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The Boundaries of Hegel's Criticism of Kant's Concept of the Noumenal

Kant conceives of experience as the *synthesis* of understanding and intuition. Hegel argues that because Kant is presupposing two origins of experience, Kant in the end has to conclude that reality as it is in itself becomes a Thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) that is placed outside of experience. As a result, Hegel claims, Kant is unable to think its inner unity of experience and reality and remains with a dualism between reality as it is *for us* and reality as it is *in itself*. In his own philosophy, most explicitly in the Introduction to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel sets as his goal to overcome Kant's dualism.¹

However, in his attempt to overcome Kant's dualism between the phenomenal and noumenal world, it seems that Hegel misses out on a certain dimension of Kant. In this contribution, I argue that Hegel's characterization of Kant's Thing-in-itself does not do justice to Kant. Basically, his criticism is that the Thing-in-itself is an empty abstraction that nevertheless aims to express something about being.² Of course, this would be an obvious contradiction. I argue, however, that although for Kant the Thing-in-itself might be an abstraction, it is not simply empty – like in a skeptical negation, for instance. In the following, I explain that in my opinion its presumed emptiness – understood as the impossibility to have knowledge about it – is a determinate and complex conceptualization of a specific notion of absolute nothingness that rests on a reasonable negation rather than a skeptical one.

1 Reading Kant as a metaphysician

In Kant's transcendental philosophy, the primary task of reason is to set the boundaries of reason. In other words, his *Critique of Pure Reason* works in two ways. The metaphysical aspirations of reason must not simply be limited but also the criterion of this limitation must be purely reasonable. In this way, it certainly is a critique of most metaphysics of Kant's time, but it is not a critique of metaphysics per se. On the contrary, Kant tries to save metaphysics by using reasonable investigation as a method to purify the metaphysical question of any irrelevant, unfit, or improper element that frustrates and undermines it, and thus to penetrate the actual question of metaphysics.

Hegel fails to see what could be so interesting about purifying metaphysical questions as a fulfilling philosophical project. To him, purity primarily means abstraction, and projecting the pure object as something in itself rather than the provisional result of a partial reflection about the conditions of knowledge is a mistake. For this reason, Hegel in no way deserves the title 'the last metaphysician'.³ The introductions to both the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* make clear that metaphysics was already passé for Hegel. It plays

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Gesammelt Werke 9, Hamburg 1992.

² Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)*, GW 20, 47 ff.; and idem, *Wissenschaft der Logik: Erstes Buch. Die Lehre vom Sein*, GW 21, Hamburg 1984, 4.

³ Generally, unlike Kant, Hegel is not genuinely interested in metaphysical questions. Cf., e. g., Walter Jaeschke, „Ein Plädoyer für einen historischen Metaphysikbegriff“, in: *Metaphysik und Metaphysikkritik in der Klassischen Deutschen Philosophie*, eds. M. Gerhard, A. Sell & L. de Vos, Hamburg 2012, 11.

an important role in the history of philosophy but is not a serious occupation for modern philosophers, precisely because metaphysics essentially concerns itself with the idea of pure reality.

Most philosophers after Hegel have actually drawn the same conclusion from Kant as Hegel did: Kant's transcendental philosophy only makes sense as a critique of metaphysics. Ironically, sometimes it is even turned against Hegel, e. g., when they accuse Hegel of falling back behind Kant. However, reading Kant's first critique as perhaps actually making metaphysics possible, I would like to make a case for a non-Hegelian reading of Kant. To remain in the spirit of Kant, we should not simply pose the metaphysical question – *Is pure knowledge a priori possible?* – but first and foremost we have to develop the conditions that make it possible to pose the question. Hegel rejects this question and nowhere seeks to resolve it. We should not set Hegel's objections aside, but turn them around to reveal something potentially meaningful about the Kantian question.

Taking Hegel seriously means that we have to critically examine the Kantian distinction between a *a priori* and a *a posteriori*. Kant defines pure knowledge as an original synthetic judgment a priori, as a relation between subject and object that is outside of every experience and logically precedes it. Hegel argues against Kant that absolute knowledge cannot be knowledge a priori, because the absolute cannot exist in opposition to something outside itself. Absolute knowledge must concern, therefore, the underlying unity of the relation between a priori and a posteriori. Consequently, their opposition must be a relative one. Hegel's criticism is justified to the extent that the distinction between a priori and a posteriori often functions as a relative distinction in Kant, but that this is not recognized as such. However, the criticism's viewpoint that the question of metaphysics presupposes a contradistinction between a priori and posteriori, and thus is a biased question, does not do justice to Kant.

