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Is Reason Contradictory When Applied to Metaphysical Questions?

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Biography

Graham Schuster is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Georgia, where he is working on Hegel's attempt to address the possibility of unconditional knowledge. He is interested in any serious inquiry into the nature of what is, with a particular focus on Plato, Aristotle, the early Moderns, Kant, and Hegel. He is also considering the fundamental assumptions of Sartre and Nietzsche as part of an investigation of the role of creativity and judgments of beauty in moral engagement with the world. Mr. Schuster is an adjunct professor at Oglethorpe University, where he teaches a series of interdisciplinary courses in existentialism as an investigation into human freedom, using both philosophical and literary source material.

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Abstract

With his “Antinomies of Pure Reason,” Kant exposes the illusory nature of reason’s attempts to think the unconditioned in cosmological, metaphysical questions. The illusion is that reason can have anything to say at all on these matters. When one tries to put forward an argument that, for example, the world must have a beginning in time, one finds that there is also an argument ready to hand that the world must be infinite in temporal extent. Since we cannot rest in a contradiction, the result is that reason comes to recognize the boundaries of its own appropriate use. This crucial step in Kant’s project requires that reason produce equally convincing arguments with opposite conclusions. This paper argues that Kant’s Antinomies are, however, not convincing, because they engage in question-begging. This is not, however, simply a mistake on Kant’s part. Rather, it follows from his fundamental assumption that concepts are fixed in character. If, however, concepts of pure reason have within themselves sufficient determination for a dynamic self-development, then the way is open for a rational grasp of the unconditioned that does not involve question-begging, nor unavoidable contradictions.

Keywords

Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, Hegel, metaphysics, epistemology, reason, reasoning, antinomy, concept, idealism, contradiction, time, cosmology, unconditioned, conditioned, appearance

All pre-Kantian attempts to do metaphysics, that is, to attain knowledge of the nature of reality, fail, and all for the same reason—they assume that knowing consists of one’s ideas matching the independently given objects of those ideas. The trouble is, one can never get outside of one’s ideas to verify their supposed correspondence with their objects. This leads the pre-critical philosopher either to the enthusiastic but unverifiable conviction that one’s ideas can and do match objects, or to the skeptical recognition that one’s experiences of objects carry no necessity, and at best one’s ideas can be shown to correspond to each other, but not necessarily to a mind-independent world.¹ If this fundamental assumption about knowledge were unavoidable, we could conclude that metaphysics is impossible. Kant, however, offers another option. If we invert the relationship between knowing and its objects, such that knowing is constitutive of its

1. Locke is a good example of the former, Hume of the latter. See also Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B127-28 (hereafter cited KrV).

objects, then by knowing our own knowing, to which we do have access, we will at the same time be able to know the objects that our knowing produces. In what follows, I hope to show that Kant's account would preclude the possibility of a genuine metaphysics, but that one of his key arguments, that of the Antinomies, fails in its aim. Further, I hope to show that it must fail, but that seeing why it must fail points the way to a genuine metaphysics, such as what we find in Hegel's work.

I

Starting with the, initially hypothetical, assumption that knowing is constitutive of its objects, our task is to find the elements of knowing that are necessary for any awareness of an object. These elements are (1) the *a priori* intuitions of space and time and (2) the concepts of the understanding (categories). One could summarize the bulk of the first half of the *Critique* by saying that without these three factors at work in us *a priori*, no experience of an object would be possible. As such, they are features of our awareness that are constitutive of objectivity in general.

Spatial determination is necessary for any awareness of an external object because, minimally speaking, such an object must be represented as outside of oneself. If space belongs to things, then one would first have to experience things, then abstract one's representation of space from these experiences. But, spatial representation is a prerequisite for the first experience, so space belongs to our way of perceiving, not to a mind-independent world (*KrV* A23/B38, A26/B42).

Likewise, temporal determination is necessary for the awareness of any object because, minimally speaking, an object must be represented as existing simultaneously with oneself, and coming to be aware or ceasing to be aware of an object requires the representation of succession. Also, one's awareness itself occurs as a series of changing inner states that belong to one, persistent self. Temporal determination is thus a necessary condition of inner experience, and since the awareness of objects occurs in inner experience, time must belong to us, not to things. If time belongs to things, then just as with space, one would have to experience things first, and then abstract the representation of time from those experiences. But one cannot have any experiences without temporal determination already at work making the experience possible (*KrV* A30/B46).

In addition to space and time as the conditions of sensibility, conceptual determination is necessary for the awareness of any object because, as Kant famously says, intuitions without concepts are blind (*KrV* A51/B75). That is, the manifold of sensible content that we are aware of as temporally and spatially determined is, without concepts, just a

meaningless jumble of data. Concepts allow us to unify the manifold stream of incoming data in various ways that make it intelligible. For example, without the concept of thinghood (substance), one could not be aware that some particular collection of sensible content belongs to one thing as distinct from other things. Without the concept of cause and effect, one could not be aware of the connection between one state of affairs and the next, so one could not experience an event. And so on.

