these concepts the greatest (possible) unity combined with the greatest(possible) extension."<sup>18</sup>

That sums up the immense value of the transcendental concepts of reason. They arise from the very nature of reason and they set a limit to the knowledge obtained by understanding by seeking a unity to which they point but which can never be obtained in experience. The value of idea can be said to be two fold: (i) they guide the understanding towards greater knowledge and (ii) they make secure the field of the application of practical reason. Further, the demand for the completion of the knowledge obtained through understanding paves the way for genuine metaphysics. The transcendental ideas can neither be evaded nor can be realized in experience. They point out the bounds of the pure of reason and at the same time point out the way to determine them. Herein lies the purpose and use of the ideas. As the predispositions of reason they take us to the realm of metaphysics. This metaphysics is not a product



of blind chance; it is

"placed in us by nature itself and can not be considered the production of an arbitrary choice or a casual enlargement in the progress of experience from which it is quite disparate."<sup>19</sup>

Transcendental ideas, therefore, are the self-conscious regulative efforts of reason to find unity (final unity) to the possible experience gained by understanding. But they are unable to present that unity as an object. Kant has barred reason from making such an effort. The value of the ideas therefore consists in the fact that they enlarge the area of our knowledge without actually giving any knowledge.

This speaks of the self-transcending nature of human reason and human being. This is a concept which has been most fruitfully used later on in the philosophies of phenomenology and existentialism. The supreme idea, which is an ideal of reason in Kant, takes the form of Being in the philosophy of Heidegger. This somewhat mysterious Being wants to open itself through its silent messages. Man is the being who has been assigned to receive the message and let the Being speak through him. And, in order to listen to the call of Being, man must be able, in fact he is able, to transcend his fallenness into the averageness of commonsense life. In the solution of the third antinomy of the cosmological idea Kant takes recourse to double causality, i.e., natural causality and free causality. Free causality is nothing but man's transcendence of the natural life. This concept of free causality is the key concept of Sartre's existential phenomenology. Man is free because of his self-transcending nature. As a self-transcending being man is always ahead of what he is.

Kant has been criticized for placing reliance on the traditional logic and Euclidian geometry in deriving the concepts of understanding, the ideas of reason and space and time as forms of intuition. Discovery of non-Euclidian geometry and new forms of logic are cited as grounds for the inadequacy, or even falsity, of Kant's doctrine. In our opinion such criticisms are misplaced. Kant has used Euclidian geometry and traditional logic to prove something which is not necessarily conditioned by these principles. He has given us a basic insight regarding transcendental ground of all possible experience and at the same time he is careful enough to curb the pretensions of reason with regards to its transcendent use and thereby give us knowledge of metaphysical objects. Kant has thus brought out self-conscious character of reason.

Self conscious reason knows both its power and limits. Its limit consists in its inability of transcendent use of its ideas. Its power consists in its regulative use which opens new areas before human consciousness which it must try to appropriate not in the mode of thought-knowledge but in the modes of moral, aesthetic and legislative efforts. And in these efforts lie the dignity of reason and human consciousness towards which Kant has been constantly drawing our attention in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* (tr.) N. K. Smith, London: Macmillan & Co. 1952, B.166
- (B refers to the numbered paragraph of the second edition and A refers to the numbered paragraph of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*)
- <sup>2</sup> Foot note to *Critique of Pure Reason*, B.166
- <sup>3</sup> Korner, S.: *Kant*, Pelican Pub., 1954, p.105
- <sup>4</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*,: B55, and A298
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.* B355, A298
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.* B359, A302
- <sup>7</sup> *Kant: Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* Lewis White Beck (ed.), New York; the Bobb-Meril Company. Inc, 1950, p.75
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.76
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.76
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p.76
- <sup>11</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, B.391, A.334
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.* B.370, A.314
- <sup>13</sup> *The process of reminiscences is philosophy itself, says Kant*
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.* B375, A319
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.* B375, A319
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.* B383, A327
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.* B386, A327
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.* B673, A645
- <sup>19</sup> *Prolegomena*, p.102