In Kant, the importance of metaphysics for philosophy is not derived from a supposedly given distinction between a priori and a posteriori (and the consequent question: how are synthetic judgments a priori possible?), but the distinction is justified insofar as it contributes to making metaphysics possible. In other words, the criterion is the possibility of metaphysics. Everything else is subjected to this end. This means that the distinction between a priori and a posteriori already presupposes a certain metaphysical stance. This stance consists of the assumption that we do not possess intellectual intuition, i. e., we have an idea of absolute knowledge, but exclusively in the sense that we can never obtain it.

Kant does not think there is no relation between our concepts and reality-in-itself. Pure concepts, like the categories, may be empty, but Kant does not consider them to be pure *because* they are empty. Also Kant regards their emptiness as problematic, but for him emptiness and purity are not the same. Their pureness has to do with their potential to express an intelligible and super-sensible domain. It is only the absence of an equally pure intuition that makes the sensibly unmediated actualization of this potentiality impossible. As a result, our concept of the Thing-in-itself, i. e., the Noumenon, is not knowledge of an object, but the self-explication of the structure of the understanding's spontaneity, the negation of its being affected through the senses included.

Therefore, firstly, the possibility of any knowledge a priori involves an explicit negation of sensibility. Secondly, we can only negate the senses through abstraction, not in real-time, because we have no means to replace sensible intuition with some other form of intuition. Noumena can only be conceptualized by distinguishing them from phenomena, and any concept of a super-sensible world remains tight to the sensible world as its possible negation. So although Kant holds on to the core of the Copernican Turn, i. e., the structure of the subject determines the boundaries of knowledge, intellectual intuition plays an important role here. Intellectual intuition is not in itself an illusion for Kant. It is very well possible that other creatures, like gods or angels, possess it. For Kant, the real illusion is to think that human beings possess it.

Intellectual intuition is the idea of a perfect correspondence between the particular content of intuition and the general nature of concepts. Knowledge of Noumena is only possible under the condition of such intuition. For Kant, we are not able to imagine how something like that would be even possible for us, but we can think of this perfect correspondence as the absolute absence of all sensibility in the determination of such an object. The absolute nothingness that remains, does

not signify reality, but establishes a hierarchical difference between the subject's affective nature and his spontaneous nature. The a priori generality of the transcendental subject turns out to be a (purely abstract, unrepresentable) concept of an intelligible reality, i. e., reality-in-itself, only insofar as it explicitly points out the absolute nothingness of its sensible nature.

In other words, everything we can possibly say about the Noumenon has to be something purely logical, as Kant often repeats. However, this idea is not given a priori, but is rather the result of an absolute negation of sensibility. Also, the activity of reason is not to uncover eternal a priori ideas, like Plato believed (according to Kant), but rather to provide us with the activity of negation. How does this work?

In the transcendental deduction, Kant argues that the subject is not external to the object, but constitutes the latter's unity through unifying the pure manifold of representations. Here, the initial argument that this subject is transcendental because it cannot originate from sensible intuition, is effective against empiricism, but it is not enough to articulate the specific transcendental nature of the subject. The subject of understanding is not transcendental because it is originally distinct from sensible intuition, but because it conditions and restricts sensibility in intuition. And because of this conditioning, we can recognize the subject's super-sensible status. The activity of conditioning is the transcendental identity of the subject.

In this idea of a transcendental identity three things – concept, reason, and sensibility – are brought together. The transcendental subject is the unity of experience and pure concept. That, which it is a concept of, is a pure reason that at the same time expresses the affective-sensibility of the subject. The activity of reason that Kant considers to be pure within this constellation is the so-called ‚inference of reason‘ (*Vernunftschluss*).⁴

In the first Critique, the inference of reason is the limitation of the overbearingness of theoretical reason to know the Thing-in-itself on the basis of sensible intuition. It is the judgment of reason that expresses the absolute nothingness of the pure forms of intuition in relation to determining what reality is in itself. Kant calls this the ‚transcendental ideality of time and space‘.⁵ His point is not, however, to simply dismiss the senses and seek pure knowledge elsewhere, like Descartes and other rationalists did. Stressing the transcendental ideality of the pure forms of intuition, he wants to make explicit the specific nature of the negation of the sensibility through reason. An actual negation of sensibility would leave us with nothing, since we have no other intuition, thus it cannot be transcendental on this account only.