Furthermore, since the categories make objectivity in general possible, they must apply to all objects, which means they cannot have any particular content of their own. They are dependent on a matter given in sensibility. As such, their legitimate use extends only to that which can be given in sensibility, that is, to appearances.

Of course, there is much more to the story, but for my present purposes, the upshot of all this is that space, time, and concepts—the elements of human knowing—must be found in every experience, since they are constitutive ingredients of experience in general. But at the same time, the way things appear (spatially and/or temporally) and *what* things appear as (their conceptual determination) pertain only to how things are *for us*, as possible objects of experience, but are utterly meaningless if ascribed to things in themselves, independent of our awareness of them. This is analogous to, for instance, the sweetness of a fig. “The fig itself is sweet” is really a meaningless statement, since the sweetness belongs to our perceptual faculties. As conditions for the possibility of objects, the fundamental elements of our experience of objectivity cannot belong to the objects, since the condition of something is logically prior to that which it conditions. Space, time, and concepts are, in Kant’s terminology, transcendently ideal. They are merely ideal, as opposed to real, when applied outside the boundaries of possible experience.

If Kant is right that what we can know of objects is what we put into them, then the nature of our perceptual and conceptual determinations means that our knowledge is limited to appearances. Although it counts as real knowledge, because it pertains to how things *must* appear, it does not extend to the way things are in themselves. In other words, since our knowing conditions what can be an object for us, any possible object of knowledge is necessarily conditioned, and thus, we cannot know that which is unconditioned. As we will see, this gets reason into trouble.

II

Reason finds itself confronting what Kant calls an illusion, the source of which, generally speaking, is the ascription of objectivity to that which cannot be an object (KrV A297/B353). In other words, reason cannot help but take its own principles and

apply them as if to objects, yet these so-called objects are entirely outside the scope of a possible experience, and hence, not really objects at all.

The illusion, Kant argues, is built into the very structure of reason, which compels it to seek the unconditioned, regardless of the particular contents of its thinking. For, reason draws inferences, that is, it justifies some judgment (the conclusion) by means of its connection with other judgments (the premises). Reason is thus properly called a faculty of syllogizing, the activity of which is to uncover, and provide to thinking, the conditions for something that is thereby conditioned. The nature of this activity, however, compels reason always to seek yet higher conditions, because the premises in any given instance of reasoning are themselves judgments that require justification. This feature of reason is not by itself illusory, although it does involve the difficulty associated with a regress of conditions, such that no syllogism can ever be completely grounded. It may well be the case that there is a regress here that reason cannot complete. This would be unsatisfying in terms of the possibility of reason leading to unconditional knowledge, but it is not illusory. The illusion becomes evident by adding, to the unavoidable regress of conditions, another necessary feature of reason, namely, the Principle of Sufficient Reason. That is, for any given conditioned term, since its determination depends on its conditions, all of its conditions must also be given (*KrV* A307/B364). If this is correct, and if some conditioned term is given, then the principle amounts to positing an unconditioned, either as the totality of the regressive series, or as standing somehow at the head of the series. The totality would be unconditioned because, as the complete series of conditions, there can be no condition outside of it. And a first member would be unconditioned, because if it had a condition, it would not be first.

In whichever of these two ways the unconditioned is conceived, reason takes it as something objective, that is, as having membership in the series of conditions. For, although reason has its own principles, it has nothing upon which to operate other than judgments of the understanding, which it connects into a unity that is yet itself a judgment. Accordingly, although reason does not refer directly to objects, its matter—judgments of the understanding—applies only to objects. Hence, reason cannot help but take its inferences to have objective significance. Since reason seeks the unconditioned as the ultimate ground of the conditioned, and indeed provides the principle whereby this relation is necessary, reason is engaged in uncovering the ultimate condition(s) of appearances. In so doing, reason not only claims objective significance for the unconditioned, but as we have already seen, objectivity is the conditioned result of the activity of sensibility and understanding (intuitions and concepts).

To reiterate, the empirical demand that everything has a condition does not of itself lead to the unconditioned. Rather, it simply leads to a regress of conditions. (*KrV* A308/B364) However, reason's own demand for a complete totality of conditions leads it to go beyond what is merely given empirically, and thus posit, as an actual object, the unconditioned as standing in a necessary relationship to the series of appearances. Thus, it is a condition of reasoning that the unconditioned be conditioned, even though this is an impossibility. Hence, although one sees the conflict, one cannot escape the illusion without abandoning the use of reason. However, one cannot abandon reason, because one cannot abandon seeking the unconditioned basis of the conditioned, as is evident in Kant's examples of its use. Thus, we cannot help but reason about the unconditioned, but when we do, we contradict ourselves, as Kant argues in the antinomies.

III

The antinomies are supposed to be both illustrations of, and antidotes to, the illusion that reason finds itself in when it oversteps its boundaries and tries to ask metaphysical, cosmological questions. They aim to show that reason finds itself not only in an illusion, but in direct conflict with itself when it attempts to think the unconditioned. This is because there are two ways to think the unconditioned in the series of appearances. That is, the unconditioned could be some condition that is itself unconditioned, that is, something standing at the head, or outside, of the series of conditions, but not itself under any further condition. Or, the unconditioned could be the totality of conditions, that is, the series itself, outside of which there can be no condition, since any condition must be included in the sum total of all conditions (*KrV* A417/B445). The trouble is, in the case of the first two antinomies, the unconditioned has to be one or the other, but both options are impossible. The only way out of the conflict is to deny reason the ability to ask such questions. If successful, each antinomy amounts to an argument for the restriction of reason to the domain of appearances.

The first antinomy deals with the extent of the world in space and time.² The argument of the thesis is as follows. Assume that the world never began, that it is infinite in temporal extent. Then, because the series of prior times must be completed to arrive at the present, an infinite series of prior times must have been completed. But, by definition, an infinite series cannot be completed. Therefore, there is no present. Since we

2. For the sake of brevity, I am only going to address the time component of the first antinomy, as an example of what I think applies to the antinomies in general.

have clearly arrived at the present, the initial assumption must be false, and the world is finite in temporal extent (*KrV* A426/B454).

The argument of the antithesis is as follows. Assume that the world began, that it is finite in temporal extent. Then, there must have been an empty time before the world began. In an empty time, there is nothing that could act as a cause, since causes and the laws they follow belong to the world. But, for the world to begin, something has to cause it to begin. Therefore, the world did not begin, and does not exist. Since the world clearly exists, the initial assumption must be false, and the world is infinite in temporal extent (*KrV* A427/B455).

Both arguments are valid and, Kant thinks, convincing. But their conclusions cannot both be true. The world cannot be both finite and infinite. So Kant offers a simple solution; the world is *neither* finite nor infinite, or rather, we can make no meaningful claim about it one way or the other. In order to make these contradictory arguments, one has to proceed on the underlying assumption that the resources available to reason are adequate to a grasp of the unconditioned. The thesis turns on the claim that an infinite world would involve a successive temporal series that cannot be completed. But notice that this places the infinite world-whole under the conditions of temporal succession that govern the conditioned entities within the world. In other words, in trying to grasp the world as an unconditioned, infinite totality, one can only think of it in terms of the temporal conditions of sensible appearance, and thus one fails to grasp the world as an unconditioned totality.

A similar assumption haunts the antithesis, but in the other direction. There, one takes a member of the series, which as such stands under the temporal conditions of sensible appearance, and attempts to think it as not under these conditions, namely, as not in a necessary causal connection with a prior state of affairs. But, membership in the world-series involves the determinations of natural law, which are necessarily temporal, for instance, the requirement that every event have a prior cause. This means that, in trying to think a member of the series as unconditioned, one fails to think a member of the series.

What generates the conflict, Kant thinks, is the uncritical use of reason. What the antinomies have in common is the underlying assumption that perceptual and conceptual determination apply outside of what can be an object of experience. These arguments are put forward by a reason that has failed to discover that intuitions and concepts apply only to appearances. As soon as we notice that the unconditioned cannot be an appearance, and that temporal determinations belong only to appearances, then it becomes clear

that it is simply untrue to say that the world as unconditioned whole, or an absolute beginning of the world, is conditioned by any temporal determination whatsoever.

Thus, there is really no conflict here. Both thesis and antithesis are false. Since the only way out of the dilemma is to pull reason back from its illegitimate transcendental realism, the antinomies turn out to function as an argument for transcendental idealism, for the limitation of reason to the realm of appearance, which is to deny it any satisfaction in the pursuit of metaphysical questions.

IV

I think, along with Hegel, that we need not accept Kant's conclusion limiting the scope of reason. The antinomies are not convincing because their arguments assume what they are trying to prove. The question-begging takes place at two levels, with respect to (1) the individual arguments and (2) the overall argument for limiting reason.³ In the thesis, the question-begging can be seen in the premise that an infinite series cannot be completed. By hypothesis, now exists and the series leading to it is infinite. If we assert that an infinite series cannot be completed, then we have already denied the hypothesis, but the denial of an infinite series leading to now is just what the argument seeks to prove. The argument is valid, but trivial. It amounts to saying that if there can be no infinite series, then there can be no infinite series.