Later in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the chapter on Schematism, it becomes clear that the negation of sensibility does not take place at once, like a skeptical negation, but is a gradual and mediated movement. The last schema of the schematism of the pure concepts of understanding, i. e., the application of the category of necessity on the pure forms of intuition, is the affirmation of the absolute impossibility to know the Thing-in-itself. Although this affirmation has the form of a negation – nothing given in time and space can be necessary – it is nonetheless a positive relation, because it relates the category of necessity to the transcendental ideality of time and space rather than their empirical reality. So there is an important link between the absolute nothingness of sensible intuition with regards to the Thing-in-itself and the absolute impossibility of noumenal knowledge.

4 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hamburg 1998, B 51 ff.

5 Idem, B 52.

2 Two notions of absolute nothingness

It seems to me that Hegel believes that these two propositions found in Kant relate to a single notion of absolute nothingness. For him, Kant's Noumenon is a negative concept of the Thing-in-itself which is the objectification of the negation of sensibility. Implicitly, therefore, Kant already presupposes a relation between sensible intuition and the Thing-in-itself, hence the latter nothing but the absence of sense-determination represented as an independent object. However, arriving at this conclusion, Hegel assumes the transcendental ideality of time and space and the negative concept of the Noumenon are in fact the same. In my view however, there only exists comparability. This means that there is an important difference between the two notions of absolute nothingness that are at stake here too.

Firstly, for making visible their difference, we have to establish their comparability. Indeed, the *positing* of the transcendental ideality of time and space, i. e., the *first* absolute nothingness, is the necessary condition for expressing the boundary-concept, which also entails a *second* absolute nothingness, viz. the absolute impossibility of noumenal knowledge. This positing of the first absolute nothingness is, as we have seen, an act of reason. As an act of reason, it cannot be an act of sensible intuition itself, thus it has to be conceptual. Concepts however presuppose an act of the understanding, yet understanding does not limit sensible intuition, only reason does. The act of the understanding merely functions as the condition of possibility for this working of reason – not as its origin. In other words, the transcendental subject is not the same as the noumenal subject and spontaneity and freedom are not the same. In fact, the relation between reason and understanding is also one of absolute negation, distinct from the negation of the senses but at the same time explaining how the latter is possible.

Secondly, we can now focus on the difference. Now I have introduced the terms freedom and spontaneity, which we can use to distinguish three levels: receptivity, spontaneity, and freedom. The sensibility in intuition expresses the pure heterogeneity in experience, receptivity makes our intuition a pure manifold. The first absolute nothingness thus has to be the absolute lack of unity.⁶ It is not a pure manifold in itself, as if it would be a quasi-nothingness, but for sensible intuition unity is radically placed outside of it. Kant points out that the origin of sensible intuition is the Thing-in-itself, but only as something essentially external to it. Its counterpart is, therefore, intellectual intuition, whose act of intuition is identical to the act of the act that causes the intuition instead of preceding it.

Proceeding to the level of spontaneity, Kant's point is that the possibility of experience presupposes the negation of the first level. Experience presupposes unity, which is not present at the level of mere receptivity. The stance of theoretical reason, even in its confinement to the limits of experience, therefore presupposes a perspective that cannot be reduced to a relation of pure dependency from something given from the outside. We knew this already, but the question is how precisely this independency from the senses can exist.

Although the spontaneity of the understanding implicates such independency, Kant argues that the transcendental subject still depends on sensible intuition for the realization of its concepts; and therefore we cannot say that it is free in the pure and practical manner. He expresses, nonetheless, a possible unity of freedom and spontaneity in terms of a divine understanding that would bring forth the objects of its intuition through thinking them alone. Such a creature would be really free, but only because it possesses intellectual intuition. Our limited understanding however, cannot be regarded as pure independence from the senses and therefore also not purely free. However, the first absolute nothingness leads us to the second absolute nothingness to make

⁶ The pure forms of intuition structure pure sense-input, but not by introducing unity. Instead, they introduce difference: time and space are modes of separating between objects, not of unifying them. Cf. M. Caimi, „About the argumentative structure of the transcendental aesthetic“, in: *Studi Kantiani IX* (1996), 27–46.

explicit the condition through which our limited understanding could still be conceived of as a transcendental condition, i. e., contributing to the possibility of metaphysical knowledge.

3 Metaphysics as ongoing possibility

Generally, Kant argues that knowledge about reality, i. e., objective knowledge, is not fixed but a movement. The synthesis between intellect and intuition does not result in observing singularized objects, but rather in an endless string of objects that are known precisely insofar as they relate to each other according to certain rules. The specific problem at stake here is that the reappearing of the role of intuition in the constitution of objective knowledge after the transcendental deduction cannot imply a simple return to the sensible intuition as the source of determination. It must also return to the transcendental ideality of time and space. In fact, it is not sensibility, but sensibility's rational negation that provides us with the solution to how objective knowledge is possible. In other words, the nature of pure knowledge consists in comprehending the activity of understanding of negating sensibility in intuition.

Kant rejects the idea of most of his predecessors, viz. that pure reason is invisibly active in the affection through the senses and / or in the activity of our intellect, but he regards reason as a separate activity that manifests itself in the relation between intellect and intuition. In comparison to traditional concepts of reason as some kind of intellectual intuition, Kant's grasp of it is a more limited one, but with respect to the relation of pure dependency there is a considerable broadening. The broadening is that the nature of reason becomes fully transparent, because it is conceived of as a necessary condition of experience. Through the inference of reason, reason limits the pure dependence from sensible intuition to make the act of synthesis possible. The capacity of understanding is the independent application of pure concepts, but only through the act of negation, conducted by reason, it can actually apply the categories to intuition. The truth of this act of negation can be proven by experience, because the unity of experience is only possible through the act of synthesis, which itself thus is only possible through the inference of reason.

Now even the idea of an intellectual intuition itself obtains a positive function, viz. to make explicit the absolute nothingness of sensibility when it comes to determining reality-in-itself. On the one hand, the idea of intellectual intuition is in contradistinction with our intellect, because we are never capable of intuiting intelligible objects. On the other hand, the possibility of an intellectual intuition – even if unobtainable – expresses the innate and absolute limitation of our sensible intuition. Therefore, the object of a possible intellectual intuition, i. e., the Thing-in-itself, is not simply placed outside the realm of knowledge, but the placing-outside at the same time *constitutes* the boundary of this realm. As a result, the Thing-in-itself is not merely an abstraction, but points forward to something very real for Kant: it is a *fact* that sense-determination cannot provide any kind of knowledge about intelligible things. The fact that this fact cannot be uncovered other than through the use of abstraction, does not make the fact itself abstract. In this way, the negative concept of the Noumenon articulates a positive fact – precisely because of its negativity.

4 Conclusion

In the end, the distinction between phenomenal and noumenal world with regard to the possibility of metaphysics, serves only one purpose for Kant: showing that the absolute impossibility of noumenal knowledge is itself an insight into the nature of sensibility, which limitation is not abstract but real. In other words, the Thing-in-itself points to something real, yet not to existence

of an intellectual intuition but to the nature of sensible intuition. For Kant, the truth of the Thing-in-itself lies in its negativity for us, because in this negativity we become aware of an act of pure reason that is not merely speculative but one that can in fact be proven by investigating the conditions of experience.

Remarkably, Hegel does not attribute this idea to Kant's philosophy, but to his own philosophy. Hegel distances himself from attempts at an a priori deduction of reality from the pure self-determination of a subject or to abrogate the subject in favor of the self-causation of an absolute substance.⁷ Also for Hegel, philosophical knowledge is obtained through grasping the *mediated* nature of abstraction and making explicit the complex structure of negation, even though for natural consciousness it appears as a single undifferentiated act. However, the truth that lies within the negation of sensibility is already identified by Kant. In that sense, there is much more continuity between Kant and Hegel than is often accounted for.

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⁷ For recent attempts to defend Hegel's philosophy as absolute idealism, see S. Houlgate, *An introduction to Hegel: freedom, truth, and history*, Oxford 2005; R. Stern, *Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object*, Routledge, London / New York 1990.