Regarding the antithesis, we have the claim that any state of the world must have a cause. Yet, by hypothesis, there is an uncaused beginning state of the world. As soon as we assert the claim, we deny the hypothesis, which denial has yet to be proved. Again, the argument is the equivalent of saying that if there can be no unconditioned beginning, then there can be no unconditioned beginning.

If I am correct that the antinomies beg the question,⁴ then noticing the reason why they do so could be instructive in terms of the possible application of reason to metaphysical questions in general. Given the result of Kant's account, which precedes the antinomies, that our cognitive apparatus only has relevance to that which is conditioned as an appearance, the antinomies cannot help but beg the question. This is because, lacking any insight into the unconditioned, reason has no resources available to generate meaningful premises regarding the essential attributes of the unconditioned. To avoid

3. For my present purposes, I ignore Hegel's treatment, in favor of my own simpler argument, but see G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic* §48; G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 190–97. See also Sedgewick (1991).

4. Although I only treat the first antinomy here, the others fall prey to a similar critique. Indeed, any argument concerning the unconditioned must be circular, given transcendental idealism.

begging the question in the thesis, for example, one would need to justify the claim that an infinite world-series cannot be completed. But, since an infinite world-series, as unconditioned, cannot be an object of knowledge, one cannot defend the claim, and is left with no option other than mere assertion. In other words, lacking insight into things in themselves, any claim about a thing in itself can only be asserted without a rational basis.

Not only do the individual arguments beg the question, but the antinomies in general do. Kant's goal is to show that transcendental idealism is correct, but the whole endeavor of the antinomies assumes that any thinking about an object is transcendently ideal. For the hypotheses to be shown as absurd, one has to assume that temporal determination in general is equivalent to the temporal determination of appearances, that the concept of time cannot be reasoned about outside of the conditions of possible experience. So, in the thesis, one can maintain that an infinite world-series cannot be completed only on the assumption that "time" is equivalent to "time as experienced," namely as a successive synthesis of moments. Of course, one cannot traverse an infinite series of times in experience, but why should we accept that time itself must be traversed in order to be given? Likewise, in the antithesis, one can maintain that every time must be determined by a prior time only on the assumption that "an individual time" means "an individual time as experienced," which necessarily involves a causal connection with a prior time.

Only a transcendental idealist would accept these assumptions, yet the antinomies are supposed to argue for transcendental idealism. Thus, the both the content and the overall strategy of the antinomies commits Kant to begging the question.

V

Where does this leave us with regard to the possibility of reasoning about metaphysical questions? The assumption of transcendental idealism forces the individual arguments into circularity and itself amounts to question-begging, since the antinomies are meant to prove transcendental idealism. Kant makes this assumption going in to the antinomies because it is the result of the first part of the *Critique*. So, the antinomies' failure indicates that there might be something wrong with the preceding account. As it turns out, there is a fundamental assumption that underlies Kant's entire account, and which leads directly to the transcendental idealist position. I suggest, along with Hegel, that the problematic assumption is that concepts are fixed in character.

Concepts, according to Kant, are entirely dependent for content on a matter given by sensible intuition. Since the *a priori* concepts make objects in general possible, they

must apply to any object, which means that they have to be indifferent to the particular contents that distinguish one object from another. In other words, concepts, considered apart from sensible intuition, are empty and have no resources of their own to generate any content. They are empty, fixed universals (*KrV* A51/B75). But this, in turn, means that conceptual determination has no significance without sensible content, that is, concepts only apply within the domain of appearances.

With this assumption about the nature of concepts at work, that they must apply to any object and are thus empty, it is no surprise that reason cannot generate nontrivial premises regarding the temporal extent of the world. For, this would require one to think the concepts “finite” and “infinite” as having significance for an unconditioned world-whole or absolute beginning. On Kant’s assumption, however, these concepts can only have significant application to a sensibly given content. And so, the antinomies illegitimately apply the conditions of temporal appearances to that which, by hypothesis, is unconditioned.

If the problems here are generated by the assumption of the fixed nature of concepts, then it might well be the case that reason is not in conflict with itself in asking metaphysical questions, but, rather, in conflict with this assumption. We are now in a position to question the conclusion of the antinomies, but in a way that indicates the next move. We can, at least provisionally, go forward with the supposition that concepts can have intrinsic content. If this is correct, then reasoning using concepts alone, that is, philosophy, could think the unconditioned without inadvertently rendering it conditioned, and thereby contradicting itself. This is essentially Hegel’s move. For the post-Kant development of a metaphysics that does not get stuck in contradiction, nor in circularity, I refer you to Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, which opens the possibility of thinking the unconditioned by showing how conceptual determinations develop out of their own inner necessity.

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